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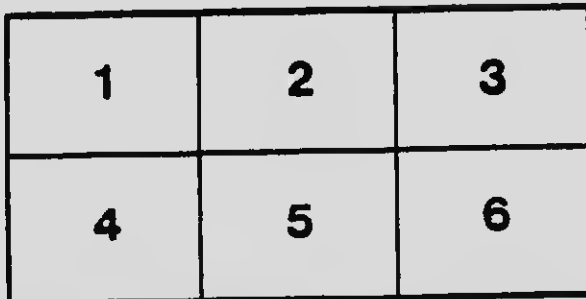
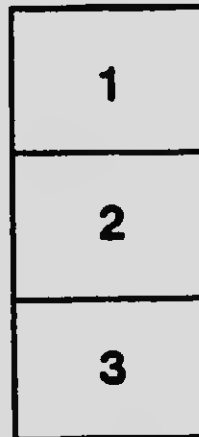
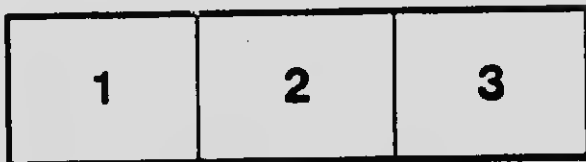
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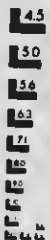
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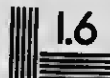
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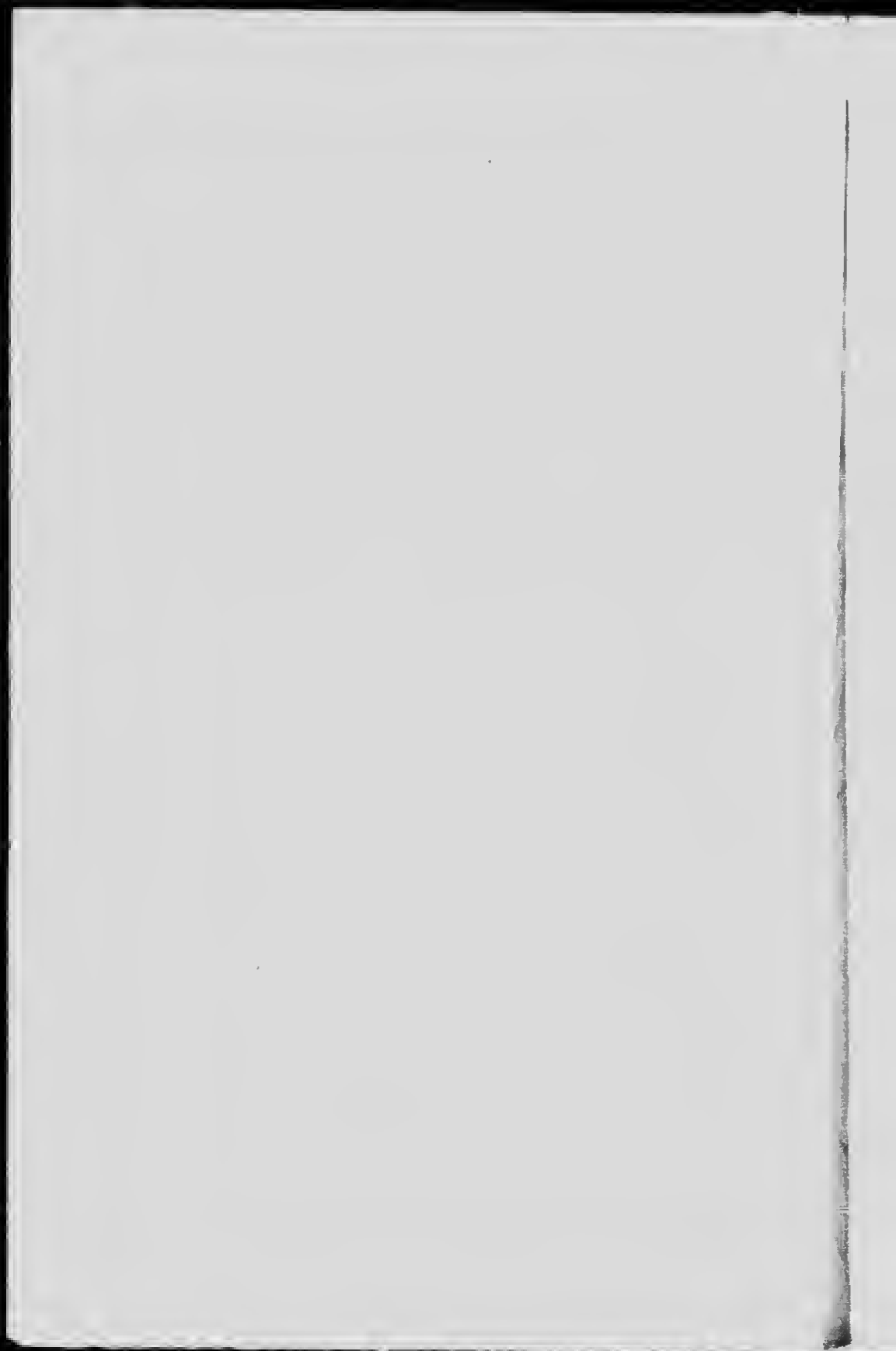


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QUICKSANDS



QUICKSANDS

BY

JOHN A. STEUART

AUTHOR OF "THE RED REAPER," "THE MINISTER OF STATE,"
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CHAIRMAN OF EXECUTIVE, AND PRESIDENT OF THE SCOTTISH
PERMISSIVE BILL AND TEMPERANCE ASSOCIATION, WHO FROM THE
COMMON GROUND OF PRIVATE CITIZENSHIP BROUGHT
TO IMPORTANT QUESTIONS OF SOCIAL REFORM
AND PUBLIC WELFARE THE DISINTERESTED
ZEAL OF A PATRIOT AND THE
PRACTICAL SAGACITY OF
A STATESMAN



QUICKSANDS



PART I



CHAPTER I

WHEN important people condescend upon acts of benevolence which are lightly esteemed they have a right to feel annoyed. All Lady Stapleton's breeding was not proof against the irritating sense of rudeness and impropriety, that increased momentarily, as she waited without greeting or explanation. First she crinkled her calm brows, then tapped impatiently with her fan, and finally sat bolt upright with unmistakable signs of displeasure.

"I don't understand it," she remarked, looking round the company with an eye of resentment. "I don't understand it at all." Instantly, like a forest of autumn leaves, the assemblage of silks rustled and murmured in agreement that what puzzled Lady Stapleton was past finding out, and, moreover, in this instance smacked unpleasantly of insult.

Here they were, leaders of fashion, devotees of pleasure, assembled at once by invitation and as an act of patronage, yet neither host nor hostess appeared to welcome them. It was enough, they felt, to justify them in washing their hands forever of all deeds of charity.

The occasion was a drawing-room meeting in

Lumley Beacon Vicarage, at which Lady Stapleton had graciously consented to prescribe for the ills and follies of the world in general as viewed from the Olympian heights of Mayfair. It pleased that illustrious woman, from pure zeal for the common welfare, to exercise, minus fee or emolument, the functions of public censor and director of public morals. In doing this it was felt by herself and others that she not only rendered invaluable service to an age rather urgently in need of censorship, but set a noble, far-shining example of self-abnegation, a virtue, good people aver, not so much in vogue as it should be. There were so many agreeable things she might be doing instead: backing horses, for instance, or scorching in motors, or indulging in a little gamble at bridge, or otherwise enjoying the thousand and one legitimate pleasures of her station. But it was her peculiar and particular felicity to go about "doing good," which being interpreted means delivering homilies of the rarest Socratic wisdom, nicely adapted to the needs and minds of the vast masses without the sacred pale. It was a marvel to many why, with such a mentor pouring out free counsel, any one should ever go wrong, just as many cannot understand why, in the midst of omniscient physicians and infallible cures, any one should ever die. These things are dark and illogical.

Accustomed at all times to deference, and to ovations as often as she appeared in her chosen rôle of universal counsellor, Lady Stapleton was now deeply offended by the gross inattention of the Rev. Leslie Herrick and his wife. Were they out of their senses that they actually delegated the duty, the honour of receiving her to a gawky country thing in cap and apron, too awkward or too nervous to have even

the proper use of her tongue? "Like any common person," thought Lady Stapleton, fuming mentally. "Like any hack evangelist picked off the street and hired at so much a turn." What, indeed, could they be thinking of?

Fortunately she could rely on the complete sympathy of the company, the audience being composed almost wholly of her friends or those who fain would win access to the magic circle. There were, in fact, but three men present, and they were merely reporters, who subsided in a stale flavour of tobacco and beer behind a table in a corner, and were, so to speak, obliterated. In the ordeal of waiting one of them yawned expansively; another inquired gently of his neighbour "What's on to-day?" and received the whispered answer, "Gas, as usual." Reporters are born irreverent, live without grace, and die impenitent.

"Isn't it wearisome?" some one remarked, turning significantly to the leader.

Lady Stapleton shook out her laces and frowned. She was a handsome woman, with a Junoesque presence and the thoroughbred mien of generations of good blood. Her age might be fifty, or by 'r Lady five years more, making allowance for cosmetics and skill in dressing. An imperious aristocrat, she nevertheless professed democratic sympathies, and was even suspected of Platonic flirtations with socialism. Not that she ever made the mistake of soiling her jewelled hands with anything common or unclean; no, she merely touched the people with an elegant finger as with a divining-rod, observing "You ail here and here," and generously prescribed. Her system was an immediate social success. "Have you been to dear Lady Stapleton's meeting?" was

a familiar question, and an answer in the affirmative became almost as good form as inclusion in a Royal Drawing Room list or a ducal bridge party.

The Rev. Leslie Herrick very properly congratulated himself therefore on a first-rate piece of business in bagging a star of such magnitude for his modest Vicarage meeting on social reform. He would not have ventured to approach her but for the circumstance that she was an old friend, or more correctly an old patroness, of his wife. The same circumstance secured her consent to attend.

Her theme, admirably and felicitously chosen, was "The Crime of Drunkenness," with special reference to the lower orders. To be sure no drunkard of the lower orders would be present to benefit by her scathing denunciation of his ways; but the reporters aforesaid would give her eloquence wings, and it was hoped that between its swills of beer the nation would give heed and mend. Now here she was primed and ready, with a picked audience hungering for her wisdom, and lo! no Herrick.

She was on the point of rising to depart in dudgeon when the defaulter entered hurriedly with his little daughter, a tripping, eager, fairhaired, rosy, winsome child of seven or eight. He was deathly white and piteously nervous; piteously solicitous to conciliate, too, as he apologised with an almost abject humility, first to Lady Stapleton and then to the guests in general, for his seeming discourtesy. He was detained, he explained rather brokenly, by the sudden and alarming illness of his wife, who sent her regrets for being unable to come in.

"You shouldn't have come either, you should have stayed with her," Lady Stapleton responded, touched and mollified by the evident sincerity of his con-

trition for unavoidable bad behaviour. "And you shall just go straight back to her."

Illness abides no man's pleasure; social reform, like Felix's conversion, may be postponed to a more convenient season. But Herrick assured her ladyship that, as the invalid was already better and would probably be quite restored by a sleep, there was really no reason for missing an address to which he had looked forward with ardent expectation.

"Quite sure?" she beamed, her good-humour entirely restored.

"Quite sure," he replied.

"Very well then," she said. "We may as well proceed."

A minute later she rose amid the most flattering manifestations of popularity. She had reached one of her purplest purple patches, and in graphic reportorial phrase "held her audience spell-bound," when of a sudden the door opened with an erratic jerk, and Mrs. Herrick, swaying by the handle, grinned upon the assembly. Lady Stapleton stopped, a half-uttered word on her tongue, and all held their breath in a dead and awful silence.

"Sho shorry for being late," said Mrs. Herrick thickly, grinning yet more amiably. "Sho very shorry."

With a gasp of astonishment and alarm Lady Stapleton retreated, and sank panting into a chair. Mrs. Herrick, dropping the support of the door-handle, lurched forward in pursuit, her hand held out as in greeting. Being belated, she seemed doubly intent on discharging her duty as hostess.

Recovering from his momentary stupor of horror, Herrick was by her side at a bound. "You are not well, my love," he said in a ghastly voice, seizing

her arm just as she appeared to be toppling into Lady Stapleton's lap.

"Qui' well, m'dear," she returned in polite protest ;

"Qui' well. I mush speak to dear Lady Shtapleton."

"You are not well," he repeated in a panic of shame and terror. "Let me take you back to your room."

"Well'n'uff," she assured him with preternatural gravity. "Want to speak to Lady Shtapleton. Le' me go."

She made a quick side movement, bending as though to kiss Lady Stapleton. Her ladyship drew back, with wry visage, sniffing audibly. For Mrs. Herrick was perfuming the room as with the very breath and atmosphere of the wine cellar.

"I—I am afraid you really are not well," said Lady Stapleton severely. "You had better go and lie down."

"Do I look ill?" retorted Mrs. Herrick, drawing herself up with a ludicrous travesty of dignity.

"Very ill indeed," was the quick reply. "In fact, you ought to be in bed." And Lady Stapleton drew in her skirts as in fear of contamination.

Herrick tightened his grip on his wife's arm ; in the same instant a childish hand tugged at her skirt. Mrs. Herrick looked down into the perplexed, frightened face of her little daughter, love and anger contending within her.

"Mama, dear mama, what is it?" asked the child.

"They are insulting mama, darling," was the answer. "You won't forget it, Pearl."

The shock of anger was already correcting her slurred utterance.

"No one is insulting you, dear," said Herrick in a sweating agony. He was humouring her to obviate the disgrace of having to force her away.

"She is," was the retort, and before he could divine her intention she stooped and shook a vengeful fist in Lady Stapleton's face. It was as if some rebellious mortal, forgetting his own insignificance, assaulted the angel Gabriel.

Herrick could endure no more. "Come," he said, swinging his wife about, not rudely nor roughly, yet with a peremptory decision which was not to be resisted. "Come, you must get back to your own room."

He led her away, her eyes turned with a dull glow of resentment on Lady Stapleton. Pearl gaze^d after her mother a moment, her small figure rigid with terror and amazement; then she followed swiftly, shutting the door hard behind her.

CHAPTER II

IN the silence of consternation the company stared fixedly a full minute at the shut door, as though they would pierce it with their eyes and see beyond; then with a quick half-furtive intelligence they looked at one another, breathing deeply. Ho, ho! and ha, ha! who could have guessed this? Who could have suspected the existence of the frightful skeleton which had popped in so hideous and untimely a fashion from its dark cupboard? Mrs. Herrick, of all people in the world! Mrs. Herrick, wife of the Rev. Leslie Herrick, the man whom report made out a saint, almost a zealot! They thought of clever deception, of unholy skill in the art of hiding, till—— But no, they would not judge hastily. Poor thing, poor thing! it gave them a vertigo to think of her calamity, the worst surely that could befall her. Never in all their lives before had they been so startled, so shocked in their tenderest sensibilities, so grieved for one of good repute gone wrong—or so absolutely certain there must be an engrossing sequel. The best bred palate is tickled by the expectation of sensations to come.

Is civilised man especially distinguished from his savage ancestors by his finer, subtler relish of a

scandal? Or does that distinction belong peculiarly to woman? Benevolence, grace, breeding, were writ in the best running hand of fashion on all the ladies then gathered in the Herrick drawing-room.

But they were not marble; no, they were human, and their humanity could not help auguring evil, or thrilling with half-suppressed excitement over the augury. Instinctively they paid that tribute to the old Adam and the old Eve, hereditary influences stronger than civilisation, deeper than the virtues and the graces. The event was terrible; yet it was but the beginning of the tragedy.

With an admirable self-possession Lady Stapleton remembered the reporters.

"Since the meeting appears to be over I suppose you may go," she told them, "and—and I should say nothing about what has happened."

"Nothing at all?" asked one of them, who had mentally worked up a rousing account of the sensation and was pluming himself on a spicy piece of "copy."

"Better so," returned Lady Stapleton. "It doesn't do to print everything, does it? Some poet or other, I forget his name for the moment, advises us always to keep certain things to ourselves. Excellent advice, I think. Good-day."

They picked up their battered hats and crumpled note-books and strode off. The stale odour of tobacco, sacred to the Fourth Estate, they could not wholly pick up. Much of it was left as a kind of incense to remind the profane of the priestly character of the British reporter. As soon as they were gone Lady Stapleton applied a delicately scented handkerchief to her nose as though she preferred her own perfumes. But the offence to her nostrils was not allowed to divert her mind from the sensation of the day.

"Ah! dear me, how sad!" she sighed. "How very sad!"

"Extremely sad!" chimed in a chorus of a round score.

"Very dreadful!" said Lady Stapleton, with sudden emphasis. "And to think she was once a protégée of mine. When I knew her she was really a nice girl, and one would have thought that marrying into the Church was at least a safe course, quite safe. I wonder what old Sam Kippen will say to it all? He's her father, you know—a man as strong as Gibraltar in his own conceit. But this bomb will shake him up—assuredly this bomb will make him rock on his foundations. Talk of a dynamite explosion!"

"And Sir Theodore will be horribly shocked too," observed one who knew the family relations.

"Oh! I'm not so sure of that," returned Lady Stapleton, who, as Sir Theodore's wife, spoke with full and particular knowledge. "Sir Theodore's feelings are not, of course, engaged like Mr. Kippen's. Then he is a man, my dear, and men take other people's troubles philosophically, as a rule. That's where they have the advantage over us poor women. Their feelings are well covered up; ours lie open, as the saying is, to every breath of heaven, and consequently," pursued Lady Stapleton, as wisely as the blue-stocking of Sheba, "are liable to be chafed and ruffled by such an affair as this. But, of course, Sir Theodore will be sorry about Gracie Kippen. Though he never knew much of her personally, he is very closely associated with her father at the bank, you know. Ah! dear me, dear me!"

Lady Stapleton sighed again, and the dolorous gust, being promptly reinforced by the others out of regard and sympathy, souged round the room as dismally as a November wind.

"I suppose," she added, when it blew over, "I suppose there's no use staying any longer. We can't do any good now."

It was unanimously agreed that as they certainly could do no good now they might as well go. Nevertheless they tarried, simmering with expectation and curiosity. Not every day did chance provide an event so dramatic in its elements, a situation so piquant, and so promising. Suddenly as an earthquake the thing came, and behold a ghastly rent in the moral and, what was far worse, in the social reputation of the Herricks. A disaster fascinates in proportion to its terror and the havoc it works. It was impossible that Herrick and his wife could survive the disaster of that afternoon.

"I wonder if Mr. Herrick means to come back to us," said Lady Stapleton, tactfully furnishing an excuse for delay. "Perhaps we'd better wait a minute."

Of course they had better wait. It would be positively indecent to rush off as if they didn't care and didn't feel for people in misfortune. So they waited in a pleasant tingle till the maid entered to serve tea. At that Lady Stapleton made a gesture not remotely suggesting the agonies of sea-sickness. "No tea for me, thank you," she told the maid.

"Nor for me," "Nor for me," "Nor for me," came like a running fire of musketry from the others.

"Very good, m'lady," returned the maid, reddening in confusion. "And Mr. Herrick's 'pologies, and he hopes as you'll excuse him." She made a curtsy, as though apologising in turn for her master's message.

"Certainly, certainly," returned Lady Stapleton, at once beginning to gather herself up. "Pray tell Mr. Herrick that he's not to think of excuses or apologies. Take care to tell him that, if you please."

With that she moved off, deliberate and stately as an ancient flag-ship under full sail, the rest following meekly like inferior members of a fleet. But as she was stepping into her carriage, which had been hastily summoned, Herrick ran out white-faced and distraught to apologise again. It was in his heart, it was almost on his tongue, to implore her, as she had pity for the unfortunate, not to speak of what she had seen. But shame and a sense of futility withheld him. What end would such a request serve? The deed was done; the scandal was already on the wind, and would presently be on every tongue in Lumley Beacon and on tongues far beyond.

He was in such a tumult that he scarcely heard the well-bred words addressed to him or saw the hand held out with perfect composure and steadiness.

"Goodbye," Lady Stapleton was saying in her most soothing manner. "I hope dear Mrs. Herrick will soon be herself again, quite herself." She leaned towards him, whispering confidentially, "I have asked the reporters to say nothing whatever of our meeting."

She meant to put him at ease; in reality the effect was as if she poured liquid fire into his veins. Yet his response was as commonplace as if he endured no torture, or were merely taking leave of some casual visitor.

"You are very kind," he said, and then, as if he could think of nothing else: "Won't you give us your address another time, Lady Stapleton?"

"Another time," she smiled, as one smiles on a child who is being humoured. "And you are not to vex yourself, remember. Goodbye, goodbye."

She went off nodding and beaming blandly, and as in a nightmare he turned to such of the others as were not yet gone. When he had shaken hands with

the last of them, received the last pitying look, he felt they had turned their backs upon one fallen and forsaken and were fleeing from the house of shame. It had come to this then: he and his were as things unclean, abhorred and accursed. In a moment, without warning, the catastrophe came upon him, laying his life in ashes, like tow at the touch of flame.

He stood absolutely still, like one stupefied by a blow or fixed to the earth by stakes. He did not know that the cold sweat was drenching him; it did not occur to him that this was Gethsemane. He knew only that ruin had come, swift and terrible as the stroke of heaven; that a mighty wind smote the four corners of his house, shattering it to chaos, and that he remained in the midst solitary, maimed, and helpless. What had he done to bring so crushing a judgment?

He was recalled by the touch of a tiny hand slipped softly into his own. "Papa, what is it? What is the matter with mama?" Pearl asked in an awed voice, gazing up at him. He looked down into the sweet young face darkened by its first real trouble and on the golden hair glinting—

"Like sun-gilt ripples
On the yellow bed of a brook,"

and a great spasm of pity shook him. His Pearl, his darling little Pearl! God help her in all this. The wide, innocent wondering eyes told of the love that is without bounds and the faith that does not reason. Would he, could he sully or hurt that divine affection by any tale of frailty or shame? No, not if he lied to save it. God would forgive him for the sake of a little child, a pure unstained soul still in the white

radiance of heavenly innocence. Let love and faith remain inviolate. Not from his lips, not from his, should Pearl hear the damning truth.

She repeated her question, and he answered with an odd thrill of guilt that mama was ill.

"You know, dearie," he said, "people sometimes fall ill very suddenly."

Yes, she knew that. Had she not had measles and things? And of course, when people were very ill they couldn't be expected to walk or talk properly, could they?

"But what made mama ill?" she asked with the remorseless directness of her age.

He almost choked at that. The honest man does not lie easily with his child's eyes fixed on his own, telling him that every word he says will be believed implicitly to the last syllable. Yet as an honest man shields the woman he loves, trusting his offending soul to its Maker, Herrick answered, "I cannot tell you, dearie. I don't know."

"Then," cried Pearl in an instant concern, "we must send for the doctor quick, quick! He'll be able to find out and make her better."

Herrick held his breath. Send for the doctor to have their shame scientifically diagnosed? How cruel love could be!

"Mama will be better after a sleep," he returned evasively.

Pearl's face gleamed with a new thought. "I shouldn't wonder a bit if it was Lady Stapleton that made her ill," she said, her small lips compressing. "I don't like Lady Stapleton. I think she's nasty, and I believe she did something to mama."

"You must not speak like that, Pearl," her father told her. "Lady Stapleton does a great deal of good."

"I'm sure she didn't do my mama any good," was the dogged rejoinder, "and I hope she won't ever try to do me any good, because I'd be naughty just to vex her. I wish she had never come here."

"Hush, Pearl, hush!" her father returned, crushing down the thought that was in his own heart. "Come, let us go in."

She took his hand resolutely.

"Yes," she said, "we'll go to dear mama and tell her that Lady Stapleton is never to come back to make her feel bad again. Never—never!"

Herrick felt that the words uttered in fervid love were fraught with tragic import.

CHAPTER III

FOR the rest of the day an eerie tomb-like stillness, such as follows storm and wreck, lay on the house and its inmates. There was an instinctive feeling to walk on tiptoe, to speak in whispers, to darken the rooms as in the awe and hush of death. Calamity at last beats down every noise. The end of all things is silence.

Herrick made it his own particular duty to attend his wife and guard her from intrusion. No one else was allowed to enter her room, even Pearl being excluded, in spite of heart-breaking entreaties to be admitted.

"I'll go as quiet as that," she promised, demonstrating how she could vie with a mouse in softness of movement, "and just kiss her so" (the rosy mouth pursed), "and come out again. People like to be loved when they're sick. I do; so does mama. She told me once."

"She told you?" he said, as one battling with himself and very much afraid of the issue.

"Yes," replied Pearl. "Once, when I had my arms about her—this way. See." At an imperative gesture he stooped, and instantly the small arms were about his neck. "That way," panted Pearl, after a terrific

squeeze ; "and I said I would always love her, always, always. And she was so glad that she cried. It's funny, but sometimes when people are very, very glad they cry. I don't know why, but they do. So you see," she pursued triumphantly, "I must keep my promise, mustn't I? It's very wrong to make promises and break them."

It was his own teaching rising against him in the crucial moment.

"Pearl," he returned, trying to get something out of his throat, "you love mama very dearly?"

"Dear mama!" said Pearl, and there was more in the two simple words than in a million vows. "Dear mama!"

"Well, darling," said her father, with an indifferent effort to keep a steady voice, "when you grow older you'll know that love is patient and can wait."

Pearl opened her eyes wonderingly. Her notion of love was that it should be present and instant, that nothing good can come of delay. Nevertheless, she listened attentively.

"Sometimes," added her father slowly and gravely, "it waits a long, long time."

"Oh yes, I know," responded Pearl, recalling a recent Scripture lesson, "Jacob waited seven years for love of Rachel. But I think he was a silly fool to wait so long. I don't want to wait seven years."

"You won't have to wait so long to see mama," he returned, ignoring the slur on the patriarch. "As soon as she is a little better you shall go to her."

It tore his heart to deny Pearl ; but for very love's sake he must. He remembered the subtle tenacity of a child's impressions. Was she through all the long future to carry appalling memories of the mother she loved? Not if he could help it. So she was sent off

to amuse herself, if happily she could find heart for amusement, while he turned to his watch. And as he watched he prayed silently, yet with such fervency as he had never known before, "Merciful God, help me, help me to save her." To save her; that was now his duty, his mission, his privilege.

When dinner was ready he opened the door of her room noiselessly and peered in. She was fast asleep in the bed where he had placed her. Advancing on tiptoe, he gazed upon her as a man might gaze on his beloved in mortal conflict with the last enemy. She was sleeping the heavy, unquiet sleep of one drugged into insensibility. One arm lay on the counterpane, and he noted that the fingers jerked spasmodically. In her bare throat, labouring with the stertorous breath, the veins were distended and purplish. Her face was still beautiful, unmatched in loveliness as he thought, but it was no longer serene. There was trouble in the drawn forehead, the twitching eyelids, the oozy lips that moved uneasily, as if burdened with something they sought in vain to utter. For a moment he was terrified beyond thought or motion. When he breathed again it was with a renewed and piercing sense of overwhelming, irretrievable disaster.

In all the world there is no more terrible experience to the devoted mind than to come upon the first incipient mark of that degeneration which shows that the soul is wounded, and the devil clutching at it gleefully as a sure prey. It was Herrick's vocation to deal with sinners in all conditions of sin and misery, to exhort, to admonish, to encourage, to help them out of the sloughs of Despond, and if so it might be, set them with fresh hope in the sunlit ways again. "Courage," he had been wont to say, "courage, and all will be well." Courage! Hope! In the day of

trial, the day of tribulation, did he hold up his head? Had he heart for his own precepts? In fancy he heard the fiends mocking. All well, indeed! all well, with *that* spectacle before him? The old Satanic gibe rang in his ears with curdling irony: "He saved others; himself he cannot save."

A long time he stood, with bowed head, gazing at, but scarcely seeing, the unconscious figure in bed. He was in revolt against his own reason. What it told him was incredible, simply incredible; it could not be true. He was in a world of dreams and spectres, not of solid realities. He would arise, shake himself like Samson of old, and dispel the horrid visions. Then all at once in the midst of this self-wrestling he shuddered as with a mortal pang. Next minute he was on his knees, his face hidden in the counterpane. No sound came from him; but the convulsive shoulders had a direr eloquence than any speech.

At a movement in the bed he raised his head quickly, and as quickly got to his feet. His wife was regarding him with the dazed look of one half roused from a stupor and dimly trying to lay hold on events.

"What is it?" she asked confusedly. "Where am I?"

He answered tenderly that she was in her own room and must lie still.

Her eyes were fastened on him with curious intentness. He fancied that some consciousness of the truth was dawning on her disordered mind, and that she was considering what to say. But in another minute the heavy eyelids began to droop; in a minute more they had fallen over the dull eyes. Assuring himself that she was again asleep, he turned, and silently as he had entered it, left the room.

When she awoke once more, late at night, he was by

her side. Her look told him instantly that intelligence was reviving, and that already conscience was at its sickening task of accusation. That she should be able to recall what had happened with any precision he knew to be impossible. Memory is an obscure and complex blending of the mental and the physical, the offspring of that mysterious union of mind and body which still puzzles the psychologist and biologist. The drugged faculties, groping darkly, were seizing on blurred, isolated impressions, on tags and threads of remembrance which they vainly strove to piece coherently. For the broken glimpses seemed at once to reveal and to hide, to suggest and to obliterate. Not till next day did the tragedy reshape itself sharply in her mind; and then her remorse was pitiful. His anguish was no less keen, nor one whit easier to bear.

The great act of judgment has three scenes or stages. First, we judge ourselves in general complacently and smugly, but at times and in moods of rare honesty with poignant condemnation. Next we are judged by others, wrongly for most part, as is almost inevitable. Finally, we are judged by One with whom there is no limit of perception and no possibility of error. At one and the same time the Herricks had to face the ordeal of this triple judgment. They stood arraigned before themselves, before the world, before God. How were they to endure?

In the afternoon, when he ought to have been going about his pastoral duties, visiting the sick, helping the needy, perhaps lifting the fallen, Herrick went into his wife's room and locked the door behind him. For once he was to do a day's pastoral work at home, the most arduous, the most trying he had ever undertaken. When he passed out again at the end of two hours, bent and stricken as with old age, it might have been

said of him as justly as it was said of Dante : " There goes the man who has been in hell." In very truth he had been in the nethermost deeps wrestling with Satan for a soul, a soul for which he would joyously give his own were the exchange possible.

Late into the night he sat by himself in his study trying to think, to plan. Still in a feverish maze he went to bed in a small room next to his wife's ; but he fought evil spirits for hours before dropping into visions scarcely less harrowing than the realities.

CHAPTER IV

IN the grey of dawn he leaped up with a guilty sense of having slept too long and neglected some momentous duty. What was it? Even as he mentally asked the question, the confusion was lit up as by a flashing light, and he remembered all.

He stood for a while in a daze, then began to dress absently and mechanically. In spite of a seeming urgency there was really no need for haste. There was nothing for him to do. Wherefore he had leisure to ponder the situation, which is to say, leisure to torture himself afresh with agonising and perfectly futile thoughts. He hoped his wife was asleep, lapped for a little while in the merciful oblivion which overcomes the acutest misery, and even stays the sting of conscience. But asleep or awake, it was charity not to intrude upon her.

Sitting down half dressed on the edge of his bed, he reviewed the situation for the fiftieth time. He thought of all the world would say. He could almost hear the fateful whisperings, the awful insinuations dropped like poison into ready ears; he saw the arched brows, the gloating looks, the smirks of scorn and pity with which the tale of his shame would be rehearsed. And he knew, and this was, perhaps, the most galling thing

of all, that the world would be amply justified. People would call him a whited sepulchre, a deceiver unmasked, a Pharisee found out, and he could but hang the head in silence. Assuredly Satan had struck where the blow was deadliest and the effect most conspicuous.

According to his reputation Leslie Herrick was a man of spotless, indeed, of austere virtue. But with the austerity (if it existed) were mingled a tenderness, a sympathy, a brotherly charity which made the children of misfortune call him a saint. The saint was now struck in the very bosom of his saintliness. None needed tenderness, sympathy, brotherly charity more than he. Where was he to find them?

In matters of conduct the clergyman is judged by stricter standards than are applied to the ordinary man. This is just and proper. His path is made easy. He has not to go forth and wrestle in fierce competition for the bread he eats. He is protected by the respect and reverence which even in these days belong to his calling. Hence strugglers in the whirlpool, dusty traffickers in the mart, expect to see in him the fulfilment of ideals which they cannot realise for themselves.

Nevertheless an inconsistent world makes it easier for him to live and thrive if he evince something of its own spirit. The discreet minister, therefore, thinking prudently of loaves and fishes, is not all censor and moralist. The very discreet minister is perhaps not censor and moralist at all, save in an abstract and wholly impersonal fashion. This genial diplomatic tact insures pleasant relations with the dispensers of patronage and a safe and easy way up the golden stairs of preferment. The clergyman who is once hailed as "a good fellow" is made for life. What

becomes of him after death it is no one's business to consider.

It is doubtful if after the completion of his University career any one ever ventured to pay Leslie Herrick this high if equivocal compliment. He had never learned to wink at foibles forbidden in the Decalogue, nor hint that perdition is the creation of interested persons. Once when a disciple of the Broad School invited him to behold the vast toleration of Nature, he answered, "Yes, Nature is indeed marvellous. You tell me she has a wondrous catholicity. The fact is undeniable. She tolerates with the impassivity of the Sphinx, and, mark you, in like manner destroys. She does not cry out when she is disobeyed; she merely waits, and in her own good time silently crushes the rebel. Except the power and majesty of God I know nothing sublimer, nothing more awful than the catholicity of Nature."

The Broad School evangelist opened his eyes.

"Ah!" he said, "and the lesson—what do you make the lesson?"

"Simply this," was the answer, "that the logic of things is inexorable, and that sooner or later it brings all men to book, though the fool may delude himself with hopes of escape."

It now seemed that this pitiless system had him and his in its fell grip as between iron teeth; that every text he had ever enforced, every precept he had ever uttered, every counsel he had ever given, came back, each with a separate sting.

In a whirling turmoil he rose and walked to the window, which was partly open. Lumley Beacon stands in the highway of traffic between London and the great Midland centres of industry. But it refrains from imitating the strenuousness of either. It is

surrounded by woods and fat pastures, whereon flocks of sheep and herds of sleek oxen feed succulently in preparation for metropolitan dinner-tables. Lumley Hill, on the side of which the lazy, rusty-roofed town seems rather to recline than stand squarely on solid foundations, was frequently ablaze with beacon fires in the days when England had need to keep her weapons bright and handy. Hence the name, Lumley Beacon. When the hill-top flamed all the flat lands around bestirred themselves bravely enough to front danger; when it ceased to flame they sank back peacefully to their home-brewed and their prime juicy beef. The railway came, self-assertive and clamant; but Lumley Beacon merely retired further up its hillside, leaving the vulgar intruder at the bottom amid its own noise and smoke. High up the Vicarage stood by itself, a little Eden embowered among trees and flowers.

Herrick thus looked forth upon a serene pastoral landscape. Though the season was autumn the sun shone with a spring-like gladness and buoyancy. Sparrows made a chattering din about the eaves as if they mistook the time for midsummer. The liquid notes of a thrush came full-throated and jubilant from a dew-drenched clump under the window. In a distant field an exuberant heifer vocally saluted the sun, moving a rival or a mate to long-drawn emulation.

Herrick threw the sash up higher and leaned out. The glory of the morning enveloped him. The sweet fresh air fanned his brows and cooled his brain. In his nostrils were the distilled scents of wood and meadow gathered by the roving winds. His pulses began to beat more equably; a magical peace stole into his heart. He leaned yet farther out, filling his

lungs with an ineffable draught. For an instant it made his head light. Then a nameless exhilaration suffused his whole being. He was in a rapture, an ecstasy of joy and gratitude for being alive to feel all this goodness.

There are moments when the soul sweeps upward, as on some immeasurable billow, to heights which are not so much as dreamed of in common moods. They are usually moments of intense light after utter darkness, of heroic hope after craven despair. They are the crowning, epoch-making moments of life; they formulate and decide issues for eternity. Leslie Herrick drew back a new man, a man braced and rehabilitated, set right with himself and the God who made him.

He finished his dressing rapidly, impatiently, like one bent on a great deed and burning to get it done. So in fact he was. For he was going to *her* to share this new-found hope and courage. He would take her to the open window; he would ask her to lean out and drink full of the benediction which had come to himself. Ay, and he would tell her to put the past out of her thoughts and turn in faith and pious resolution to the future. Ah! it was magnificent, magnificent! Surely he had never tasted of God's goodness till now.

He left the room in the spirit which straightens weary backs and sets drooping heads erect. Silently but swiftly he went to his wife, his face radiant, his heart leaping with the greeting he was to give her.

Expecting her door to be locked, he knocked gently. Getting no answer, he knocked a little louder, his pulses delirious with a joyous impatience. Still getting no answer, he tried the knob. It turned: the door opened and he entered, ready to cry out in his

transport of love and gladness. But the greeting froze on his tongue. The room was vacant and disordered. In a spasm of terror he leaped forward, calling his wife's name. Then, with a reeling sensation, he halted, like one mortally stricken.

CHAPTER V

PRESENTLY his eye caught an envelope so placed on the dressing-table that it could not be missed. A glance showed that it was addressed to himself. With a hand trembling as if palsied he seized and tore it open. This is what he read:—

“My own husband, mine still, mine for ever, though I may never see your dear face again.

“I do not know how I am going to write this letter or say what I want to tell you. I scarcely know what I am doing: but perhaps you will understand. This night I am an outcast—an outcast. I could bear the shame if it were laid on me alone. I am nothing. But, God help me! it falls on you and Pearl also, the husband and child for whom it would be perfect happiness to die here and now. That is the thought which I cannot endure. Yesterday we talked of repentance and a new life. Impossible, dearest. I see that now. A thing has been done which no tears of repentance can wash away, no, not if they were to flow in rivers or bulked like the surging ocean itself. Why did I do it? I don't know. I simply cannot tell. I was weak and wicked. I suppose that must be the answer. But, before God, I did not mean to

be. Why didn't some one dash the accursed thing out of my hand long, long ago, when I had no liking for it, when I was pure and innocent? It would have saved me now. Oh! my dearest, dearest, best beloved, that it should ever have come to this with us—with us who were so happy. I think I must stop. My head is bursting: I cannot hold the pen.

"Half an hour has passed since I wrote that last sentence. I wonder if any mortal ever suffered so much before in so short a time. A new and awful thought has come to me. Is it possible that Pearl can inherit the sin of her mother? I have heard you say many a time that we cannot escape the inheritance of our fathers. Have I bequeathed the curse to my darling? Great God, do not say that I have been guilty of the damnation of my child, that I have destroyed her hope of the heaven I may never see. But if I dwell on that I shall go mad.

"What I have to tell you, then, is that I am going away. Forgive and pity me. What has happened will not happen again. I will make quite, quite sure of that. So I am going away. I am tempted to take Pearl with me; but that would be increasing my guilt and her danger. I am not fit to have her. Take care of her. Let her forget me—yet not that either, not that. In the grave itself, through all the endless eternity, I should be yearning for one thought of my darling's heart. Train her to be a good woman. Tell her, as my last message, proved in awful bitterness, that at last there is nothing in all the world worth having except goodness, the jewel I have thrown away.

"I go into the darkness alone. I entreat you do not try to find me. I wish to disappear quietly and completely, a poor, worthless wind¹estraw sucked

down into the great gulf. But oh! my husband, pray for me. You are a good man—a good, good man. It kills me to think I am so unworthy of you. But pray for me. It may be that God's arm will reach even to the depths where I am.

"I cannot write more. I am nearly blind. My head is splitting; but it is not half so sore as my heart. God bless you. He will if He heeds my supplications. He heeded the Magdalene. After all, am I a worse sinner than she was?

"Your distracted, disgraced, but still loving

"GRACIE.

"PS.—Tell father and mother as you think fit. Poor, poor things I ever to have reared such a daughter as I am."

He finished the reading of this letter in utter stupefaction. For a little he stood breathless and dead still in what seemed a ghastly vacancy, a blackness as of falling worlds. Then by degrees he began to realise what had befallen him. She was gone—gone. With the joy of morning on his lips, with love and hope and forgiveness in his heart, he came to her, and lo! she was not there to receive him. It was as if he hastened blithely to a bridal, and instead of music and happy faces found the silence of death. What were all his high intentions, his glowing resolutions, worth now? While he, poor fond fool, planned a glad future for both, she was flying like a criminal.

And, in truth, like one guilty of an awful crime she went. Only before going she did something which was not in the least like the act of a criminal. Coming forth silently from her room, she kneeled first before his door and then before Pearl's, her

head bowed so low that her streaming face touched the floor. Then rising, she went downstairs quickly, like one afraid her courage might fail. As she drew the door noiselessly behind her, the first streak of dawn gleamed over the tree-tops. Instinctively she looked up: but instantly dropped her head and fled swiftly, a fugitive from the very light of heaven. A little later her husband entered her deserted room, as we saw.

In a clammy, oozing cold he re-read the letter, perceiving this time how deeply it was stained and splotched with tears. Gracious Heaven! what anguish she must have suffered in writing that tragic farewell message.

His eye caught the glitter of a small heap of jewellery placed conspicuously, as the letter had been, on the dressing-table. With the tip of his finger he scattered it gingerly, and was seized by a new horror. For there in the midst lay her wedding-ring, to signify, as his terrorised heart told him, that she had made her word good and was indeed gone.

With a cry of pain he turned from the outspread trinkets, a frenzied impulse to pursue thrilling in nerve and blood. But where was he to pursue—where? It seemed he never knew helplessness till then.

He read the letter yet again, marking the ominous determination not to be found. He shook in a fresh and grisly fear. What if, in a delirium of shame and remorse, the poor, crazed brain gave way? Was his loved one, never loved as now when she was lost, was she to be amongst the abject wrecks and derelicts of humanity, the flotsam and jetsam which provide coroners with their ghastly

business? Not that, gracious Heaven! not that. Anything, anything else.

A new thought darted through his brain. Had she gone off fully dressed? He flew to the wardrobe, nearly wrenching off the catch in his haste to get the door open. But there, too, all was disorder. He could not tell what she took

As he turned away, sick and giddy, the light sound of a footstep outside caught his ear. He sprang to the door and opened it, to look into the pale but smiling face of Pearl.

"I have come to bid mama good morning," she informed him, "and hope she is better."

She made to pass, but he stopped her peremptorily, almost harshly, as she thought, in her surprise.

"Mama must not be disturbed," he told her, stepping out and shutting the door after him. "Come."

Next minute he returned stealthily, locked the door, and put the key in his pocket.

CHAPTER VI

NEAR midnight a dead-weary man entered the police office at Lumley Beacon and dropped limply on a bench. It was Herrick.

The superintendent greeted him in surprise, and marking his desolate appearance, sniffed a tragedy. To be sure, the Rev. Leslie Herrick was the last man in the world to be associated with such tragedies as require police intervention; yet experience taught the superintendent that it is precisely the unexpected for which a zealous police officer has at all times to be prepared.

"Can I do anything for you, sir?" he asked politely.

"Will you please give me a glass of water?" Herrick returned; "and then I have something of the gravest importance to tell you."

He drank the glass of water greedily, and felt better. "Can we have a few minutes by ourselves?" he asked then.

"Certainly," replied the superintendent. "This way." They passed into an inner room, a sergeant and a constable looking curiously after them.

"Wonder what's up?" said the latter. "Seems pretty sick. Looks as if something's happened and he has come straight to surrender."

"It's about what he would do," observed the sergeant, who knew the Vicar well. "If he's gone and done those things as he oughtn't to do, being a parson and a respectable man, he's had the sense to come to the right place, anyway."

They were wondering whether he would come forth again a free man or remain within. It would certainly be piquant to have the parish clergyman under lock and key.

Meanwhile, Herrick was doing what he had sworn not to do. In the morning he set out, fiercely resolved to find his wife for himself and so save her good name. Eighteen hours of frantic, futile searching had broken that resolution and sent him beseeching aid where secrecy was impossible.

"I come to you on very unpleasant business," he told the superintendent. "The fact is, my wife has"—the words seemed to choke him, but he got them out somehow—"well, has disappeared rather unaccountably; and I have come to seek your help in finding her."

The superintendent inclined his head as in sympathy.

"When did she go, sir?" he asked, in a quiet, even voice.

"Early this morning or during the night. I cannot tell which."

"I take it you have yourself made an effort to find her?"

"I have been out all day searching wherever I thought she might be."

"And discovered no trace of her?"

"None, I am sorry to say—none whatever. No one saw her go off, and not a soul appears to have seen her since." Herrick's voice trembled as he

made the confession ; but the superintendent did not notice the circumstance. He was thinking of other things.

"Pardon me for being blunt, sir," he said, after a momentary pause ; "but it is best to be plain in such matters. Have you any cause to—well, to suspect suicide ?"

"I have been fighting the idea all day," was the reply. "I hope it will not be necessary to discuss that possibility yet—not just yet."

The superintendent observed him shudder like one in mortal extremity, and rang the bell.

"Bring Mr. Herrick a cup of tea and something to eat," he said, when his summons was answered. "It will do you good, sir," he added, in reply to Herrick's protest. "I dare say it is some time since you had any food."

"I have tasted nothing since last night," Herrick owned.

"Then," said the superintendent, who knew the rigors of an exhausted and famishing man—"then we will positively discuss nothing until you have had your tea."

He smiled like a Samaritan while Herrick nibbled at the bread and drank the tea gratefully ; then promptly resuming business he asked : "Did Mrs. Herrick leave any hint of her intentions or probable whereabouts ? Any message, for example ?"

"Since I have come to you it is right you should know all," replied Herrick, losing the slight flush which the hot tea gave him. "She left a letter. Here it is. Please read it for yourself."

He watched with a painful intensity while the superintendent read ; but the composed official countenance gave no clue to the thoughts within.

"What do you make of it?" Herrick asked, like a man holding his breath for a sentence of life or death. "You are accustomed to such things. Tell me honestly what you think."

The superintendent did not answer immediately. His face was grave and touched with pity for the sufferer before him.

"Mrs. Herrick was obviously very much upset when she wrote that letter," he replied cautiously, handing it back. "How people will act at their normal one can reckon with more or less accuracy; but not what they might do in a state of frenzy. You wish us to help you, Mr. Herrick?"

Nothing is to be gained by vague speculation or violent displays of emotion. Therefore both are discouraged in police offices.

"If you will or can," was the quivering response. "Perhaps I had better tell you the whole story. It may help you to understand and plan." He was pathetically eager to tell, to do anything that might by a remote chance be useful.

"First, sir," returned the superintendent, "may I ask just one question?"

"Any question you like," was the quick reply.

"Then I will just ask this," said the superintendent. "Was Mrs. Herrick's disappearance due, do you think, in any way whatever to any act of your own?"

"You mean was there anything in my conduct to make her commit such an act of desperation?" cried Herrick, aghast at the idea.

"We are obliged to be or seem impertinent at times," explained the superintendent softly. "But I ask in your own interest, sir. Any little quarrel or difference?"

"Quarrel!" repeated Herrick, as if the mere notion

burned like an acid into his mind and heart. "No, thank God I nothing of the sort. Nothing whatever."

"Then you need not tell me the story now," said the superintendent quietly. "For the present it is enough for us to know that Mrs. Herrick is missing."

In his soul Herrick was grateful for that mercy. "Thank you," he said, in a low voice, scarcely daring to trust himself to speech. "Thank you. But please understand you have only to ask to be told everything."

"I will remember," responded the superintendent. "And now, sir, have you any hint to give?"

"I am too confused," was the answer, "to give any hint. But I hold desperately to the hope that she may recover herself and return. Such things do happen, don't they? And for that reason I should like you to proceed secretly."

"That is to say you wish as far as possible to avoid publicity."

"Exactly, exactly. You see, if we made a fuss and she returned of her own accord we should be sorry. At any rate I should."

"Of course, though there may come a point in our investigations when publicity cannot be avoided."

"True, true; but in the meantime——"

"In the meantime secrecy is the word. Have you any idea where she is likely to go?"

A look of pain and despair came into Herrick's face.

"None," he answered, "none. The truth is, I have come to you only when I could do nothing else."

The superintendent nodded. That was generally the case.

"I gather she is not likely to go back to her own people," he said.

"No; it is certain she would not," Herrick assured him.

"Nor to any friend you can think of?"

"Nor to any friend I can think of."

"You say you have yourself searched every place near home where she might be concealed."

"Every place."

"And have found no clue?"

"Not one. Not a single one."

"In other words, it is a case of complete, of absolute disappearance."

"Absolute," groaned Herrick. "Complete and absolute."

There was no need to say more. The superintendent made a movement towards the door as if to intimate that the interview need not be prolonged, and the two men returned to the outer office. A minute later Herrick went out into the night alone.

"Poor beggar!" said the superintendent, turning back quickly after seeing him off. "Lost his wife. Taken French leave."

"An elopement?" inquired the sergeant shrewdly.

The superintendent laughed. "Worse than that," he returned. "Gone—but not in the way of romance."

"And we're expected to find her, I suppose," said the sergeant.

"Yes," answered the superintendent almost jauntily. "We're expected to find her." He drummed on the desk with his finger-tips like one in a pleasant muse.

"Any clue?" asked the sergeant.

"None. Got to make the clue for ourselves. He's mortally afraid it's suicide and he's pretty well broken up. I have known a great many men get into trouble

one way or another over their wives. It's a risky business, getting married. When a man marries he often makes work for the police. Tum, tum, tiddlity tum. Well, we must do our best to find the runaway—dead or alive—dead or alive."

That way lay promotion.

CHAPTER VII

A WEEK passed—a week of agonising suspense, varied by wild liftings of hope and yet wilder plungings of despair. With each recurring night Herrick wondered how much more the cords of the human heart could bear without cracking. Fate was doing her best to impart that bitterest piece of knowledge. Seven brief days seemed to have added half a century to his age. As by a stroke of lightning his life was cleft in two. On one side of the gulf he was young, full of hope and ardour, full of ambition, aye, and despite some moments of disquietude, full of happiness. On the other he was an old man bent under a crushing weight of misery. He felt things could never be again as they had been. In that feeling lies all the tragedy of humanity.

The police found no clue. Somehow he did not expect they could. True to her resolution, the fugitive baffled all the ingenuity of the detective.

"She was very clever, was she not?" the superintendent remarked to her distracted husband at one of their many interviews.

"Very clever," was the answer. "Very, very clever."

"Ah!" said the superintendent. "That's the diffi-

culty. We have no trouble with stupid people. It's the clever people who set our wits at defiance."

To his men he said: "She is either at the bottom of a pond or a river or she is hidden in London—probably the former. Yes, I should certainly think the former."

All the while Herrick was in that state of anguish which consists in hoping against the hope of keeping a tragedy secret. Every morning he went forth drearily to search, every evening he returned sick and limp, every night he lay awake through a black eternity of torture to face another dawn, a little more haggard, a little more wretched than on the day before. And in her eager, wondering, almost feverish affection Pearl added poignantly to his distress. "Where is mama? When will she come back? Why did she go away without kissing me goodbye?" were questions she asked with increasing insistency.

For a while he parried her questions, answering vaguely or deftly changing the subject. But at last, being able to bear no more, he cried out, "Don't ask me, Pearl; don't ask me, darling. I don't know." She gazed at his wrung countenance, her eyes expressing first awe, then acute pain, then a quick living sympathy. There is a terrible, a divine intuition in childhood which goes straight to the mark where adult reason falters blindly or altogether fails. Perhaps the world has not yet grasped the Master's truth that the kingdom of heaven is like unto a little child.

Pearl did not speak. Instead, with a swift impulsive movement she clambered on her father's knee and clasped her arms about his neck in passionate tenderness and devotion. With womanly instinct she was comforting the stricken man. Weakness was upholding strength with the magical potency of love. Was that

God's way of answering his midnight prayer, of telling him that he was not forsaken? Perhaps.

Sitting thus with clenched arms Pearl asked no questions. She simply held as tight as she could, knowing that when she was herself in trouble she liked to be held just so. Such a clasp was balm for all her griefs; she would make it balm for his also. Her cheek, pressed hard against his, was thrust so far forward that she could not see his face. A delicate feminine tact told her it was best not to look. In extreme cases people bow the head and hide the face. But the small arms drew harder and yet harder. Then all at once she felt her cheek wet. She had no need to be told what was happening. The enfolding arms tightened as in desperation, as though by very force of pressure she would rid him of his woe.

In all her life she had never seen a man weeping. Jesus, as she knew, wept; but that was long, long ago, when men and things were different. It had never occurred to her that a full-grown man of to-day could weep. Crying was for little girls, at rare intervals for little boys, and in tremendous crises for full-blown women. But a man in tears—the thing was entirely outside the scope of her experience or reckoning. Yet somehow she was not in the least surprised. Love inspired her to hold tight, and she held with all her little might, her face wet with his tears.

He made no attempt to disengage the small soft arms. It was good to feel them, though hard to bear them. Pearl felt the strong chest heave, and put a delirious force into her clasp.

"Papa, dear papa!" she murmured. "Dear, dear papa!"

For a minute or two they sat thus in silence. Then she whispered in his ear, like a magician who had

performed her wonders: "There now, I must leave you for a little, just a little, little while." She kissed him quickly, slipped from his knee, and ran off without casting so much as a look back. It was not seemly to behold a strong man in the throes of grief. Neither was it seemly to speak of what she knew.

"I must not tell any one," she told herself with fiery resolution. "Not any one. A man isn't used to crying, and papa didn't mear me to see him, I am sure he didn't."

Pearl might keep sealed lips, but Mrs. Grundy was not to be denied her immemorial privileges. Piquantly agog, that delectable personage was already beginning to ply a busy tongue over his affairs, as the suffering Herrick found.

CHAPTER VIII

THAT very day his desperation drove him to call without appointment on his Bishop, a man reputed to be a stickler concerning episcopal dignities and etiquette. Luckily he knew the Vicar of Lumley Beacon intimately, and though a man of affairs, had an appreciation of spiritual gifts.

"Important business, no doubt," he said cordially, in reply to Herrick's broken apologies for the intrusion.

"You are pale. Not ill, I hope?"

"Not ill," Herrick answered, "and yet not well either."

"Fortunately luncheon is just ready," said the Bishop genially. "He was a shrewd man who discovered that the fortunes of business depend on the success of the cook. Ah! you would rather avoid the luncheon table? Very well. Perhaps I can understand. It shall be as you like." And without more ado he led the way to the library.

"We shall be quite private here," he remarked. "Pray be seated. No serious trouble, I hope?"

"Yes, I have come to you with serious trouble, my lord," Herrick replied.

"Then," returned the Bishop, "since you have come

to me I will ask you to do me the favour of speaking quite frankly and in confidence."

Thereupon, haltingly and brokenly, Herrick told his pitiful story. The Bishop listened with sympathy and attention.

"Very curious," he observed when Herrick had finished. "I ought to tell you that only last night I met Lady Stapleton at dinner in London, and that she mentioned, perhaps I ought to say, rather, hinted something of what you have now told me."

"Then you knew my story," said Herrick, with an icy shudder.

"No, I didn't," returned the Bishop promptly. "Not till a minute ago. For I took occasion to turn Lady Stapleton's talk into other channels. For I knew that if there was anything to tell which I ought to know you would come to me. I prefer not to judge my clergy by the tittle-tattle of the dinner-table, even when the tattler is a lady and titled."

"Thank you, my lord," said Herrick, his tone and face, even more than his words, expressing his gratitude. "And you would have heard sooner, only I was hoping——"

"I understand," put in the Bishop quietly. "Tell me exactly how you stand now."

"In fearful dread of what the next hour may divulge," was the answer.

The Bishop looked intently but kindly into his Vicar's eyes. "You are fortifying yourself for the worst," he said.

"If despair can fortify, I am," was the response. "I expect the worst. I see no alternative."

"You have no theory that gives hope?"

"None, none that bears examination."

"Have Mrs. Herrick's parents any theory?"

"I have not told them yet. I ought to have done so ; but the plain truth is, my lord, I couldn't."

The Bishop sighed. "When we are really hurt we do not cry out, we instinctively try to hide the wound and its cause. I dare say it was not of yourself you were thinking."

"I was not thinking of myself at all," Herrick returned piteously. "A week has taught me, my lord, that I am of very little consequence. But there are others, in particular my little girl."

The Bishop nodded. "I understand," he said gently. "I am a father myself. Children hang by one's heart-strings. But you must tell your father-in-law. Think of his feelings as well as your own."

"I have thought of them," cried Herrick, in a quiver of pain. "I have been trying to spare him. I have been trying to hush up a scandal among the people and among my brother clergymen."

"We cannot put padlocks on babbling or evil tongues," said the Bishop ruefully. "But as for the clergy of this diocese, I hope and trust they have more feeling, more charity, than to turn a brother's misfortune into a cry of shame. I shall know how to deal with any such case coming to my knowledge. You have searched very diligently for your wife?"

"As diligently as my poor strength enabled me," Herrick returned.

"And if you found her?" said the Bishop. His voice was low ; his eyes were the eyes of a brother. He was thinking there are things which are best hid, memories and events for which the grave is by far the fittest place. This thought did not come at all to the Bishop. There was no place for it within the folds of the episcopal robes. It belonged wholly to the man,

brought face to face with a fellow creature in shame and agony.

"And if you found her?" he said with peculiar significance.

Herrick did not answer. The Bishop, divining he could not, leaned towards his visitor.

"Manifestly we may take it that Mrs. Herrick does not mean to come back," he said, a new tenderness in his voice. "It may be, my dear Herrick, that the old, old experience has come to you which David expressed. *I shall go to him: but he shall not return to me.* It is my vocation and yours to prepare others for such events. Let us not forget ourselves. I give you my hand."

Herrick took it in silence and bent over it. Even the Bishop found it hard to speak, but he managed to say, "All you have told me concerning yourself and all I now see before me does you honour. Rest in that assurance. And I want you to know, and act on the knowledge, that I am here to help you always, if I can and you give me the opportunity."

"Thank you, my lord," answered Herrick brokenly. "Thank you."

"Your brother, if you please," rejoined the Bishop quickly. "Your brother, to whom you can come in absolute confidence at any time. For the rest, my dear Herrick, if you were counselling another, you would tell him, would you not? to have courage and patience. The world judges us by the use we make of our own admonitions. There are many eyes upon you now; there will be many more upon you presently. Do not cry out, do not rebel. We are shortsighted. We do not know what benefits God means to bestow through this sharp discipline. Only be assured that He is not unheeding. If I could only get my people

to believe that and act on the belief, I should be able to say in the end with perfect joy, 'Lord, here are they, every one, whom Thou gavest me.' Less than any other man I have ever known, much less than myself, you need preaching. But I ask you not to forget that faith and patience and hope and courage are for the day of calamity."

Herrick looked with glistening eyes into his Bishop's face.

"I will not forget," he said; "God helping me, I will not forget."

"That is good," returned the Bishop, like one on whom a great favour is conferred. "That is the best of omens. Meantime your confidence lies here inviolate." He touched his breast. "Come to me as often as you feel inclined. It will give the quidnuncs less chance to gloat and look wise than if I go to you."

"And my pastoral work?" asked Herrick.

"We will talk of that another time," replied the Bishop.

CHAPTER IX

WHEN Herrick presently left, it was in the turmoil which comes of feelings blended almost wholly of opposites. The Bishop had at once braced and unnerved him, inspired him with new hope, frozen him with fresh despair ; so that one part of his mind was thrown into utter blackness by reason of the glowing brightness of the other. Nature and destiny manage their effects on the exquisite principle of contrasts, the throb of pain being the keener when set against the thrill of joy.

For one thing, the hope to which Herrick had clung like the drowning man to his straw must now be abandoned. What he strove frantically to hide must be revealed ; the open shame confessed. His friends must be told what had come upon him, the police freed from all fetters of secrecy in prosecuting their search. The press would revel in the sensation, and the world, with a million venomous tongues, insinuate infamy. In a flash of the imagination Herrick saw it all, and knew he was to undergo the most excruciating of operations without anæsthetics. He could only set his teeth and submit, praying that the ordeal be not too cruelly prolonged. He went first to the police, telling them henceforth to bate no jot of publicity which might aid them in their search. Next, facing a harder

duty still, he took train to his wife's old home at Rushborough, a Midland town notable in the latter-day history of industry.

Mrs. Herrick's father, Mr. Samuel Kippen, had given himself zealously to Mammon, and received the reward which comes to the man of single heart and aim. Mr. Kippen was now at the head of the great bank he had entered as a junior clerk five-and-thirty years before, with a luxuriant Scotch accent and the scantiest stock of gold. In the course of time he vastly increased the latter and considerably abated the former. His life consisted of two impelling ambitions. On the first day he entered the institution he resolved to get "somewhere near the top," and in that purpose he never faltered until it was accomplished.

While his fellow clerks engaged in social delights he was working, planning schemes of advancement. Most of them were still enjoying life as clerks when he was on the delectable heights as general manager, with their fate in his hands. The top gained, his second ambition came into operation. He found the bank an insignificant provincial affair; he made it a national institution, with Metropolitan offices and a colossal capital. But he did not himself remove to London. "I will direct from Rushborough," he said. There was something pleasing to the fancy and gratifying to honest pride in making Rushborough dictate to London, the huge egotist with the offensive airs of superiority, if not of omnipotence.

The triumphant banker, if he be not endued with phenomenal modesty, almost inevitably suffers a distorting inflation of the organs of self-esteem. The world comes to him as a suitor for what the world most covets and values—money. Hence he sometimes falls into the delusion that the very light of heaven

itself is but the sheen of burnished gold ; and at all times he entertains an honest, if politely veiled, contempt for everything which cannot ultimately be weighed in his cashier's scales or locked away in the strong-room as gilt-edged securities. His final notion of virtue is a thumping bank account.

It would be wronging his intelligence to aver that Mr. Kippen had not an ample and proper sense of his own importance and the greatness of his position. He had worked hard and he enjoyed power, which he exercised with consummate mastery. The directors were his tools, the staff were his tools, the shareholders were his tools ; the capital was the most effective tool of all ; and he used these various tools to such effect that at each annual meeting the mere mention of his name evoked tumults of applause.

In rule he was a martinet. During the early days of his *régime* a few managers, fogeys of the old order, who knew him as a junior and could not forget the fact, presumed, more familiarly than was fitting, to have minds of their own. As an example and encouragement to others they were invited to tender their resignations. Discipline is discipline ; a commander-in-chief must command. For the rest, having proved the potency of money, Mr. Kippen stood foursquare to the world on a basis of gold, as a banker ought.

He did not neglect the one imperative duty of all good citizens. In spite of his absorption in money-making he found time to marry, and as a contribution to the State and society he presented three sons and one daughter. The sons he trained to business ; the daughter he educated in "all necessary accomplishments," home and foreign, hoping that so equipped she would proceed in the customary way, and without

undue loss of time, to find herself a husband. Nor did she disappoint him. While little more than a girl she found one in the Rev. Leslie Herrick, a young and handsome clergyman, of excellent family and moderate prospects. Mr. Kippen made no pretence of being elated. He would have preferred a son-in-law more in the money sphere. Yet he reckoned that the many millions which flow into the coffers of the Church ought to afford a tolerably shrewd man something more than tolerable pickings. The bride went off in tears and happiness, as the way of brides is, and he turned again to his dividend-making, thankful that busy people are not every day pestered with weddings.

The subsequent intercourse with the new member of his family was not such as to inspire Mr. Kippen with any profound respect or sympathy. His son-in-law insisted on discussing things which did not interest him, and evinced a deplorable ignorance of the things which did. "A baby," he once remarked impatiently to his wife, "an absolute baby! I only hope he is not a fool as well. What do our universities teach, anyway?"

"Latin and Greek and things of that sort, I suppose," returned Mrs. Kippen at a venture.

"Latin and Greek and things of that sort!" repeated Mr. Kippen scornfully. "Just so. Latin and Greek and things of that sort, that is to say, things that are as dead as Egyptian mummies, and every whit as useless. I never learned Latin and Greek. Am I any the worse for it?"

"No, dear," replied his wife meekly.

"I should hope not," said Mr. Kippen. "My directors and shareholders don't think so, any way. The universities, I understand, plume themselves on something or other which they call culture, an article

that seems to have exactly and precisely the same market value as moonshine. That's evidently what men waste their time and their money on at Oxford and Cambridge. Snobbery, I call it—a system that turns out prigs and dandified good-for-nothings. I'd have their Oxford and their Cambridge swept out of the way like old rubbish, if I had my way."

"Leslie's full of ideas, anyway," said Mrs. Kippen, who cherished a deep, if secret, regard for her son-in-law.

"Oh, choke full!" was the response. "As full, in fact, as a blown bladder is of wind. Pugh! we want something practical in these days, something tangible. I wonder what show Leslie's ideas would make in a Board of Trade return, or—or" (the illustration was inevitable) "in our annual accounts. I wish I could get him for six months—just six months—into my office; he'd get rid of some of his fine ideas, I warrant you."

To such a father-in-law Herrick was now coming with the tale we know.

It was already dark before he reached Rushborough, and the glare of its furnaces, set off against a starless sky, made the night weirdly lurid. There was something tragically in harmony with his mood in the tartarean flames which leaped up as if striking at something in the air, and turned and coiled and licked their brick funnels like red and yellow crested snakes writhing over their prey. He did not know that Mr. Kippen held the title-deeds of some of those belching fiends and counted them among the bank's best securities. He was not thinking in the least of title-deeds nor of banks, nor of the great, the supreme art of money-making.

To compose himself (if that were possible) for an interview he would have avoided at the cost of all

his worldly possessions, he walked from the station through the lighted town to the Kippen residence, a mansion taken over from an unfortunate debtor at less than half its original price. It stood spacious and serene within its own ample grounds, away from the smoky, dusty traffic that was nevertheless as the breath of life to its owner.

As the gate swung behind him and he entered the stately elm-bordered avenue, Herrick's excitement became a delirium. For as he drew near his destination a mad new thought made his head light. Was it possible that *she* had after all gone to her father and was even now waiting for him to claim her again as the guerdon of chivalry? Perhaps she was trying him. In the old happy days he thought her girlishly, almost absurdly romantic. It might be she was now testing, challenging her knight afresh. On that notion he walked as in a dreaming ecstasy of elation. In a giddy vision he saw himself approaching her father's door, the lover once more, and *she* running out, white-robed and radiant, to greet him as of old. What should he say to her in the moment of meeting? Should he say anything? Would it not be best to say nothing, to take her in his arms simply and look into her eyes and make her feel the love that surged triumphantly in his heart? Yes, that was it: love triumphant, love that blotted out all the unpleasant past, with its agonies, suspense, and disappointment, and looked to a glowing, irradiated, consecrated future.

Panting and faint with his transports, he turned a curve in the avenue and came full view upon the house. The front was a blaze of illumination, every window, as it seemed, being brilliantly lighted. It suggested festive gaiety, and the remembrance of his mission struck him with a sudden deadly cold. Then

as suddenly his heart began to beat like a trip-hammer against his ribs and the drumming blood made a noise in his ears as of mighty waterfalls.

The dining-room blinds were undrawn and he could see a great company assembled—men of aldermanic proportions and consequence, women with bare shoulders, shimmering and flashing in jewels. He marked, too, the gleam of crystal and silver ware, and as he looked a servant went round pouring out wine. All at once a fierce passion seized him, a futile passion of anger and resentment. There, there was the hellish thing which wrought all the woe—sparkling in glasses held smilingly to smiling lips—in *her* home, ay, merriment at the glittering table within, and he outside in the darkness, and *she*, God alone knew where.

Wheeling abruptly, he walked back a distance of fifty yards or so; then again wheeled as abruptly as before. At the end of ten minutes of agitated pacing to and fro his gust of passion was spent. It left him limp and nerveless. He felt his courage oozing. Unless he took care he should end by running away. Perhaps the most effective incentive to courage is a piercing sense of cowardice. Herrick drew in his breath as if bracing for a crucial effort, and like a soldier crossing a fire zone made swiftly for the door and rang the bell—vigorously, as though to deprive himself of any chance of retreating.

He asked for Mr. Kippen. The servant, who did not know him, answered that Mr. Kippen was particularly engaged and could see no one.

“I think he will spare me a moment,” said Herrick, sweating under the treatment.

The servant looked him over critically: he had a look of distress, and as in pity she asked, “What name, sir?”

When she heard it she invited him in with a murmur of apology, and hurried to the dining-room with her message.

But instead of responding himself, Mr. Kippen sent his wife. She came with a genuine welcome in her heart, but at sight of Herrick's drawn, haggard face, she cried out in alarm, "Leslie, there is something the matter!"

"Yes," he answered. "There is something the matter, otherwise I would not intrude now."

"Something about Gracie?" she asked, and her heart stood still for the answer.

"Yes," he replied; "I am sorry to say something about Gracie."

"She is not dead, Leslie!" cried Mrs. Kippen. "Tell me she is not dead!"

"I will not tell you she is dead," was the response. "But I have bad news, and it is best, I think, I should see her father—alone."

In her panic Mrs. Kippen left him without another word, running straight to her husband.

Next minute he came out, his face full of surprise and rebuke. For that was his great night of the year, the night on which he entertained his directors. Any interruption or intrusion was therefore doubly annoying.

CHAPTER X

"WELL?" said Mr. Kippen, scarcely taking time to greet his son-in-law. From long habit in putting that brusque interrogative to underlings and dependents, his voice had acquired an awesome rasp of imperiousness and impatience. The present intrusion, coming at the most inopportune moment, tended rather to increase than diminish the habitual bluntness. He, too, noted Herrick's haggard, disquieted look, but did not stay to ask the cause. It saves time and temper to let intruders explain themselves promptly, the more particularly if their business may chance to be disagreeable.

Herrick did not answer immediately. He had planned what to say in the awful moment, but now that it was come, the face of Mr. Kippen seemed to freeze the fountains of speech within him.

"I am dreadfully sorry to break in on you in this way," he faltered at last. "And sorrier still to be the bringer of bad news."

"About Gracie, Samuel," put in Mrs. Kippen, who, forsaking her duty as hostess, slipped back to the drawing-room to listen.

"What's the matter with Gracie?" Mr. Kippen demanded,

"I don't know," his wife responded fearfully; "Leslie has come to tell us." She turned her eyes imploringly to Herrick.

"I only know myself," he blurted, as if the words were shaken out of him, "that she left home some days ago and has not returned."

Mrs. Kippen gave a cry as of pain, which she promptly stifled at a glance from her husband. He did not believe in emotion. Iron and granite men called him, and he was secretly gratified. Iron and granite do not break into foolish displays of feeling at every touch of circumstance. Iron and granite are symbols of strength, and Mr. Kippen, being strong himself, adored strength.

"I asked you to remain in the dining-room," he told his wife rebukingly. "Our guests are much too important to be neglected. Go back and say I'll be with them again in a few minutes. There now, go at once, please." He opened the door for her himself, and shut it firmly behind her. That done, he turned, fixing his hard eyes on Herrick.

"You mean, as I understand it, that Gracie has run away from home," he said.

"That's the plain truth of it, sir," replied Herrick, trembling to his heart's core.

"When did she go?"

"A week ago."

"A week ago, and this is the first I have been told of it. Do you think that is right or proper?"

"I was hoping that either she would return or I should find her. I have been searching everywhere."

"And you forgot your duty to her father. I gather you have no notion where she went."

"If I had, sir, be sure I would go straight to her."

"I suppose a wife running away from home would

scarcely leave her address. Why did she run away from you?"

Herrick winced as from the cut of a lash.

"Don't ask me that," he returned; "at any rate not for the present. For Gracie's sake I beg of you."

Mr. Kippen's face flashed back rebuke and amazement.

"Why, are you mad? You come to tell me my daughter has run away, left her home, and I am not to ask why! Consider what you say. She did not go without cause. I am entitled to know the cause. I take it there was a quarrel."

"No," Herrick answered with choking eagerness. "There was no quarrel. Gracie and I never quarrelled in our lives."

"That's extraordinary," observed Mr. Kippen, who had a theory that in all properly regulated households there must be quarrels to keep existence from stagnating. "No quarrel. Well, why did she take it into her head to run away? I presume you know."

"Yes—I know—but——"

"We will dispense with 'buts,' if you please. As one who has a right to know I ask why your wife left you."

Herrick had hoped, had, in fact, resolved, to keep the cause of her flight a secret from everybody. Not even to her father or mother would he breathe it. But since that vow could not be kept, since he durst not hedge and would not lie, he drew from his pocket her own letter, which he handed to her father as the best answer to all his questions. Mr. Kippen read it deliberately, as he was in the habit of reading documents put before him, his lips compressed, his face studiously impassive.

"This is the product of dementia," he remarked,

looking up, when he finished. "My poor daughter appears to have been extremely unhappy. She says she did not know what she was writing. That is obvious, poor thing! I can account for this letter on no theory except that of a misery which turned her brain. She speaks of disgrace. That is an exceedingly ugly word, and one to which I am not at all used in my family. You have struck me as with a thunderbolt. I am trying for everybody's sake to take it quietly; but I have this to say, that it will be best for all—best by a long, long way—to be perfectly candid and frank with me. Your home life has not been happy?"

"Oh, but it has, it has!" Herrick protested vehemently.

"Then I have no option but to conclude that Gracie has lost her reason," rejoined Mr. Kippen. "What put the idea of disgrace into her mind? Is it pure hallucination? Such things do not come about in a moment or without warning. I want to know exactly what led to this."

There was no help for it, and in broken half-sentences that tore his heart as he uttered them Herrick made his confession. At the mention of Lady Stapleton's name Mr. Kippen sprang to his feet.

"Lady Stapleton," he cried; "Lady Stapleton! Why, man, do you know that her husband, Sir Theodore Stapleton, is chairman of my Board, and—and is in my dining-room at this very moment?"

There was no impassivity now. The stroke went straight home. "And you tell me that as Lady Stapleton was addressing the wretched meeting in your drawing-room my daughter entered in-intoxicated."

"You asked for the truth, sir," Herrick panted in

reply, "and as Gracie's father I own your right to know it. But, before God, if you had not pressed me I would not have told."

Mr. Kippen took no notice of the plea.

"Did you know that your wife was drinking?" he demanded; and as Herrick hesitated, "I want to know everything—everything, you understand. Don't mind my feelings, and be good enough to remember that you are not the only person involved in this—this frightful scandal." He had to get out the fearful word; it came in spite of him. "I want to know all—the worst, the very worst. I ask again, did you know that your wife was drinking?"

"Yes, sir, I knew."

"And you allowed her to go on?"

"She promised——"

"Promised I" repeated Mr. Kippen, interrupting. "Promised I You knew she was drinking?"

"No, no I" cried Herrick, like one in unbearable agony. "She had been—but she gave it up. We talked it over. I pleaded with her—for her own sake, for Pearl's, for everybody's—to give it up completely; not to taste at all—and she did, she did; and we were so happy."

"You seem to have odd notions of happiness," retorted Mr. Kippen. "She was drinking—let us be candid with ourselves; she was drinking, and yet you invited Lady Stapleton to address a meeting in your house. Good God I didn't you see the danger; didn't it occur to you that you were courting exposure?"

"Lady Stapleton came to my house because she was Gracie's friend, and because Gracie wished it, and because I thought it was quite safe. At the last moment, not feeling very well, as I take it, and wishing

to be bright for the meeting, my poor wife forgot her promises. She took a glass of wine. The rest you must imagine. I was out. On returning and seeing how things were I took her at once to her own room—away from all eyes. She promised to remain there, and I thought her fit to keep her promise. The guests had arrived; I had to go to them. What prompted her to follow I cannot tell you. Probably she was not aware of her own condition. The rest you know."

"Yes," said Mr. Kippen, with extraordinary bitterness, "the rest I know."

CHAPTER XI

HE strode across the room, turned on a fiery heel and demanded, "Do you understand what it all means?"

"It means, I suppose, that I must resign my living," Herrick replied.

An expression of raging contempt sprang to Mr. Kippen's tongue. The answer was so ludicrous, evinced such a childish misconception of the relative importance of things, of a paltry Church living and the general managership of a great and flourishing bank.

"It may mean that *I* must resign," he said, as an archangel might speak of deposition or abdication. "Did you know of my relations with the Stapletons?"

"As I told you, sir, it was because of the old friendship that Lady Stapleton was invited."

Mr. Kippen made a gesture which suggested disgust as much as mere impatience.

"The old friendship!" he repeated. "In my calling there is no such thing as friendship. Only fools connect sentiment with business. Sentiment never yet earned a dividend and never will. Friendship, and this is the result! You see I am twice hit, for

I am Gracie's father, and manage the bank of which Sir Theodore Stapleton is chairman."

"I cannot tell you how grieved I am, sir," Herrick said in a kind of moan.

"No doubt, no doubt," rejoined Mr. Kippen. "But grief does not alter facts. There is this difference between your business and mine. You stake all on repentance; to me it is no use. It would be a poor plea to lay before my directors and shareholders for things gone wrong, that I was sorry. They'd very soon show what they thought of it by putting another man in my place. And now you see how I am placed by others. Lady Stapleton is at present in London and has evidently not yet told Sir Theodore. But she'll blab—as sure as Satan is evil she'll blab. And then——" Mr. Kippen waved his right arm to indicate universal wreck.

"You preach the doctrine that the innocent are safe," he continued hotly. "Do you see what a lie, what a monstrous and cruel lie that is? The innocent safe! I tell you the innocent are often in greater peril than the guilty."

Herrick was overwhelmed and dumb. In the ordinary exercise of his vocation he would have spoken soothingly, comfortingly, of those high things which are the crown and ultimate reward of innocence. It did not occur to him to do anything of the sort now. He stood dumfounded, his head bowed like one who is accused and has no answer.

Of a sudden Mr. Kippen remembered his guests. "I must go to them for a while," he said; "you will wait. If you were in the least humour for company, as I know you are not, I would ask you to come in with me. As it is, you shall have something in the library. You might be disturbed here."

He rang the bell, told a servant to attend to Herrick's wants, notwithstanding Herrick's protests that there were no wants to attend to, and went back to the dining-room obviously perturbed, despite a strenuous effort to appear at ease. The feeling of misfortune is as contagious as a plague. The guests felt it when Mrs. Kippen returned, they felt it still more strongly when Mr. Kippen returned. In some embarrassment the ladies fluttered into the drawing-room at the appointed time; the gentlemen lingered behind with a decent show of relish and even of conviviality over their cigars and wine. But the effort to be cheerful served only to emphasise the chill which had suddenly fallen. Sir Theodore Stapleton, taking the lead, made a plausible excuse and left early, an example followed by the others, though some of them would fain have tarried to discover what was amiss.

Before the wheels of the last carriage ceased to crunch the gravel outside, host and hostess were back with Herrick. Mr. Kippen would have preferred to return alone, but after all his wife was Gracie's mother.

He sat down crushing the dead stump of a cigar in his hand. "I have to tell you, my dear," he remarked to Mrs. Kippen, "that the unfortunate Gracie was addicted to drink—a nice thing to say of your daughter and mine. What I want to know now," he pursued, turning to Herrick, "is what drove her to drink. Obviously she lived for some time in great misery. What was the cause of that misery?"

"You drive me, sir, to speak the truth too bluntly," said Herrick, his mouth crackling with dryness.

"Truth was meant to be blunt," was the retort. "The blunter the better. There is nothing to be

gained now by glozing. Be as blunt as you possibly can."

"Then, sir," returned Herrick, "you have yourself stated the cause of misery."

"Drink," said Mr. Kippen curtly. "Yes ; but who or what drove her to it ?"

"She was never driven to it," Herrick answered.

"We mince words," said Mr. Kippen. "What gave her a taste for it, then ?"

"I cannot answer that question, sir."

"I think you can if you try."

"I cannot," Herrick reiterated.

"Why not ? Remember that you are under pledge to speak plainly. The disaster is upon us. We have to face it, whether we like it or not, and we shall be the better able to deal with it if we know the exact truth."

"I have told you, sir," Herrick cried.

He was suffering acutely. Mr. Kippen, being exceedingly shrewd, detected in that suffering, that extreme reluctance to speak out, the unmistakable token of guilt. They were the worst kind of sinners who shirked or dodged confession.

"You have told me only in part," was the rejoinder. "Shall I be forced to add, the part which evidently suits yourself ? Was it in your house Gracie learned to drink ?"

"No, sir, it was not."

"Was it in your friends' houses ?"

"No."

"Then where in the world was it ? Am I to infer she went out like—like a common woman to the public-houses ?"

"He who would hint such a thing would lie in his throat," Herrick protested tragically.

"Will you be good enough to answer a plain question plainly, then?" said Mr. Kippen, confirmed in his suspicion by all this hedging and reticence. "Where did Gracie get the taste for drink?"

It seemed to Herrick that the air was thick with tiny darts of fire. As he did not speak Mr. Kippen leaned forward, his look piercing and stern.

"Why do you hesitate?" he asked. "Once more, where did Gracie get the appetite for drink? Do you know?"

"Yes," Herrick replied huskily; "I think I know."

"Then tell me. I demand it as my right."

Herrick gulped as if trying in vain to swallow something.

"Do not force me, sir," he returned; "I ask you not to force me."

"Are you afraid?" asked Mr. Kippen, truculently thrusting his face forward. The hot blood sprang singing into Herrick's ears, but he kept his temper in check.

"No," he answered firmly, "I am not afraid, at any rate for myself."

"Then tell me," rejoined Mr. Kippen, "and never mind any one else."

Herrick looked straight into the fierce domineering eyes bent on him.

"Then, if I must answer," he said, "it was here."

The words were spoken with amazing quietness, yet as they were uttered something seemed to crash, leaving a dread vacancy and silence. Mr. Kippen was the first to recover himself.

"Here I" he repeated incredulously. "Did you say here?"

"You forced me," cried Herrick, quivering from

sole to crown. "I warned you, but you would not heed."

Mr. Kippen's face became livid.

"It is a lie," he said from between set teeth.

"Oh, Samuel!" wailed Mrs. Kippen, like one incurably hurt.

"A lie," reiterated Mr. Kippen; "a base, black, diabolical lie."

A stinging sensation thrilled through Herrick, such as a man of honour feels under deadly insult.

"I am not in the habit of lying, sir," he returned with a flash of pride and retaliation.

Mr. Kippen rose, flinging the dead stump of his cigar into the grate. His face, always formidable, was now ferocious.

"I don't know and don't care what you are in the habit of doing," he retorted; "I can only tell what you are doing now, and that is telling an infamous lie."

The drumming blood made a raging din in Herrick's ears: but he held himself fast, well knowing how an angry tongue runs away with the judgment. Nevertheless his voice vibrated significantly as he said, "You are the first who ever ventured to call me a liar."

"And you are the first who ever dared to accuse me as you are doing," was the rejoinder; "will you retract before more comes of it?"

There are moments in which the events of years flash before the mind's eye and a thousand arguments are marshalled with the celerity of one flying thought. Herrick remembered that the furious menacing man before him was Gracie's father. That was love's admonition to patience. But he remembered also her own sorrowful confession of the origin of all the

evil. And what had he seen even that night? There could be no retraction; for retraction would be a lie, the real lie in the case.

"Are you going to retract?" demanded Mr. Kippen yet more truculently.

"I would immediately retract anything that hurt any one in this house, if I could," was the answer. "But Gracie's own letter shows that I cannot."

"Gracie's letter!" repeated Mr. Kippen. "How do I know under what pressure or direction it was written? Besides, the poor thing must have been demented. Yet you come to me and tell me I am the cause of it all. God's sake; but there is justice and gratitude. It is not enough that I am dragged into the scandal, that my name is smirched before all the world; no, I must bear the blame as well. Do you know what you are saying?" he cried, his fury blazing out uncontrollably. "Do you realise that you are charging me with giving you a drunkard for a wife?" His voice rose to a fierce crescendo: his breath hissed in his nostrils like an enraged bull's.

"That is neither fair nor just," Herrick returned with marvellous calmness. "You forced a certain statement from me. You must not now read into it more than the truth it contains."

"Fair and just!" retorted Mr. Kippen, scarcely able to articulate. "Fair and just! Is it fair and just for you to come all the way from Lumley Beacon to Rushborough to lay the blame at my door for what is due to yourself? I tell you that no man dare speak to me in my own house in any such fashion. Out with you. Out! lest I forget myself and lay hands on you."

It was not meet, it was not seemly, to wrangle with Gracie's father. Without answering a word Herrick

turned swiftly and left the room. Mrs. Kippen, following next minute to plead with him, to explain, to bring him back, heard footsteps on the gravel outside. She rushed to the door. "Leslie," she cried, as one in despair; "Leslie, Leslie!"

But there was no reply. The night had swallowed him.

CHAPTER XII

THE entrance gate at the foot of the avenue was swinging behind him almost before he was aware of having crossed Mr. Kippen's threshold. More by instinct than volition he made for the railway station, head down and at a flying pace, so that people turned in the streets to gaze after him. He did not see, he did not care. He had but one frantic idea—to get away from a scene and a cruelty that were unbearable. A train southward bound was entering the station as he approached. He sprinted, gained the platform just in the nick of time, and took his seat sick, giddy, and panting.

After the race he lay back ominously still in his corner. In truth, he was very near fainting. He had never fainted. Yet the sensation was neither strange nor really unpleasant. "That's how people die," he told himself, when the momentary half-swoon was past. It seemed no hard ordeal to pass into the deepening twilight with that odd sense of floating on unknown elements. He was not the first to discover that dying may be easier, much easier, than living.

He tried to think of the happenings of the last hour, and lost himself in a phantasmagoria of horrors. The furnace fires glowing in the darkness, leaping, darting

viciously as if to strike, turning and coiling suddenly as if enfolding captured victims, suggested the outworks of pandemonium ; the engine whistled and an antic voice observed that the lost were shrieking. As the train clanged on he fell into a fiery reverie, his eyes fastened on the great yellow glare in the sky, as though finding in it something kindred and apposite, something peculiarly adapted to his situation and mood. The fires were left behind, the glare faded into unrelieved blackness, and still he sat gazing intently. Then again the engine whistled, and the train began to slow down.

"Lumley Beacon," said a fellow-passenger drowsily, drawing his rug closer about him. "Half way from Rushborough to London."

Herrick sat up trembling. "Lumley Beacon," he repeated mentally. "Lumley Beacon." The name sounded oddly, and with an odd feeling of being a stranger he stepped on the platform. Nevertheless it was with the old smile he nodded to the collector as he gave up his ticket and passed out.

Lumley Beacon was snoring in its night-cap. Its streets were empty, its windows dead as eyeless sockets. Even the public-houses no longer flared forth their garish invitations to the wayfarer. Lumley Beacon, being eminently sedate and respectable, believed in going early to bed and shutting off alike the cares and frivolities of a feverish world. That way lie peace, a good digestion, and length of days. So it slept a deep peptic sleep as its Vicar passed through the vacant streets, in which his footfall raised ghostly echoes.

A dream-like, half-dazed sense of unreality was still upon him. In their starkness and silence the houses were as a serried array of tombs reared by human

vanity, and serving only to mock human mutability and pride. In turning a corner he met a night policeman. The man seemed a phantom. All at once the phantom flashed its lantern and saluted in surprise.

"Good-night, sir. Out late," it said.

"Yes," Herrick returned. "Rather late."

He wavered in his step as if meaning to stop. In truth, he wanted to talk to this simple human brother, this warm breathing reality in a world of shadows; but something alien, something not himself, drove him on. He even quickened his pace as though to impress the policeman with his haste to get home. The policeman was not deceived.

"Still looking for her," he commented to himself, as he went his slow way pondering. "Poor beggar, he does seem cut up, he does for certain. And no sort o' luck in his search. She can't have throwed herself afore a train or she'd be found. By the same token she can't have shot herself. She's taken to the water, that's what she's gone and done. Taken to the water, poor soul! Women mostly do. Men shoot 'emselves when the game's up; but women take to the water. P'raps it's easier drownin'—dessay it takes more nerve to shoot, though I never fancied water myself. They say as it takes a corpse eight days to float. She's 'bout due now, 'bout due."

The official pulse gave an extra beat of expectation. "When she's hauled out all a drippin' there'll be a big ado," he reflected. "Hope as the p'lice will get some credit out of it all. Whatever made her go and do it, and her a Vicar's wife, that ought to have knowed better, not to say one of the finest women I ever set eyes on in all my mortal life—just the very sort of a woman any sensible man would go and marry, and

think he'd got a good bargain. Lord, Lord ! but 'tis a strange old world, anyway."

On a night beat in a sleeping town one has leisure for speculation and philosophy.

Herrick meanwhile climbed the hill at a pace which brought him breathless to the top. At sight of the Vicarage, a black forbidding mass within shut gates, that haunting illusion—at once vague and subtly real, as illusions are—of being a stranger amid once familiar dearly-loved scenes, became suddenly intensified. He was as one who had lived there in a far, far happy past, and in the interval had wandered over forlorn lands and dreary seas—to return in the end a weary, out-worn exile to the home that knew him no more. In such a spirit, with such feelings, Herrick leaned over his own gate and gazed at his own house. And by a singular freak—for affliction, like joy, is incalculably illogical—there came to him the grief-stricken words of the beautiful old story, "*They have taken my Lord away, and I know not where they have laid Him.*" Ay, that was it, love bereft, love grieving by the empty tomb. Could he but peep in and assure himself that his beloved was at peace, though it were the peace of death, he thought he could be satisfied. If only *she* were safe, what mattered anything else ?

A long time he stood thus bent over the gate, the spectres of the past crowding eerily about him. The night dew fell heavily, but he did not heed. The cold was numbing, but he did not know. His mind, involuntarily as it appeared, re-enacted the fearful scene with his father-in-law ; then in a trice it was back to the desolation which was home ; and as he thought of what was and what might be, he shuddered with unutterable self-pity. Not till that abject feeling seizes him does a man know the full horror of the pit. It is

the last stroke of misfortune. Herrick's drooped head fell yet a little further forward, and there broke on the black stillness a low sound, desolate and penetrating—the wail of a soul in Gethsemane. No human ear heard it; the gracious Night swallowed it, as she swallows so many sobs and moans of misery. Neither did human eye see the convulsive shaking of the bent form. All the same it is not to be inferred that no One heard or saw or pitied.

For all her evil name, for all the dread deeds done under her concealing wing, there is a benign spirit in Night. Hers, when she is in beneficent mood, is the true physician's secret of healing. Magically she bathes the bruised heart as with oil, gently as a mother lays her cool hand on the fevered brow, assuaging its deadly throb. Even in her seeming indifference there is medicine for tumult and grief. Her vast serenity, her self-centred unheeding silence, the calm and sovereign power with which she makes the world her own—all these have curative potency.

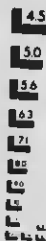
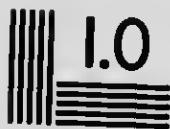
Insensibly Herrick yielded to her mystic influences. By and by he raised his head: then unconsciously he stood upright. A late moon was swinging gloriously to her place. Light was overcoming darkness. For a minute Herrick looked steadfastly upward with an expression of expectation, almost as though he hoped to see a face in the sky. Then suddenly he quivered and thrilled as one into whom a new spirit enters.

There are moments of stress when memory, so to speak, slips its coupling and ceases to act; when the stress is over it automatically recouples and resumes action. Only now Herrick remembered that he had told those in the Vicarage not to expect him till next day, as he would pass the night in Rushborough. For the blackness which appalled as though there



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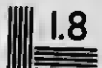
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were to be no more welcome he was himself to blame. Should he enter now? All within were peacefully asleep. Why disturb them? And what would they think of his return at such an hour in such a manner? In particular, what would Pearl say when she awoke and found no mama? "You are going to fetch her, aren't you?" she had asked, and he had not the heart to undeceive her. While he hesitated a clock in the town below boomed out weird and solitary, like a brazen sentinel calling over a spectral city. Instinctively he listened; the next stroke came, and died into silence. So it was two o'clock in the morning—the hour of mysterious movings and the myriad uncanny whisperings of unknown things in forest, field, and hedge; the hour, too, when as sailors, shepherds, poachers, and other nocturnal experts know, the night wind sallies from its caves to sweep earth and sea in gleesome song or sobbing threnody.

That coming forth of the wind is the prophecy of the still invisible day, a token that the dead of night is past and that the hosts of morning are already marshalling afar off. It is a cold, keen wind, as though its sleeping-place were the ice; but it is mightily wholesome and bracing to blood and nerve.

It was now crooning in the Vicarage eaves and waving the tree-tops like funereal plumes. Darting down in a sudden eddy, it caught Herrick's hat as though to make off with it, and, baffled, smote him smartly on the cheek, making it tingle pleasantly.

Again he looked upward. The light was increasing. A miracle had been wrought: the world was transfigured. He drew in his breath sharply, filling his lungs with a great draught of scented essences. Next minute he turned and walked off with long strides as from some new impelling motive.

CHAPTER XIII

AT sunrise he was in a sylvan lane beside a sluggish brook, in a pause over his movements. A burst of irresponsible energy carried him hither; it passed, and he was almost as driftwood cast up and deserted by a buoyant but treacherous tide.

The day came with crystalline brightness, so that the stream, lingering in sandy pools between pebbly shallows, gleamed like a long line of mirrors. Or ever men dreamed of plate-glass and quicksilver, the burnished waters served excellently for looking-glasses. Alone with Nature and at odds with life, Herrick felt through all his being the movings of a dim aboriginal instinct as of something vaguely familiar, vaguely remembered from a former existence. He looked into the shining brook and beheld his own dishevelled likeness. The picture made him gasp. A single night then of vagrant existence was enough to give a respectable man the aspect of an outcast, a week of it would make him an utter vagabond. The Nemesis of humanity is the easy descent to the Avernus of degeneracy.

He looked cautiously round, furtively, one might have said, but for the fact that there was not a shade of furtiveness in him. He was in a dell encompassed by woods. Save for the clamour of rooks, the

calling of blackbird and thrush, and the chirp-chirp of smaller singers, the silence and privacy were absolute. Even the early-rising country folk were not yet afoot, or at any rate had not invaded this woodland solitude. It was given over to the sun, to the breezes, to the wild things of Nature and to him.

Slipping off hat, coat, collar, and shirt, he soused face and neck with the thirsty greed of a desert traveller unexpectedly come upon an oasis and a well. Then, getting to his knees on a convenient stone, he plunged his head under water with a resounding splash. Again and again he repeated the delightful operation, looking up between the plunges like a dripping, blinking caricature of a seal. A rabbit a little way off on the opposite bank sat up on its haunches and gazed at him in startled wonder. A crow on a tree near by stopped its cawing to watch, with cocked head, the odd spectacle : a squirrel crept to the end of a branch high overhead in the fascination of awe and astonishment.

The vigorous ablution done, he rubbed with both hands till an exhilarating glow came. There is a virtue in cold water beyond that of all other tonics or cordials. A handkerchief and the passing breeze served for towel ; a tiny pocket comb laid the drenched hair sleekly in order. It was the first time he ever made that primitive out-of-door toilet, and it was the most refreshing he had ever known. The story of the sick man healed in the pool of Bethesda took on a new meaning.

With new vigour and the desire to avoid his fellow-men he went on through the woods. The rooks, disturbed in their noisy convocation, wheeled in a protesting cloud skyward. Rabbits and squirrels

stared an instant as he approached and then bolted in terror. The fact grieved him curiously. Yet they were fortunate compared with him. They had their retreats; there was no ultimate retreat for him. Man cannot evade man—and live.

He tried to shake himself free of these gloomy thoughts, and the sun and the wind helped him. The charm, the magic of morning was upon everything. Nature saluted him with joyous welcome. "See"—she appeared to say—"See what a feast of brightness I spread for my guests. Enjoy it, I beseech you. Your dismal thoughts are but so many evil spirits; cast them out. Are you in trouble? Then take heart. Your trouble will vanish even as a cloud disappears from yonder sky, you know not how. Think not that because there is an hour of darkness there will be no more light. Last night I was lost in blackness. Behold me now."

And in that delicate inner ear of the soul which closes like the petals of some supersensitive flower amid the dusty turmoil of the world and opens tentatively in the hours of silence, she said, or seemed to say:

"Do not imagine that yours is the most grievous lot that has ever been. A thousand generations, aye! and a thousand more to that, have passed in long procession before me. I have beheld the wrecks of innumerable ages and the vanities and convulsive ambitions of mighty empires long since extinct. Yon sun and I were twin born. I saw Lucifer fall. I looked on when the waters covered the earth and the world was without form and void. I felt the glow of the molten rocks: I was chilled by the glitter of the thick-ribbed ice. I have seen the mountains rear themselves out of the shuddering earth

and the sea rush obediently to its place. I witnessed the advent of man, and with him came trouble, sore trouble. The countless throngs who have gone on before you wept as if there could be no solace for their grief. Yet every vexed soul of them is at peace now. Not one of them so much as sighs. There is no voice, however bitter in woe, that is not soon mute."

And then it seemed to Herrick's awed heart that into the mystic voice there stole an intimate ineffable tenderness and yearning. "I am the nurse to whose care the sleeping children are committed, and I keep them close and well. Yet I know the time is coming when they will leave me. I know that on the appointed day the myriads who rest in my arms will awake and rise up, answering radiantly, 'Yes, Father; behold, we come.' Yea, and I know that when I am dead they will be singing the glad songs of everlasting youth. Go, fortunate one, go your way to your high and glorious destiny. It is I who have cause to repine."

A tumultuous emotion shook Herrick. With an unbreathed prayer he lifted his face to the lucent heavens, and there was on it something of the light of transfiguration. And as though a celestial choir sang afar off in low, sweet tones, there came to him the bracing lines:

"Angel host around doth hover,
Us in heavenly tones to cheer;
In the Dens our heads doth cover—
Needs the poor child there to fear?"

"Whetted sword to scabbard cleaving,
Faith and Hope victorious see;
Strong who loving and believing
Prays, O Lord, to Thee."

Herrick went on with a light morning step ; and of a sudden, like Peter at prayer on the house-top, he was seized with hunger. The feeling was entirely wholesome, for it came of sun and wind and song of bird and ripple of laughing water and a heart mightily uplifted. At a turn of the path he saw before him the smoke of Lumley Beacon rising placidly against the southern horizon. How warm and friendly it appeared, with its suggestion of cosy breakfasts and ruddy, contented people, and the blithe patter and bustle and laughter of children !

The mere sight gave hunger a sharper tooth. And to its pangs (his mind being now preternaturally active) was added the sting of a new and distressing thought. He was in flight ; he was running away from somebody or something. From whom or what ? "From yourself," answered a still small voice. "From yourself, and you cannot succeed. Bear yourself like a man. Don't be like Ephraim in the day of battle—a broken bow." Was he then a coward ?

The question is never a pleasant one for an honest man to ask himself, though the mere asking may well be the highest proof of courage. A cold twinge went to Herrick's vitals. Had that scene in Rushborough been too much for his manhood ? Would it have been braver, better to have taken Mr. Kippen, so to speak, by the throat, and made him own the truth and take back his cruel imputations in a breath ? He turned his eyes backward. In the gracious stillness of morning Rushborough seemed exceedingly remote. Not a shred of its black smoke, not a gleam of its raging furnaces, was visible. In the silent immensities, what signified all its sound and fury ? "Possess your soul," said the monitor within. "That is at once the final test and the final achievement of courage."

He turned again to the blue inviting smoke of Lumley Beacon, spiritualised as it seemed by the golden light. "Forward," said the monitor peremptorily. "Dwell not too much in the past. You have a duty yonder. To it like a man."

And as one leaping to a trumpet call he made for home.

CHAPTER XIV

At the click of the gate Pearl was up like one in a long suppressed fever of waiting. She met him at the door in tremors of glee; but finding him alone, cried out in quick disappointment, "Mama, where is mama? You went for her; why haven't you brought her?"

Instead of answering, he took off hat and coat and passed into the dining-room, his arm about Pearl.

"Why haven't you brought her?" she demanded again. "I have been waiting all night for her. Yes, and I have been dreaming about her, too."

"What did you dream, dearie?" he asked, putting the bearing-rein on his feelings.

"Oh I I dreamt a whole lot," answered Pearl, catching her breath in eagerness. "I thought she was somewhere in some place I didn't know and never saw before, and oh I papa, she was crying. The big, big tears were tumbling down, and her hair was all dreadfully tossed, just like mine when the wind blows it about very badly; and then she stretched out her hands to me—so—and I called back to her, 'Yes, mama darling, I am coming.' But something, I don't know what, was between us, and I couldn't get to her, though I tried with all my might. She kept stretching her hands—like that, and I tried and tried to get to her,

but couldn't. Then I woke up in a terrible fright, and wasn't I glad it was only a nasty dream! And I said to myself I was a silly girl for being so frightened for nothing. And then I remembered what you told me, that if I wanted anything very, very much and prayed for it with all my heart and soul and strength, God would give it to me. So I asked Him as much as I knew how to bring back my dear mama with you in the morning; and He hasn't done it."

There was the tragedy of broken faith in the childish voice. She took her father's hand imploringly: "Perhaps God would bring dear mama back if you asked Him, papa," she said, the tears welling in her eyes.

"Shall we ask Him together, you and I, Pearl?" Herrick returned, he scarcely knew how.

"Please, papa, please!" cried Pearl, and together they kneeled. "And if you please, dear God," Pearl put in on her own account, to enforce the petition, "bring her back soon, soon, for I can't live without her. And bless papa, too, for I love him very dearly," she added, lest there should appear to be anything invidious in her affection. "There," she said, in perfect assurance, as they got to their feet, the eyes of both running over. "God will hear that, anyway."

That matter disposed of, she turned to the practical needs of her father. All haste and ardour, she fluttered into the kitchen to give cook instructions what to prepare for him. Fluttering back to the dining-room, she insisted on presiding at breakfast "like mama," and spilled the coffee. In a blithe confusion she assured everybody it didn't matter, and keeping her place, urged her father to eat. When he would eat no more she set two chairs by the fire, a large one for him, a small one for herself, and invited him to render an account of his doings during the preceding twenty-four hours.

Perhaps it was from weariness, perhaps from policy, but he yawned drowsily. She broke into bantering rebuke. "Why you're sleepy, and it isn't eight o'clock in the morning yet. What makes you sleepy?"

"Because, dearie, I hadn't much sleep last night."

"Oh I why hadn't you sleep?"

"People can't always sleep," he returned.

"I can," she rejoined confidently, "except, of course, when I have measles or whooping-cough or something."

"Ah I but you are young, dearie."

"And when people grow old do they not sleep, but lie awake in the dark?"

"Sometimes that happens."

"Then I shouldn't like to be old. For it's not nice to lie awake in the dark."

He smiled sadly. "But we mu all grow old, Pearl," he told her. He felt extremely old now.

"Oh I no, not always, papa," she returned thoughtfully. "Sometimes God takes little boys and girls up to heaven. Then they can never, never grow old, can they?"

"No, dearie; when that happens they can never grow old."

"Then you see," said Pearl, with a Socratic air, "you were wrong in saying that everybody must grow old. Lots and lots never grow old. Do you think it best not to grow old?" she asked quickly. "I do; I like being just a little girl with dear mama and you. And I shouldn't like to be in heaven either without mama and you. What is the matter, papa?" she cried, springing to her feet and bending over him.

"I—I think I must have got a chill," he replied, wiping a clammy forehead and trying to control the

shuddering nerves. "I'm better already. It's nothing, dearie."

"I think it is more than that," she returned, a vivid concern in her eyes. "I know what," and making a dart at the sofa, she began to pull it in front of the fire. "There now," she told him, when it was placed by his own aid, "you lie down and I'll put a rug over you." He obeyed, and she tucked him in softly and carefully, as though he were the child and she a full-grown responsible woman. "Now I'll read to you," she announced. "How would you like 'Alice in Wonderland'? But no, that won't do. I think Alice was a little silly. Don't you?"

"Perhaps," answered her father cautiously.

"Yes, she was," asseverated Pearl; "I wouldn't believe half the stuff she believed. Suppose I read you the story of Joseph in Egypt. It's awfully interesting, you know, about his brethren throwing him into the pit, and then putting blood on his coat and going home to frighten his poor old father by saying a wild beast had eaten him. I call that mean. If I had been Joseph I wouldn't have given them any corn when they came for it—not one little particle."

"What would you have done, Pearl?"

"I'd have looked at them as fiercely as I could, and said, 'Ho, ho! so you've come, have you? and you're surprised, aren't you? Didn't expect to see me, did you? I have a great mind to dig a pit and throw you in.'"

"Yes," said her father, interested in Pearl's sense of poetic justice.

"Then I'd have stood up—so"—Pearl drew herself up with a high air of authority—"and said to them, 'You may just go away again, for there isn't any corn in Egypt for you.'"

"And when all that was done you would have given them the corn, little Pearl. For, you see, Joseph was really sending it as a gift to his father in a time of need; and you remember he sent back the money as well."

"Hid in the sacks for a surprise," said Pearl. "That was awfully nice of him. Of course, sending it to his father was different, wasn't it? He did just what I should do."

"Just," said her father tenderly; "just what you would do."

She was silent for a little, as if in a muse, and then, sighing deeply, remarked, "Oh, dear I but I do feel like Martha."

"Like Martha?" he echoed.

"Yes," she returned. "Troubled about many things. That was Martha, wasn't it? Perhaps it's best not to read after all, but just talk. I want you to tell me about mama." However wide the sweep, she always came back to that.

But unhappily there was nothing to tell, except what could not be told. Pearl's eyes opened very wide in wonder and then clouded in dismay. Was mama never coming back again then? And what was keeping her away? It gave an added poignancy to his suffering to hear her reiterate the same unanswerable questions day by day, to mark her drooping face, to know that in the watches of the night she, too, lay awake, aye, and that her pillow was often wet.

And all the while there was neither sign nor word from the fugitive. The world took on the aspect of a vast desert wherein he had lost his most precious treasure. "Somewhere there, somewhere out there," he would say to himself, gazing forth as upon a wilder-

ness like one reduced to helplessness. He could do nothing to find her. After the first spurt of searching he felt like one lying under some baneful enchantment, with just vigour enough to be tormented by thoughts of his own utter inability. The inaction became intolerable; Lumley Beacon became intolerable. He must get away; he must do something, if only to save himself from madness.

He went to the Bishop and explained his position and state of mind.

"I must go out into the world and try to find her," he said.

"And if you succeed?" returned the Bishop, reverting to a former question.

"If I succeed," answered Herrick, "I will return with her to Lumley Beacon."

The Bishop opened his eyes but made no comment. Most men in such case would desire not only to go away, but to remain away. Herrick, however, was not exactly as other men. Under his gentleness, his long-suffering, his dislike of all forms of violence, there beat a heart of the rarest courage. On the whole the Bishop was disposed to think he had never known a braver man.

"Leave it to me, then," he said, in a note of sympathy and admiration. "I will arrange matters. You can go when it suits you, remain as long as it suits you, and may you return as you would like!"

So one day a little later Herrick announced to Pearl that they were to leave Lumley Beacon for a while.

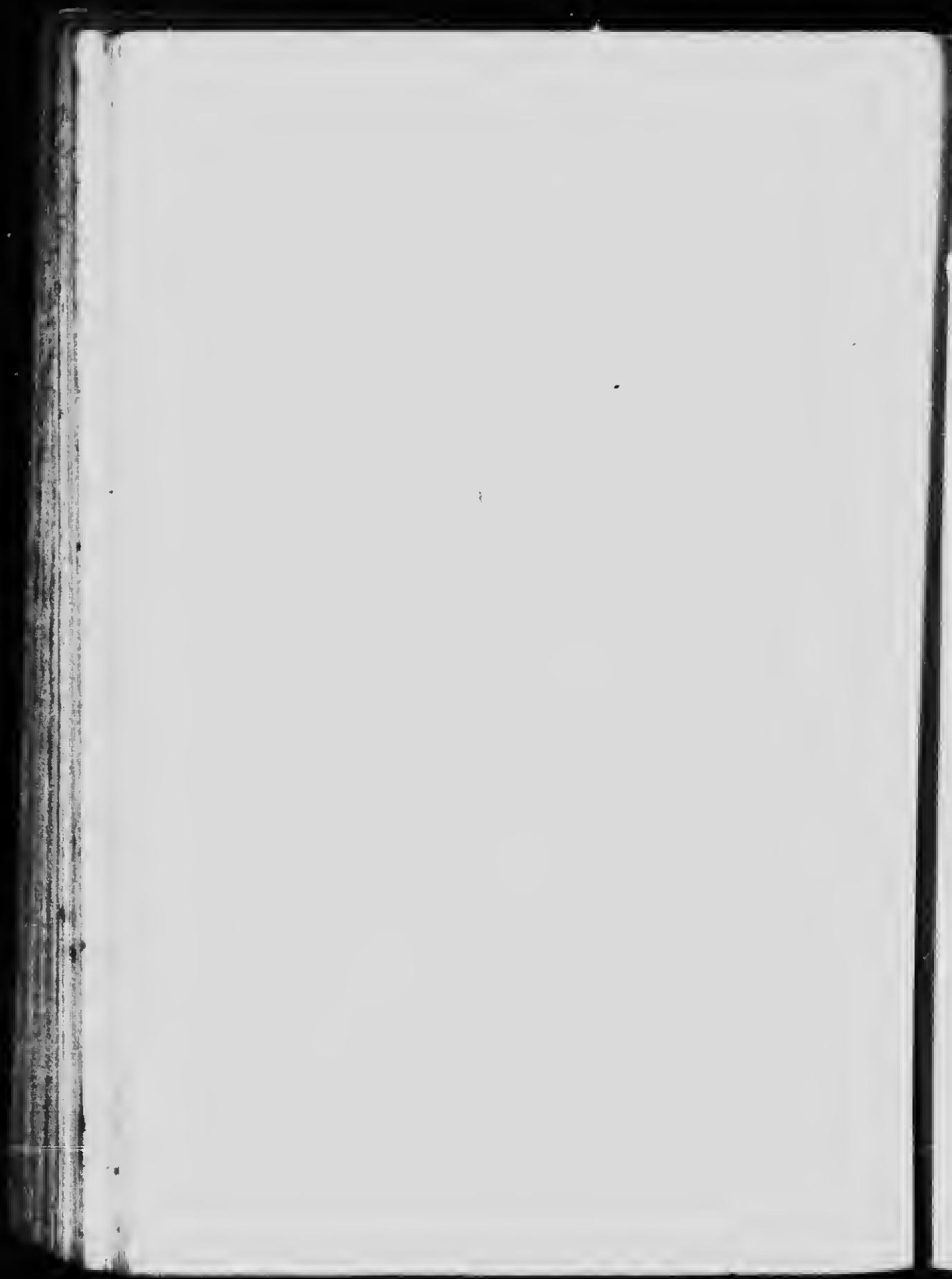
"For dear mama?" she cried instantly.

"Perhaps, darling," he answered. "Perhaps."

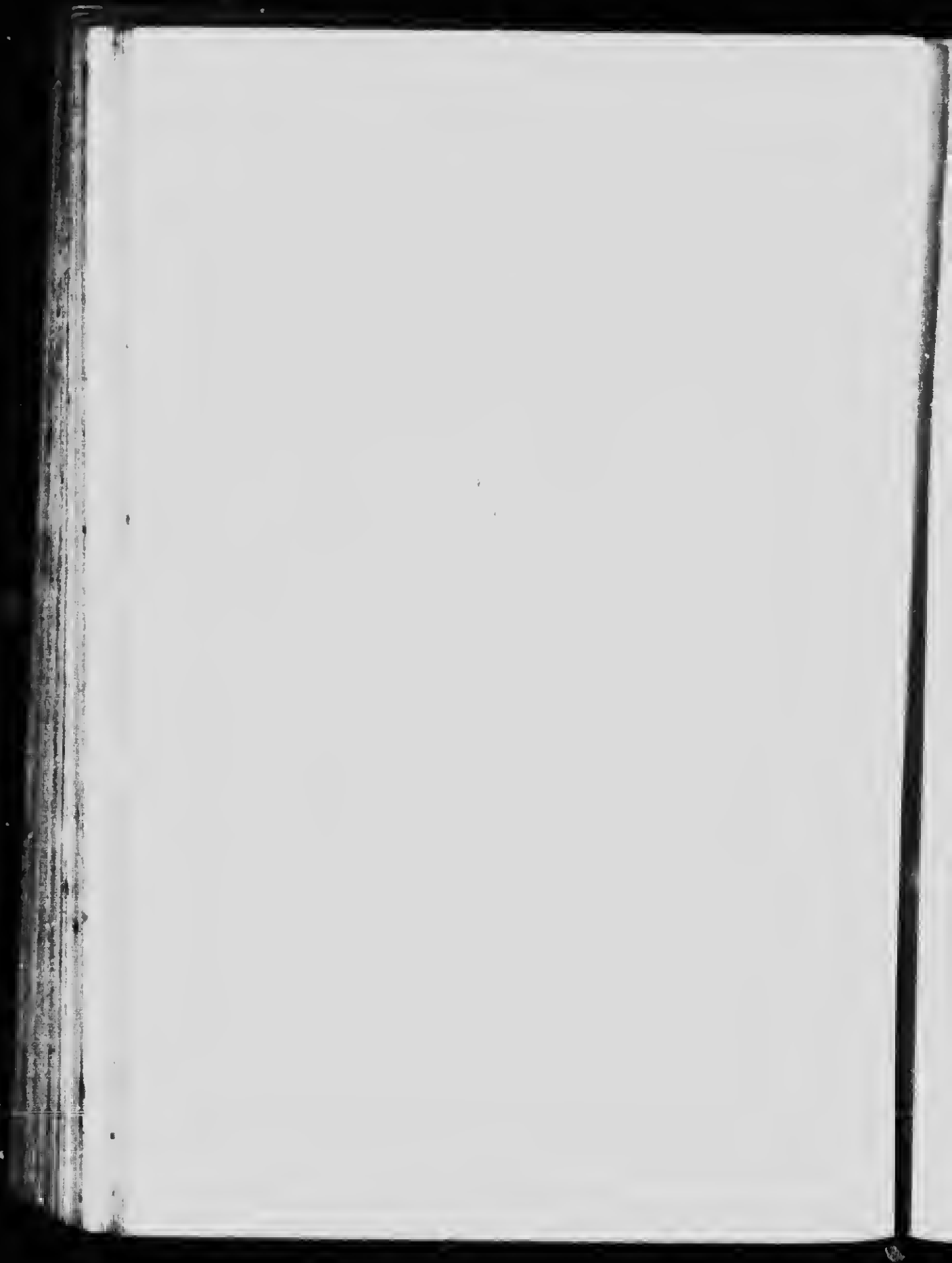
"I am so glad," she said, with a quick, deep breath. "So glad; and won't mama be glad, too, when she sees us?"

He made no response.

When the time came she put her hand confidently in his, a gleaming light in her face—the light of eager hope and anticipation, a light which almost made her father quail. As they went, Lumley Beacon watched behind its doors and curtains. “Poor things!” remarked the watchers, with bated breath. “Poor things! there they go, nobody knows where; and as for what’s afore ‘em—God A’mighty be merciful!”



PART II



CHAPTER I

THERE is a marvellous city full of fabled gold and the witcheries of delight to which people of all degrees and conditions—the gay, the needy, the ambitious, the wretched, and the criminal—throng in endless procession. Its mansions and palaces are the most renowned on earth, its luxuries the rarest. It has more wealth than any other city that is or has ever been, and also more poverty, with the thick brood of evils that arise therefrom. Behind every mansion and palace are festering lairs and squalid cellarages where guilt and misery crouch in hiding or lie down to die; and beneath all vast black abysses where misfortune is swallowed as by the insatiate sea. This unspeakable medley of contrasts and opposites is so cunningly planned that, although pleasure house and hospital stand almost side by side, those who feast and dance in the one are never disturbed by the groans of woe or cries of pain from the other. That marvellous city is London, a microcosm of civilisation, at once magnet and maelstrom, attracting to happiness or sucking to destruction.

On a bleak, dripping Sunday evening, as the church bells were quiring their call to worship, a woman, dead weary and sorely distressed, approached it by way of the western suburbs. Her walk was painfully slow

and limping, and for most part her eyes were steadfastly on the ground. In truth there was small temptation to raise them, for the air was a sooty drizzle and the sky a sullen pall of smoke, illumined to a dirty yellow by the struggling flare of a myriad half-suffocated lights. She kept carefully within the darker shadows, stopping frequently to rest or watch the hastening church-goers. These in passing sometimes brushed her clothes, at other times she had to dodge their umbrellas. A glance would have shown that she wished to avoid curious or inquiring looks.

The last of them past, she resumed her halting progress, a little slower and lamer, a little more woe-begone, as it seemed, for having been momentarily in contact with respectability and happiness. Opposite a public-house and almost within the circle of its radiance she stopped again. As she watched its patrons coming and going a fierce longing seized her. Inside were the warmth and comfort that her cold, worn body and exhausted spirit needed. Through the half open door she could see the gleam of crystal and polished wood and the rubicund faces of the drinkers. She shivered with a dreadful longing. A kind of dizziness came upon her, and she leaned against the wall, pressing a cold, numb hand to her forehead.

"I shall faint," she thought. "If I fall down in the muddy street what will become of me? Where will they take me? What will they do with me?"

Rallying her energies, she looked across once more at the alluring brilliancy. Her eyes were dazzled; the sound of laughter was in her ears; it seemed that the fragrance of wine was in her nostrils. "Why do you hesitate?" whispered the tempter. "Ah! you are afraid! The remnants of your conscience hinder you.

Well I if you prefer conscience to yonder cheer by all means be a fool, only let me tell you that what you need is over the way. Will conscience warm you this dismal night? Come, step across and be comforted."

Trembling to the core of her being, she moved forward with a quick, jerky motion, and then as quickly drew back terrified. In the same moment a bus pulled up beside her and the conductor, stepping to the curb, began to call after the manner of his kind.

"'Ere 'e are, mum," he cried, addressing her. "'Ere 'e are. Step in."

Dazed and shaking, she accepted his invitation, instinctively choosing a seat in which she would be as much as possible screened from the light and the gaze of her fellow passengers. She had no idea how far she had travelled when the conductor intimated that the end of the stage was reached.

She got out and resumed her walk. Service was proceeding in the churches. As often as she heard the sounds of worship she stopped, listening to the singing congregations with woeful intensity. About the same time the Vicar of Lumley Beacon was saying prayers for outcasts and wanderers in a voice which brought tears to them that heard him. Was the woman in the street thinking of services in which she once delighted to take part? Aye, and her eyes too were full of tears, the bitter tears of self-reproach and self-pity.

Presently the worshippers began to fill the streets, and she hurriedly entered another bus to get away from them. When she alighted again she knew, in spite of its strangeness, that here at last was the heart of the seething city, a place that ought to be marked in

blood. Her feeling was one of mingled bewilderment and despair. The immensity appalled her. The multitudinous loneliness appalled her yet more. In all the teeming vastness there was not one soul to speak to her in kindness. There are moments when a friendly word is more than heaped up gold. For want of it the woman standing alone in the midst of London wished she had died rather than lived to come there.

She moved on once more uncertainly, like a somnambulist. Once she got a glimpse of the mighty river, gleaming black and treacherous as the ally of death. In fancy she could feel its choking cold at her vitals; the surge and lap of its stealthy waters sounded uncannily in her ears. Turning from it in a ghastly horror, she entered at a venture a network of short, narrow, dismal streets. In an alley apparently abandoned to night and misfortune she stopped, like one utterly spent and unable to go farther. Every atom of her being ached in sheer exhaustion. She was ill, and her heart was breaking. The end must be near, and her desire was that it might come speedily.

By chance she stopped hard by the recess of a deserted doorway. With the instinct which makes the wounded and forsaken hide, she crept in, and sinking in a coiled huddle on the cold stones, broke into piteous sobbing, her head drooped so low that the loosened strands of her hair trailed in the mire. She did not know. The memory of other scenes and times pierced her. Oh! the days that were gone, the days that were gone! She had lost, forfeited everything—home, love, friends—all that saves this world from being itself perdition. And it was come to this—this crouching as an outcast in a London doorway in

the night. Would to God she could die! Happily for humanity, God in His mercy does not grant all its frantic prayers.

When she lifted her head a boy stood on the pavement regarding her intently. Making a hasty attempt to dry her eyes, she surveyed him in return. He was small, pale, pinched as with chronic hunger, and more than a trifle grimy.

"What do you want, little boy?" she demanded, resenting his presence. "What are you doing here?"

"Me? Oh, I'm just looking round," he replied, with the air of a prince in the midst of his dominions. "'Spect I shall come across a chum or something. What are you doing here?" His aspect was that of the street arab, but his tongue suggested other associations.

He asked the question in politeness, but the blind could see that she was in the clutches of hunger and cold, those terrible twins that bit like vipers, as he had more than ample cause to know. At first he thought she had merely been merry after the fashion of the district, and had mistaken the doorway for an easy-chair at home. But a second look corrected this error. Besides, her dress and manner of speech proclaimed her a stranger.

"Can you tell me the name of this street?" she asked, getting to her feet.

"Lost yourself, eh?" he responded briskly.

"I have got a little out of my way," she owned. "I don't know this quarter."

"Hard lines," he returned sympathetically. "Cold and hungry and lost all together. Makes one squirm, don't it?"

She had not said she was hungry, but his philosophy

of life told him she must be. He was sorry for her ; in fact, the valiant impulses of knight-errantry were stirring his blood. Here was a lady, obviously a real born lady, in trouble of some sort. If he had a sword big enough and sharp enough he would fight for her though a legion of dragons opposed. In particular, he would procure her food and warmth, and after these perhaps a castle and silk attire to replace the mud-stained dress she wore.

"Like something to eat?" he asked compassionately.

His sympathy and interest touched her. Through the unpromising guise of a London street urchin she divined a Samaritan.

"You would get me something to eat if you could?" she responded gratefully.

"Rather," he assured her. "There isn't any fun in being hungry a night like this."

She took out her purse and handed him a shilling, asking him to buy whatever he thought best. He regarded the coin with gleaming eyes. Why, it would buy up half a cookshop.

"You wait," he told her, with a great air of business. "I shan't be long. Only look out for the copper. They're always 'spicious of people that hang round doorways."

"You mean there is danger of being arrested by the police?" she said, a new fear thrilling through her.

He nodded in his quick, elfish way. "Yes, and of being taken before the beak, too."

"The what?" she asked, in dismay.

"The beak," he repeated, pitying her ignorance.

"And he's simply drefful."

"You mean the magistrate, I suppose?" she said.

"That's his other name," he replied, smiling to

encourage her glimmering intelligence, "and he's got no soft spots about him. But if you keep moving along it'll be all right, and I shan't be more'n a minute."

He started at a run, the shilling held tightly in his hand. From curiosity, and the lack of anything else to do, the woman followed slowly in the direction he took. A quarter of an hour passed, and she began to think she had seen the last of both boy and shilling, when there arose a sudden uproar at the head of the street in which she sauntered to and fro. First she saw a boy—her boy—running with all his might, and hard at his heels a man, hatless and coatless, calling lustily, "Stop thief!" She hastened forward, just in time to see the boy run into the open arms of a policeman.

A sudden darkness fell on her. She heard a tumult of voices as it were afar off. Next minute, as it seemed, she stood alone in a vast blank silence. Boy, pursuer, and policeman had disappeared, and with them the gaping, excited crowd.

CHAPTER 11

SHE retreated to her alley as a wild beast retires to its den. The warren in which she thus sought refuge was one of evil name, which the spirit of improvement, as personified by a zealous County Council, decreed should no longer pollute the atmosphere. Already most of its inhabitants had retired fighting sullenly before the house-breaker, in clouds of dust, to the music of rending timbers and crashing walls. It was full of caverns and lurking-places, so that in her present mood its very dilapidation was a merit in the eyes of the hiding woman. Here she could collect her thoughts and plan—plan what ?

Certain experiences are burned into the mind as by a stroke of lightning or the thrust of red-hot irons. They come unexpectedly ; they blight like a poisonous wind. Usually, too, they are outside the range of all previous knowledge, yet they wear a singular air of familiarity. Calamity possesses this dreadful gift of intimacy, as though it were some dimly-remembered thing from a previous existence, a sort of ineluctable inheritance arrived in due season in the logical train of events. Thus the sick man is soon accustomed to sickness, the wretched man to misery, the felon to the stern discipline of prison. Her environment froze the

woman with horror; but it did not appear strange. All former experience, all acts and thoughts, led naturally and inevitably to *this*.

It was a relief to get in among the dismantled gables and broken arches of the alley. Her one wish was to lie down somewhere out of sight. If a wall should fall and crush her to death, so much the better. In the midst of the turmoil she found herself thinking incongruously of her shilling. Of course she had been fooled and cheated. Was it not common knowledge that London swarmed with rogues of all ages, and the young were worse than the old because they gave to their roguery a deluding appearance of innocence? The loss of the shilling was nothing, but she was curiously vexed by the thought of treachery. The incident served to remind her that in the quarter she had chosen thieves were as thick as beasts of prey in a jungle. An awful sense of the general hostility came upon her. She would have fled if she could, or knew whither to fly.

Presently a policeman burrowed her out of her place of concealment, warning her what would happen if she persisted in wandering or lying out of doors without visible means of subsistence. The law is fastidious, and expects everybody to have a proper bed and something to eat. These are tokens of respectability. She made terrified apologies to the man in blue, and fled from him. Half a minute he gazed after her, as if debating whether or not to make an example of her, but deciding for clemency, resumed his march. An hour later another policeman repeated the warning in yet sterner words. She had never dreamed that the law chivied the unfortunate in this way.

By and by there broke on the thick air, as in wild

competition, the chiming of a great multitude of clocks. She counted twelve. Midnight! Then there fell an awesome silence. Not the silence of the grave, for that is sacred, nor the silence of forest or moorland, for that is soothing, but the silence of a devouring monster breathing low in its lair.

Partly because her strength was spent, partly from a pathetic desire for company, she crawled into a six-penny shelter. The night passed somehow, and in the morning she slipped into a cheap coffee-house for breakfast. There she was startled to hear some one describe with rousing gusto the chase and capture of the night before.

"Blessed if the little nipper didn't almost get through between the copper's legs," said the narrator in a glowing excitement.

"Wot was he up to?" another asked.

"Oh I 'elpin' 'imself to sumthin' as he forgot to pay for," was the answer. "You should 'ave seen the fat un runnin'. Most as good as a stampedin' elephant at the Zoo. 'Easy,' says the copper, 'or ye'll 'urt yer innards.' It was that big Irish chap, ye know, not a bad sort if ye don't try to take 'im below the belt. 'Keep yer mind easy,' says 'e. 'Can't ye see the boy's safe? Wot's the charge?' An' the fat un, wheezin' an' rumblin' like an old motor with an attack of bronchitis, told wot the nipper 'ad done. If I wasn't too busy, blessed if I wouldn't look into the police court this mornin' to see 'ow 'e gets along."

The woman forgot her buttered slice of bread and stale egg in the intentness of listening. She heard at what court the culprit would be tried, and a nameless fascination drew her thither. As it was Monday morning the court had the ingathering of two nights to deal with. The woman had never been in a police

court before and the proceedings awed and dismayed her. What affected her most were the doings of her own sex. For a long procession of ladies of all ages, sizes and degrees filed before the magistrate to answer charges of unlawful diversion or festivity. One had danced defiantly on a rival's new hat, and when requested to desist, responded by slapping the owner's face. Another challenged a jeering crowd to a general fight, and when asked to "move on," clenched her fist and gave the law "one in the eye." Another "was incapable in charge of a baby." Yet another dropped her baby in the gutter and then clung to a lamp-post grinning as over a great feat. Several sang outrageously and greeted the law with profanity; and not a few were helpless. So the tale of "drunk and disorderly" ran.

In the dock only one cried in shame or grief, and she was by no means the youngest. Of the rest, some were boisterous and some indifferent. One lady of experience, desiring to be at once polite and save time, called out cheerily on entering the dock, "Good-morning, yer worship. Guilty, guilty. Too much public-house, of course."

"Thank you," returned his worship grimly. It expedites matters to make frank confession. A second, on being asked if the charge were true, answered quite good-humouredly, "Blessed if I can remember anything at all about it. But as I'm 'ere, 'spect I must 'ave took a drop too much."

The strange woman at the back noted that nearly all of them saluted the magistrate with a horrible familiarity. One or two explained with brazen guffaws that they were "stone-broke" and must go to gaol. Others pleaded cajolingly to be "let down easy, as it was only a Saturday night drunk." One dame called

out lustily, "'Arf a crown, yer wusship, 'arf a crown, as usual."

"You and I are old friends, are we not?" returned the magistrate.

"Ole friends," she repeated, "I should think we are! An' early every week I puts away 'arf a crown for Satiday night. One never can tell wot may 'appen, yer wusship."

"I can see you are a provident woman," observed the magistrate. "Well! as I approve of thrift I am going to help you. You shall save your half-crown this time. Seven days."

She cried out in shrill protest and disappeared to lower realms volubly reviling the fount of justice.

When his turn came, the boy for whom the strange woman was waiting entered under guard, as though he were the most dangerous criminal in the kingdom and might certainly be expected to make a desperate attempt to break away. Her heart stopped as she beheld this mite of humanity in the awful grip of the law. He appeared pathetically small and very much afraid as he craned on tiptoe in the effort to see his judge.

CHAPTER III

"ALBERT CHARLES MERRISHAW," said the clerk, reading from the charge sheet.

The boy's eyes dropped to the lower official and two small black fists closed with a nervous clutch on the dock-rail. The clerk read the charge rapidly, as if the thing were too atrocious to be dwelt on, and then requested to be told whether the prisoner at the bar pleaded guilty or not guilty. The small black fists tightened their grip on the dock-rail and their owner looked from the clerk to the magistrate and then from the magistrate to the clerk, as though on the balance between smiling and weeping. Habit came to his aid and he smiled. For already he had learned the vital lesson that in all cases of doubt it is best to take things pleasantly. "Yes," he returned with a sharp constriction of the throat, "I did it." Then he smiled again, as though by some remote unimagined chance the affair might after all turn out to be an elaborate joke.

The spectators in the body of the court drew a tense breath. The magistrate leaned forward, his face grave and more than a trifle sad.

"No one defending, I suppose?" he said.

No, he was told, no one was defending.

Evidently it was of no consequence what became of

the prisoner. Then the magistrate, looking with disconcerting straightness at Albert Charles, informed him that he need not plead guilty unless he liked.

"The law doesn't expect you to tell on yourself," said the magistrate. "We'll hear the evidence and then let you know whether we think you guilty or not."

Thereupon the prosecutor stepped into the witness box and told how on the previous evening the prisoner had entered his shop, and after some looking round wickedly and feloniously seized certain articles and made off. He, the prosecutor, gave chase, with the result that the thief was promptly captured. The stolen articles were then displayed for the benefit of the court—half a loaf, two or three bath buns, and a small sample of confectionery, now compressed out of recognition; perhaps sixpence worth in all.

"Were you hungry?" asked the magistrate, turning to the dock. Albert Charles's face became deadly pale in spite of its grime, and his lip twitched.

"Yes, sir," he answered; "I was hungry: but it wasn't for myself I did it."

The court leaned forward with a fatherly expression. "For whom did you do it, then?"

Albert Charles clucked as if choking and tears sprang to his eyes.

"I don't know, sir," he answered; "I can't tell you."

"Do you mean to tell me," said the magistrate in a tone which indicated he was not to be taken in by a palpable lie—"Do you mean to tell me that you really do not know for whom you stole these things? You were frank in admitting the theft. Be frank and truthful to the end. It will be best for you, you know. For whom did you commit the theft?"

The strange woman at the back sat panting, but

with a mighty effort she held her breath for the answer.

"I don't know, sir," the boy repeated, his voice quivering with fear. "Really and truly, sir."

There seemed nothing for it but to dispose of him as an incorrigible thief and liar, and that was what the watchers expected. But the magistrate, a man of kindly instinct as well as profound knowledge of the ways of crime, looked intently at the culprit.

"Tell us all about it then," he said quietly.

With choking eagerness Albert Charles complied.

"It was like this, sir," he related; "as I was walking along the street in the rain I saw a woman, a lady she was, sitting alone in a doorway crying, all by herself. I asked her what was up, if she was hungry and cold, and all that, and she said she was. Then she gave me a bob—I mean a shilling, sir—to go and fetch her something to eat; and as I was going as fast as I could I met some boys I know and told them, and when they heard about the money one of them laughed and said he would like to see it before believing such a kid's story. So I showed him it. 'Give me it into my own hand,' says he. So I gave him it into his own hand. 'Goo!' says he when he got it. 'Goo! a kid like you going round with all this money. 'Taint safe. Why, ye'd get sand-bagged and knocked down and robbed for sure. I'll keep it till you grow a bit.' They all laughed at that, saying it wasn't safe. 'Think,' said the boy who had it, turning to the others, 'think of a kid like him going round loose with all this money.' He whistled as a sign to them and started to run. I ran after him: but he's bigger than me, and I couldn't catch him. So then I thought of the lady that was hungry and cold and wet and crying by herself, and that I had

lost her shilling. So I saw the things in his shop," looking towards the prosecutor, "and went in and took them, because I had promised, and that's all."

As he finished tears trickled down his unwashed face, leaving smudgy tracks.

"Any one here to confirm your story?" asked the magistrate, not unkindly.

The boy looked round helplessly. The woman at the back ceased to breathe. Her whole being seemed to be caught up, suspended. She could not so much as wink.

"You see," said the magistrate, breaking an electric silence, "there is no one to confirm your story."

Something appeared to catch and throttle the woman at the back. She tried to speak, but her tongue was paralysed. Her cowardice was too much for her. It was worse than Peter's. She could not even speak.

"What am I to do with you?" said the magistrate, his gaze fixed on Albert Charles. "How am I to know you are telling the truth? You see, there is none to speak for you."

The woman at the back made a noise like one in the throes of suffocation. Then, as if an invisible hand clutched and raised her, she got to her feet.

"I can speak for him," she cried hoarsely; "he is telling the truth. I am the woman who gave him the shilling."

Before the court could see her properly she had collapsed. She did not hear what the magistrate said; a great buzzing was in her ears and her vision was dimmed, for a sudden twilight fell on the court.

In the throbbing excitement the magistrate was almost the only person present who retained complete self-possession.

"In luck after all," he remarked, turning to Albert Charles as it seemed in relief. "Though the evidence is informal, I am glad to say it leads me to believe all you have told me."

He was smiling benignly. Albert Charles thought he never in all his life before beheld so divine a smile on any human countenance. It warmed him through and through; it made him dizzy with rapture; it lighted up the grim black foreboding court like a gush of sunshine.

"It was certainly very wrong of you to take those things," pursued the magistrate, "though I take your motive into account. If you get into the way of helping yourself to what does not belong to you, even to keep your promise to another, you will land yourself in serious trouble."

"Yes, sir," agreed the boyish voice from the dock.

"And I must tell you," said the magistrate impressively, "that if ever you come here again on such business as brings you now, something terrible will happen to you. Will you remember that?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you a father and mother?"

"Oh yes, sir!"

"Then why don't they look after you? Do they drink?"

Albert Charles flushed quickly, but made no reply. The magistrate understood.

"Ah!" he said, "the old story, the weary old story. We get the wrong people here sometimes. Well, you may go."

The guard, politely opening the dock door, stood aside, and Albert Charles, marvelling at his own good fortune, stepped back to liberty. His first thought

was of the strange lady who was at once his rescuer and the cause of his trouble. But she was nowhere to be found. She had disappeared, carrying her mystery with her.

Outside he met his friend Dalrymple, the Scots Guardsman in the guise of a slum missionary, to whom he related his adventures, and was duly and fittingly congratulated on the happy issue.

"Come round and see me to-night and we'll talk o' it all," said Dalrymple in his hearty, breezy way. "We're going to have some fun, I think. Miry is to be in charge of the cake. You know Miry?"

Yes, he knew Miry, the most astonishing combination of the Amazon and the angel, the sinner and the saint, ever created. Her reputation was indeed almost comical in its blending of piety and pugilism. She had fought whole battalions of women and conquered red-fisted. She had even fought men, scientifically, and with success. Everybody knew Miry. Many feared and hated her, and not a few loved her to adoration. For when there was no occasion to fight she devoted herself to good deeds with a mighty and inspiring energy. Dalrymple reckoned that on a moderate estimate she was worth a round half score of his own kind.

Albert Charles had just accepted the invitation in much glee when there came round a corner, scarcely a dozen yards away, a bevy of women out for their morning dram.

"'Ullo!" cried one of them, a small, thin woman with a shrill voice and a vicious red eye, "'ullo, there 'e is, Mrs. Merrishaw, there's yer Albert Charles as you've been breakin' yer dear 'eart for, a-jawin' an' carryin' on with them passons. I'd let 'im 'ave it if I was you—I should."

"Come here at once!" called she who was thus addressed, as though meaning to act on the hint there and then. "Come at once!"

But the response of Albert Charles was to bolt as if the arch enemy were clutching at him.

CHAPTER IV

HIS chagrined mother gazed after him a moment and then, instigated and encouraged by her friends, turned on Dalrymple.

"At it again!" she cried, surveying him with a smouldering eye. "At it again! What right have you to be always meddling and interfering? I won't have it, understand that! I simply won't have it!"

"Quite right, too," observed a voluminous dame, heaving up her great loose, beery bulk, that trembled through all its vastness like a shaken bog. "Perfectly right. If this goes on we shan't be able to call our children our own—no, nor take our drop o' liquor without askin' leave of the passons! They're a-forgettin' of 'emselves, that's wot they're doin', clean a-forgettin' of 'emselves!"

"Gar 'long an' fetch back 'er boy as you've frightened away!" said the little woman who had first spoken, looking as if she meant to square for a fight.

"Yes," chimed in Mrs. Merrishaw, "fetch him back. I want him. If you don't I will send my husband after you!"

Though to the eye she was exactly of the same order as her companions, her manner of speech was not

theirs. Dalrymple knew her history, and for that reason she disliked him the more.

"That's it, send yer 'usband arter 'im," cried two or three in chorus. "'E'll comb yer 'air for ye proper," one of them added to Dalrymple, "which is wot ye jolly well deserve."

"Tell your husband I shall be delighted to see him at any time," was the cordial response. "Let him come to-night and bring his boy, and you too will be welcome."

"Well! I'm blessed if that aint cheek," remarked the stout dame.

But the thin little woman, changing her tack, intervened with satirical politeness: "Wouldn't you like us to come too, sir? We'd do up our back 'air and polish our faces till you could see yourself in 'em a'most. Lor bless 'e, we just dotes on you, an' when you was spoutin' we'd cheer like ole crikey. There's nuthin we love more'n a teetotal bun-fight and seein' the dear little kids a-guzzlin' an' a-makin' of 'emselves ill with blessed canary cake. An' then, sir, to 'ear you a-goin' for the pubs an' lettin' 'em as drinks 'ave it 'ot, it do just make us bubble and run over with 'appiness."

At that sally the company laughed so uproariously that a policeman on the other side of the street pulled up, looking across inquiringly. The little woman ducked in mockery.

"Please, sir, we're a-movin' on," she called out to him. "But the passon 'ere 'e's so funny we had to stop an' larf. Couldn't 'elp it. Talk o' pantermimes, why they aint in it with a passon when he's jolly."

She stepped out, making a pretence of tootling a flute, and the others, catching her humour, stepped out in unison. The policeman crossed to Dalrymple.

"A trifle balmy, sor, as they say here, that lot," he observed. "It's beginnin' it early they are."

"You see a good deal of this, O'Ryan," returned Dalrymple; "even in the early morning."

"Faith, sor," was the response, "onless I went about wid me eyes shut I couldn't help it. The women do most av the early drinkin', havin' most time belike. How's the mission, sor?"

"Struggling along," replied Dalrymple. "Doing its best to live. You don't look in on us now as often as you used to do."

"Och, well, ye see, sor," returned O'Ryan, "when Mr. Emmet was about I had a kind av a raison for lookin' in. Him and me was bhoys together acrost the bit watter, and in the ould happy days we fought like born brothers, sometimes the one on tap and sometimes the other; but above or below never comin' to a ha'porth av harrm either av us. That kind av thing cimints friendship; and so when I joined the force and he came to convert the hathen, 'twas like ould times in a sort av a way. But the place didn't agree wid him nor the people, and he's wid the saints in glory this day. Ye'll moind, sor, that he died about the time you came, and though it's not for the loikes av me to be givin' the loikes av you advice, still and all, sor, I'd be keepin' quietly in my memory what happened to him."

"I never forget," returned Dalrymple quietly, "and never shall. By the way, we're to have something special to-night. Can you come? Miry will be there."

"Then, sor, there'll be a woman worth lookin' at," responded O'Ryan with conviction. "'Twas Mr. Emmet made her what she is. Not that he managed to make her just a perfect angel, as ye'd

say, or knock the ould Adam clane out'n her. On the day av Judgment Miry will still have a spark av the old rascal in her; but 'twill be forgiven, or there's a poor chance for some av us."

"You have seen Miry in all her moods," said Dalrymple.

"Mostly," returned O'Ryan—"mostly; and some av them's not the meekest goin'. 'Twas only the other night I had ividence that that same ould Adam we've been spakin' av is alive and kickin' up his heels. It came about loike this, sor. She was comin' from prayer-matin' at the mission or something av the sort when she came on a drunken man wid a bhoy. The man had just come rowlin' out av one av them palaces av delight, and insisted on sittin' down be a lamp-post, sayin' life wasn't worth livin' and he wanted to go to slape. I didn't want to arrist the critter if I could help it. I'm gettin' tired, sor, runnin' in drunks; it brings no promotion. What came over him I don't know, but up he gets and begins to lether the bhoy. Miry was on him like a cat on a mouse. 'What's this?' says she. 'A great big iliphunt abusin' a poor little kid!' says she. 'If it's wallopin' ye want,' says she, 'here goes,' and wid that she strikes out.

"Down went me man like ninepins. If Miry was a mumber av the force she couldn't have done it claner or purtier. He was up again, however, quite brisk and wonderful for a drunk man; but Miry just walked round him, gettin' in a lick here and a lick there, till the pore divil, beggin' yer pardon, sor, was that bamboozled he didn't know his head from his fut. 'Got enough?' says Miry; and be the grace av Hiven he had sinse enough to say 'Yes.' 'All right,' says she, 'when ye want a fight don't you take to wallopin' kids. There's them that's always ready to

oblige ye with the real thing,' says she. 'So it appears,' says he, blinkin' like a stuck owl; 'so it appears.' Be roights I ought to have run them both in for a braich av the paice."

"Scandalous neglect of duty!" laughed Dalrymple.

"Oh I for sartin," O'Ryan agreed. "Both av them should have gone to quod that night. Riotin' in the open strate like mad Orangemen on the twelfth av July. 'Twas fair disgraceful. But would ye believe it, sor, as I saw her standin' there forninst him and traitin' him like a misbehavin' baby 'twas liker cheerin' than arristin' her I was. So I just kept back out av sight, tellin' myself that if everybody had their due it's ridin' in her carriage wid flunkeys in attindence Miry would be, 'stead av wastin' her strength on the scum av the earth."

"You told yourself the truth there," said Dalrymple with conviction.

"Och, faith, didn't I know it rightly, sor!" returned O'Ryan. "'Let her be,' says I, raisoning wid myself like a sinsible man. 'Let her be. There's things in this world that shouldn't be tuk no notice av anyway. And as for justice,' says I, 'if it never fares worse it's good and happy the world's gettin'.' That's how I raisoned wid myself, sor, workin' on my own feelin's as a mumber av the force."

"And the man convinced the police officer," said Dalrymple.

"He did, sor," responded O'Ryan briskly. "He did. By the strict right and wrong av it, Constable O'Ryan ought to have reported himself for permittin' s'trate rows agin orders. But I haven't heard that the report has gone in, and I'm misdoubtin' if it will. Dishonesty, sor, but Miry was to blame. Well, sor, no sooner did the man own up that he was beaten

than she whips out her handkerchief and begins to wipe and comfort him as tender and purty as if he was a bird wid broken wings. 'Now,' says she, as cheerful as a filly after a feed av corn, 'that's better. We'll be goin' home. You not off in front,' says she to the bhoy, 'and ye needn't be spakin',' says she, 'av what ye have seen.' Well, sor, off she goes wid the man linkin' arm in arm and me watchin' the spoort from behint. He joggled a dale on his legs, bein' wake in that quarter, and wanted to stand and argue; but Miry kept him goin', and at last delivered him safe to his wife—her whose bhoy ran away there just as I came along. Well, good-day, sor; duty and other things permittin' I'll be wid ye."

Saluting affably, he resumed his walk with the flat, stolid sole-to-earth tread which a dozen years of police tramping brings. Dalrymple, too, went his way thinking of many things, but chiefly of Miry, of Albert Charles and his father and mother. He was still engaged with these thoughts when Albert Charles, flushed and out of breath, surprised him.

"I was watching, sir, all the time you talked to the policeman," the boy explained, "waiting for a chance to come back to you."

"Ah!" said Dalrymple, "why did you run away? Were you afraid?"

"Yes, sir."

"Of a whipping?"

"No, sir, not of a whipping; you see——" He stopped, a deep trouble, a deep shame, as Dalrymple thought, in his eyes. "You see, sir, when mother and yon lot are together they'd take away my boots if they caught me, and I only got them last time I was at school."

Dalrymple had no need to ask why a boy should be

deprived of his boots. He knew they would go to the pawnbroker to provide money for the publican.

"And I'm not sure, sir," added Albert Charles quickly, "that I can come round to-night. Dad mightn't like it."

"But I want you very particularly," Dalrymple returned. "And we'll try to make it all right with dad. I shall look for you early, and by the way, if you come across the strange lady again, let me know."

If he was ready to take risks, so was Albert Charles.

"All right, sir," was the cheerful confident response. "I won't forget."

And on that compact they parted.

CHAPTER V

THE elder Merrishaw was invested with all the piquant interest of mystery touched with tragedy. Concerning his past he was himself haughtily reticent, save in his cups, when he became either darkly tantalising or frankly fabulous. But it was known that he once moved in very select circles and suspected he was then called by another name. By the rude standards of his later associates he was still reckoned a gentleman, and report made him likewise a scholar. A scholar indeed he was, as competent judges testified, one who might have sat with credit in Porson's chair and given a new impetus to the study of Plato.

When the young Achilles covered himself with glory at the University, it was thought he would "adopt" the learned leisurely life of a don. But the tame caged existence of a college tutor, with the prospect of possible incursions among the cobwebs of commentary or textual criticism, had no charm for his adventurous imagination. He desired to see the world of men; so he did what the adventurous do—burned his boats and hastened to London, where all the world congregates.

Having missed the golden spoon at birth—that is

to say, having to earn his bread—he made journalism his calling. Now in all the world there is not such another whetstone for the mind of man as Fleet Street; and not for many a day had that unrivalled shaper of talent fashioned a weapon of such keenness and potency as the wit of Merrishaw. Some said, between roars of laughter, that a new Voltaire had arisen to kill the conventional with ridicule; others said, No, it was a new Junius. Yet others declared it was a new Rabelais, with a dash of Swift for flavouring. Others again made flattering comparisons with Aristophanes and Heine, or chuckling gleefully, recalled the quips and cranks of Yorick.

From all this you may extract the Admirable Crichton of popular journalism. And in truth editors tripped each other up in sheer eagerness for "copy." "Anything you like to give," they pleaded. And the vast greedy public, avid of amusement, laughed consumedly and asked for more. For it is delightful to have the Comic Muse walking abroad and with audacious irreverence openly making sport of all things and all men. Merrishaw had found his vocation; he would provide the world with laughter.

A career of wit involves much conviviality, and there temperamentally lay his danger. To be a *bon vivant*, to be seized and compelled by crowds of jolly admirers to look nightly on the wine when it is red, is to stand where the footing is exceedingly slippery and perilous. Fleet Street uses up her choice material with spendthrift recklessness, and is cruelly unkind when wit grows stale or evaporates. "The King is dead—chuck him; long live the King—hooray!" is an axiom much honoured in the observance.

The laughing public takes its entertainers lightly; forgets them easily. Their antics and grimacing done,

the jesters may go. Merrishaw forgot that when the play is over the curtain falls, and on the morrow may rise on other performers. Many things happened, the effect of them all being that one day he found himself in a region where the voice of applause was mute, where men do not drink champagne to the strains of costly music or dine in diamond rings and immaculate shirtfronts. Thenceforward Aristophanes was concealed under the cloak of Timon.

For the fallen there is commonly but one course, to fall farther and ever farther, and the descent is accomplished with frightful celerity.

Merrishaw came tumbling out of the empyrean like a wounded eagle. Two things, however, he retained: his pride, which was inordinate, and a malicious delight in the destructive power of scholarship. He was as touchy as Lucifer, and his beloved classics became barbed shafts with which to smite presumption and ignorance.

"Man, if I had but half your gifts and attainments," Dalrymple remarked one day, "I could move the world."

"And if I had but half your dulness," was the sour retort, "I could still be happy."

A whole system of bitter philosophy lay in the repartee.

Having secured the presence of Albert Charles at the mission festival, Dalrymple expected a visit from the boy's father, and was not disappointed. The revels were at their height when of a sudden there arose a commotion about the door. A man's voice was heard, high and strident; then the man himself appeared, sorely dilapidated and manifestly very angry. It was Merrishaw.

"I'm at yer service, sor," whispered O'Ryan, who managed to snatch an hour according to promise.

"Thanks; but we mustn't make a scene if we can help it," Dalrymple returned. "He'll perhaps be reasonable."

"'Tis little raison that's in his head be the look av him," observed O'Ryan, watching the newcomer. "I'm thinkin', sor, it's spoilin' for a row he is."

With remarkable promptitude Merrishaw proceeded to vindicate the official judgment; but just as he was on the point of clutching Albert Charles by the collar to drag him forth in ignominy, Miry intervened.

"Stidy," she remarked, "stidy. Though ye mightn't think it, this aint exactly a free-and-easy, where it's come when ye like and do as ye please. We aint goin' to 'ave no rows. Take that strite."

"He's mine," rejoined Merrishaw, flashing upon her in wrath. He made a dart at Albert Charles, overbalanced, and fell into the succouring arms of Miry.

"It's somebody to mother you that you want," she observed, setting him squarely on his feet again.

His impulse was to slap her face: but sharp recollections of her skill in retaliation restrained him. The tongue and not the fist must be his weapon of offence.

"You presume," he said, drawing himself up in offended dignity. "Be good enough to get out of my way."

"Please, sir, won't 'e wipe yer boots on me?" Miry responded with a satiric duck. "Never mind my feelin's. They don't count. Lor' bless 'e, I aint no lidy. No, I aint settin' up to be no bloomin' duchess with nuthin' to do but swill fizz and nurse puppy

dogs. It don't agree with me as a gen'ral thing to take sarce permiskus like from anybody as 'appens to come along; but you're a gentleman, sir, ain't 'e?"

He regarded her in solemn astonishment, as if revolving the question in his mind.

"Used to be, I think," he answered doubtfully.

"Ye are now, sir, I'm sure," said Miry, breaking into her most genial smile. "An' 'cause of that ye won't make no bother now, will 'e, sir?"

"And you'll leave your boy with us just a little while longer," put in Dalrymple, who had stepped quietly forward. "I think I may venture to say he's enjoying himself."

Merrishaw turned his eyes from Miry to Dalrymple, then from Dalrymple to the trembling, expectant figure of his son, and finally back again to Dalrymple.

"Sir," he responded with a blistering look, "you set up here as a purveyor of counsel—given *gratis*. Pray permit me to offer you a morsel of your own ware. Read Bishop Taylor on meddlers. You will find it, I believe, singularly edifying in your unhappy state of conceit. The law of England gives me control of my own child. It might teach you justice, as well as manners, to be laid by the heels for your impudent interference with the natural rights of an Englishman; and you," glancing at Miry, "for being deluded into playing the part of accessory."

"If ye must go, sir," returned Miry, striking in before Dalrymple could speak, not for her own sake but for his, "why I suppose ye must; but don't be takin' on about it. There's nuthin in this world worth worryin' over, 'cept, maybe, sunthin to eat—and another time, sir, another time, as the song says."

She turned away smiling, and with a sleight of hand which, in any one who had given less proof of

honesty, would have been suspicious, slipped a miscellaneous collection of cake and confectionery into Albert Charles's pocket.

"Come," said Merrishaw, with an imperative jerk of the thumb, "and if ever I catch you here again there'll be something to remember." He marched in swaying dignity to the door, all eyes upon him and his prisoner. There he turned for an instant to take a Parthian farewell of Dalrymple.

"Purty hard to stand, sor, that kind av thing," observed O'Ryan, as the door closed on the pair.

"Part of the day's work," returned Dalrymple, smiling as one who has no thought of taking offence. "If we don't take it as such here, we'd better give up."

"And that's good Gospel trewth, sor," assented O'Ryan, "and what I'm wonderin' is this—which is the bravest man, him that squails and splutters when he's hurt or him that houlds his tongue and his hands for sake av the other fellow. Hullo! there's Miry off after them. D'ye think I'd better be steppin' outside, sor?"

"Oh, she'll probably be able to take care of herself," laughed Dalrymple.

"'Tis not the question in me moind at all, sor," rejoined O'Ryan. "It's who'll take care av him if she gets tromplin' on her war-horse. Howsomever, a bit av a dressin' down wid Miry's currycomb would do the man no harrm in the worrld—not a ha'purth."

In a few minutes she returned without any sign of battle, though her face was full of gloom and anger.

"Have they gone home?" Dalrymple asked softly.

"No, sir," was the reply. "'Taint 'ome that's in 'is 'ead. It's Albert Charles singin' for drinks as usual. That's the game, sir."

CHAPTER VI

THE boy possessed one rare and enviable gift—a voice of celestial quality, an inheritance from his mother. In the heyday of her youth and fortune she had been the star of a fashionable and popular church. Devout audiences, doting on the operatic pitch in religion, listened entranced to her solos, feeling that just so the angels who kept abreast of the times must sing in glory. And the concert hall, with as deep and a yet more ebullient rapture, repeated and ratified the judgment. It chanced that Merrishaw saw, heard, and, like the rest, was enchanted.

"If I were a rich man she should go to Italy," he declared ecstatically. "By Heaven, she shall go!"

He meant it. For a whole evening the generous impulse glowed in his breast. Next day, fixity of purpose being no attribute of genius, it had passed. Yet his magnanimity was not wholly void. He wrote up his *prima donna* with a boundless enthusiasm and all the resources of a popular journalist. Then, finding himself distractedly in love with his divinity, he had no option but to marry her.

The Society reporter, letting herself go with a fine *abandon* in the manner which delights Mayfair, described the wedding as "one of the prettiest and

most interesting of the season in view of the multitude of friends and the celebrity of the contracting parties." A crowd of notabilities attended the ceremony, presents were numerous and of a quite satisfactory monetary value, and both bride and bridegroom looked radiantly happy. Thus the Society reporter, No one, of course, thought of the grim Fates in the darkness behind or suspected what stuff they were even then laying on their black looms.

Merrishaw belonged to the order that craves a new interest with each rising of the sun. The honeymoon was scarcely over when he began to yawn. Marriage, it seemed, was not a perpetual diversion nor a wife an antidote to *ennui*. Temperament called, like a tormenting demon, for variety, variety, and ever more pungent variety. "I shall die of tedium," it said, like a flighty, empty-headed girl seeking the spice of life in endless flirtation. "What has become of your jocund hours? Where is your vaunted conviviality? Think of all the wise men of old who plucked the sunshine which empurples the vine-clad hills, stored it in casks, and in due season made themselves merry therewith."

So he taught his wife what was necessary of the Dionysian mysteries as brought up to date by the skill of brewers and distillers. She proved an apt learner, after the manner of her sex. Indeed, the pupil soon outdid the master in zeal and devotion. For it is at once the signal merit and the perilous defect of woman that she does nothing by halves. It may have been mere coincidence, it may have been something deeper, subtle effect following subtle cause, but as time passed the singer sang with diminished *éclat*, even as the jester jested with less point and mirth.

When Albert Charles came upon the stage the

sullen murmur of Avernus was already audible below. There were frantic spasmodic efforts to turn back, to regain the comparative safety of the top; but one does not return easily upon a declivity of polished ice. "Never mind," said Temperament insidiously; "good things were meant to be enjoyed. Better a short life and a merry one than æons of respectable dulness. Bacchus is a jovial and beneficent god. First he gives his worshippers great draughts of joy, and then a happy oblivion. He is the only god who does this."

But it seemed that this jovial deity was in the end a gross deceiver. "Don't imagine I drink for delight," Merrishaw once told Dalrymple in a moment of confidence. "That stage is long past. It's the waters of Lethe I want. But, sir, the god has fooled me. There is something here," tapping first his breast and then his forehead, "which no opiate can effectually dispose of. Sometimes it is a fire and sometimes a poisoned arrow. When it is a fire I cannot quench it; when it is an arrow I cannot pluck it out."

"Then there is still hope," observed Dalrymple quietly.

The other laughed in scorn. "It is, of course, your business to say so," he returned. "But I know better. The day I came here Hope and I parted company. Hope is a very dainty lady. She dislikes the mire as much as any simpering creature of fashion. The Inferno, as Dante well knew, is not for her. And in truth she could not live here if she tried."

"She could—and does," was the emphatic answer.

"Then perhaps you will have the goodness to give me her address," Merrishaw retorted ironically. "Upon my word, I should like to call and see her for old times' sake."

"I promise you shall see her if you come with me," said Dalrymple earnestly. But Merrishaw laughed more bitterly than before.

"No, no!" he cried; "I am not to be fooled any longer. Once I believed all I was told, like a child or an honest unspoiled Greenlander. I thought the universe swarmed with good genii. I hung up my stocking at Christmas with unquestioning faith in Santa Claus. By and by I found out that Santa Claus was a beneficent imposture. As I grew older I found out other things, till at last all my illusions were gone. Finally I discovered that the thing called happiness is itself an illusion."

"Might it not be that your discovery is the illusion?" Dalrymple asked gently.

"Ah!" cried Merrishaw, "you would draw me into metaphysics. Well, perhaps I could meet you there. But experience puts metaphysics out of court. I am cold, I am hungry, I am thirsty. Metaphysic would prove to me in her airy fashion that I merely imagine I am cold and hungry and thirsty. I answer bluntly that Metaphysic is a liar. So go your way, sir, to your own folk. If you have anodyne for their woes, let them have it. As for me, I desire only to be let alone."

That was ever his way—the disdainful retort, the cold shoulder to the would-be helper.

"So he's at it again," remarked Dalrymple sorrowfully, when the angry Miry returned.

"Yes, sir, for all 'e's worth," said Miry truculently. "Can't we take Albert Charles away from him?"

"You heard what he said about his legal rights," replied Dalrymple. "The law gives him sole charge of his boy."

"Then," responded Miry fiercely, forgetting her

manners in her disgust, "all I've got to say is this, the law's a bloomin' moke. If them as makes laws would come 'ere to see 'ow the thing works sometimes, they'd learn wot they don't 'pear to know much about. But there," she cried, flushing as in apology. "There's them blessed kids as 'ungry lookin' as stray dogs. Wot yer a-doin' of anyway, Mr. O'Ryan? Aint 'e got no more for the poor dears to eat?"

"Lashins and lashins," answered O'Ryan blithely, bestirring himself. "Faith, and 'tis the foine healthy appetites they have entoirely. What I'm beginnin' to look for is the flyin' buttons. They're about due, I'm thinkin'."

"As you're the 'andy man ye can sew 'em on again," retorted Miry, bustling with a basket of buns.

CHAPTER VII

ALL human things have value or significance by the great law of contraries. Death sits over against life, evil against good. The unshared feast gives a sharper pang to hunger, the unshared felicity a keener edge to misery. Perdition is but bliss reversed, hell but the antipodes to heaven.

Christmas, ideally a millennial pause in the ruthless tumult of the world, emphasises the contrasts of human fortune, like an artist flinging on canvas the extremes of light and darkness. If Yuletide brings to Dives a livelier delight in the blessing of bursting larders and overflowing wine-bins, it pierces Lazarus with an acuter sense of his beggary and his sores.

Thus the glad current of feeling which runs through half the community intensifies the gloom and infelicity of the other. It is as if a vast curtain, transparent but impassable, were hung between earth and sky, so that the wretch looking through may be embittered by beholding the pleasures in which he cannot participate. But to feel the full rigour of the cold, the full anguish of the dreariness, it is necessary to have once revelled with the merry throng and glowed in the exhilaration of the sunshine.

The strange lady who had so mysteriously appeared

and disappeared at the police court, and for whom Albert Charles promised to keep a look-out, was receiving the most trenchant lesson in this trenchant law. On Christmas Eve she went out desolate and dejected into the busy streets, telling herself that at last she knew how the fallen angels felt when they were cast out of Paradise. Old times and glad faces arose with excruciating vividness on her memory. And others were now as she had once been—full of gaiety and happiness. All over the land postmen were hastening to and fro like beneficent fairies, laden with tokens of love and friendship. Not one would come to her in her desolation, not one. Forgetting the London crowds as though she were in the midst of a vast solitude, she saw herself a little girl again, dancing in rapture about the magic tree. In a trice she was grown up and sharing adult gaieties. Then all at once there rang in her ears such a babel of childish shouts and laughter that she could have cried out in her torment.

The cold checked the blood in the veins and gave to human flesh the chill of marble. For a week the streets were a sludge of mud and melted snow. Then came a smart frost, making them both rough and slippery. In the country snow is a thing of purity and beauty; in London it is hideous and the cause of hideousness. The happy, the well-fed, well-clad, indeed, stamped their feet and clapped their hands, crying, "Glorious, glorious!" because it was the proper thing to do in weather that upheld the grand old traditions so splendidly; but the ill-fed, ill-clad and unhappy, shivering and shrinking to half their natural size, murmured dolorously, "Cold, cold, dismally cold!" Twice under sheer compulsion of the piercing wind the fugitive woman was driven within the sheen of

a public-house door and twice drew back in a quick fear. She would not yield, she told herself, no, not if she must drop and perish in the street. She hurried on, head down, as though resolved not to see the seductive invitations of taverns. But the frosty wind, blowing through and through her, made every nerve and muscle tremble in unbearable pain, and she looked up to find herself once more within the glowing circle.

A kind of blindness came upon her, a dizziness such as seizes nervous people in the crisis of some fearful hazard. Before she was aware what she was about, she was inside, panting with excitement. The hot, perfumed air warmed her like the breath of an oven. The flash of lights and sparkle of glass were as the welcome of waiting friends. Yet she shuddered. How was it that Satan made his halls so attractive and so pleasant ?

She slipped into a corner unobserved save by an attendant, who promptly posed before her and by a look asked what she wanted.

"Something hot, please," she told him timidly. "Not wine or spirits," she added, ready to go if he were unable to serve the order. She was frightened at her own act in entering and would gladly have slipped out again. But the man, after some delay, and not too obligingly, was able to give her something hot that was not alcoholic. When he returned her fingers were so numb she could not produce the necessary coppers. He watched her fumbling, as a hawk watches a pigeon, both hands on the counter, as if guarding the cup he had just set down.

"It's so cold," she said apologetically. "May I drink this to warm me?" and reached forth a hand.

He promptly snatched the cup away from her.

"Not much," he returned with a hard laugh. "Pay first and drink arterwards is the rule of this 'ouse."

Once he was caught by that innocent device, but since then he had gained wisdom. He knew the tricks of all such as fumbled in an empty pocket, designing to refresh themselves at his expense.

She would have fled had she dared. Partly from helplessness, partly in proof of honesty, she plucked out her purse, begging him to take the price for himself.

His eyes opened in astonishment at sight of a handful of silver. Why, the woman was rich! Then he noticed that her appearance was not that of the ladies who usually patronised him.

"Thank'ee, mum," he said, tone and manner all at once become deferential. "'Ere's the stuff to make Christmas jolly and no mistake. 'Ow was I to know as you wasn't one of the common sort? Lor' bless 'e, we 'ave to look arter ourselves 'ere, we 'ave."

He took the money and handed back the purse with an exaggerated politeness which drew upon her the attention of the whole company. To be treated with respect and ceremony by a barman is, from a public-house point of view, a rare and signal honour.

"Yer'ealth, mum," a man cried jovially, and instantly a dozen glasses and mugs were in the air. Evidently a great lady in disguise had strolled or strayed in amongst them. Next minute a woman crossed from the other side of the room with an elaborate air of geniality.

"May I have the pleasure of introducing myself?" she said; "I am Mrs. Merrishaw—well known, I think, in this neighbourhood."

"'Ear, 'ear!" ejaculated a man, apparently under the impression that he was at a public meeting

and therefore in honour bound to applaud. "'Ear, 'ear!"

"'Taint 'ear, 'ear, and you'd better jolly well shut up," retorted his wife sharply. She was Mrs. Merrishaw's friend, the thin little woman who played the flute pantomimically in derision of Dalrymple. The man was just sober enough to remember the duty of obedience.

"All ri'," he said humbly and thickly, "all ri', then it aint."

"I noticed you were a stranger," Mrs. Merrishaw went on, disregarding the interruption, "and as we all like to be friendly here I ventured to speak to you. Doesn't feel nice to be all alone in the world, does it? That's why we meet and turn in here for a bit of cheer. To-night, too, it's as cold as charity outside, and that's about as cold as it can be."

"It is," agreed the newcomer.

The two women were regarding each other with a curious, half amazed sense of kinship. A singular emotion quivered in the hearts of both, the emotion which a chance meeting brings to children of misfortune who have known better things.

"Having something to warm you," pursued Mrs. Merrishaw with studied affability. "It's the only thing to do a night like this, it really is. Positively starving."

Her eyes dropped to the purse which the stranger still held forgetfully in her hand, and she bent forward remarking, with a significant nod, "Not all so lucky as you are. Wish we were."

"Have something with me then," was the response.

It came impulsively from sheer pity, for despite her brave cheerfulness Mrs. Merrishaw seemed to have reached the very nadir of adversity.

"Thanks; delighted, I'm sure," she responded,

beaming like one enjoying an unexpected stroke of good fortune.

"'Ear, 'ear!" interjected the man who had previously applauded.

"Will you dry up with yer 'ear, 'ear?" demanded his wife fiercely.

"Yesh, yesh," he replied meekly, shuffling his feet, as though by that process he effaced himself the more effectually. Having thus reduced him to submission, his wife crossed to her friend Mrs. Merrishaw, and by that lady was introduced to the stranger as Mrs. Deakin.

"D-e-a-k-i-n," her husband hiccupped across the room, suddenly picking up again; "barynite in our family somewheres—kind o' relation, yesh."

"You look jolly like a barynite, don't 'e?" his wife fired back at him. "Ye'll be a bloomin' hearl next, I 'spect, or a harchbishop or sunthin'."

There was a laugh, in which Mr. Deakin joined as it were out of pure good-fellowship.

"Wass up?" he demanded next minute. "Wass up, eh?"

He saw the strange lady lay down a piece of silver which could not be less than a florin, he saw his wife and Mrs. Merrishaw smiling over their glasses, and the others press in as if hoping to share the social cup. They might have succeeded too, for they knew how to wheedle, and the moneyed stranger was weak and afraid. But their expectations were dashed by an interruption from without.

"Why, it's your Albert Charles, aint it?" cried Mrs. Deakin, looking at Mrs. Merrishaw, "a singin' a blessed Christmas carol."

Mrs. Merrishaw bent her ear hearkening. The young voice rose quavering, as if palsied by cold, as

indeed it was. An expression of intense irritation came into her face. "Yes," she responded, "and he's making a hash of it, a regular hash."

"Sure it's a hash, missus?" a man inquired, taking his pipe from his mouth and spitting into a heap of sawdust. "Bet a bob you don't do better, and if you lose you needn't pay."

"Take 'im up, m' dear," said Mrs. Deakin encouragingly.

"Take 'im up!" echoed half a dozen others.

"Hand over the stake then," said Mrs. Merrishaw, her eyes gleaming.

"P'raps as you'll be good enough to 'old it," said the man, handing a shilling to the barman. "Now," he added, "call in the boy."

As Mrs. Merrishaw guessed, not only the boy entered but the boy's parent and guardian, her husband.

"Hullo," cried Mr. Merrishaw, eyeing his wife in hot displeasure, "why aren't you at home?"

"It's a bet," put in Mrs. Deakin soothingly.

"A bet!" repeated Mr. Merrishaw in yet hotter displeasure. "A bet, and you know how I hate betting and gambling! It's my opinion Old Nick and all his legions couldn't keep some women straight."

Mrs. Deakin gave a peal of stage laughter. "If ye arsk me, I think the gennleman ye name wouldn't bother 'is 'ed tryin'," she cried; "all t'other way round, I reckon. Come, Mr. Merrishaw, don't you go and be unsociable now, 'specially at Christmas-time. There's a bob on it."

"Oh, there is, is there?" returned Mr. Merrishaw. "And what's the bob on?"

"On 'er," replied Mrs. Deakin, jerking her head at his wife. "'Bout singin' a Christmas carol. And you aint goin' to be nasty, are 'e now?"

"'Ear, 'ear l" called Mr. Deakin in thick approval.

"Oh l you glue up," retorted Mrs. Deakin, with her utmost severity. "The drink's took 'is silly old 'ead, that's wot's the matter with 'im," she explained generally, adding that in the privacy of the home circle there would certainly be a reckoning. That done, she urged Mrs. Merrishaw anew to go on and win the bet.

"Don't know as I can 'low singin' in 'ere," observed the landlord doubtfully.

"It's all right and proper, mister," returned the backer of Albert Charles coaxingly, "and you can make it drinks all round."

"'Ear, 'ear l" cried Mr. Deakin, this time with a kind of defiant vigour and vivacity. "Drinksh all roun'. Mine dogsh-nosh, please. Wass mahr?" he inquired, catching his wife's admonishing eye. "Drinksh all roun'—all ri,' aint it?"

"You'll get chucked l" was the crisp reply. But whether it was the spirit of Christmas or the prospect of good business that mollified the landlord, he politely fell in with the humour of the company. He smiled upon Mr. Deakin as upon a toper well deserving toleration, and with his own hand set a glass of the appropriate beverage before Mr. Merrishaw. Objections thus happily disposed of, Mrs. Merrishaw pulled herself together.

"What shall it be?" she asked.

"Oh l the beautiful, beautiful 'Erald Hangels, as Albert Charles was a-singin'," suggested Mrs. Deakin.

"I fairly dotes on it this time of year, I do."

As others doted equally, Mrs. Merrishaw began :

"Hark the herald angels sing,
Glory to the new-born King,
Peace on earth and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled.

Joyful all ye nations rise,
Join the triumph of the skies ;
With the angelic host proclaim,
'Christ is born in Bethlehem.'
Hark the herald-angels sing,
Glory to the new-born King."

Her voice, a soprano of the rarest richness and purity, was long demoralised by alcohol. But as she sang now it recovered something of the old quality, the old charm which had captivated alike pit and dress circle. As they listened the men forgot their liquor and ceased to smoke ; the women breathed in their dishevelment like wild creatures conquered by a divine spell. Deep in the core of their being something seemed to be touched, setting free their better instincts and impulses. As for the singer herself, before the end was reached she was transformed and transfigured. She forgot her rags and her wretchedness, forgot that she was singing in a public-house for a sordid bet of a shilling, forgot the bleared eyes and purple sodden faces about her. The old spirit was upon her—a sheer delight in the thing she was doing for its own sake. For one brief moment the artist rose triumphant from the wreck of the social outcast. When she began her face was deathly white ; when she ended it was eager and glowing. On the last note she threw back her head in the old fashion, and it seemed the very walls thrilled and trembled.

For a moment there was a dead, breathless silence. In the midst of it her boy's champion strode across the room, his eyes glistening, his hand held out in congratulation. But before he could speak some one struck up, and the entire company, catching the strange infection, broke rapturously into the familiar Christmas hymn, surely never before sung by such a choir in such a place :

"Joyful all ye nations rise,
Join the triumph of the skies ;
With the angelic host proclaim,
'Christ is born in Bethlehem.'
Hark ! the herald-angels sing,
Glory to the new-born King."

Before that mighty volume of sound it appeared the walls must burst asunder. When it died away the strange woman was wiping her eyes ; but no one noticed her.

"Pay over," said the man who had wagered to the barman. "Pay over. It's not 'ere you ought to be, missus," he added, turning to Mrs. Merrishaw. "Not 'ere, nor any place like it. And for bein' moke enough to doubt I make the one bob three, if you'll 'low me. Wish I could make the three, a thousand. You'd deserve 'em all."

"Give them to me," said Merrishaw, stepping forward. "I'm her husband."

But the other waved him off.

"No, sir," was the response. "This aint goin' to be melted. This is for 'er and the kid."

Merrishaw flashed on him the scowl of a wild beast, and turned on his heel, ordering Albert Charles to follow.

In the darkness outside he brushed against a man who stood listening in wonder to the singing of the hymn, and growled savagely. The man apologised for being in the way and hastened on. He was scarcely out of sight when the strange woman passed out into the street behind him. The man was Herrick ; the woman his wife.

CHAPTER VIII

ON learning that Herrick and Pearl were leaving Lumley Beacon, Mr. Kippen requested that his granddaughter should be sent to him at Rushborough, intimating in his imperious way that if the request were denied she need have no expectations from him. His motive was to break off all relation with her father.

Herrick debated the matter with himself long and earnestly. Would it be right to stand between Pearl and her mother's inheritance—in other words, should he surrender her for her own sake? The answer in the end was an emphatic negative.

"The request is unfair and unnatural," he told himself. "She is mine and I will keep her. He may relent; if not, he can but carry out his threat. There is one inheritance he cannot take away—God's love and mine."

The refusal of his request gave Mr. Kippen the excuse he sought. Herrick was guilty of contumacy, and to contumacy he added folly.

"I would have saved the child if he had let me," Mr. Kippen remarked with an injured air to his wife as they discussed the letter of refusal together in the dining-room. "But you see he won't allow me. You

can make nothing of fools. I only hope he will have the sense to hide himself where no eye that concerns me will ever look on him, though, of course, it would be like him to go and aggravate the scandal."

"You are not afraid of anything more happening, are you, Samuel?" she asked tremulously.

"I am not so sure," was the answer; "as you may judge, I have my enemies. Every successful man, I suppose, has, and if the wolves caught the lion down, depend upon it they would be upon him without scruple."

"The directors know, dear," said Mrs. Kippen, her face full of a new dread.

"The directors know," repeated Mr. Kippen. "Good Lord! the whole world knows, and what's more, the whole world gapes. People turn in the street and stare at me as if I were some new kind of monster escaped from the Zoo. Even customers coming in to see me itch to speak of the thing if they dared. But they daren't, by Heaven they daren't! It would be short shrift for any one of them who presumed to take such a liberty. Luckily I am still master at the bank."

"Sir Theodore is all right, isn't he?" Mrs. Kippen inquired, getting more and more tremulous.

"I hope so," was the reply. "He doesn't say much: but it's not to be inferred he's gratified to see the general manager mixed up in such an affair. The directors, too, are respectfully mum; but neither can they be pleased. 'I'm sorry,' Sir Theodore told me when he heard of it. 'Very sorry, indeed. My wife has told me.' His wife, it seems, has been blabbing to the four winds. If some people's tongues were treated as Cromwell treated his enemies' ears, that is to say clipped, the world would be spared much

malicious talk. I tell you, it is fortunate for me that the year just closing is the best the bank has ever had. It would be madness to throw the pilot overboard, and they know it. Otherwise things might be even worse than they are."

"They are bad enough," said Mrs. Kippen drearily.

"Yes," he agreed. "My worst enemy could scarcely have anything more pleasing to chuckle over. I don't know what Grace can have been thinking of. But of course she was driven to it; must have been. Either that or she's stark mad."

"I wish I knew what has become of her," said Mrs. Kippen, her eyes beginning to swim. "I think I could be happy if I even knew she was waiting for me where I often long to be. My dear, innocent baby, that used to lie on my knee and laugh up at me; my little girl that snuggled tight in my arms! That's how I have been thinking of her lately. I can feel the soft touch of her arms now, aye, and often when I'm lying in the dark I can hear her voice quite plainly calling 'Mama, mama,' just as she used to call. And I'd rise out of my bed and leave everything and go to her if I could—willingly, willingly."

Strong man as he was, something caught Mr. Kippen by the throat and shook him. There was a moment's silence. Knowing how he disapproved of tears, Mrs. Kippen dried her eyes; and he, to save himself from a similar exhibition of weakness, went on with an added bitterness:

"And all this comes of the mistake of marrying a fool—a born fool. It would have been infinitely better if Grace had married my junior clerk. For her sake I could have made him a country manager somewhere, anyway. But no, she must have a gentleman, a man who had been at the University. Well!

see what he has done for her. Bagh! I was a bigger fool than either of them not to have put down my foot. But I allowed myself to be cozened, persuaded. 'He is so manly and good, papa, and I respect and love him dearly.' That was the tale. Would she say as much now? He manly?—the—the absolute idiot that he is."

Mrs. Kippen put up her hands feebly, as though warding off blows.

"Don't, Samuel," she pleaded. "Don't, or you'll drive me altogether crazy. Gracie did love him, I know she did, and—and I believe in my heart she loves him now."

"It would need only that to perfect her folly," was the retort. "I tell you Herrick is impossible—flatly impossible. I don't believe he ever had one real practical sensible idea in his head, or ever will till it ceases to be a head. The very first time I met him here he talked some bosh about the salvation of humanity and the amelioration of the world, as if God weren't fit to manage what He had created. Let him ameliorate himself. We see now what all his ideals were worth. Some people fly at the moon and light in the mud. He and his idiotic schemes! If he only knew it, it's of more service to humanity to have one potato properly cooked than to listen to the outpourings of all the wind-bags in existence. I don't know what I ever did to have such a son-in-law foisted on me."

"Perhaps you're too hard on him, Samuel," returned Mrs. Kippen, choking down a sob. "Will you be angry with me if I tell you something that has been on my mind ever since we knew about Gracie?"

"You think it may hurt my feelings," he returned.

"Yes."

"Then don't trouble about that. My feelings are getting hardened by rough usage. Go ahead, please."

"Well, then, it's this : I have been asking myself if by any chance we can be to blame for what has happened."

"Ah! so you've been asking yourself that, have you? The very last time Herrick was here, as you may remember, he had the generosity and good taste to tell me that we certainly were to blame. He did not stay to tell me twice. I think I heard you calling after him when he left this house; but he did not come back. No, he knew better; there at least he showed some glimmering of sense. Let him pull the beam out of his own eye before he troubles about the mote in mine. I am no faddist. There has always been wine on my table; there always shall be while I remain master. If a guest or a member of my family wants a glass, there it is; but if any one says to me, 'Sir, you made your daughter a drunkard,' I reply, 'Sir, it is a lie.' That was my answer to Herrick, and let it suffice."

He turned away to signify that the matter was dismissed. He would admit no responsibility, permit no criticism of his domestic policy. As father and husband he had done his duty; and duty done, carpers and faultfinders must be silent. So he went his way, with shut ears and hardened heart. It is a convenient plan, but it by no means abolishes the day of reckoning.

Left to herself, Mrs. Kippen took up Herrick's letter, which her husband had cast contemptuously on the table.

"I am going to search for her," she read with dim eyes. "To that sacred quest I dedicate my life. I say nothing here of the tragedy that has befallen

us all. I want simply to tell you that in God's name and with God's help I am going to seek my wife—the woman I love with all my heart and soul, the woman who deserves a far better love than mine. Please God I shall succeed. Meantime, think of her and me with pity and forgiveness."

Mrs. Kippen bent over the table, covering her face with her hands.

"Gracious God, help him!" she sobbed. "For a mother's sake, help him!"

Mr. Kippen, returning for something, pushed the door open and beheld her thus. She did not hear him; he did not speak. A second he looked in, as if awestruck, then, turning away, drew the door quietly after him. He had heard that piteous cry, "For a mother's sake, help him!"

CHAPTER IX

"I AM going to seek my wife." The whole man—heart, will, affections—was in that passionate determination. The wife of his youth, the wife of his love and his vows, in distress—a wanderer self-exiled from home and friends! Surely, surely he would go forth and search till he found her, aye, and restore her to the happiness which, in spite of everything, none better deserved. Often, as his head reeled in the fever of thinking and planning, he saw her as in a mist afar off stretching her hands to him for aid, so that he was constrained to cry out: "I am coming; courage, dearest, I am coming." But the fiery resolution to be up and off to the rescue was dashed by the ever-recurring question, Where? Whither should he turn—north, south, east, or west?

From the first the police said "London or suicide," with a curdling inclination, as time passed, to emphasise the latter. The idea of self-destruction he fought with all his might. True, she must have been momentarily demented; and as he had to own, the actions of madness are incalculable. Nevertheless, he steadfastly refused to accept the theory of suicide. The truth, the indubitable truth, as he easily convinced himself, was that the remorse of a startled

conscience suddenly brought to its own judgment bar was responsible for her flight. So his heart reasoned; and there are times when the heart is a far deeper reasoner than the head.

"My poor lost darling is hiding in shame," he told himself.

London is the best or worst of all hiding-places. To London therefore he turned, taking Pearl with him that she might be at school near him, while he pushed his search.

Pearl danced in a wild exuberance of joy. "At last, at last!" she cried, clapping her hands, "we're going to mama, dear mama."

Herrick did not contradict her nor explain too nicely what the removal to London might mean. So, nothing doubting, Pearl went about singing joyously to divers tunes the one great song, "Going to mama, dear mama; going to mama!" Once she stopped before her mother's portrait, and gazing up at it with the adoration of a devotee, exclaimed: "Oh! you dear darling mama. You have been away from us so long, but we are going to you at last, and we'll never, never let you go again."

Her song and her eager, confident expectation almost broke her father's heart. But still he held his peace, and Pearl sang on seraphically, "Going to mama, dear mama; going to mama!" And when the time of departure was at hand she went out among the hedges and sheltered nooks of wood and garden and gathered a bouquet of grasses, ferns, and hectic belated leaves. Her hands bled freely in the process, but what mattered that? Mama liked posies from forest and hedgerow; and here was a posy to delight her in far-away London, where Pearl understood there were neither grasses nor ferns. She

exhibited it in triumph to her father, tied with a bright silk ribbon and labelled in a painful childish hand, "To darling mama, with love from her own Pearl."

As he did not immediately speak, she cried in her quick impatient way: "Why! aren't you glad? You ought to be glad." And then, noting the tremor of his face, she asked in sudden dismay: "Is anything the matter, papa? We are going to mama, aren't we?"

"I hope so," he answered lamely.

"But we are really and truly, aren't we?" she demanded. Hope was not enough for her; she expected fulfilment. It was not a case for hesitation, and Herrick, as once before, took the hurdle blindly.

"Yes," he replied. "We are going to mama."

"Then why aren't you glad?" rejoined Pearl, with a puzzled expression. "Is it because you are sorry leaving this?"

"Yes," he answered. "I am sorry leaving this." There, at any rate, he could speak the literal truth.

"You needn't," she told him. "We'll come back with mama, won't we?"

"Sometimes, you know, dearie," he answered slowly, "people go away and do not return."

"Oh, but we're coming back," Pearl assured him with as much confidence as if she held the management of the world and the workings of destiny in her own small hand. "I should die if I didn't get back; and I'm sure mama would like to come, too."

That decided it. "Very well," he assented. "We'll keep up our hearts then."

So with the celestial lightness of her age Pearl resumed her chant: "Going to mama, dear mama; going to mama."

The arrival in London brought a heart-searching crisis. It needed all her father's tact and finesse to

get Pearl quietly established in the school, and the feat was not accomplished without a dubious tinkering and colouring of fact. Driven to seek explanations for herself, Pearl asked if mama was still too ill to be seen, and Herrick seized on the idea with the eagerness of despair.

"All right," she said, compressing her mouth resolutely. "I'll wait here and try to be good. But you must come to me every day to tell me about her. I am sure I shall not like these people the least little bit."

"These people" referred to so contemptuously were, it may be mentioned, the *élite* of their kind: but it would be waste of breath to explain that fact to Pearl. For she had made up her mind that somehow or other they were concerned in prolonging the time of her separation from mamā. But he ventured to suggest it might be against the rules of the school to admit a daily visitor.

"I don't care a snap for their rules," was the response. "If they bother me I know what to do," she added, her face gleaming with intelligence.

"What?" her father asked.

"Run away!" she replied promptly and with decision.

"You must promise me not to think of that, Pearl," he returned, a sudden cold at his vitals.

"Then you must promise to come to me every day," was the rejoinder.

There was nothing for it but to make the compact. Thus it came that in contravention of all school rules he reported himself daily, like a ticket-of-leave man compelled under fear of frightful penalties to give proofs of good conduct. Many and pointed were the questions put to him at those daily interviews. How

was mama? When would she be well enough for the promised reunion? And how long was she, Pearl, to be left in that dreadful, dreadful place, where everybody expected her to take an interest in all the nasty things that nasty people had ever invented for the torture of little girls?

"I hate them all!" she declared passionately. "When I'm thinking of mama and wondering when I shall see her, they ask me seven times seven or eleven times twelve, or want me to tell them when Julius Cæsar fought the battle of Bannockburn, or something, as if I cared two straws! It is my mama I want."

Her father never went to pay his visit without a sinking of the heart, nor left without a choking pity and terror. Should he, after all, be forced to go to Pearl with the piteous confession: "I don't know when you will see mama; I don't know whether you will ever see her at all. I don't know where she is, nor whether she is dead or alive. My trustful darling, I have been deceiving you?" The possibility of such a scene, such a confession, was always before him. How could he look in Pearl's face and hear her say, "Papa, I believed you, and you told me a lie; I am never to see mama any more."

It might in truth come to that. For day after day passed, and for Pearl he had only evasions and makeshift encouragement. Day by day he mingled in the roar and tumult of London, saw the human waves surge, break, scatter, and gather and surge again, without revealing the face he sought. He never guessed that the Fates were within an ace of granting him almost at the outset the desire of his heart. It was indeed as if they resolved to be kind, but at the last moment rued and denied the happy chance. It might never recur.

CHAPTER X

HERRICK chose missionary work in London, his reasons being two. He should be where he wished to be, and he could, or so he fancied, minister to those who most needed help. The Church, finding certain of her sons with ideals of raising the low and succouring the fallen, sends them to toil in the densities and reeking murk of cities, bestows her blessing, pleasantly commends their altruism, hopes they may have a great harvest of souls, and for the rest goes her comfortable, dignified way, forgetting them, except when accident or the routine of business restores them momentarily to the light, like sunk reefs at low tide. But in truth Herrick was more than glad to feel the ecclesiastical bearing-rein held lightly, to enjoy something of the liberty of a free-lance.

He was not new to the nether side of the metropolis of Christianity, the Gehenna of civilisation, where the rubbish of humanity welters and smoulders in everlasting foulness. Fired with pity for the order well denominated "the masses," since for most part it is massed in squalor, he passed direct from the University to an East End curacy. Hence he was returning to familiar haunts, haunts which know not religion in furs, laces, and silk hats, and have fashions all their

own. The old knowledge enabled him to get his footing quickly. Indeed, save for one thing, it might have seemed that the interval was but a vague dream between two points of intense reality.

As of old, he went to and fro and in and out, ministering quietly, but ever with one supreme purpose burning in his heart like a flame. Scales had fallen from his eyes; misfortune and suffering inspired a new and deeper feeling.

"Poor wretch I" he would say to himself over some battered derelict. "God save us, you, too, may once have been prosperous and happy."

That idea of a past full of felicity, and consequently a present embittered by memory, was constantly in his mind. The tragedy of human fate oppressed him like a dripping fog, till even his ardent clear-eyed faith faltered. Ancient doctrines, once studied lightly as college exercises, came back with awful and crushing force. Was it true that mortals were the mere sport of a wanton Destiny? The question beat upon his brain with maddening insistency. His heart cried out in fierce denial; and yet, and yet what did his eyes behold? A chaos of mischance and misery, a confusion of infatuated mimes scurrying and dancing to their own destruction. Had pagan Greece with her sunny vision read the stupendous riddle aright after all? Were later gospels and philosophies only so many cunningly devised fables meant to lull the victims into a false security, or an anæsthetic to drug them to utter insensibility, like patients in the operating rooms of hospitals? Not that; surely not that. Creeds of despair did not, could not, hold the truth of the living God.

He who is hurt in his own house is thrice wounded. It sharpened Herrick's anguish that both his hope and

his faith should be tried most sorely by Pearl, whose questions were as rankling barbs. A new fear, too, came upon him. More than once in the later interviews her look seemed to suggest a doubt of what she was told, a suspicion that his unaccountable silences and perplexing replies were meant to put her off.

"Mama is ill an awful long time," she observed one day; and then, with the abruptness which marked her in stress of feeling, "Tell me true, papa, do you think she is ever going to get better?"

He caught his breath sharply, but answered with forced cheerfulness:

"I hope so, dearie."

"Oh yes I of course, I know you hope so," was the rejoinder. "But do you really think so? Hoping and thinking are not the same at all."

That was a stroke beyond her age, a wisdom gained at too sharp a price, and it distressed him terribly.

"I hope and believe, darling, that mama will soon be quite well again," he assured her.

"I don't know," said Pearl dolefully, a big tear trembling on one lash. "I don't understand. Sometimes I think I shall never see her any more, and then I want to die."

He regarded her with terrified pity.

"You must not on any account say that, Pearl," he told her, as it appeared in rebuke.

Yet he had no notion of rebuking. Only he would guard her against the black thoughts which besieged and at times unmanned himself.

At school Pearl was the cause of sore tribulation, for she obstinately declined to take a docile interest in seven times seven or eleven times twelve. Neither could she be induced to care for the stock heroes of

history. When her teachers reprovved or remonstrated she assumed a far-away look, as if she were absorbed in something else and did not hear. Being a school modelled on principles of discipline, it had a rule that for every sin of omission or of commission the transgressor must sign a book in acknowledgment of her misdemeanours, for judgment against her if need be. Pearl was an easy first in signatures. The other girls wondered at her courage or her indifference in signing so regularly and imperturbably.

"Wait till she comes before Miss Ripton," they said with pleasurable tinglings, thinking how the headmistress evinced displeasure.

The command to appear in the private room set apart for such interviews came suddenly but not unexpectedly.

"What is this I hear of you?" said Miss Ripton in her severest manner. "Not interested in your lessons?"

"No," replied Pearl wearily.

"And show no desire to learn?" said Miss Ripton.

"No," Pearl owned frankly.

"Do you not like the school?"

"No, I don't."

"What, may I ask, is your objection to it?"

Pearl looked into the stern, reproachful countenance unflinchingly.

"Everything," was the comprehensive answer.

"Ah—everything."

"Yes."

"Do you not like your teachers?"

"Oh yes, when they're not trying to teach me. Then I don't."

"Am I to understand you don't want to learn?"

Pearl shut her mouth tightly, but her eyes made

eloquent and defiant answer. There was a pause as the head-mistress surveyed the rebellious little figure.

"You know, I presume, of our rule to make a girl who won't learn and is naughty withdraw from the school?"

"Yes," replied Pearl, "I know all about that."

"Then I warn you that if this goes on I may have to act on it in your case."

A light as of sudden joy came into Pearl's face.

"Do," she cried eagerly. "Please do."

"Pearl Herrick," returned Miss Ripton in horror, "I want you to go back to your lessons at once, and never, never let me hear you talk in this fashion again. It is wicked—it is unbecoming. I cannot permit it."

Under compulsion Pearl returned to her books, but her zeal for learning did not increase.

"How is Pearl Herrick doing?" Miss Ripton asked her form mistress a week later.

"No change," was the reply. "As indifferent and forgetful as ever."

"Dear, dear!" said Miss Ripton, crinkling her brows, "she is vexing. I'm sure I don't know how to deal with her. Apart from her rooted dislike to books she's a nice girl."

"Yes," agreed the form mistress, "one of the very nicest we have. That's the pity of it."

When he called next day Herrick was informed that the head-mistress wished particularly to see him.

"It isn't as if she were stupid or couldn't learn," Miss Ripton told him, in presenting a catalogue of Pearl's delinquencies. "Not at all. I am quite convinced she could do herself and us credit, great credit, if she liked. But she won't try. What I am dreading is the effect of her conduct on the rest of the school. Of course, we have to be very careful."

"Of course," agreed Herrick, writhing inwardly.

"Only the other day," pursued Miss Ripton, "Mr. FitzGerman, our vicar—perhaps you know him, a dear, noble man—was here examining the girls in Scripture knowledge. 'What do you know of heaven?' he asked Pearl. 'Nothing,' she answered. 'I don't know anything at all about it.' I couldn't believe my ears, and as for Mr. FitzGerman, I thought the poor man would have fainted. 'Not know anything about heaven?' he said in amazement. She shook her head as if she had never heard of it before. 'No,' she said. Imagine the effect on the other girls."

As a desperate expedient the culprit was called in and asked to explain her behaviour.

"I am sorry to hear how you behaved to Mr. FitzGerman in the Scripture lesson," her father said. "What made you answer as you did?"

Pearl's eyes turned from her father to Miss Ripton with a look which said plainly, "So you've been telling tales, have you?"

"Perhaps you would like to talk it over by yourselves," remarked Miss Ripton uneasily. "Shall I withdraw?"

"Oh I thank you," cried Pearl, accepting the offer before her father could speak.

CHAPTER XI

WHEN the door was safely shut upon her head-mistress Pearl sighed a deep sigh of relief.

"I am glad that woman is gone," she said. "She vexes me. Sometimes I wish I was a brigand or a pirate or something, so that I could stick her with my sword or dagger."

"Hush, hush! You really mustn't talk like that, dear," her father told her in the proper tone of rebuke.

"Of course if you don't like it, papa, I won't," she responded obediently. "But if you only knew her as I do! And then, you know, I can't help thinking, can I?"

"Come up on my knee," he said. And when she had mounted and seated herself like a fine lady in her saddle, "Now tell me, dearie, what made you answer Mr. FitzGerman as you did. You know about heaven, don't you, darling?"

"Of course," answered Pearl promptly. "You have told me lots and lots of times. Besides, I have read about it for myself."

"And what made you say you didn't know?"

Pearl put up an admonishing forefinger. "Speak low or she may hear," she returned softly. "You see it was like this, papa. I thought it was a silly thing to

ask, and then, you know, it was on Miss Ripton's own lessons we were examined. I didn't like Mr. Fitz-German and I didn't like her."

"So you pretended ignorance?"

She nodded emphatically. "Thought it would annoy them both," she explained.

"But you know, dearie, that was wrong? Very wrong."

Pearl's small legs swung to and fro, her heels drumming vigorously on his shins.

"I was a little bit sorry for Mr. FitzGerman," she owned. "He was so flabbergasted."

"Don't say 'flabbergasted,' dearie."

"But he was," insisted Pearl, "really and truly flabbergasted; and as for Miss Ripton, I thought they'd have to carry her out."

"Pearl, Pearl!" cried her father.

"It's true," rejoined Pearl, quite impenitently.

"I'm glad she had the sense to go away. I want to leave this horrid place, papa, and go with you."

Her tone was earnest and pleading now.

"So you shall, dearie, when you've learned a little more," he promised her.

"But I want to go now," she returned; "at once. I don't want to leave you any more till I see dear mama."

The small arms were about his neck passionately. His encircled her in return, and the sunny head lay an instant pressed against his breast. For that minute, at any rate, Pearl knew what heaven and happiness were.

"Will you take me with you?" she asked presently, looking up. "Papa, dear papa, say you will take me with you—say you will!"

"Pearl, do you love me?" he asked, his voice trembling in spite of his studied calm.

"You know, papa," was the wondering answer.

"Yes, darling, I know," he said, looking closely into her eyes. "Well I when we love a person very, very much, we try to please that person, don't we?"

"Of course," she replied; adding, before he could take advantage of the admission, "Papa, do you love me?"

"Have you any need to ask, dearie?" was the response.

"It's nice to know for certain," she remarked coyly.

"Well, then, if we love a person very, very much, we try to please that person, don't we?"

He did not expect that pertinent use of his argument, and could not hide his delight in being so neatly caught in his own net.

"Well done," he said admiringly, "well done!"

Pearl slipped to the floor with a purposeful, confident air.

"Let us get ready, then," she said briskly, as if the matter were threshed out and settled.

A child's heart is the most mercurial of created things. At one bound Pearl went from midnight to high noon, a midnight of utter blackness to a noon of brilliant, exhilarating light. She fluttered about her father like a bird that unexpectedly finds its cage door open and scarcely knows what to do for joy.

"Will you come and help me to pack?" she demanded all at once, with the practical spirit which distinguished her even in her moments of rapture. Her bustling gladness struck him dumb. What did she expect? What fairy palaces had she built? In truth he had no need to ask. He knew that as she planned it they two were to go forth hand in hand into Paradise to meet one who was waiting there for them.

"Why don't you answer and come and help?" she asked almost sharply.

"They mightn't like my interfering," he replied, and suggested that the whole question should be referred to Miss Ripton.

"If you call in that woman again," rejoined Pearl decisively, "she'll spoil everything. She always does. There's nothing in her head but horrid rules and impositions and things."

"We must at least tell her, Pearl."

"I tell you she'll spoil everything," Pearl cried peremptorily. "All the time I have been here she's been making me do the things I hate, and I want to get away from her. I am going with you, papa, am I not?"

"Pearl," was the response, "you and I love each other so dearly we'd do anything for each other, don't we?"

Her eyes dilated, partly in wonder, partly in reproach. Why was he going back on that question?

"I told you that already," she answered.

"Then I want you to do something for me," he said.

"Stay here?" she cried, with the intuition of fear.

"For a little while, dearie," he replied, not too steadily.

Her face fell: a quick pain clouded her eyes.

"Then I am not to go with you," she said, the heartbreak of bitter disappointment in her voice.

The dreary round of seven times seven, the reproaches of teachers, the impertinences of rude and inquisitive girls desiring information on matters that did not concern them, the separation from all she liked or loved—all this was to go on indefinitely. And worse still, her father was falsifying his own

argument and so breaking faith with her. Her father, in truth, was in the throes of a terrible temptation, a fierce battle between head and heart.

She saw that he hesitated. Did some nascent sex instinct tell the little woman that he who hesitates is lost, or did something deeper whisper that love is omnipotent and in the end will surely overcome all opposition?

"You don't want to make me unhappy, do you, papa?" she asked, her lip trembling.

He opened his arms and she leaped into them, nestling so closely that he could feel the hard quick beat of her heart. She took it as unconditional surrender.

"I suppose we shall have to go away in a carriage," she remarked, after the first wild flush of gladness. "There will be baggage, of course. What will you say to Miss Ripton?"

In imagination she saw that portentous woman falling from an immense height, with fatal injuries to her dignity; and not the least delectable part of the whole plot to the conspirator was that her father was irretrievably committed as an accomplice. He could not possibly go back now.

"I don't think she'll like it the least little bit," Miss Pearl opined. "When she told me the other day about the rule to send naughty girls away and I said I was ready, she jumped with fright and changed the subject."

"What did she say, dearie?" Herrick asked vaguely. Like one in a dire dilemma he was trying to gain time, in the desperate hope that the genius of things for righting themselves might come to his aid.

"Oh!" replied Pearl frankly, "she told me to go back to my lessons and not be wicked. When people

are in a fix and don't know what to do, that's how they try to get out of it. But what are you going to say to her, papa?"

"What do you suggest?" he asked in return.

"I really don't care," she responded, a fine disdain in tone and manner. "Tell her if you like that it's a good thing I'm leaving, and that it's a pity I ever came, and—oh I well, that covers everything pretty well, doesn't it?"

"Before you leave for good it will be necessary to make other arrangements," he intimated gently. "Suppose for the present I ask Miss Ripton to grant you a holiday."

"A holiday!" she repeated, all her alarms flooding back upon her. "But I am to be with you always, am I not?"

"Come to me, darling, and I will explain to you," he said, holding out both his hands to her.

The explanation was long and by no means lucid, as he felt, but she was patiently attentive; she even nodded several times to encourage him and indicate that she understood. But if he entertained false notions of his own success he was speedily undeceived.

"Of course I shall see dear mama," she observed when he finished, putting her own construction on all he said.

At a breath his carefully built edifice of excuse and exposition was blown over.

"As I told you, dearie," he replied, steadying himself like a wounded man, "I hope you will see mama very soon. But I planned this as a holiday by ourselves—just you and I together. You haven't seen many of the wonders of London, have you?"

"No," she confessed; "but I don't want to see them. I want my mama and I want to be with you."

There was a piteous yearning in voice and face. Not being inhumanly strong or inhumanly wise, Herrick did what multitudes of honest men have done before and must do after him—obeyed the impulse of his heart and put his better judgment arbitrarily to silence; that is to say, yielded without considering too closely what the weakness involved.

CHAPTER XII

THE compact between them followed the universal law of compromise. In part she had her way ; in part he had his.

On one thing she insisted rigorously, that she should accompany him everywhere and see everything. The novelty kept her interest ardently on the strain ; but through all the ardency there ran the one constant thought. Thus in reading the inscription over a hospital door, she surprised her father by asking " Is mama in there ? "

It was a relief to answer for once with readiness and conviction what he felt must be the truth : " No, dearie, mama is not in there."

" I'm so glad," said Pearl wistfully, " because it doesn't seem a nice place ; and when people are sick they like nice things—I do."

In her own mind she had concluded that somewhere in the vast chaotic city mama lay exceedingly ill, and often she asked herself in childish awe, " I wonder if I'm near her. What is she doing ? Is she thinking of me as I am thinking of her ? "

Every wall was invested with a strange pathetic mystery because mama might be lying behind.

She enjoyed the rare experience of a social evening

at the mission, where she made the acquaintance of Miry, and promptly fell in love with that Christian Amazon. Miry was in unspeakable delight.

"Lor' l" she remarked to the enchanted Pearl, "to think of a blessed little hangel like you comin' 'ere. Course ye don't like it, do 'e now, m' dear?"

"Oh yes, I do!" was the emphatic answer.

Miry could have hugged the "little hangel" to her muscular bosom; but forbore from a nice and exalted sense of good manners.

"P'raps when you're big you'll come back an' 'elp us," she ventured.

"Perhaps," said Pearl, "if the people wash themselves. Why don't they?"

Miry looked round cautiously to make sure that none of the unwashed should overhear.

"The truth is, m' dear," she replied, with as much of a grimace as was permissible in such polite company, "the folks round 'ere aint too fond of cold water, and that's a fact."

"Why can't they use it hot, then?" demanded Pearl, as severely as if she were a full-blown sanitary inspector. "It's sinful and nasty to go dirty."

Miry laughed heartily.

"To be sure," she agreed, "they might' ave it 'ot, but then ye see they aint fond of 'ot water neither, no, nor of soap, most of 'em. Reckon a good many of 'em never 'ad a real good wash down in all their lives."

"Oh, the horrid things l" exclaimed Pearl. "Well, they'd have to wash if I came here. I could never put up with such dirty people, never."

Miry did not explain that those who made cleanliness at all times a condition of living and working in that quarter were likely to be very sick. Instead,

she introduced Constable O'Ryan, and for a full hour that master of the picturesque entertained Pearl with Arabian tales of the strange new world into which she was permitted to peep.

"You know everything," she told him, surveying in admiration his massive six feet two. "Tell me, were you born here?"

"In this kennel av a place?" returned Mr. O'Ryan with a sniff of disgust; "this bradin' place av var-mints? Troth and it's glad I am to tell ye I was not. Did ye ever hear tell av a counthry called Oireland?"

"Oh yes!" Pearl replied promptly, glad to discover that geography was not the fatuity she had thought it.

"Well, then, when I sing *Hail, Columbia* to comfort myself, that's the land I have in me moind," said O'Ryan proudly, "and 'tis considerable short av the truth to say that when I was there I was in a better place."

"Why did you leave it, then?" asked Pearl.

"Och, as for that," replied O'Ryan, "ye'll maybe have heard what sent the fallen angels out av hiven—not havin' sinse to let well enough alone. 'Tis a disaise that afflicts men and angels mortal bad."

"Don't you like being here, then?" inquired Pearl sympathetically.

"Betwixt and betwane, like the horse in the cab-shafts," was the response. "I might by some misadventure get into a worse place; and 'twould be no great luck to get into a better. Well, sonny, and how's the cakes this evenin'?" he broke off to Albert Charles, who, as the guest of Miry, was vigorously appeasing an importunate appetite.

"All right," replied Albert Charles, wiping his mouth and gazing at Pearl as a being from other realms. Pearl regarded him in turn a little resentfully.

"What are you staring at, little boy?" she asked, with a look at least as direct and penetrating as his own.

For reply he shuffled his feet and grinned, not because he was in any way awed or abashed, but simply from habit.

"Did you never see a little girl before?" demanded Pearl, growing indignant under his stare. She would have turned her back on him for his rudeness, but just in the nick of time Miry intervened with whispered explanations.

"Is he an orphan?" asked Pearl, immediately relenting.

"Not just wot ye'd call an orphant," Miry replied in a low voice. "Not an out-and-out orphant. But 'e aint got no father or mother to speak of, and that's a fact."

"That's funny," remarked Pearl, puzzled by this new problem in human relationship.

"I reckon 'e don't find any fun in it, poor little beggar," returned Miry, deliberately keeping her back to Albert Charles, lest he should be hurt by hearing what was said. "Ye see, 'is father 'e aint no good, and as for 'is mother, why she's gen'rally speakin' on the loose, drinkin', 'angin' round public-'ouses, and all that. If ye ask me, 'e'd be better without 'em."

"Poor little boy," said Pearl pityingly. "Let me speak to him."

"Albert Charles," said Miry, wheeling upon him with the abruptness of a drill sergeant, "this young lidy wants to speak to you. Now then, buck up."

Albert Charles grinned again to intimate that in view of all the circumstances of the case he was ready and willing to undergo the ordeal of being spoken to by the young lady in question.

"I am sorry to hear," said Pearl, with the gravity of three score, "that you haven't got much of a father and mother."

"Dunno," responded Albert Charles with a yet broader grin. "'Bout the ordinary size, I should think."

"Silly boy," observed Pearl, with rare toleration; "I wasn't thinking of their size."

"She manes," put in O'Ryan over Pearl's shoulder, "that yer fond and dotin' parents lave ye mostly to yer own swate devices; which is to say that as a gin'ral thing they don't provide ye wid a castle to live in, nor servants to bring ye yer slippers av an evenin', nor the liver wing av a turkey to pick any time ye happen to think you're hungry; and that same isn't so many miles beyant the truth, is it, sonny?"

"Oh!" said Albert Charles comprehensively, "that's what she means."

"Are your father and mother here now?" inquired Pearl.

Albert Charles glanced at Miry to see if she were enjoying the joke.

"Not likely," he replied.

"Do you know where they are?"

He shook his head.

"Have—have they gone away and left you?" she asked, a new light of appreciation and sympathy in her face.

"Oh! they haven't gone and left me," he replied; "leastways, not that I know of."

"I thought maybe they had," she said reflectively.

"But it's strange you don't know where they are."

Miry chipped in with the information that in that particular quarter of the British dominions it was nothing uncommon or extraordinary for a boy to be

temporarily bereft of his parents; that, indeed, the condition might be considered quite normal.

"They'll turn up again, never you fear," she said with confidence.

"If I was on duty this minute," observed O'Ryan, "it sticks in me moind that I'd have a kind av a notion where they're likely to be found. They're festive birds, and the fun av the fair begins proper about this time av night."

"And what happens then?" asked Pearl.

"The lucky pull through and t'other sort go to gaol mostly," replied O'Ryan.

"Do you take them?"

"If they haven't sinse to kape out av my way," was the answer.

"But if they really didn't mean to be naughty mightn't you let them off?" said Pearl, trying to puzzle out problems of law and ethics.

"What would be the use av havin' gaols if they were never used?" responded O'Ryan evasively. "Them that's so kind as to provide gaols would be mortal graived if they stood impty, d'ye see! People like to have their gifts appraiciated."

Pearl was thoughtful for a moment, and then, turning to Albert Charles, asked suddenly, "Were you ever in gaol?"

He crimsoned deeply and shuffled his feet.

"Been in the lock-up," he replied, glancing uneasily at O'Ryan.

"What's that?" asked Pearl.

"He knows," said Albert Charles, jerking his head at the representative of the law.

"'Tis the half-way house to perdition wid thieves and malefactors," explained O'Ryan sententiously.

"They're there all found, pendin' inquiries about their



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hobbies and what they do wid their spare time. 'Tis their spare time that gets most people into trouble. They're well looked after when they're wid us; and for all that them that's in want to get out, and them that's out sildom or niver want to get in, 'tis my opainion that the residents av the lock-up have their mate an' drink more comfortable and regular than some av their neighbours outside."

"What was he there for?" asked Pearl, with an inclination of the head towards Albert Charles.

"Bedad, just for takin' it into his onfortunate head to be a Christian at the wrong time, and wid circumstances agin him, the misguided child," replied O'Ryan. "Ye see, he wanted to act the Samaritan. But in doin' that 'tis needful to obsarve times and saisons, and 'specially police regulations. 'Tis no matther if a man manes right if he goes like a blind donkey and does wrong. An officer on his bate can't stand and argue the point wid people tearin' and hollerin' 'Stop thaif!' So 'tis a case av collar and come, and if not come aisy, come any way, though it should be strapped hand and fut on the ambulance."

Pearl quivered with interest and emotion.

"Did he go strapped as you say?" she asked, again indicating Albert Charles.

"Is it that child?" responded O'Ryan, with an Olympian look at the boy. "'Tis not childer we take to the station that way. 'Tis not for them at all, at all."

"Who, then?" inquired Pearl. The mystery of these proceedings was exceedingly piquant.

"Mostly women," was the answer. "Ye see, when they're took they often lie down, squailin' like red murther, and bitin' and kickin' most unholy. So there's nothin' for it but the ambulance, and tight

strappin' at that. I'd rather arrest six wild Chinamen than one Christian woman wid drink in her."

Pearl had a confused but awful vision of bound figures in petticoats being carted off by rude hands like so much rubbish. Nevertheless she did not allow it to divert her from the doings of Albert Charles.

"You haven't told me what he did," she said.

"You are to notice, if you please," replied O'Ryan, "that 'twas entoirely his own good natir that did it. It seems that somewhere about the strates he came acrost a pore woman in need—a lady as it seemed—cryin' by herself on a dore-step. She had money, which is onusual, and gave him some to buy food for her. By a trick it was taken from him. But food for the woman he must have, whether or no. So he went and took the law into his own hands, which is a mighty dangerous thing for the inexperienced to do. Natrilly he was ketched."

"But he was trying to do good," cried Pearl, her eyes flashing in indignation.

"So," said O'Ryan, "and lucky it was for him that the magistrate was a man av sinse and not merely a thing in a wig callin' itself a lawyer. I'm glad to tell ye that the prisoner" (O'Ryan slipped unconsciously into official phraseology) "left the coort widout a stain on his character, though he had many's the one on his face, pore bhoy."

"He's got some there now," observed Pearl, scrutinising Albert Charles. "What became of the woman he wanted to help?"

"Disappeared," replied O'Ryan; "disappeared, as the way is in this raigion. This is what ye might call the poort av the lost and the missin'. They sail in here that never sail out again, and no man livin' knows what becomes of them."

"Poor thing," sighed Pearl, "I'm so sorry for her! And you say she was nice?"

"A lady for sure," cried Albert Charles promptly, blithe and eager again now that his character was re-established. "Talked just same as you."

"I like you for being good to her," said Pearl, her eyes moist with pity.

Then, discovering her father, who had joined the group from behind and stood holding his breath at what he heard, she turned to him with a passionate earnestness:

"Oh! papa, they have been telling me about a poor woman who was so troubled that she sat crying on a doorstep all by herself—a nice, nice woman; and this little boy was good to her. May I give him a shilling, papa?"

Herrick's head was reeling, yet he answered quietly enough:

"Yes, darling, you may give him a shilling."

CHAPTER XIII

THE expected once more happened when Mrs. Merrishaw, with a comical aspect of recent conviviality and present indignation, appeared, demanding to be informed if her own flesh and blood meant to disgrace her for ever by this rebellious frequenting of forbidden places. As usual, she was supported by Mrs. Deakin, who accounted it the blackest of crimes to lure unsuspecting children into missions "when their own fathers and muvers wanted 'em," as, for example, to sing for drinks.

Quite by accident the two met in the pursuit of pleasure an hour before; an accident which by some mysterious law of chance occurred regularly twice a day, morning and evening, and oftener if funds prompted. They were joined by several friends, and the party, passing down the back street in which the mission modestly concealed itself, came to a halt over suggestive sounds of revelry.

"Ullo!" cried Mrs. Deakin. "Wot's up 'ere, eh? Them missions is agoin' it, an' no mistake. Mean to knock out the pubs I 'spose. Mrs. Merrishaw, you was lookin' for Albert Charles. Bet a white satin first time I 'ave the necessary that 'e's in there."

"Shouldn't wonder," said Mrs. Merrishaw. "It would be just like him."

"An' if 'e is," pursued Mrs. Deakin in a spare-the-rod-spoil-the-child manner, "though I pint one as 'olds by wallopin' kids, 'e deserves it 'ot; though I will say this, an' you know as I'm right, Mrs. Merrishaw, that 'e aint arf as much to blame as 'em that tempts 'im away from 'ome an' dooty. Them 'ere missions is gettin' perfectly outrajus; dussn't scarcely call yer soul yer own for 'em, nor so much as look at a drop o' liquor. Sometimes they make me larf. 'We're snatchin' brands from the burnin',' says one of 'em white-chokered Gospel whipper-snappers to me the other day. 'Good,' says I, 'only for any sake use long tongs so's not to burn yer fingers, an' be mighty, mighty careful not to fall into the fire yourself.'"

There was a general laugh. "That's one in the eye for 'im. Wot did 'e say?"

"Oh," replied Mrs. Deakin, "said he wanted pretty bad to snatch me. But I says, 'No, thank'ee, sir, I don't 'pear to need it.' 'Ye drink,' says 'e. 'When I gets the chanct,' says I. 'So far's I can make out, liquor's made for drinkin'. An' look 'ere, Mister Currick,' says I, 'ye'd better jolly well take care wot yer up to, a-molestin' an' insultin' a 'spectable married woman.'"

"Ha, ha!" cried two or three together, "'ad 'im there! A 'spectable married woman! 'Ad 'im there!"

"'If I send my 'usband arter ye,' says I, 'e'll comb ye down an' dress ye up, an' turn ye out so's yer muver wouldn't know ye.' Fact is," added Mrs. Deakin impressively, "them missions 'as swelled 'eads 'bout as bad as they can 'ave 'em, always a-meddlin' an' a-pokin' in their noses. So, as I say, Mrs. Merrishaw, you just cock in yer eye an' see if I aint right 'bout Albert Charles bein' there."

Albert Charles was accordingly hailed and dragged forth with every mark of ignominy and humiliation. That done, he was privately admonished by a shower of cuffs in the darkness outside and sent home, there to await his mother's arrival for a further and final reckoning.

Since, however, it was impossible to carry out these instructions, the door of his home being locked and the key in his mother's pocket, he decided to walk abroad in the cool of the evening to see what was stirring and think over events. Despite the cuffing, and the threat of more to follow, he was in excellent spirits. For one thing he had dined, sumptuously as he felt; for another, he was warm; and experience, the most convincing of teachers, told him that he who is warm and full of meat has no rational cause of quarrel with Fate, whatever betide.

One genuine regret, indeed, he had, that he was so unreasonably torn away from Pearl. Although with the cynicism of his age he contemned girls, he nevertheless confessed to himself that Pearl was interesting—not wholly because of that donation of a shilling. He was engaged with thoughts of her when he felt the touch of a hand on his arm, and turning quickly, looked into the face of the Strange Lady.

"Excuse me," she said in a low voice, "I wasn't quite sure that it was you. But I am glad it is, for I wanted to see you; in fact, I have been looking for you ever since our last meeting."

"'Bout that shilling?" he inquired, drawing a quick breath. "I couldn't help it. Really I couldn't. That's honest."

"I know, I know," she returned, casting an apprehensive glance at the passing throng. "Of course you couldn't."

"Perhaps we'd better move on," he said with delicate tact. "Doesn't do to make a block."

"I want to tell you," she said as they went on together, "that however little reason I have to trust people in London, I am quite convinced from what I heard in the police court that you did not steal the shilling."

"No'm, it was the other thing I stole," returned Albert Charles, his eyes expressing his relief.

"Quite so, quite so," she said, speaking very rapidly. "And for me. That's what went to my heart, and that's why I wanted to see you and tell you how glad I am that—that you were set at liberty. I shall always remember your kindness to a poor woman lost in London and not knowing which way to turn, always. I have forgotten your name. May I know it?"

Albert Charles told her with all the elation of pride.

"Yes, yes, of course I ought to have remembered," she responded. "But the fact is—well, I forget things."

"Head queer, I suppose," he said compassionately.

"Yes, very queer indeed sometimes," was the answer.

He looked at her fixedly for an instant, a genuine pity in his face.

"No friends round here I reckon?" he said then.

"Unless you allow me to call you friend—not one," was the mournful reply.

"Oh! you may if you like," he returned cordially.

"But it's jolly hard lines."

"What?"

"Oh! having only me for a friend."

Once or twice his father had told him stories of wonderful men on wonderful horses riding to the succour of distressed ladies. They were commonly in

armour and brandished huge swords, which clove through helmet and coat of mail if only the wielders hit hard enough. Here was the call for chivalry, for deeds of high heroism; but, alas! he had no horse, no sword, no armour for the fray. It was easy for men to be gallant and successful in the olden time; it was quite different in modern London, where gallantry had no chance.

He was silent a minute, his face betokening a spell of hard thought. His right hand was in his pocket, tightly shut on Pearl's shilling, a silver mine which would procure incalculable pleasures. Then he looked at her again with an odd, sidelong expression.

"I'm awfully sorry I lost your money," he said in a singular embarrassment. "I ought to have been sharper, of course."

"You trusted him?"

"Yes—like a silly. But——" He stopped, eyeing her shamefacedly. Then taking a deep breath as for a great resolution, he said, "Now I have one of my own, and—and there it is for the one I lost."

He thrust the coin upon her with a decision meant to intimate that he could not think of tolerating a refusal. Nevertheless she refused.

"No, no," she answered, tears of gratitude springing to her eyes. "You are a good, kind boy; but I cannot take your shilling."

"I want you to," he rejoined almost fiercely. "Only fair. Here, take it."

Once more his hand shot out, but she drew off to avoid it.

"You must not give away your money," she told him. "Besides, I—don't need it."

He regarded her incredulously. If she did not need it, why had she that aspect of hardship? People with

plenty of money did not wander about the streets friendless or make themselves miserable just for fun. Manifestly she was pretending.

"I dare say you don't get many shillings for yourself," she said, breaking in upon his thoughts.

"No," he replied, "I don't. But that doesn't matter. This one belongs by right to you, and I want you to take it, please."

He made another attempt to force it upon her; but again she gently evaded him. The act was as fuel to fire, the spur to a keen horse. For his mind was made up. What at first was but a blind impulse was now a fixed, even a fierce resolution. She should have that shilling or he would know why.

"Look here," he said, in a tone partly of threat, partly of entreaty, "it's yours, and I want you to take it."

"But suppose I say it's yours," was the response.

He made a gesture of impatience. Why were women always given to contrariness? asked the man of experience. But he rather fancied he knew how to bring her to her knees.

"Then you don't want me for a friend," he rejoined, as if presenting an ultimatum. He saw the alarm in her face before her tongue could express it.

"I do. I do, of course," she replied.

"Then, of course, you must take it," he told her, like an Oriental despot laying down conditions of life and death.

CHAPTER XIV

THERE was nothing for it but unconditional surrender. He held out his hand once more as with the proffer of fate. She could choose between him and her own foibles. If she were perverse he had no option but to bid her a polite "Good-night" and go his way, leaving her to the fruits of her perversity. Being a woman, she read his looks aright, and with an instant grace which almost took his breath away submitted.

"If you insist," she said, smiling as he had never seen any woman smile before, "of course I accept it; and what is more, I will always treasure it as a keepsake in memory of your goodness."

He was charmed. There could be no doubt that the Strange Lady was a real lady. He wished some of his friends could see her as she smiled upon him, and more than ever he longed to be a bold, gaily-caparisoned knight for her sake.

"And now," she went on, becoming every moment more bewitching, "I have a great, great favour to ask in turn. As I did not refuse you, so you will not refuse me."

Esther suing before King Ahasuerus could not have been more dramatically effective. His eyes said plainly, "Ask on, even to the half of my kingdom," but his tongue was brief by reason of his eagerness.

"What?" he inquired.

"That you accept a shilling from me—no, not in exchange for yours," she explained, seeing the cloud of dissent gathering in his face, "but just as a little gift from one friend to another. I should like it very much."

"Oh! if you put it like that," responded Albert Charles, grinning in sheer pleasure and geniality.

"Thank you," she said gratefully. "Now, I am almost happy."

She was a singular woman, to be sure; the most singular he had ever met.

Favours beget confidences as confidences beget favours. Before he knew what he was about, Albert Charles was describing with infectious zest the events of the evening.

"Ripping," he assured her. "Ripping. Ought to have been there."

"That would have been nice," she responded, as he thought with an extraordinarily odd expression.

"Who manages the mission?"

"Oh, parsons, as usual," he replied. "But," he added, lest she should run away with wrong notions, "they're a good lot, a jolly good lot!"

On the qualities of Miry and the Homeric O'Ryan he touched with glowing admiration. But it was concerning Pearl that he really let himself go. "Nicest girl I ever saw in my life," he declared ecstatically, summing up as poet and worshipper.

"Ah! so you like little girls," observed his companion.

"When they're like her," he returned promptly.

"The face that launched a thousand ships
And burnt the topless towers of Ilium"

could not have been fairer or more fascinating than hers. So much he managed to intimate; but when he was asked for particulars the masculine intelligence failed. How was she dressed? He really couldn't say exactly, except that her dress was as becoming as an angel's robe. How old was she? He couldn't tell, being no judge of girls' ages. But he was able to state authoritatively that her hair was fair and fell down her back like thick golden spray, and that her eyes were just the colour of the sky on a very clear summer day. And as crown and capestone of his praise he added that it was she who gave him the shilling.

His companion made a curious little noise. He was sure he heard her draw a gasping breath, and he looked at her in wonder.

"Do you know her?" he asked shrewdly.

"How should I?" was the reply.

"Haven't been to the mission at any time, I suppose?"

"No, but I'm very much interested in all you have told me. Where is the mission?"

"Take you there, if you like. And you can go right in if you feel inclined. Always glad to see strangers, so they say. We must turn and go back."

She turned mechanically and accompanied him. He talked volubly, giving information which she did not hear, and recounting comic anecdotes at which, to his astonishment, she did not laugh. At last he pulled up, and pointing to a low, dingy building, said, "There it is. I dussn't go in myself or I'd introduce you. But that doesn't matter. You go right in and make yourself at home. They like it. That's what missions are for."

"Thank you," she returned in manifest agitation, in

spite of an effort to be composed. "You have been very kind, very kind, and now—good-night."

She gave her hand, and he noticed that it was trembling and deathly cold.

"I should go in at once and get warmed up if I was you," he advised.

"Thank you—perhaps. Good-night."

She seemed nervously eager to be rid of him now. Was she afraid of something? or—or?—he could not make her out, and greatly wondering went his way. Turning to look back, he saw her go on past the mission. "Isn't going in, after all," he said to himself. "She'll drop if she doesn't take care. Wonder who she is, anyway."

He lost sight of her; but she did not continue her walk. Within the shadow of a disused building she stopped, taking up a position whence she had a full view of the mission door.

She stood there till she was chilled to the marrow, but she had no thought of cold. At last the people began to leave, a varied throng, mostly of women and children. She recognised O'Ryan; she thought she recognised Miry. Then at the very end, when she could scarcely see or hear for the tumult of her excitement, Herrick and Pearl stepped out together. She would have called to them, but something held her tongue fast. She would have run to them, but her limbs were lead and would not move. In all her experience she had never known a moment like that.

CHAPTER XV

THE fear of losing them restored her power of motion and she followed desperately. Engrossed to blindness by her purpose, she collided much with those in her path, and was gruffly counselled to mind what she was about. One man, steering an erratic course in the deceptive uncertainties of liquor, unexpectedly bumped against her, spun on his heel and drew up, observing with peculiar aptness that the people who made themselves a drunken nuisance in the street should be locked up. She apologised in guilty confusion and hastened on. An acute pain came into her throat and chest, such as makes the overstrained runner in a race imagine his lungs are cracking. Her head swam, but it would never do to give way. If ever she was to keep up, to show herself capable of self-control, it must be now.

All at once she stopped with a gasp. In her blind speed she was almost upon them. Why she should halt thus in the supreme moment she could not have told. It was as if the wheels of being were reversed with a terrific shock, and the frantic wish of one moment became the frantic terror of the next.

Her gaze was fixed on the two figures ahead. Pearl tripped lightly along, partly swinging on her father's

arm. So *she* was happy. What did happiness really mean? Mrs. Herrick had almost forgotten. But Pearl was happy, because she was innocent. Ah! that was it; innocence and happiness went together. Misery was but another name for guilt. But guilt could be expiated—and—and forgiven. God had promised that.

She went on again, a fierce impulse upon her to disclose herself. They loved her; she knew they did. Even then they might be thinking, talking of her. Yes, she would go to them like the prodigal son to his father, repentant, suing for mercy. How gladly they would forgive! She could hear their words of joy, see their faces of welcome, feel their arms about her. Yes, she would go to them. Then in a moment came a revulsion, caused as it seemed by the very vehemence of her rapture. Her heart failed her. She would wait a little; she would not surprise them yet, not just yet.

They took a bus presently, and immediately she took another on the same route, mounting to the top in order to keep them in view. Both buses drew up at a common stopping-place, and Pearl and her father alighted. In getting out, Pearl glanced up at the bus behind, looking a second time as though she recognised some one. For an instant mother and daughter looked into each other's faces. But the recognition was on one side only. Pearl turned away, taking her father's arm again, and the two set off at a brisk pace, the night being too cold for sauntering.

Mrs. Herrick never knew how she got off that bus, what instinct guided her feet or kept her from falling. In a moment she was on the pavement and once more in pursuit. The passionate impulse to run and overtake them returned upon her; but, as before, her

fainting heart answered, "Not yet, not just yet; wait a little. You will be more composed by and by."

In this way she followed for nearly half an hour. She had no notion where she was nor how far she had come. All her faculties, all her feelings were absorbed in the one stupendous thought that there, scarcely more than a score and a half yards in front, were her husband and her child, and that she had not courage enough to go to them.

All at once the whirl of emotion brought to her mind the question, Why this mysterious and unexpected appearance in London? And quick as lightning a voice seemed to answer, "For love of you." They came to seek her. Well! well! here she was, almost within touch of them, only hidden from their eyes for a little while, a very little while, to make the meeting all the sweeter. By degrees she found that in truth she had really expected them; they would not let her sink into the depths without making an effort to save her. And here they were. The thought made her weep for joy. She was loved then, still loved, in spite of all. Ah, God! how good, how precious it was to feel that. It was as if an angel took her softly by the hand, whispering in her ear, "Fear not, love envelops you, and love is omnipotent."

They turned into a cross street, and instantly she was again in a commotion. Running on, literally running, she turned into the same street, taking the opposite side and keeping within the shadow of the houses. With this precaution, she crept up till almost abreast of them. She could see now that her husband walked with a heavy foot, and stooped as under a great burden of trouble. "He is an old man," she told herself, with a fiery thrill of remorse.

Then the quick searching eyes fell on Pearl. She had on such and such a dress, got, her mother remembered how. Under a lamp she threw back her head, tossing her hair, and the watcher caught the golden sheen of it in the white light of the electric arc.

"I will go now," Mrs. Herrick told herself. "I will call their names, and run across to them holding out my hands, so. And then, then——"

She was so giddy that she staggered, nearly falling. Her mouth was crackling, that unbearable pain was in her throat again. But what of that? Her soul was leaping within her. The great moment was come.

A blackness came upon her. Was she going blind? No, it was the dazzle of a great radiance. Before such a light the angels veiled their faces. But the dizzying blindness would not go. The figures on the other side of the street grew strangely dim, as if a mist shrouded them. She must go to them or die. They grew yet dimmer, became shadowy and spectral. Was she losing them? Or was she going mad?

In that moment they mounted the steps to a door bearing a big brass plate—Pearl's school. Next minute the door opened, making a lighted aperture which swallowed them, and then shut with a bang on the outer darkness.

There were railings behind her. Turning half round, she clutched and clung to them as if swooning, her moan mingling eerily with the wail of the bleak night wind.

CHAPTER XVI

IN that attitude and position she remained as in a trance, till an inquiring policeman surprised her. "Drunk" was his first and natural thought. Only "drunks" were found clinging to railings in that fashion, except when a super-astute burglar, caught in the pursuit of his calling, shammed intoxication. But a second look told him the judgment was wrong.

"Ill?" he asked, curtly but not unkindly; for beneath the blue coat and imperious Jove-like manner of the Metropolitan Police there sometimes beats a heart.

"No, thank you, not ill," was the confused answer; "only a little tired, that is all." She drew her hand across her forehead to push back some damp strands of hair. "I was resting just a minute. I—I hope I haven't been doing wrong."

He looked her over deliberately, from the scared, pallid face to the muddy, well-worn shoes. If the dethroned king, eating out his heart under the rude eye of plebeian gaolers, touches the gods to pity, a woman in the depths of adversity bearing tokens of former felicity may well move human compassion. The constable's trained eye read the signs of past prosperity in present decay, like an archæologist reading in

crumbled ruins the story of departed greatness. The woman's protests were honourable, but they could scarcely be accepted as true.

"Don't seem up to the mark yet, missus," he observed. "Are you hungry?"

"Not the least, thank you, not the least," she replied, which was the truth, though she had eaten nothing since morning, and very little then.

She turned to go, and, as he expected, limped from weakness. It would be charity to take her to the station, but as she could crawl and refused his aid he must let her go her way. Had she been a felon caught in felony she would have been taken and well cared for; but being merely honest and miserable she must be left to herself.

"It's the sort that needs help most that don't get it," the constable reflected, gazing after her, by that thought unconsciously impeaching the law of England.

Very slowly and in manifest pain she proceeded, like one utterly spent; but at last she was out of sight, and he turned to other thoughts, if a constable on beat is permitted to think. To him she was but a casual, trivial incident, as it were a straw circling for a moment on the edge of the whirlpool before going down. To her he was a portentous event, almost a disaster.

At times the fortuitous, the accidental, has all the effect of an eternal law. By chance he came up and she had to move on because she could not explain, or if she tried, because he would not believe. Even as he spoke she was telling herself, "I will stay here and watch. Yes, I must stay—all night, if necessary."

It was cold and she was thinly clad, but she would keep herself warm by walking up and down before the house that held her treasures. And then in

the morning, the dawn that scares off monsters, at whose coming all foul and malignant things take flight—then she would go to them, not forlornly as an outcast, but in the gladness of an assured love. This was but an evil dream; with daylight she would awake and shake it off, smiling at the fears of night. Incongruous images and fancies flashed through her brain. She thought of Egypt's queen, never so much queen as in the crisis of her fate, calling out triumphantly:

"Give me my robe; put on my crown.
 Methinks I hear
 Mark Antony call. I see him rouse himself
 To praise my noble act. Husband, I come."

So, so. "Husband, I come." But the constable came, and in the prosaic duty of pacing a London street discomfited her.

Discomfited her in truth in a way she little guessed. For she had scarcely disappeared when the door opened again, and the two who were more than salvation to her stood a minute together on the lighted threshold. They parted and the door closed once more, as it were shutting off her hopes.

Crossing the street, Herrick overtook the constable, and in the kindly fashion of the country gave him greeting.

"Good-night, officer."

"Good-night, sir," came the prompt response.

Herrick slackened to the official pace, and they talked of the mysteries of London and police experiences.

"Things are a good deal better here than in the East End," Herrick observed, unable to get away from the one current of thought.

"On the surface, sir," replied the constable. "More carriages and silk hats and all that round here. But you won't have to search far to find the little hells. They're tucked away behind the back premises so's to be out of sight. But they're there all the same. And it seems worse here because there's other things alongside. 'Pears to me, sir, a hungry man is always hungriest when he's looking into a cook-shop. When I see rags and fine dresses taking the air together, why, speaking candid, sir, I'm not surprised there's Socialists going round."

"Nor I," returned Herrick with remarkable energy. "If I were as I see some about me I should certainly be a red-hot Socialist."

"And then, sir," smiled the constable, "p'r'aps I should have the pleasure of arresting you. But as to the sights to be seen here, if you was just one minute earlier you'd have seen a case for yourself, though not exactly one of the common sort."

"Man or woman?" asked Herrick.

"Woman," was the reply. "Somehow the worst cases are always women. When they go they go, so to speak, for all they're worth. No half measures with a woman, sir. It's the whole hog or nothing. And then they're that troublesome to deal with. We don't want 'em at all, and that's the truth, sir."

"Was the one you have just mentioned of the troublesome kind?" asked Herrick.

"Troublesome!" repeated the constable. "No, sir, quite the opposite. Hoped she wasn't breaking the law in leaning for a minute against a railing to rest herself, and nearly fainted when I spoke to her. Thought I was going to run her in, I suppose. Not used to it, that's plain. There's two sorts, sir: them that break the law and are proud of it, and them that

take on too much for fear of breaking it. I know 'em both the moment I see 'em. As for this one," glancing significantly at Herrick's clerical collar, "she needed comforting by such as you, sir. That's what she needed."

"Ah! poor soul," said Herrick, "I wish I had the chance. Have you any idea where she is now?"

"Somewhere about," replied the constable vaguely.

"Hard to say, sir, where she's taken herself off to."

Somewhere about, somewhere in London: a drop in the ocean, an atom of dust in the desert, a fallen leaf in the fores'.

"I'm sorry she's gone," said Herrick; "I should like to help her. Good-night."

He went his way a little sadder by reason of what he had just heard, a little more depressed by "all the weary weight of this unintelligible world."

Meanwhile his wife was returning the way she came, instinct rather than reason or volition guiding her feet eastward. In the heyday of her happiness had any one suggested that a time was coming when she would seek London warrens as a fox turns to its hole she would have derided the idea as ridiculous, impossible. Was it ridiculous or impossible now?

What made her turn thither? What makes the heart turn to what it knows? One spot in London had already afforded her shelter. She returned to it now as the only place she could think of as a refuge. The conditions were harrowing, the environment loathsome, but at any rate she could lie down there, and perhaps find the brief oblivion of sleep, since she durst not seek the long oblivion of death.

All at once a motor bus whisked past and she caught sight of a face, *his* face, drooping and exceed-

ingly sad. With a sharp little cry of surprise and desperation she sprang in pursuit. But the motor-man had a clear stretch and was not to be overtaken. The brooding face grew dim and then vanished beyond a medley of intervening vehicles. To the pursuer the lighted street suddenly darkened, and the roar of traffic became as the murmur of a distant sea.

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PART III



CHAPTER I

PEARL did not return to school with any deepened zeal for study nor a greater docility under discipline. "She's a nice girl and of good people and all that," said Miss Ripton wearily, after a long and minute consideration of Pearl's vagaries. "For several reasons we want to keep her. But I am forced to ask again, What in the name of wonder are we going to do with her?"

A letter from Rushborough, if it did not furnish an explicit answer, opportunely postponed the need of a decision.

"We want Pearl for a little while," Mrs. Kippen wrote imploringly to Herrick. "For Gracie's sake do let her come."

Had it been the old command repeated, he would have answered again with a polite but emphatic "No." But that appeal, "for Gracie's sake," broke down all thought of opposition.

It seemed that in Rushborough, as well as in Lumley Beacon, recent events had made a great gap, left an aching sense of vacancy and loss. By virtue of a monumental integrity and a financial brain of the first order Samuel Kippen continued to direct the destinies of the bank which his sagacity and foresight had brought to the front. Indeed, that splendid

institution became more and more the object of his devotion. In truth, as happens with strong natures, he sought in intensity of application to duty the means of escape from thoughts that he would fain bury and forget. And again as happens in such cases, this undivided ardour had results which he did not anticipate and for which he did not strive.

Singlemindedness is the most tremendous weapon that man can wield. It is your true magician. It removes mountains, surmounts the insurmountable; in a word, it performs miracles incredible to the common mind until they are accomplished. Samuel Kippen looked neither to the right hand nor the left, and by thus keeping his eyes on the straight and narrow path progressed as if Destiny herself made a way for him.

Nothing so effectually condones a scandal and silences malicious tongues as success, public and unqualified. Those who said, not perhaps without a secret thrill of satisfaction, "Kippen is ruined; he must go down under this blow," saw him with amazement shoot up yet higher. Then, since men must always find excuse for deluding themselves, they changed their tune, remarking, "Of course, the man's a genius and can't help it." Mr. Kippen knew better.

Years before it was given him to do a wonderful thing. Most men fall lamentably short of the eager ambition of youth; he had outstripped it. "Manager of a decent branch," he said to himself at the start, reckoning his chances. "With luck perhaps a branch managership." To the junior clerk down in the hollow at the foot of the hill behind the massed ranks of seniors, who would neither advance themselves nor make way for others, even that ideal

seemed a height scarcely attainable. But one day the opportunity came, and being ready for it, he leaped at a bound over the heads of half the obstructers.

He never achieved the minor glory of a branch managership. Instead he became inspector, secretary, general manager—the man whose word was law in a hundred offices. At that shining altitude he might have rested content. But there came the motive we know, driving him on. He could not rest; he could not hold back. A new office was created, and the general manager signed himself managing director, with a salary multiplied by two. To the vacated post a successor was appointed, but he filled it merely to do the will of his masterful superior. Thenceforth Samuel Kippen *was* the bank.

Rivals, observing the new policy, enviously remarked, "Success has turned his head. He has lost his caution and will go smash." They did not understand the value of hard thought and absolute absorption. Mr. Kippen kept longer hours than his youngest clerk, and was severe in his displeasure over any sign of slackness or incompetency in his staff. "It's all very well to be a demon for work," they said, weary of increasing dividends, "but wish the chief practised slave-driving a little less."

They, too, mistook his motives. He was not thinking of them at all, save as the handiest means of keeping the black dog at bay.

"I will rule Grace out of my life," he declared peremptorily; and this was how he was keeping his word.

His wife, sitting immured at home in the company of her own thoughts, grew daily whiter faced and more tremulous. Crediting all women with weak

heads, he never thought of discussing his official affairs with her. The other affair he declined to discuss with any one. It was inhibited on every tongue that owed him allegiance, and the inhibition was despotically made effective.

Mrs. Kippen, having the instinct both of obedience and of loyalty, held her peace according to his pleasure. But one day she wandered into an unused room, the nursery and play-room of long ago. She entered it as in a dream, and as in a dream opened drawers and lifted out their contents—a tiny white shoe, a pair of child's socks, a one-armed doll, a broken trinket, a photograph, much faded, of a little girl in a short frock, and so on, making a small heap on a table beside her. Then she sat down, took them in her lap, and examined them slowly one by one. The tears fell thick as she recalled their history and associations. But she made no noise, and at the end of an hour's silent weeping she quietly returned them to their places.

That evening after dinner she said to her husband, "Samuel, will you let me have Pearl? If I don't have some one my heart will break."

He looked at her sharply.

"I don't suppose for a moment she will be allowed to come," he answered. "Besides, the child is at school. Children should be kept at work. It's their only chance of being happy or useful."

"I wish you would let me, dear," she said, valiantly keeping a rein on her emotions; "I think Leslie would not object."

"Very well," he returned, "very well. Since it's not the man himself you're inviting you may try."

So Pearl was despatched to Rushborough, greatly to her own satisfaction. For though her grandfather's

house was not the gayest spot on earth, it would at least be a change from Miss Ripton and seven times seven. Besides, she might there be able to get some information on the subject that was never out of her thoughts.

"Grandpapa," she said suddenly the very first evening at dinner, "can you tell me anything about mama? I can't understand what has become of her."

"Has your father told you nothing about her?" was the response.

"Oh yes," replied Pearl; "when I ask him he always tells me she is ill and that I can't see her just yet, and I have waited a long long time now. But he won't tell me where she is. Do you know, grandpapa?"

Mr. Kippen hurriedly took a sip of the old port his doctor had prescribed as a tonic. "We will talk of that another time," he said, using the formula from force of habit.

But Pearl was not to be put off like a poor relation or a subordinate in the bank.

"I want to talk of it now," she rejoined unflinchingly.

"Well, when you return home," Mr. Kippen began.

"I haven't any home now," she corrected, making no apology for the interruption; "I haven't anywhere except that nasty school, and here, of course. Mama is your daughter, isn't she, grandpapa?"

He looked at her curiously. Where was she off to now?

"Yes," he answered curtly, as if the relationship, though regrettable, could not be helped or denied.

"Well," said Pearl with profound conviction, "if

anything happened to me I am sure papa would see to it at once. Don't you love mama?"

Mr. Kippen drank off a whole glass of port to compose his feelings, and even that heroic measure was only partially successful. He glanced at his wife upbraidingly. "See what you have done with your folly," the stern face seemed to say. "Couldn't you have left her where she was?"

In a trying pause Pearl laid down a half-consumed apple, got off her chair, and walking briskly to Mr. Kippen's side, asked him to be good enough to make way for her on his knee.

"Now," she said, settling herself without the least sign of awe or abashment, "we can talk better this way, can't we? Do you know," she went on, laying her face so close to his that the golden hair mingled with the silver, "I am so sad thinking about dear mama."

Mrs. Kippen furtively wiped her eyes, but Mr. Kippen sat erect and rigid, like one fortifying himself against assault.

"Ah!" he said mechanically.

"Yes, indeed," pursued Pearl, sublimely unconscious of trespass or broken edicts. "You see, I love her so much and I can't find out anything about her. I thought I should see her in London, but I didn't. You haven't told me if you love her," she added quickly, her head poised like a bird's in the intentness of watching. "Do you?"

"Of course, dearie," put in Mrs. Kippen, choking down a sob. "What makes you ask such a thing?"

"Say it then," Pearl told Mr. Kippen, still with that bird-like watchfulness.

"Say what?" he returned.

"That you love mama. Say it like this: 'I love

your mama very dearly, because she is my daughter and because she is good and kind and everybody likes her.' Say that."

It was Mr. Kippen's boast that no man had ever coaxed or coerced him to do the thing he would not. Was a child likely to succeed where strong men failed?

"If you don't say it," Pearl went on in solemn warning, "God will not love you, and then perhaps you'll never see my mama any more for ever and ever, or have a chance to love her. God doesn't like people who don't love each other. Papa told me."

Something laid sudden hold on Mr. Kippen and shook him.

"Did your papa tell you to say that to me?" he asked, doing his utmost to maintain his composure.

"Oh dear no!" was the prompt reply. "All papa told me was to see and be a good girl to you and grandmama, and I'm trying with all my might. But it would be easier if you said you loved mama."

"You love her?" he returned.

"I would die for her," cried Pearl with sudden passion. "She is the best mama that ever lived."

That something unnamable again caught Mr. Kippen and shook him yet more violently. Feeling him shiver, Pearl asked in concern:

"Are you ill?"

"No," he answered, as if pulling himself together.

"I am not ill."

"I was afraid you were catching cold or something," said Pearl. "And you do look queer."

With a quick caressing motion she laid her cheek against his. "Dear grandpapa," she murmured. "Dear grandpapa."

Not for thirty years, not since her mother was a child sitting on his knee as she sat now, had any cheek pressed to his produced such a sensation. Pearl nestled closer.

"Put your arms about me," she said, and when he had complied, "There, that's nice." She lay a minute, his arms tighter about her than he knew, then looking up, she repeated earnestly, "Say you love mama."

He was no longer rigid. His head bent forward till his lips rested on the golden crown. Then of a sudden he set Pearl down, rose, and without a word left the room. Pearl watched him in amazement.

"What is the matter with him?" she asked, running to her grandmother.

"Hush, dear," whispered Mrs. Kippen, opening her arms. "Hush. He loves mama."

CHAPTER II

DOWERED with something of his own energy and resolution, Pearl would have followed Mr. Kippen and wrung from him the open confession she desired. But Mrs. Kippen, knowing his will and having his idiosyncrasies by heart, gently restrained her.

"Grandpapa sometimes likes to be alone, dearie," she was told. "We'll just talk for a little while by ourselves."

"Very well," Pearl assented readily. "You can tell me about mama instead of him." It was as if the Arabian despot were commanding yet another tale on penalty of death.

To that end she led Mrs. Kippen to the drawing-room, pushed her with tender eagerness into the luxurious depths of an easy chair and promptly climbed on her knee. That was always Pearl's chosen position when it could be secured.

"There we are," she remarked, shaking out her skirts like the plumage of some white fluffy bird. "I'm not too heavy, am I, grandmama?"

"No, darling, you are not too heavy," replied Mrs. Kippen, wiping her glasses as it seemed to Pearl quite needlessly, though the matter was not worth speaking of.

"Grandmama," was the next question, "do you remember mama when she was a tiny little girl, just so high, littler than me?"

"Is 'littler than me' good grammar, dearie?" returned Mrs. Kippen, still wiping those glasses.

"Oh I good enough," rejoined Pearl impatiently. "Grammar's silly. They talked a lot about it at that nasty school, and I never saw that it did them any good. Answer my question. Do you remember mama when she was a little, little girl?"

"Yes, dearie, quite clearly."

Pearl caught her breath in the gladness of excitement.

"Tell me about her then," she cried, with another shake of her plumage.

To the childish intelligence nothing is more wonderful than that grown-up people should ever have been children, real children—that is to say, with toys and short frocks and bare legs and a great love of confections and neither beards nor spectacles.

For instance, Pearl had more than once tried to imagine Mr. Kippen in the infantile stage, his cheeks bulging baby fashion, his fat fists stuck in his mouth or clenched greedily about a feeding-bottle. Had he ever crowed in delight over a rattle or been tickled under the chin and dandled to the tune of "Baby, Baby Bunting"? Above all, had any one ever had the presumption and temerity to whip him? To think so was like imagining Jove himself ignominiously laid across the avenger's knee face downward. She supposed he must once have been a baby, long, long ago in some prehistoric era, and played naughty pranks as a boy and got into hot water from love of fun; but looking at him now it was hard to realise these facts.

The same remarks applied more or less to her grandmother. Even the case of her mother, though she had neither grey hair nor spectacles, was too wonderful to be seized completely. With a big effort Pearl projected her mind backward (the impulse of youth being ever forward) to the far-off time when mama played with dolls, perhaps whipping them and tearing their limbs off for punishment when they were naughty, as some one else so often did, and owned a skipping-rope and was bored by lessons, and did a vast multitude of things which grown-up people for some absurd reason vehemently denounced. The world as she found it was, in fact, an exceedingly irrational place, full of irrational beings who had once been young, and yet of their own accord, as it appeared, had foolishly chosen to grow old, depriving themselves of all chance of real fun. Had she no thought or dread of going the common way to the plight of grey hairs and spectacles, and it might be even crutches? None. For childhood is Paradise, and in Paradise there is no old age.

For the present Pearl's backward thoughts were all of that small, far-away image which had so miraculously grown and expanded into the mama she knew. Her grandmother's tale was an enthralling romance. But one pertinent question suggested itself to Pearl.

"Was mama never naughty?" she asked, as if the last touch and consummation of girlishness were wanting. "Sometimes I am, you know. Grandmama, you are crying!"

"Grandmama is foolish, darling," was the response.

"Oh! I know why you are crying," said Pearl, who referred all things to the one cause. "It's for mama, and I cry for her, too, often and often when I am all

by myself in bed. In the daytime I mustn't let the other girls see me, you know, or they'd laugh, and then I should do something dreadful to them. But in the dark it's different. Then I can cry, for nobody can see me. Sometimes," she went on, her face fallen to a pitiful sadness, "I just shiver for fear I shall never see my mama any more. Do you think God would take her away and never let me see her again?"

"No, I am sure He would not," Mrs. Kippen managed to say.

"Well I" rejoined Pearl, "she never comes to me and I can't find out where she is or anything about her. So you see I can't help thinking that God has hidden her away from me. Is God cruel, grand-mama?"

"No, darling. God is very kind and good."

"I wish He'd be good to me, then, by bringing back my mama."

"What would you do, dearie, if you met her now?" Mrs. Kippen asked for want of anything better to say.

Pearl's eyes gleamed like diamonds. She had one special way of showing her love, and in giving an illustration of it she nearly choked her grandmother.

"That," she replied, and suiting the action to the word, clenched her arms about Mrs. Kippen's neck with a strangling intensity.

"And when I get her," she added vehemently, "I will never let her go again. If I had known in time she shouldn't have gone away and left me. But I didn't know. One night when I went to bed she was there all right and next morning when I went to kiss her she wasn't there, and that's all I know. But I was sorrier for poor papa than for myself. Did you ever

see a man crying, grandmama, just—just like a woman? It makes one feel so queer and sad." The mention of her father brought the inevitable yearning to be back with him.

"Of course I must go to that nasty school again," she said, after announcing her intention of returning soon to London. "But I don't care so long's I'm near papa. He promised to take me to the mission again. It's first-rate fun."

She gave a running account of the chief characters who provided the fun, including the inimitable Miry and the redoubtable O'Ryan. But it was on Albert Charles and his misfortunes that her memory chiefly ran.

"He's got a bad, bad mama," she told Mrs. Kippen indignantly. "She came there for him, and what do you think, grandmama? She was as tipsy as tipsy could be, and scolded and scolded, and said bad words. I was so sorry for him. Do you know what I thought?"

"What, darling?"

"Just this, that I was glad my mama didn't get tipsy and go on like that. But it was very funny all the same," concluded Pearl, with a gurgling laugh. "Don't you think so, grandmama?"

But somehow Mrs. Kippen did not seem to see the humour of the situation.

CHAPTER III

ALBERT CHARLES resumed his walk in a fever of curiosity concerning the Strange Lady and her doings. Who was she? What brought her there? Was she really and truly in trouble, or just indulging in a lark? Was she rich? Was she a duchess or some such resplendent personage in disguise? Above all, what did she mean to do with herself?

He had plenty of time for speculation, for there was no need to think of turning homeward till the public-houses began to close. It was Saturday night, and from ample and varied experience he knew that the festive spirit was then especially ardent. His mother might possibly be home by midnight; but certainly not a minute earlier.

When at last the revellers were turned into the street there broke out a violent storm of vocalism, and he marvelled why people who in their sober intervals gave no sign or token of musical taste should, when fuddled with drink, feel it incumbent upon them to make such frantic and grotesque attempts to sing. He supposed it was because they imagined themselves to be running over with happiness, and must needs lift their voices in raucous shoutings and bellowings to signify the fact. He was confirmed in

this opinion by the circumstance that although they reeled and staggered as they sang, they nevertheless maintained a determined and preternatural gravity.

Several who "were cleaned out," that is to say, had spent their all and lingered obstreperously, were "chucked" headlong. He helped to lift one of these, a woman who cursed feebly as she tried to adjust her bonnet on her grey head, and begged of him to go in and avenge her. He witnessed at least three free fights, two of them between ladies, which were brought to a gory issue before the police interfered. The festive spirit, it appeared, ran as naturally to fighting as to singing.

The police had a spell of great activity, because in a heaving, topsy-turvy world many failed to make port for themselves, and so had to be assisted and taken in charge at the public expense.

"Lots of drunks to-night," he reflected indifferently, as one might remark casually "It is cold," or "The wind blows for rain." Such things had long lost all novelty; were, indeed, become commonplaces of existence, to be observed in tedious repetition on any Saturday night one chose to walk abroad.

On reaching home he found his mother waiting for him according to expectation. Mrs. Deakin had just helped her upstairs, and then retired to exchange endearments with Mr. Deakin across the domestic hearth. As he ascended he could hear them hard at it with missiles as well as voices. "Another plate gone," he thought at the sound of smashing crockery. Then he heard Mr. Deakin remarking in a thick chuckle, "Ah, hal misshed th' time. Goo' job too." The plate had taken the wall instead of his head. Albert Charles did not stay to listen. These things, too, were familiar.

"So you've come, eh!" was his mother's greeting. "Well! I'll teach you to obey."

Rising, not without difficulty, she proceeded forthwith to administer the promised and, as she intimated, much needed correction.

No properly constituted boy dreams of whimpering under chastisement, that craven spirit being for girls and milksops. Albert Charles, therefore, took his punishment with a Spartan contempt of pain. He did not even take the trouble to resist or point out that he considered the procedure unjust; for that might seem a reflection on his self-respect and fortitude. Perhaps, however, the stripes were less terrible than they seemed. For his mother had been excessively social during the evening, and alcohol by no means gives increased muscular pith.

"Got enough?" she panted, while he still expected much more. He indicated that he was satisfied; but made it plain he cared nothing how long she continued her exertions. "Oh dear!" she cried, letting him go, "was ever woman so tried by a boy in all the world before?"

Collapsing on the bed, she gave way to tears as the only adequate means of expressing her sense of grievance. Her eye fell on the dead ashes in the grate, and she remembered that she had neither fire nor supper. Then blazing up suddenly, as at the recollection of further wrong, she ordered him to go forth at once and bring his father home.

"Know where he is?" asked Albert Charles.

"Know where he is?" repeated his mother in a maudlin voice, as though the question were yet another token of unfilial conduct. "It's your duty and business to find him. Off with you."

He went obediently, one might even have fancied

with a kind of cheerful alacrity. Unluckily for his quest, however, O'Ryan, who had resumed duty, preceded him, and found the missing man in the midst of a crowd engaged in the forbidden pastime of causing disorder and breaking the peace. O'Ryan would gladly have winked at the misdemeanour, had winking been possible; but the culprit being blatantly insistent, he had no choice but to do his duty. Two days later, in the course of half an hour's leisure at the mission, he described the incident to Herrick.

"It went clane agin my heart to arrest him, poor sowl," said O'Ryan. "For when he's free av the drink he's as fine a gintleman as ever wore shoe-leather. And as for his larnin', maybe ye mind the words av the song, sor:

'Don't talk av yer Provost and Fellows av Trinity,
Famous for ever at Greek and Latinity,
Faix and the divil and all at Divinity,
Father O'Flynn 'ud make hares av them all.'

That's him all over, sor, from the soles av his leaky boots to the crown av his onfortunate head."

"Ah!" said Herrick, his ears pricked in interest. "A scholar, eh! Even scholars drift into this dismal region."

"As I'm tellin' ye, sor," returned O'Ryan; "as for this hathen raigion, 'tis what ye might call a scrap-heap av every sort and kind av battered and discarded utensil. There's them here that druv their carriages not so long ago, and had their victuals presinted to them by powthered flunkeys on goold plate, and liquored up on the finest wines, that's glad enough to-day to have broken bread and the scrapins av mutton bones washed down by the rinsings av glasses in the public-houses. And there's them like the man

we're spakin' av, as full av larnin' as a University library. But, och and all, sor, maybe ye've noticed that when liquor ketches houl't av a man, neither riches nor larnin', nor wife nor childer, nor the raisonin' av frinds nor the love av God is any use to him. D'ye think, sor, man was created just to show how ready he is to go and make a downright, ram-pagin' fool av himself?"

"I hope not," Herrick replied fervently. "I sincerely hope not."

"You know best, sor," said O'Ryan simply. "But time and again 'tis in my moind that men get rope for the express purpose of goin' into the wood to hang themselves. When a man becomes his own inimy, 'tis my opinion the divil needn't throuble no more about him. He'll travel by the left-hand road widout any coaxin'. Human natir minds me, sor, av a misguided goose av a gander my poor ould mother onct had, that conceived such a love of rat poison he'd watch by the hour for a chanct to get it, for all it made him sick, till one day he succaded so well there had to be a fun'ril. And a fun'ril's generally the end av the game here, too."

"Yes," Herrick agreed with a sigh. "I am sure you come across some very sad cases."

"Och, sor, sad's not the word for them," responded O'Ryan. "I'm not what ye'd call throubled wid a squeamish stomach; but there's times when I feel in my heart like givin' up the whole job and goin' back to Oireland for a breath av fresh air and the sight av people wid clane, dacent dirt on them. What wid drinkin' and thaivin' and murtherin' and things that's worse than all that, 'tis just like a new Sodom and Gomorrah wid all the latest improvements in sin. Time and again I wonder to meself when the fire av

hiven will discind and finish off the business. When it does come there'll be a dale to burn, whoever's here to see it."

"Men and women alike," said Herrick, with thoughts which O'Ryan could not divine.

"Men and women alike?" was the answer. "Only the women's the worst—more cunnin' in their wickedness, and no shame to speak av once they've ketched the bit and bolted. By my way av thinkin', a woman was meant by Him that made her to keep a man straight; but here, sor, 'tis mostly her business to put general divilment into his head—for sake av the company, I suppose. There's exceptions, av coorse. Miry's one. There's an angel av the right sort for ye, sor, but it's easy seein' what'll happen in the end."

"What do you think will happen?" asked Herrick.

"Just the ould thing and nothin' else," returned O'Ryan. "The ould, ould thing. She'll go down wid the ship, colours flyin', ye may be sure; but she'll go down all the same, and nary a sowl av them will ever think in their ongrateful hearts that she went down for them, bad scran to them. They broke Mr. Emmet's heart—ye know that story, sor; they're as busy as they can be breakin' Mr. Dalrymple's, and they'll break hers for all its toughness. Yes, sor; and they'll break yours, too, if you stay long enough. I know them. Fifteen years av police duty in a place some degraes worse than purgathry opens yer eyes to a thing or two."

Herrick nodded with sorrowful conviction.

"And yet, sor," pursued O'Ryan, "if it wasn't agin all rules av prudence to speak the truth, I'd say their betters were more to blame than they are. 'Tis hard to be dacent and honest, and all the rest av it, when ye don't get a chance more than maybe once in a life-

time, and then by the mischance av things yer not in a position to take it. 'Tis onlucky to be from home when Fortune calls on ye wid friendly intentions and forgets to look back again. But we were spaikin' av the pore wreck av a critter I arrested last night because he hadn't the gumption to hould his tongue."

"Exhibiting his scholarship in defiance of police regulations," said Herrick, with a wan smile.

"Faith, and 'tis not t'he best plan in the worrld to run foul av the police," observed O'Ryan wisely. "By his way av it, I was the drunk man and he was the sober, and, av coorse, the crowd must laugh and carry on the spoort. Drink and larnin' makes a bad mixture, I'm thinkin', and he's got—what d'ye call them?"

"Delusions, perhaps," suggested Herrick.

"Daylusions, sor, and pretty bad, too," responded O'Ryan. "'Tis a disaise that goes wid drinkin' as wid other things. Well, sor, he'd have it that I didn't exist—and me standin' all the time there fornin' him, and I'm not that small, sor, but even a drunk man might see me. Six fut two in my socks and fifteen stone clear in the scales." O'Ryan smiled. "But for all that it appeared to him I was nothin'. 'Avaunt,' says he, wavin' his hands at me, 'avaunt. You're but a spectre,' says he, 'a creation av the sinses, which can never be trusted,' says he; and more to the same effect."

"Straying into metaphysics," Herrick remarked with interest.

"Strayin' is it, ye call it, sor?" rejoined O'Rvan. "Lost, wid no more notion av his reckonin' than a sailor in a fog wid half a keg av bad whisky in him. 'As a metaphysaician,' that's how he talked. 'As a metaphysaician,' says he, 'I cannot admit your existence, officer. Ye must excuse me,' says he, 'if I seem

to be rude, but so far as I have ividence, ye simply don't exist at all,' says he. 'You're just a phantom av the Metropolitan Police force—a thing that has deluded itself into the notion of bein' alive,' says he. 'This is what comes av a defective education.'

"*Cogito, ergo sum,*" said Herrick reflectively.

"Bedad, sor, and that was just what he called it," cried O'Ryan. "Cogitty erga soom. Is the thing Graek or Haybrew? He's always at them foreign languages."

"Latin," replied Herrick.

"Latin, is it, sor?" responded O'Ryan. "'Tis all one to him if it was Aigyptian. Well, sor, what wid this and what wid that, the crowd howled at seein' a mumber av the force on toast, as ye might say. Come to that, there was nothin' for it but to dale wid my man 'cordin' to law. But when I asked him to be comin' along aisy and quiet like a gintleman, he just breaks out again. 'How can I go wid a thing that, so far as I can tell, has no bein' or existence?' says he. 'Go away,' says he; 'go away and learn sense,' the crowd all the time whoopin' fit to split. 'Be reasonable now,' says I, 'and come along quietly.' 'Listen,' says he; 'by the law av metaphysics ye don't exist to me.' 'But by the law of England,' says I, 'I'm here to arrest ye for creatin' a braich av the paice.' 'Ye don't understand,' says he. 'If ye give me ten minutes I'll prove to ye onanswerably, before all these ladies and gintlemen, that so far as I'm consarned ye don't exist, and that it's preposterous and absurd for what has no bein' to think av arrestin' me.' Well, sor, the crowd howled wid delight, cryin' out to have bets on it."

"'D'ye take me up?' says he. 'Sorry,' says I, 'but you and I have an engagement at the station'; and

wid that I grips him, havin' no option, as ye can see, sor, because av his own foolishness. Well, all the way to the station he ran on in the same mad strain, informin' me that I didn't exist, though all the time I was tottin' him along. To the inspector who took the charge he insisted on the same thing. 'By that train av raisonin,' says the inspector, not wantin' to hurt his feelins onnecessary, 'you don't exist for us either.'"

"'That's so,' says he, quick as lightnin'; 'that's so. Grant me that postlit'—he used the queerest words, sor. 'Grant me that postlit, and the proof is as easy as winkin,' says he. 'Well,' says the inspector, 'we have our own way av conductin' an argiment here and takin' ividence and proceedin' to proof, and all that. And as this is a very interestin' case,' says he, 'we'll just put you up for the night anyway, to see what happens. If ye don't exist, or are a spook, or something av the sort, why, then, we won't expect ye for breakfast. Give the gintleman a cup av tay,' says the inspector to a sergeant, 'and then show him his room.' He looked dreadful disappointed," added O'Ryan, "and it appeared to hurt him more that we disbelieved his nonsense than havin' to go to the lock-up."

"And what will the incident mean to him?" asked Herrick.

"This mornin'," answered O'Ryan, "at fifteen minutes past ten o'clock, havin' no money to pay a fine, he went into retirement for a week, to think over things in paice."

"I must find him out," said Herrick, in a sudden fervour of pity; "I must find him out and get him liberated."

"Don't you be doin' it, sor," returned O'Ryan solemnly. "You wouldn't be helpin' him by payin' his fine. The week's sayclusion will do him all the

good in the worrld. He'll have a clane bed and something dacent to eat, not to speak av bein' kept away from the drink. You just let him be, sor. 'Twouldn't be any kindness to let him get out on the loose again before he's had time to sober up. Hullo!

He broke off abruptly as Miry entered in evident concern and excitement over something. With her was Albert Charles, who bore in his countenance marks of recent and dire distress. Without the condescension of a greeting, she drew herself up, arms akimbo, and looked O'Ryan over scornfully.

"Faith, and 'tis the fine eyeful ye take av an ould friend, Miry," he observed. "What's up?"

"Oh, only that you've gone and mistook yerself for a bloomin' Czar, or Shah, or Sultan of Turkey, or sunthin'," was the retort, "a-lockin' people up just as it strikes yer fancy. Whyn't ye 'ave their 'eads cut off? Quicker an' cheaper in the end, an' show better ye can do just as ye darn well please. If I was a 'copper' I shouldn't soil my gloves runnin' in them as can't 'urt anybody—'cept, maybe, themselves."

"That's it, Miry," cried O'Ryan. "'Tis a case av savin' them from themselves—and their friends."

"No," pursued Miry, disregarding the pleasantry; "an' I shouldn't 'old myself two inches 'igher all on account of deprivin' pore little kids of their dads—as are too far gone to 'it out. If ye ain't careful ye'll grow so bloomin' brave ye'll be runnin' in all the grandmothers ye come acrost."

"Has there been a foight, Miry, my girrl," asked O'Ryan, regarding her shrewdly.

"Fight I" repeated Miry hotly. "Fight to a finish and not a copper anywhere round. Sneakin' up back streets I s'pose for fear of gettin' their beauty spiled, or meetin' sunthin' fit to give 'em what's what. When

there's a row on it's their plan to march double quick on the other track. If there was a V.C. for runnin' away they'd get it every time, they would, for ce'tain."

"Has any one been interfering with you?" Herrick asked, thinking that Miry might have been set upon and maltreated.

"Interferin', sir?" she laughed. "Day as I can't take care of myself I know wot to do. Interferin', sir! t'other way about. Oh! I've gone and done it this time and no mistake, two of 'em, no less; and," turning back to O'Ryan with increased scorn, "I give myself up for 'arf killin' 'em both. Got the bracelets?"

O'Ryan regarded her with Olympian serenity.

"I'm not on duty," he answered. Arrest Miry! He would almost as soon think of arresting the Pope or jumping off the nearest bridge.

"Better 'ave me run in," said Miry, with compressed lips. "I shouldn't be s'prised if it's murder. Besides, its years and years since I saw the inside of a lock-up, and I'm just a yearnin' sunthin' awful for the plank bed. You'll look after Albert Charles, sir?"

"Certainly, with pleasure," answered Herrick. "But what's wrong, Miry?"

As he spoke the door swung again, and Mrs. Merrishaw and Mrs. Deakin entered, bearing every sign of coming fresh from the fray. Miry threw up her head like a war horse at the challenge of the trumpet.

"They'll tell 'e, sir," she replied, with a disdainful inclination. "They know."

CHAPTER IV

SINCE the victims lived to tell the tale of outrage it could not be murder, though from their furious outcries and vehement accusations, to say nothing of confirming looks, it might well be construed as something infinitely worse.

In her course to and fro in the intervals of jam-making Miry usually passed the dusky, defeated tenement in which the Merrishaws and the Deakins were domiciled. Returning to work after the breakfast hour she found Albert Charles in difficulties. For Mrs. Deakin, moved to sympathy with his harassed mother, volunteered her aid in reducing him to that condition of docility and obedience proper to boys whose duty it is to sing for drinks when parents and their friends are thirsty. This act of charity she was performing with remarkable vigour and heartiness at the time of Miry's passing.

Mrs. Deakin had five of her own, all well trained in predatory habits, and hoped she knew the value of discipline. The crimes for which Albert Charles was punished according to the Jedburgh code of justice, which first hangs and then tries the culprit, were three, namely, base and unfilial desertion at a time of need, defiance and disgrace in frequenting

missions against orders, and failure to recover his father from the clutches of the law. The last was considered almost as grave as either of the others, both ladies having learned with quite appropriate resentment how Mr. Merrishaw was for the time being deprived of the liberty so precious to all right-minded Englishmen and their wives. It was all the fault of Albert Charles.

Nemesis overtook the defaulter and rebel at the foot of the stairs, where he was captured by Mrs. Deakin in a desperate attempt to escape. Chancing to come up just then, Miry heard the noise of scuffling and turned aside for inquiry. With one swift clutch, as of an angry Athene, she rescued Albert Charles, at the same time sending Mrs. Deakin sprawling into the inner darkness. But the active little woman was up again in a trice, lithe and wicked as a wild cat, demanding to know in the name of British justice what business the interloper had to be meddling there.

"Don't you be talkin' too much of justice, for fear I take it into my 'ead to let 'e 'ave some," was the cool retort.

"If you don't take care, I shall be 'bliged to do up yer back 'air for 'e," cried Mrs. Deakin, evincing a valiant disposition to square for action. "An' it's wot ye jolly well need."

"Perlite, to be sure," rejoined Miry with an ironical guffaw. "Sorry as I can't spare the time for 'air-dressin' just at present. Ta-ta I be sober and ye'll be 'appy." And with an admonition to Albert Charles to keep out of harm's way she proceeded about her business, dismissing the incident from her mind.

Some twelve hours later, however, hostilities were renewed sharply, owing chiefly to the caustic quality of Mrs. Deakin's tongue. What followed led to the

appearance of the three principals before Herrick and O'Ryan.

"Tell me, what is it all about now?" O'Ryan asked, regarding them with magisterial dignity. "Is it fallin' out among yerselves ye are, like detected thaives? Are yez considerin' what yer doin', anyway?"

"It's all along of her," said Mrs. Deakin, jerking an accusing thumb at Miry. "She thinks she bosses the whole blessed place, she does, not to speak of 'er 'sault and battery. Look at us—aint we a pretty sight? And she done it, she done it!"

O'Ryan screwed his face comically. "Ye look pretty well as if ye'd been through the threshin' mill," he admitted. "But ye needn't be tellin' me onless ye like. When a little family party goes wrong and heads are broke by mistake, there's no obligation on any one consarned to go and take a mumber av the force into their confidence, d'ye understand? Bedad, don't I know bravely that when both sides are blue mouldin' for a frolic 'tis the easiest thing in the world to carry the joke a bit too far. But sensible people will just laugh and cry quits. 'Tis the best way in the end."

"Thankee kindly for the sermon," returned Mrs. Deakin, gathering up her abused locks. "But——"

"Did ye ever hear the story av Sergeant McPhutt av the Metropolitan Police force?" interrupted O'Ryan blandly. "No? Well, 'tis worth hearin'. This man McPhutt—he had his head made and screwed on somewhere beyant the Tweed—had a fine gaynial way wid him in administratin' the law. One night late, when most dacent folks were at home in bed, it was his painful duty to take a misbehavin' Frinchman into custody. 'It'll save time and throuble,' says McPhutt, as plisant as a cook at an area gate—'it'll save time and throuble,' says he, 'if I just thry this little case myself.

Ye don't want to be goin' afore maghistrates and all that soort av cattle,' says he, wid a face as grave as a priest pershuadin' a sinner to turn from his wickedness. 'No,' says the Frinchman, shakin' like to go to pieces. 'It will be a great favour, Mosoo gendarm,' that was how the critter spoke, 'if you permeet me for to go home to my wife and childer. For,' says he, 'I'm a respectable married man.'

"Come along under the lamp-post here, then,' says McPhutt. 'How much money might ye have about ye now?' says he. 'Not much,' says Mister Frinchy. 'Just a very little I was takin' home to my wife and family.' 'Good man,' says McPhutt, 'ye deserve encouragement. Still and all,' says he, 'it's necessary for me to know just how much ye have; and as I don't want to make ye turn out yer pockets it's best to be frank.' 'Oh,' says the Frinchman, gettin' mighty narvous, 'I have only about £2 av yer English money.' 'Is that all?' says McPhutt. 'Every cint, Mosoo, as I hope to get to hiven,' says the Frinchman. "'Tis not much to kape a wife and family on in London,' says McPhutt. 'Howsomever, we must do as things do wid us,' says he. 'Yer sure that in a corner av yer purse there's not another half-sovereign?' 'Oh, quite sure,' says the other, 'quite sure.' 'Well, 'tis in luck ye are,' says McPhutt. 'If ye was to go afore a maghistrate this job would cost ye at the very least £5, but seein' how it is I fine ye forty shillings widout the option of goin' to gaol.'

"Is that the law, Mosoo?' says the Frinchman, scared out av his wits. 'For first offences and wid a gintleman,' says McPhutt, as agreeable as could be. 'That is,' says he, with half a wink as ye might say, 'I can make it so. But if ye'd rather be put in the dock to-morrow mornin' at ten o'clock, after a night in

quod, say the worrd; 'tis nothin' to me.' Wid that he took out the bracelets, fingerin' them just as if he itched to clap them on somebody's wrists. I believe the Frinchman nearly fainted. 'I'll pay, Mosoo,' says he, as white as chalk. 'It's a favour you're doin' me entoirely,' or words to that effect. So, ye see, McPhutt served the ends av justice and made £2 out av the transaction."

"Which means that you are ready to square for two quid," remarked Mrs. Deakin sarcastically. "Sorry as we can't oblige."

"Did ye never hear that 'tis manners to wait until yer asked, little woman?" rejoined O'Ryan. "Every story, av coorse, should have its moral, though not always precisely and exactly the sort of moral ye'd expect, may be. The day av the McPhutts is over and gone. The Metropolitan Police have none av them perquisites now. But in the beaten path av duty, as somebody says, they can and must take ividence. And 'fore I can arrest yez I must know what for, and to find out what for I must hear the case, d'ye see? By the same token that manes that the lot av yez must go to the lock-up for inquiry and all that, and by all the chances spend the night under lock and key. I'm not on duty, but if it's business ye want the law's waiting and ready. All ye've got to do is to come along wid me."

Mrs. Merrishaw and Mrs. Deakin looked at each other; neither had any love of the law even when the cause was just, and reflection made the present case a little doubtful.

"Don't be decidin' in a hurry," observed O'Ryan politely. "There's wisdom in taking things aisy, as the Oirish piper said when he lay down in the ditch. And in the manetime, if I may make so bould as to say so, the two of yez," glancing at the accusers,

"might be puttin' yer dhress to rights a bit. Miry, will ye be takin' the ladies to the back primises, where they can have a wash and brush-up. Watter's a mighty refreshin' thing when people feel out av ordther," he added, smiling generally.

Miry had no need to be told what he meant. One part of her nature, that controlled by the bump of pugnacity, protested hotly; the other, where prudence held reign, assented instantly.

"If ye like," she responded, with a toss of the head, as though the old Eve kicked even in the moment of yielding. "This way, please." And in their surprise the two women followed like sheep.

"Bedad, sor," remarked O'Ryan, when they were gone, "if Miry was put in the dock and them in the witness-box lookin' like that, no maghistrate could help convictin', however much his heart might lie the other way. It's Miry's wakeness to be too free av her hands when the dander's up. Ye can see they never had and never could have a chance agin her. If she was borrn wid trousers 'stid av petticoats, 'tis as certain as mortal thing can be she'd be makin' the fine name for herself in the prize-ring. But she's gone and manhandled the little un maybe a bit too roughly."

"She deserved it," put in Albert Charles, venturing for the first time to take part in the momentous affair. "It was all her fault."

"I'm not misdoubtin' ye at all," returned O'Ryan. "But the question afore the court is not whether she desarved it or whether she didn't. Ye see, 'tis not for this person and that to be trapaizin' round nosin' out them that would be the better av a letherin' and dispensin' justice on the spot. The police and the maghistrates are paid for doin' that; and every man

to his thrade, as the fox said to the goose when it objected to bein' carried off. Tell me now, had Miry much provocation afore she done this?"

"Mrs. Deakin was going for me," replied Albert Charles resentfully. He would take punishment submissively from his mother, but objected to the laying on of hands by Mrs. Deakin.

"Goin' for ye, was she?" responded O'Ryan. "And Miry came to the rescue, so to speak?"

"Yes," was the eager reply. "That was in the morning. There was a bit of a bother then."

"Listen to the child!" cried O'Ryan. "'A bit av a bother!' Well, sonny?"

"Yes," pursued Albert Charles ardently. "Then Miry met me again in the evening and took me to a cook-shop, 'cause she found out I was hungry. When we were leaving there just outside were mother and Mrs. Deakin."

"And the fat was immediately in the fire," observed O'Ryan. "Proceed, me bhoy."

"As soon as she saw us," Albert Charles went on, catching his breath in sheer haste, "she sings out, 'Look at him! look at him, going round with——' she used a bad word, sir. 'I wonder ye allow it, Mrs. Merrishaw.'"

"And then the spoort began," said O'Ryan. "Did you happen to notice who got in first lick?"

"Mrs. Deakin went for Miry's hair," Albert Charles replied. "But Miry hit straight out and down goes Mrs. Deakin. She never had a chance after Miry started properly."

"You're an obsarvin' child and ought to do well," remarked O'Ryan. "That'll do. Ye see, sor," turning to Mr. Herrick, "how things happen in this raigion av darkness. 'Tis Miry all over to be gettin' into hot

watther from pure love av doin' good. And, av coorse, his mother got share for interferin', I suppose. What might they be layin' on you for, now?" he asked, turning back to Albert Charles.

"For coming here," was the answer, "and for not being able to find dad."

O'Ryan stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"'For not findin' dad,'" he repeated. "Faith, they went and set yer worrk for ye there, my son. And Miry was on my back for that same, though I couldn't help it. Whyn't ye kape him at home the days he has them daylusions 'bout nobody existin' but himself?"

All at once he bent his ear to hearken. "Miry's voice," he said. "They're havin' a bit av a debate in behint. Maybe ye'll better see, sor, that the argyment doesn't get too hot. If Miry starts on them again anything may happen."

"Anything indeed," agreed Herrick, hastening to the rear.

CHAPTER V

BUT it was only Miry trying to overcome Mrs. Deakin's rooted aversion to soap and water.

"I'll trouble ye to wash proper," the recalcitrant was told severely. "Ye came 'ere to be made clean, and yer goin' to be made clean. Think we're goin' to take all this trouble for nuthin', not to speak of the expense? Now then, buck up, if ye don't want a duckin'."

Finding that only the virtue of cleanliness was in dispute, Herrick forbore to interfere, and returned smiling to O'Ryan.

"That's Miry, sor," commented O'Ryan. "Lave it to her, and the other will be clane if soap and watter will do it, which I'm misdoubtin'."

Miry, indeed, did her duty so effectively that when presently the trio reappeared the guests were almost radiant from scrubbing. Mrs. Deakin, it is true, protested to the end, and needed the strong hand of coercion, which, it may be said, was applied without scruple. But Mrs. Merrishaw revelled in the clean, wholesome hot water.

"How good I" she murmured, laving face and neck, "how good I"

She lingered over it as one luxuriating in a rare sensation. For it was like recovering a lost sense, a

forfeited possession, nay, like a momentary return to Paradise. Wherefore she murmured with unspeakable meaning, "How good I"

There were moments of sobriety and sanity when, in the agony of remorse, Mrs. Merrishaw could have plucked her heart out. The attempt to stifle the accuser was but driving the arrow more effectually home. She therefore adopted the common policy of her class ; that is to say, put on a studied half-defiant air of jollity, partly for the sake of appearance, partly to sustain her own faltering courage. She laughed loudly and huskily, like an actor simulating gaiety while all his instincts revolted. She indulged much in derision of the respectability she had abandoned. Above all, she drank. "Drink," said the tempter ; "it will keep your blood coursing blithely. It will also make you forget yourself and all your woes. Therefore drink." So she drank till the serpent that lies coiled in the dregs of the wine-cup rose up and bit, infecting her with a mortal poison.

To put the gnawing worm of conscience to sleep, to kill it if need be, she drank on, soaking, steeping it in alcohol. That fiery narcotic, deadlier than "mandragora and poppy, or all the drowsy syrups of the world," gradually overcame all reproaches of the monitor. Free of the curb, she shut her eyes and went headlong without thought of the goal.

"What's the use of trying to hold back?" a sinister voice asked. "You have already cut yourself off from the past ; you cannot return ; enjoy the present. Shut off thought ; to think of misery is to sharpen it. You have forfeited everything. Well, well, here is oblivion on draught. Drink and let be."

She grew familiar with the pawnbroker, the canny gentleman with the Hebraic nose and the foreign

tongue, who handles his pence with such exceeding caution that every penny might be a drop of his heart's blood. At first she sought his aid furtively, under cover of darkness; but by and by she went to him bluish in open day and wrangled for an extra ha'penny. From his door the course was latterly straight to a public-house with a company of friends, who stuck to her loyally while a copper remained. Ten years before the mere idea of rubbing shoulders familiarly with Mrs. Deakin would have filled her with horror. Now she was, body and soul, under the influence of that baneful energetic personality.

Mrs. Deakin enjoyed advantages denied to her protégée and disciple. Nurtured, all but born, in the bar of a public-house, she took all kinds of liquor, but preferably gin, as her natural nutriment. Her vitality was that of the savage uncontaminated by any of the enervating virtues of civilisation—indeed, it might be said, fortified by its vices. For she was bred in a slum, and they who survive infancy in the slums are made of perdurable stuff.

The stoutest conscience cannot hold out for ever. Mrs. Merrishaw's surrendered at last, leaving the field to Mrs. Deakin, the pawnbroker, and the publican—an engaging trio.

That splash of clean Christian water in clean Christian surroundings seemed to revive it as by a galvanic shock. Mrs. Deakin saw the danger and acted promptly.

"This aint the sort of place we're used to. Come, let us clear out," she said urgently. "We aint agoin' into the Hallelujah business just yet, are we?"

Indeed, so great was her haste to get off that she conveniently forgot the charge against Miry. O'Ryan sagely commended the wisdom of second thoughts,

and thereby very nearly tumbled all the fat in the fire again.

"Oh!" cried Miry, regarding her adversary with defiant contempt. "Don't you go and change yer mind if ye'd rather not. There's the p'liceman, and 'ere's me. Say the word."

"Perhaps you're sorry for what you've done," put in Mrs. Merrishaw, who had even less desire than her friend to provoke fresh strife.

Miry laughed. "Sorry!" she repeated, the old Eve rampant within her. "That's a good idear. Shouldn't 'ave thought of it, 'elp me bob. But since you mention it, I am sorry."

"Coorse," remarked O'Ryan, with his best Kerry smile. "The best av us do at times what we don't mane. 'Tis repintince that matthers."

"Yes," pursued Miry, ignoring the diplomatic intervention for peace. "Lor' bless 'e! I'm just that sorry I can't tell that I didn't let 'er 'ave more when I was at it. May never 'ave such a chanct again."

She looked Mrs. Deakin over like one moved to disgust by the thought of mistaken leniency and lost opportunities.

"Takin' the will for the deed," she continued, so that there should be no mistake about her sentiments, "I 'ave as good as killed ye. And if I 'ad it would be a jolly good riddance." She bent forward, her eyes flashing. "Think of me swingin' for you. Aint it sweet? Aint it good 'n'uff to dream about o' nights when you're sober enough? But if I did we should meet and settle up t'other side of the ferry, never you fear."

"Miry, Miry!" Herrick cried in protest, his blood curdling at the thought of enmity persisting beyond mortal bounds.

"Sorry, sir," returned Miry, instantly calming down. "But if you knew 'er as I do, ye couldn't be 'sprised. It's 'er and the kind of 'er that makes this place a 'ell, beggin' yer pardon, sir."

It was in truth a case of accumulating hate on both sides. Mrs. Deakin had a blistering retort on her tongue, but prudently held it back. Her vengeance would keep; she could bide her time.

"Come," she repeated, turning quickly to Mrs. Merrishaw. "Sooner we're out of this the better."

But a new feeling had come over Mrs. Merrishaw, or rather old feelings were disconcertingly revived. She looked at Albert Charles curiously, as in doubt, remorse, or pity.

"You'll let us have his company for a little while," Herrick observed quietly, noticing her expression. "We promise to take good care of him."

"Yes," she answered, like one in a tumult. "I—I think I'll let him stay."

"Let him stay!" cried Mrs. Deakin, in amazed reproof. "Why, m' dear, 'ave ye forgotten as ye want 'im to-night?"

"I'm going to let him stay," reiterated Mrs. Merrishaw with astonishing energy.

"Whyn't ye takin' 'im as arranged?" demanded Mrs. Deakin, perturbed by a vision of vanishing drinks.

"Because," answered Mrs. Merrishaw, looking her straight in the face, "because I should like him to be saved—even if I shouldn't. Come!"

And they went out into the night together.

CHAPTER VI

SCARCELY fifty yards away they came upon Mrs. Herrick within the shadows, hiding or watching, or both. For some days her conduct had been the cause of grave dissatisfaction. After a very proper show of humility and dependence, with an obliging disposition to spend her substance for the common delight, she began to avoid her first friends and patrons.

"Givin' 'erself airs," remarked Mrs. Deakin with a sniff. "Well I all I've got to say is this, they don't do 'ere, and she'd better take care wot she's about."

To slumdom airs are insult in its worst form. That is why fashionable philanthropists going thither with an offensive show of condescension come suddenly and often violently to grief. It was Mrs. Deakin who made the inestimable Lady Stapleton herself gather up her skirts and depart in dudgeon, vowing never to set foot in the abominable place again.

"Don't you want to go to heaven?" the great woman asked, as she might ask a naughty child, "Wouldn't you like a stick of sugar-candy for being good?" And quick as resentment could make it came the reply, "Not much, if you're there!"

"Hopeless!" commented Lady Stapleton, with a horror-stricken roll of the eyes—"quite, quite hope-

less," and hastened back to her drawing-room, there to descant on the rudeness, barbarity, and base ingratitude of the lower orders.

"Why do you bother with them?" some one inquired. "A new heaven and a new earth would be very nice, no doubt; but are they likely to be achieved in our time? And do those people deserve them?"

"I am sure I don't know," answered Lady Stapleton, sighing heavily.

"Rather, you are sure you do know, dear Lady Stapleton," smiled the other. "You are just vexing yourself by trying to save people who won't even try to save themselves, and are rude and ungrateful to the bargain."

Why should Mayfair, that was designed for pleasure, trouble itself with the salvation of the masses that were obviously designed for the pit?

Now Mrs. Deakin's alert eye detected signs of snobbishness in Mrs. Herrick.

"Not like you, m' dear," she told Mrs. Merrishaw in subtle flattery. "Why, bless yer 'eart, there was you only the other day, so ter speak, a-ridin' in yer carriage, but down you steps, modest and nice—no nonsense, no flummery, no tossin' of the 'ead for to remind us wot you once was. And 'ere you are one of ourselves. Now, that's wot I like."

"Yes," agreed Mrs. Merrishaw with a queer inflection, "here I am."

"And don't regret it neither," cooed Mrs. Deakin. "Course ye don't, and I'll tell ye for why. 'Cause this world was made to be enjoyed. Ugh! it makes me sick to see some people. And I aint sure of this Strange Lidy, as she is called—not at all sure."

All the same, she hailed Mrs. Herrick with the gladness of a bosom friend, for there was money in the

stranger's purse, and Mrs. Deakin was prepared to sacrifice a private sentiment for sake of a possible sociality.

"You 'ere I" she cried quite gaily. "Wot luck, arter bein' in a place like that I" (she jerked a disdainful thumb over her shoulder at the Mission). "Most God-forsaken 'ole I ever was in in my life. Come and let's 'ave sunthin' to take the taste of it away."

"Who is there to-night?" asked Mrs. Herrick, showing no disposition to comply.

"Oh I a bleedin' little bit of a passon, as per usual," laughed Mrs. Deakin. "You mostly allus find 'em 'angin' round where they're not wanted, as the burglar said of the p'lice. That mug of an Irish copper's there too, with that blessed hangel—wot's 'er name?"

Instinctively following the rules of high society, Mrs. Deakin would not so much as permit herself to remember the name of a person whom she loathed, hated, and despised.

"Miry," said Mrs. Merrishaw.

"The same," said Mrs. Deakin. "And she's a daisy. If there aint a reckonin', and a pretty 'ot un too, before 'er, why, my name aint Julia Jane Deakin, that's all."

"What has she been doing?" inquired Mrs. Herrick.

"Wot's she been doin'?" repeated Mrs. Deakin on a high note. "Wot aint she been doin'?—that's the question. A-stickin' 'er impident nose in and a-meddlin' with everythink a: 'every one as if God A'mighty made the world and all that's in it just for 'er to run as she jolly well liked, that's wot she's been doin'. Oh, my I" Mrs. Deakin broke off, "but I *am* thirsty; don't remember ever bein' thirstier—honest. Aint ye comin' to 'ave a drink?"

"Not to-night, thank you," Mrs. Herrick answered.

"Wot's up?" asked Mrs. Deakin in astonishment.

To her mind folly and obstinacy could not go farther than the refusal to drink.

"I don't feel very well," returned Mrs. Herrick uneasily. "I—I think I want to be alone."

"Thought you wasn't, dear," said Mrs. Deakin, with well-feigned sympathy, ignoring the hint to go. "Well, wot's the medicine when yer down in 'eart and luck? Why, a drop of liquor, of course. Come along and 'ave some."

She laid a friendly hand on Mrs. Herrick's arm and felt her shiver.

"I declare you've gone and got the chills," she cried in deep concern; "that's wot's the matter with you. A drop 'ot, and quick as ye can 'ave it if ye aint goin' to be really ill, that's wot you want. Come along."

"I'd rather not," responded Mrs. Herrick, wriggling to free herself from Mrs. Deakin's persuasive grip. But Mrs. Deakin was not to be denied.

"When we're sick we're silly," she observed appositely. "I've knowed 'em that sick they couldn't take their drop of gin or beer, or wotever it was they were in the 'abit of 'avin', nohow; and when they got well again they couldn't believe it 'ardly. Of course, you aint used to it, not just yet, but Lor' bless 'e! ye'll get over that. Look at 'er," making a gesture of pride towards Mrs. Merrishaw. "'Tain't so long ago since she was just like you—'oldin back and worryin' and thinkin' of old times, and look at 'er now! Why," exclaimed Mrs. Deakin in a flush of enthusiasm, "you wouldn't find a 'eartier drinker nowhere, nor one as is jollier in takin' 'er liquor."

"Don't!" cried Mrs. Merrishaw as in sudden pain. "Please don't!"

"Why, wotever's the matter?" asked Mrs. Deakin

in bewilderment. "You ain't sick too, are you? It's a 'orspital I shall 'ave on my 'ands if I ain't careful."

Mrs. Merrishaw, apparently struggling for breath, drew herself up as for some mighty effort.

"Look here," she said desperately, "do what you like with me, it doesn't matter; but let her alone. Don't ask her to come and drink. Don't do it."

Mrs. Deakin gave her a vicious look as though to say, "There, you've gone and spoiled the game," but immediately and discreetly covered it with a smile.

"It's all along of that mission," she observed. "Oh! you should 'ear 'em in there a-goin' on 'bout public-'ouses and drinkin', and all that. It fairly makes yer 'ead ache to listen to 'em. It does, honest. Why, would ye believe it," pursued Mrs. Deakin, as if relating an outrageous scandal, "I've 'eard one of them Gospel sharps with my own ears callin' a public-'ouse the gateway of 'ell. Think of that! I call it the gateway of 'eaven, I do. Ha, ha! If there's a world where there aint no public-'ouses and no liquor, well, I don't want to go to it, that's all. I should be thirsty and miserable all the time. I am sure I should. And that aint exactly what ye'd call bein' 'appy, is it?"

She laughed the hard, raucous laugh of the drink-sodden woman of the slums, the laugh that once heard is never forgotten; the laugh that tells more of vice and corruption than all the Blue-books ever published and all the sermons ever preached. It made Mrs. Herrick shudder; it made Mrs. Merrishaw shudder still more. "Gracious Heaven!" she asked herself, like one startled out of a sleep, "have I fallen to that?"

"Well," said Mrs. Deakin briskly, nodding a sarcastic head at Mrs. Herrick, "'pears our friend 'ere

ain't feelin' sociable to-night—off 'er liquor, so ter speak, though I 'ope as she'll soon be better and tuck in again. Come, m' dear, since we must go by ourselves."

"I'm not going either," Mrs. Merrishaw replied, a feeling of ineffable loathing and repulsion upon her.

"You ain't comin' either!" exclaimed Mrs. Deakin, aghast at the defection.

"No," returned Mrs. Merrishaw, moving closer to Mrs. Herrick, "I am not going. This life is horrible—horrible!"

"Goin' back to the mission, m' dear?" inquired Mrs. Deakin, recovering her composure and her irony. "Well, p'r'aps arter all yer right. They say as 'ow passons do keep a drop of good stuff on the sly. Oh! ye've got to be up nice and early the day yer up to the passons. Ye'll tell me, dear, 'ow ye like it, won't ye?"

Mrs. Merrishaw scarcely heard, for a fierce and piteous struggle was going on in her mind. The life she was leading had suddenly become loathsome and unbearable.

"Only get away from here," something told her, "and all may yet be well. They have risen again who fell worse than you. Take heart. Break off from that evil spirit you have been calling friend. She is dragging you down, helping to kill your soul."

Like a flash out of the darkness it came to her that she had a soul to save—she, the poor, lost welterer in the mire. But she must be rid of Mrs. Deakin; she must break away—slip the serpent coils which held her so tightly for destruction. But with the serpent standing there, tempting and ironical, the feat was not easy.

We are all bravest when conscious of support.

Drawn by what mystic or magnetic power she knew not, Mrs. Merrishaw moved yet a little closer to Mrs. Herrick. Then she turned and faced her serpent.

"I ask you as a favour to go and leave me," she said, in a breathless pant. "Another time I'll explain."

"Didn't expect this of you," returned Mrs. Deakin with an injured air, "blessed if I did. I thought you was one that could be depended on."

"Another time," pleaded Mrs. Merrishaw. "Leave me now, please."

"S'pose I may go and drink all alone by myself without a copper," returned Mrs. Deakin. "That's jolly."

In an instant Mrs. Herrick had her purse out.

"Here," she said, passing a piece of money; "take that, and let her alone."

Mrs. Deakin's eyes gleamed in surprise and satisfaction.

"Thankee kindly," she said with a grin. "'Andsome is as 'andsome does, that's wot I say. I'll drink yer 'ealth, both of ye, and a good time till we meet again."

With a wave of her hand, meant to be jocular and hearty, she turned and went. They watched till she disappeared through the door of a public-house near by; then, creeping into the light like fugitives, they looked at each other timidly, yet with a searching, poignant keenness and sympathy.

CHAPTER VII

"I HAVE waited for this chance," said Mrs. Merrishaw after a minute's silence. "I wanted to speak with you. We can't talk in the open street; will you come home with me?"

The intensity and earnestness of the tone surprised Mrs. Herrick. If she could not assent, it was because she had business of her own too urgent and too important to be neglected.

"I have a particular reason for asking you to come," Mrs. Merrishaw explained. Her voice trembled; her face, dimly revealed between darkness and light, was strained as in passionate appeal. Mrs. Herrick's pulses began to throb in the excitement of mystery; but it was necessary to keep a tight rein on her feelings.

"How long are they likely to be in there?" she asked, indicating the mission.

"Hours," was the reply. "All evening probably. Do you want to go in?"

"No, I don't want to go in."

"But you want to be near. I understand."

It was a desire on the part of one new to that Gehenna to keep in touch with the past by hovering in the precincts of respectability. How well she knew that pathetic instinct!

"Since you don't want to go in, won't you come with me?"

"Not to drink," returned Mrs. Herrick.

The other winced as from a blow.

"I deserve that," she cried. "Yes, I deserve it. But I can assure you it is not to drink. You heard me refuse to go with that other woman. My God! no, I am not asking you to drink."

The intensity was become tragic. It was as if she said, "Think your worst of me, but for the love of Heaven come."

Mrs. Herrick was both touched and frightened.

"Then I will go with you," she replied, scarcely realising what she promised.

"You won't regret it," said Mrs. Merrishaw. "I— but never mind, you shall hear all when we get there."

They went hurriedly, and without exchanging a word, till the crumbling tenement door in the fetid alley was reached. "In here," said Mrs. Merrishaw, leading the way. "Mind your feet."

They passed into the darkness within, stumbled along a rough passage and up the rotten stairs, guided by a hand-rail too far gone to afford any support. Mrs. Merrishaw unlocked the door, and after fumbling for matches, lighted a dingy, undersized lamp reeking of stale kerosene. There was no fire in the grate, but a battered tin bucket held perhaps a shovelful of coke. The furniture seemed to consist of a scarred deal table, a decrepit kitchen chair, and a bed on which the ragged counterpane could not hide the broken straw mattress. The hostess set the chair for her guest and sank on the bed, her hand pressed to her aching side.

"You are wondering why I brought you here," she said, her eyes bright and wild with emotion. "Well,

it was to see this. Look round you ; look well. What think of it as a place to live in? They tell us we are made in God's image. All I can say is that some of us learn to live like beasts. What do I say? Beasts! There is not a man in England who would make a horse or dog that he values live as I am living, and I brought you to look with your own eyes on my home. Do you know why?"

"Why?" asked Mrs. Herrick, in a tremor of agitation.

"Because I like you. Because you have known better things, and because I would save you from this place of lost souls if I could. Don't start. I am talking quite rationally, and—and I am sober, for a wonder, quite sober. You see I hadn't a *sou* to pay for liquor. Candidly, I wouldn't be sober, if I could help it. You can get many things free, advice and religion among them. But you can't get free liquor. That occasionally makes teetotalers of some of us; and for once I am glad to be in my right senses, because I have a chance of telling you something it might cost you your immortal soul to find out for yourself."

"Yes?" said Mrs. Herrick, white as death.

"Often," continued Mrs. Merrishaw, "it comes into my head about the request of Dives to Abraham—you see, once I read my Bible—to send and warn his father's house, so that those he left behind might escape the torture he was suffering. Abraham wouldn't, which was unkind. I can't save myself, but I should like to save you. That would be something to my credit against the day of reckoning, not to speak of pleasure to myself. I don't know what brought you here, and I am not going to ask; the heart knoweth its own bitterness, God help it! But I feel in my

soul that you are a good woman. I have watched you, and I can read other women, and I know you are good. Look at me, look at me well; you wouldn't think that I care anything about goodness, would you?"

"You couldn't do what you are doing if you didn't," said Mrs. Herrick, trembling with awe.

"That's flattery," was the response, "and it is entirely out of place here. No, you wouldn't think that I care anything about goodness. I smashed my mirror because I couldn't bear the truths it told me about myself. A degraded outcast like me caring for goodness! Why, respectable people would laugh and tell you it's impossible. Listen! when do you value a thing? when you have lost it, when you know you can never, never have it back again. That knowledge is the real stuff of tragedy. You see what I mean? They said I was once good. Ah! yes, you understand! But I won't talk of that. I brought you here that you might take warning and fly for your life—aye, and for what may well be dearer than life. Have you a husband?"

"Yes, I have a husband."

"A good man, perhaps?"

Something flashed before Mrs. Herrick's eyes, dazzling her.

"The best man who ever gave his love to a woman," was the answer.

"Ah! then you carry a rankling arrow in your heart. Any children?"

"One child."

"Another arrow. Have your husband and child come to this place with you?"

"No."

"Has your husband—well, gone your way?"

"No, thank God I he has not."

"Then," cried Mrs. Merrishaw with extraordinary fervour, "go back to him. Appeal to his love; ask his forgiveness. Don't tell me that your pride won't let you. Crush down pride. It is the devil's favourite bait. Turn and fly as you would fly from a pestilence, for you would be flying from something worse, much worse. Go to your husband and your child. God in heaven, that I could go to mine and find them safe and innocent! Don't let the world say of yet another tragedy, 'A woman did it.' You are still fortunate, for you are here alone, and didn't help to bring others, as I did. I ask you, I beseech you, to be warned by me. When we women go downhill we go like a runaway horse. But you can turn yet; I know by your looks. Wouldn't you give anything to be back with your husband and child?"

"Don't ask me!" returned Mrs. Herrick, convulsed by a great sob. "Don't ask me!"

"I needn't have asked you. Every true woman's heart is for home and happiness. Well, get away from here; that is the first thing to do. If you stay you are lost—do you understand? Lost! You have seen the kind and quality of my friends. The same sort of people will be your friends if you don't hasten away. They will get hold of you and they will drag you down into the mire. Don't make any mistake about that. I'd run away and put an end to it all if I could. But I can't."

"And how long have you been here?" asked Mrs. Herrick, quivering in terror and sympathy.

"Three years more or less," was the answer. "Three million years judged by my feeling. It makes me afraid of eternity to think that every year of agony will be multiplied by a million. You are wondering

what brought me. Well, if you look, the answer is written all over me. Listen : the devil has one un-failing bait and a great army of anglers. The bait is drink ; the army of anglers are those who make and sell it. My curse upon them ! May they perish by their own bane ! may they go in howling torture where they send so many others ! If curses, as Shakespeare says, can pierce the clouds and enter heaven, then I register mine against them. God requite them for the evil they have done to me and mine—yes, and to hundreds of thousands of others who are lost eternally because of them."

She sprang to her feet, her face flushed, her eyes flashing, and drawing herself up in the middle of the floor, shot a clenched fist into the air. She was tall and had been handsome. Something of the grandeur of a sublime passion irradiated her tatters, making her almost glorious.

"Yes," she pursued, "in the Day of Judgment may the just God demand of them all the vast multitude of those they have sent to perdition. Cain's crime is theirs ; let Cain's punishment be theirs as well. What do I say ? Cain was humane and merciful in comparison. He killed the body ; they destroy the body and damn the soul. Stand up," she cried, with the swift fierceness of a Sybil. "There. Give me your hand—so. Now," raising the united hands, "you and I, two weak wronged women, lift our hands and our faces and our hearts to our Maker and cry to Him for vengeance, and He will hear us ; for is He not the avenger of the weak and the wronged ? Has He not said, 'Vengeance is Mine : I will repay ?' May He repay in double, treble portion. As the destroyers have no scruple, may He have none either. That is our prayer. Don't tremble so." She tightened her

hold to a vice-like grip. "I say that is our prayer. They would laugh in scorn, they do laugh in scorn, at your misery and mine. But we shall be avenged in the end—if there is justice here or hereafter."

Her voice, which had risen to a shrill treble, suddenly broke. She had not meant to say all that; but it came like a tempest from the surging, revolted heart, and the fury of the passion exhausted her. Dropping Mrs. Herrick's hand, she tottered back upon the bed, where she panted in a huddled heap, a singular contrast to the majestic vengeful figure of a minute before.

Numbed and dazed, Mrs. Herrick stood a little, looking down on her as one in a dream. Then all at once the frozen springs melted and the gracious tears came. Next minute she took a quick step forward, stooped, and flung her arms about the woman on the bed.

"You are not lost," she said brokenly, "not lost." For response the other put out her arms in turn, and thus the two sat in so fast and close an embrace they could not see each other's faces.

Before they recovered themselves there came a sudden rushing noise in the passage below and a bounding step on the stairs. Bursting in with a cry of gladness, Albert Charles found them, furtively wiping their eyes. At sight of the mysterious Strange Lady he pulled up, his face blank with astonishment.

"Didn't expect to find me here?" she said, trying to smile.

"No," he owned frankly, "I didn't. Know mother?"

"You seemed in great haste coming in, Albert," his mother put in softly. "What is it?"

For answer he tapped his pockets joyously.

"Oh!" he explained, leaping back to what was

uppermost in his mind. "Miry's been at it again, and the new parson's been helping her, the one with the nice little girl." He cast a meaning glance at the Strange Lady. "And I tell you he's a peach. Got a plate?"

A chipped, cracked plate was procured; and Albert Charles gleefully loaded it with samples of half the dainties of a cook and confectionery shop combined.

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CHAPTER VIII

AT the end of his week's retirement Merrishaw slunk back into the world, like his kind in general after a period of seclusion, to resume the old life with an appetite whetted by enforced abstinence. During that week Herrick probed and pondered his case, piecing the information he received from his mission friends, including O'Ryan, into a mental picture of the man, his early life, fall, and present condition.

At the mention of scholarship, as we know, he pricked his ears in a deep and peculiar interest. If asked whether a scholar were better worth saving than an illiterate, he would probably have answered that in the final test all men are equal. But there would have been a subconscious bias; for the freemasonry of learning seemed to make it doubly piteous that one of superb gifts and attainments, as Merrishaw appeared to be, should be sucked to destruction like a common waif in a common maelstrom. At any rate, when Merrishaw was again free to resume interrupted courses, Herrick stood by the prison gate waiting for him.

When spoken to, the liberated man answered with a surly word and look, as if resenting the intrusion, and made to pass on. But a second look brought him up sharply, breathless, and fixed in amazement.

Herrick, too, was staring as one who sees an incredible vision. As first beheld, the face before him seemed that of an utter stranger; but in the voice, in spite of its gruffness, there was something intimate and familiar, like a recovered strain in the ear, an echo out of the well-remembered past. Then as in a flash the features also became familiar, the old expression breathing through the dismal changes and accretions of degradation.

"Why," gasped Herrick, awed and startled as if verily beholding the miracle of resurrection, "it's——"

"Hush!" said the other, before he could finish the sentence; "the name you would pronounce was never heard here. I would still preserve it from pollution. Therefore do not speak it." He glanced hastily round to make sure they were not overheard.

"What brought you here?" he demanded roughly; "you are the very last man in the world I expected to meet."

"And you are the last I expected to meet," returned Herrick, his wits still in suspense. "I—I thought you were dead."

"And you were right," was the rejoinder. "I am dead—quite dead, and buried to the past. Go and leave me in my grave. You were once a good fellow. Go now, please. Leave me without more ado, and do not attempt to follow me."

He walked on swiftly and purposefully. But Herrick was not to be repulsed or cast off.

"Don't run away from me," he pleaded, stepping out by Merrishaw's side; "for old times' sake, just a word or two."

"For old times' sake," repeated Merrishaw bitterly; "believe me, I have no desire to recall old times. It is, in fact, the very last thing I wish to do. You will

understand this when I tell you that for some time my constant endeavour has been to cut off thought in that direction, to forget that such a person as you once knew under the name I once bore ever existed. I really don't think he did exist. He must have been a mere dream, a figment of the deluded fancy. At any rate, he is dead and done with now. Will that suffice as my reason for asking to be left alone?"

"This meeting is providential," said Herrick. "I ask you again for the sake of old friendship not to drive me off."

"The upper and the nether millstones are partners," was the rejoinder, "but light and darkness, purity and defilement, have nothing in common. Forget the friendship you mention. You," with a glance at Herrick's clerical collar, "are pursuing a worthy and useful career. I am—what you see. Why torture Lucifer by reminding him of what has been? Let him be in his pit. It is your business, as I perceive, to give warning by depicting the pains of perdition. But let me tell you, you know nothing of hell. Theoretic knowledge in that department is nothing. Some of us know the real thing."

"I am not so ignorant as you imagine," replied Herrick, with desperate earnestness. "Don't think that."

Merrishaw (for such we must continue to call him) looked sharply from under gathered brows, an old trick.

"What!" he said; "have you too descended the primrose path? But no, no," he added quickly; "it was never your way. The maidens with the snaky hair have not flung you here."

"At any rate, I am here," was the response.

Merrishaw laughed, a hard, derisive laugh.

"Like a second Dante doing the Inferno as a sort of holiday outing," he said. "Well, I have as good as become a native of the place. It is my home; but it won't suit you; therefore leave me. Go back to your own sphere of light and forget this meeting."

A throbbing sense of pity swept over Herrick. "I want you to come and have breakfast with me," he said abruptly.

"So that I may have the double dose of a meal and a sermon in one," returned Merrishaw, who in his desire to escape was at no pains to be polite. "Thanks, but my appetite for the one was more than satisfied before leaving Government quarters this morning. For the other, frankly and honestly, I never had any appetite."

"There shall be no sermon," Herrick assured him fervently.

"What 1 miracles still?" was the retort. "Has it really come about, then, that the Ethiopian can change his skin and the leopard his spots? or, what is far harder, that men can renounce second nature at will? How long have you been at this trade of preaching?"

"Twelve years, more or less."

"And a twelve years' habit is to be suppressed by a momentary impulse of virtue or goodwill? Don't imagine it. Abstain from preaching with a clamant text like me before you? Never! Just as likely that I should refuse to drink if the wine-cup were put brimming into my hand. No, no; habit is too strong, too subtle."

"Come and see," Herrick responded blithely, slipping an arm into Merrishaw's. "I have been planning an old college breakfast. Come!"

Merrishaw looked at him oddly, but did not resent the arm entwined in his own.

"You were always an idealist," he remarked; "I remember that. Do you really think it possible that you and I, things being as they are, could sit down together to an old college breakfast? I know we used to be told that life is one long experiment. But I have found much of the old teaching wrong. Do you know what you make me feel like? Like a man bankrupt and utterly broken, who is reminded now he once took wine familiarly with millionaires and grandees."

"And therefore," cried Herrick ardently, "is inspired to have another shot at happiness. One experiment more, just another dip into the lucky-bag of fate. Come!"

He put on a gentle compulsion, and to his joy Merrishaw did not resist. But the sharp, ironic mood was not immediately discarded. At breakfast, for a little while, it even became grimmer and keener, as though by its aid Merrishaw were determined to defend himself against all approaches to intimacy, all possible renewal of old relations and confidences.

"You are not happy," Herrick observed quietly, in reply to a particularly bitter piece of sarcasm.

"Pray, who told you that?" was the retort. "May there not be more cakes and ale and other desirable things in this underworld of ours than your cloth is ever permitted to dream of?"

"We once studied together a very different philosophy," said Herrick.

"And were enthusiastic about it too, poor fools!" cried Merrishaw. "There is positively no end to the foolish delusions of mankind. How silly, how futile it all seems now, in spite of those wise prelections of our most wise and learned tutor. You will remember the great man was childishly Platonic in his ideals.

Well I I only hope they have not failed him where he has gone ; for they have completely failed me. It was a poor business, that of trying to extract cucumbers from moonshine, and we worked so hard at it, and plumed ourselves so bravely on the glory of our alchemy. But one thing of practical value we did learn, to wit, that things are not intrinsically thus and thus, but simply as it pleases us to take them. What if I told you that I am happy ?”

“Then I shouldn't believe you,” was the frank and laughing reply.

“Which would compel me to remark that your manners have deteriorated since the old days,” rejoined Merrishaw. “What a pity Time should be kinder to wine than to men.”

“How kinder ?” asked Herrick.

“Why,” was the reply, “the old villain mellows and improves the one and spoils and corrupts the other. Mr. Leslie Herrick, the Platonist and Kantian (ah ! how glamorous that moonshine once was !) need not, I am sure, be reminded that happiness or misery is not a material state, but a mental condition. It is all as the humour chances to run. The abomination of one may be the highest felicity of another. It was worth while studying philosophy to find that out for certain. Here, you see, I have driven my stake, tied down my tent-cord. You ask, Why ? Suppose I say with Shylock, ‘Tis my humour.’ Why, that's the highest philosophy. If our old tutor ever casts back a look from Plato's side, I dare say he's monstrously grieved to see me. But—well, even he didn't know everything, and I have made a few original and independent discoveries for myself. Now you understand.”

The tone was extraordinarily bitter, like that of one

whose portion has been gall and wormwood. Yet through all the bitterness Herrick seemed to discern more and more of the man who had once been his ideal of intellectual brilliancy emerging from the wreck with the slum garb and the vagabond aspect. He thought of the fable of the Phoenix, and was more than half disposed to believe it true. Gradually the acrimony of voice and manner began to diminish. The look of understanding and sympathy, the deft word, the delicate tact that would not yield, and yet did not seem to press—in a word, the sense of brotherhood, by degrees produced the effect that Herrick desired to see. The ironic defences melted like ice-ramparts in the sun.

Unable to see himself, Merrishaw was not aware of the magical change. He could not see his own eye kindling with a new light, nor mark the softened animation of his face. Unconsciously he began to recall incidents in the far rosy past, and at that Herrick was filled with gladness. For the first condition of health is to be rid of all poisons.

"You remember this and this, and so-and-so?" Merrishaw would cry, perhaps with a laugh that had in it a note of real merriment; and promptly Herrick would cap the reminiscence. Nor was there lack of illustrious company. Horace graced the board, Aristophanes furnished the timely jest, Plato smiled sagely. The narrow black London walls grew wide and luminous, the clear warm Grecian sunshine gushed in. Once again gods walked the earth and men were glorious.

But of a sudden the gleaming sky darkened and the thunder crashed. With a wild and curdling emphasis Merrishaw was repeating one of the most terrible of Æschylean choruses.

"You haven't forgotten your *Agamemnon*," said Herrick, in a rapture over the dramatic recital. But there was no rapture in Merrishaw's heart—unless, indeed, wrath be rapture.

"Forgotten my *Agamemnon*!" he cried. "In my den, my wild beast's lair, I often repeat that to myself just to keep me in mind of the jealousy and malice of the gods. You almost succeeded in making me forget them; but that were too much felicity. How they drove it home, those old Greeks, and how right they were! Eternal Heaven, how right they were!"

Herrick made no reply. He knew the flood-gates were opened and waited patiently.

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CHAPTER IX

WHEN the heaped-up waters of a dam break bounds there is nothing for it but to let them rush. Herrick made no attempt to stem the torrent. In truth, he was glad, counting it rather an omen of good than of ill. Better, far better, the hot headlong revolt than a cynical curling up behind a breastwork of burnished irony, or the frozen despair which is the last hopeless stage of the doomed. Revolt may well be Heaven's medicine, purifying and renewing the soul, a sharp physic to end a grievous sickness. It means energy, and healthy energy is life.

Every feeling in Merrishaw rose insurgently at the thought of his abject, outcast state. The very presence of Herrick, by putting the actual and the might-have-been into lurid contrast, was as fuel to the blazing fire.

"Yes," he cried, leaping up, the red-hot glow of passion in his face, "Æschylus knew it all and drove it home three-and-twenty centuries ago."

"Another gospel has come to us since Æschylus," observed Herrick soothingly.

"And what has it done for me and my kind?" was the flashing retort. "True, it lacks neither agencies

nor evangelists. In this land of ours churches are thicker than playhouses, and almost as thick as taverns. Which do you think prevails! Look round you, and as you are an honest man answer me."

"The victory, I am afraid, is often on the wrong side," admitted Herrick.

"Afraid!" repeated Merrishaw. "You need have no doubt. I can assure you on that point. The matter is a certainty. But if you want proof, go into any public-house in this Tartarus and see if they give two thoughts to your churches or their opposition. There is not a publican within a radius of three miles who would not laugh at you if you asked him to take your churches seriously. And he would be right. For all your pulpits he does not make a ha'penny the less or send a victim the fewer into the gutter. You profess to explain mysteries. Very well, why am I here?"

Herrick shook his head sorrowfully.

"I don't know," he replied.

"You don't know," repeated Merrishaw. "Wouldn't it be nearer the truth to say you daren't know? Your knowledge is cut and dried for you. You don't know! Let me, who am unshackled, tell you. It is because, in spite of all his vapourings, man is still what Æschylus described him—a puppet, a pawn, a toy designed for the amusement of invisible philistines called the Superior Powers. He struts mightily, heaves out his pigmy chest, like a self-conceited bantam, and talks proudly of free will. Free will! What is this free will on which he vaunts himself? Freedom to choose, you say. Bah! you know that is a lie. A man goes to battle and he is free to choose whether he will be shot or bayoneted, or die of enteric or live for banquets and the plaudits of the vulgar.

That's likely. Free to choose. Yes, as free as he is to step back into yesterday or insure happiness for to-morrow."

"If you heard any one else talk like that, wouldn't you say he was absurd?" asked Herrick gently.

"Doubtless you think me absurd," Merrishaw returned. "But as a matter of fact I am merely trying to be logical. Don't imagine, however, that I am going to enter any plea of 'Not guilty.' I dare say I deserve all I have got. For I have not been as wise as Solomon nor as righteous as Job—though, like Job on his ash-heap, I have learned humility. It has in truth been beaten into me by worse than rods, burned into me by worse than searing irons. I have been scourged horribly. Will you tell me why?"

"I promised there should be no sermon," was the smiling answer.

"Think of the chance you are letting go by," said Merrishaw. "But, indeed, you doubtless think the orthodox reply is writ for all eyes to see as large as folly. In the old parable the Pharisee, beholding the other fellow in the throes of penitence, lifted his eyes—you remember how. We know that gentleman. You will see his unctuous countenance at almost any street corner almost any hour of the day, and he abounds in Church courts. It needs no imagination to make out what he would say of me. In ancient mythology, Até stung to madness all such as had the ill fortune to offend the gods, so that they should accomplish their own ruin, quite voluntarily, as it were—a most cunning device of malice. But that notion was too crude for our refined ethics; so Até has been re-baptized and is now known as Infatuation. Still the victim working out his own doom, you see. Do you seriously believe that I chose, of my own free will,

to throw myself into the hellish welter in which you find me? Tell me, is it likely?"

"No," replied Herrick, "it is very unlikely."

"And yet here I am, so changed that honestly and truly I am glad my mother is at rest and cannot look on me any more. And yet, Herrick, she was once proud of me. But let that pass. Who, being free to choose, would be as I am? Listen: there is but one god in this nether world, and he is not the God you worship. He is Bacchus; not the fine young god of the Dionysian festivals, but a swollen cruel fiend, gross with his victims' blood. Até, *alias* Infatuation, is his handmaid, and his disciples and apostles are the makers and vendors of strong drink, whose gentle motto might well be, 'Down, down to hell, and say I sent thee thither.' And they send us pelting, not in single spies, but in battalions."

Herrick rose and began to pace the room in a blaze of indignation.

"It is horrible," he cried; "shamefully, cruelly horrible!"

"You little know how horrible," said Merrishaw, wiping the sweat from his forehead.

"Oh yes, I do," returned Herrick. "I have seen——"

"Seen!" interrupted Merrishaw. "Seen! Lord! that my knowledge were limited to seeing. Seen! Have you supped on infernal horrors for years? Have you crept into a lair that is like a compromise between a hole in a lazar-house and a pit in a stew? Have you known what it is to be an Ishmael against whom all men's hands are turned as a matter of course? Do you understand what it is to be the under-dog with a whole reeking kennel on the top of you? Has your own folly or infatuation given every one who is so

mind the right to kick you and spit upon you? And finally, as consummation of your misery, have you seen those for whom you are responsible, who may be dearer to you than your own salvation, going down into the bottomless pit? If not, how can you tell me you know?"

"I do know," Herrick repeated, a shuddering chill at his vitals.

"You do know?"

"Yes, I do know."

For half a minute there was dead silence; then, with a quick change of expression Merrishaw held out his hand. "Then God pity you!" he said fervently.

He dropped Herrick's hand as suddenly as he had seized it, and wheeled to the window. But next second he wheeled back again.

"There is one thing that puzzles me," he said.

"And that is?" asked Herrick.

"How the heart of man holds out so long. It is made very tough, for no reason that I can see except that it shall not crack till the torture be accomplished. Destiny understands her business, I can tell you, and is almost human in her cruelty. An erring wretch condemned to so many lashes does not receive them all at once, lest the real sting of the thong making weals on his back should be wasted. He is beaten and nursed, and again beaten and again nursed, so that the last pang may be as sharp as the first. In like manner Destiny knocks you down, kicks you, rolls you in the mud, and sets you up for the fun of repeating the first process. A thousand—aye, ten thousand times I have resolved to cheat her. But I am a coward. Oh for the Roman courage to make an exit in the Roman fashion!"

"You do not mean that," said Herrick, his voice trembling with awe and pity.

"Mean it!" retorted Merrishaw. "I tell you frankly that if Heaven had not made me the most craven thing alive, you would not be able to tell me now I did not mean it. Once upon a time you and I did Plato together."

Herrick nodded, his feelings being too much for speech.

"Well, one small bit recurs to me unceasingly. It is Socrates on death. Eternity a single night undisturbed, even by dreams—the vast forever just one sweet, unbroken sleep. Think of it, contrast it with what we endure here. Well, recalling the wisdom of Socrates in my den I have said to myself, 'To-morrow at this hour I shall be happy. I will have shaken off the mortal coil that galls me. To-morrow I will do it.' But in the morning my valour took me no farther than the public-house. Then I said, 'I will do it in the night-time. Best to take leave in the darkness.' But when night came I went to the public-house again for courage. And so, you see, I am left weltering."

"Thank God!" said Herrick ardently.

"I wish I could echo that," returned Merrishaw. "But well, one over whose head the waves have met may well wish to go hence and be at rest. The ship that has been battered and splintered on the rocks is not to be hooped up and tinkered and made seaworthy again. Some ships are not even worth the trouble of salvage. The Greeks, who knew everything worth knowing, said with that awful wisdom of theirs that the favoured of the gods die young. If I had only died twenty years ago, while my manhood was yet intact and I could look up to the sky and smile,

before I ever set foot in the University you and I adore I"

"What I deriding your classics," cried Herrick, feigning surprise.

"No," was the quick reply, "I am not deriding the classics. They are immortal and safe, and no word of mine could touch them were I silly enough to disparage. Yet it is the simple truth that if I had never tasted that delicious fruit I should in all likelihood be prosperous and happy to-day."

"That is surely a dreadful reflection," said Herrick.

"Dreadful indeed, as I have found," returned Merrishaw. "But it comes all the same. Think what happened. I went up, captain of my school, and you know what it was, greatly applauded, full of hope, full of enthusiasm, eager to learn. But they teach other things besides classics and philosophy up there, and the other things have done for me. It was a case of the little foxes being too much for the tender vines. The very first item in my memory as a freshman is £15 spent by me on my initiation as a reveller and wine-drinker—£15 for one drunken orgie forced upon me by my seniors and the glorious traditions of our great English universities. I wish I had the half of it now. And ever after wine on every possible occasion, for every celebration or no celebration at all—always wine, wine, wine I You know that is true."

Herrick nodded sorrowfully.

"Yes," he said, "I know. I remember you were very popular."

"Fatally popular," was the response. "I have seen those debauches since described by a don as 'well-regulated pleasures.' Howling or helpless drunkenness a 'well-regulated pleasure' I There's a pretty academic jest for you I I suppose my temperament

led me on when others would have taken fright and turned back. Yet, could I think I was doing wrong in following the example of my classical tutor? If he got fuddled, might not I get merry? This minute I can see his great carbuncled nose burning before me. I used to think that if put between the sheets on a cold night it would in very truth do the office of a warming-pan most admirably."

"Yet he was a great classic," remarked Herrick.

"Unquestionably a most learned and scholarly sot," said Merrishaw. "But was the environment that made him possible the place for me? I learned Greek, Latin, philosophy, and drinking—and the last has been more than all the others. It was all fun once; it is all tragedy now. That's what makes me wish I had died twenty years ago. But I was not born for felicity."

His voice shook, tears of self-pity blurred his eyes. Herrick walked to the window and looked out. Merrishaw cleared his throat, as if impatient with himself for his weakness.

"Well," he said, recovering something of his old tone, "this is done like yourself. Thanks, and good-bye. I must be off."

He snatched up his battered hat and made as if to go; but Herrick ingeniously barred the way.

"Before you go I want you to grant me a favour," he said. "I want a renewal of an old privilege."

"What's that? Can I grant any favour?"

"To be admitted again to your friendship."

Merrishaw laughed, but this time more like a man in pain than in irony.

"My friendship!" he cried. "You don't know what you ask. The whole place would scream in ridicule if we were seen together. Believe me, my friendship would do you no good here—very much the reverse."

As I would not do an old friend an ill turn, let us part here and now. One of these days you may learn that I have gone home and ta'en my wages—such as they are. There are times when I picture myself, by the aid of some hag of Endor, calling up Samuel, and hearing from his ghostly lips the consoling sentence, 'Tomorrow at this hour shalt thou be with me.' Saul heard it and was afraid. The fool! Better that sword-thrust on Mount Gilboa than years of shame. And Jonathan, to have died in the flower of youth and been made immortal by the happiness of the event, what luck!

"You know perfectly well," returned Herrick, looking him straight in the eyes, "that life is dear to us, and that we cling to it."

"Yes," was the reply, "I know. The question is why we should. To be rid of it, that's the last act and the best. That simile of the weaver's shuttle to indicate the fleeting brevity of life gives a false notion of a long, long disease. Goodbye."

He held out his hand.

"Please sit down," said Herrick, disregarding it.

"Thanks," responded Merrishaw. "But I must be off. It's just possible that some one is waiting for me."

"I won't keep you long," rejoined Herrick. "Please sit down. I have something else to ask of you."

Merrishaw threw back his head in the old manner.

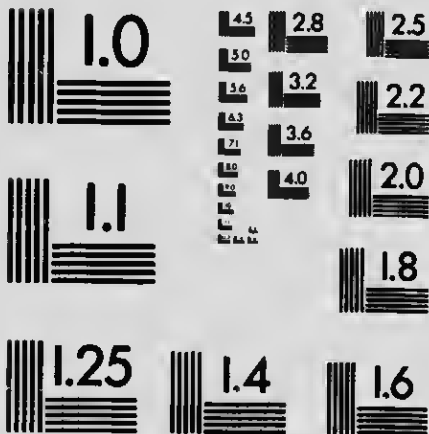
"Isn't it rather odd to be asking alms of a beggar?" he said.

Nevertheless he sat down.



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CHAPTER X

IN the austere Kippen household, austerer now than ever, Pearl had the perturbing influence of a stray elf. Active as a squirrel, agile as a bird, elusive as a sunbeam, and withal throbbingly human, she set at naught even the portentous authority of her grandfather, laughing audaciously when it became inconvenient, as though it were cunningly devised for her amusement. To Mr. Kippen she was incalculable in all things save her uncanny power to perplex and embarrass. It made her the more disconcerting that her interests were intense and her curiosity sleepless and insatiable. Had she known the language of Julius Cæsar, she might have said with equal brevity and truth, "*Veni, vidi, vici.*" She came, she saw, and even Mr. Kippen had to own to himself that she conquered.

In general, while she was allowed, or more correctly, with the easy mien of a conqueror asserted, complete freedom of movement, one room in the house was tacitly debarred to her—her mother's old nursery. For reasons not hard to guess, Mrs. Kippen kept that room shut as one might close, against all possible intrusion, a tomb made sacred by a thousand memories. And, indeed, much of her happiness lay buried there.

But one day it chanced that Pearl, in her elfish flittings to and fro, found the door unlocked, entered, and was presently in a wild delight, as over the discovery of a new fairy-land. A minute later she was running in breathless glee to Mrs. Kippen.

"Oh, grandmama!" she cried, her face alight, as only the faces of children and angels ever are. "Come and see what I have found. Come quick, quick!"

She seized her grandmother's gown and pulled imperatively.

"Isn't it just splendid!" she exclaimed, when they arrived on the scene, throbbing like an explorer over another re-discovered Nineveh. "Who owned all this?"

"Mama, dearie," was the quiet answer.

"O-o-h!" ejaculated Pearl, her mouth pursed in astonishment. The old sense of wonder was instantly revived. She had been compelled to doubt whether, in spite of the many assurances on the point, mama ever really and truly was a little girl; but this menagerie settled the matter. It was true, after all, that mama must once have been a little girl. The evidence was absolutely convincing.

"Oh, you rogue of a grandmama!" she cried in affectionate chiding. "And you never let on."

With a tingling eagerness she began to empty the contents of the drawers in a heap on the floor. That done, she arranged them according to class. The result was as if a petrified Noah's Ark were unearthed and its antediluvian treasures set forth in order for later generations by some deft antiquary or museum curator. The collection was rich and varied, particularly in zoological specimens.

"Mama must have been awfully fond of animals," remarked Pearl, sorting out an array of maimed and

crippled tigers, elephants, dromedaries, and what not. On the domestic side, too, there were many dolls of antique pattern in various stages of disintegration. Pearl was bound to confess she did not think much of the taste or skill of an earlier day in the toy department.

"You should see mine," she told Mrs. Kippen, with an up-to-date air.

Nevertheless she examined the antiquarian relics with a close and vivid interest. Who values modernity in a museum of antiquities?

It was strange, extraordinarily strange, to think that these survivals of a bygone age had once actually belonged to mama; that mama had in very truth been devoted to ill-made elephants and camels, and had nursed babies stuffed with sawdust and furnished with staring glass eyes, just like any other little girl. The fact was hard to seize, even by the aid of a lively imagination. The experience was as if by chance one came upon remnants of a remote ancestor, and from them reconstructed him to a bodily presence—a living, breathing reality. Singular indeed was the vision of mama as a child, playing with ancient toys and (as was evident) with too curious fingers pulling them asunder to investigate the mystery of their inner being.

"She must have been tremendously hard on her dollies," Pearl observed, holding up a dismembered trunk that stared in a ghastly fashion with one chipped eye. "And how little her feet must have been!" she added, exchanging the doll for a pair of tiny stockings; "why, they are littler than mine."

"Yes, dearie," Mrs. Kippen responded; "mama's feet were once very little."

She spoke in a curiously even tone, as though refer-

ring to something remote and impersonal. Such at times is the mode of profound sorrow. Ah! those little feet of long ago; the sound of their pattering pierces the aching ear of memory; their baby step presses the blood from bruised hearts, bereaved mothers know how.

All at once Pearl stood up, her face shining with the ardency of a great purpose.

"I'll take them to mama," she announced; "maybe she has forgotten them, and I am sure she would like to see her dollies again. It might make her better, mightn't it?"

Mrs. Kippen looked at her with straight unwinking eyes, wondering why it was given to one who was compact of affection to hurt so cruelly.

"You'll take them to mama?" she said in the same even, matter-of-fact voice as before.

"Yes," was the quick reply; "by this time likely I shall be able to see her, for I do hope she's better. Papa said she would be soon, and she's been ill a long time now. You see, when I pop in on her with her old dollies, she'll be so glad; it'll do her a lot of good, I'm sure."

It did not occur to her to ask whether she might have the collection; she merely assumed possession in her regal way, and Mrs. Kippen had not the heart to deny her. Accordingly, when Mr. Kippen finished his day's business, that is to say, got rid of the trivialities of finance, he was conducted to the nursery and instructed to procure a box large enough to hold the heap on the floor.

"Why on earth should I do that?" he demanded.

Pearl regarded him demurely.

"Because I want to take these things with me," she replied.

"You want to take all that trash to London?" he said.

"Silly man!" rejoined Pearl affably. "It isn't trash. Now, grandpapa, dear, don't you go and be nasty. If you are, I will never love you any more. There!"

It was an ultimatum to be considered very seriously. Mr. Kippen kicked a little, as his nature was. In the end, however, he not only procured a box of sufficient capacity, but, under Pearl's orders, assisted with his own august hands in the operation of packing. That done, he was told to look up the times of trains for London.

"When do you intend to travel?" he asked, with a smirk of amusement.

"At once," she told him. "You see, I want to see mama."

"And what are you going to do with all this antiquated stuff?"

"Don't you call it antiquated stuff," she warned him. "I will take it to papa in the first place."

"Good gracious, child!" exclaimed Mr. Kippen. "Do you imagine that your papa means to set up in business by opening a shop for the sale of defunct dolls and other lumber?"

"No, silly," was the pitying response. It was a hazardous liberty to take with Samuel Kippen; and in general any one venturing upon it would have been visited by withering ire. But Pearl was a chartered libertine, with the true charmer's power.

"Has papa sent for you, then?" he asked, without the least trace of resentment.

"No," answered Pearl slowly; "he hasn't sent for me, because very likely he knows I couldn't read his letter. For, indeed, indeed, his writing is awfully bad. If I was to write like him at school, I don't know

what they would say. But," she added in blithe assurance, "I'm perfectly certain he'll be glad to see me all the same."

"Of course, of course," Mr. Kippen agreed. "But wouldn't it be wise to wait until you know he is ready for you?"

"He is always ready for me," was the prompt and proud reply. "Always—always."

Mr. Kippen looked down upon the small figure, so staunch and full of confidence, his eyes strangely suffused. His mind went back to a time when he knew that note of adoring trust in another little girl. He was not sentimental. Practical by nature, the assiduous pursuit of his calling had tempered the original faculty to the hardness of steel. Yet deep down in the very core of his being, as it seemed, there were unsuspected wells of feeling. In his wrath he vowed that his daughter's name should be blotted from the book of his remembrance. He had banished her from his heart, turned her out of his life—for ever. Yet here, as if summoned by the little magician before him, was the Gracie of long ago stealing back upon him as the lost child steals back from the grave upon the brooding mourner. Gracie of the bright eyes and the rosy morning face, the Gracie who once upon a time locked her arms about his neck and smothered him with caresses. Centuries had passed since then; awful things had happened. But somehow the interval was obliterated, and he thought only of that shining, winsome vision. As he gazed at Pearl she seemed to melt into a misty, impalpable presence, as if giving place to the luminous image that his heart recalled with such strange lucidity.

"Poor papa will be wearying for me," Pearl remarked, her eyes fixed on him with an odd

penetrating intelligence. "He likes somebody to love him."

"Ah!" said Mr. Kippen, starting like one taken unawares. "Ah!"

"Unless, of course," Pearl pursued, "mama is with him again. Do you think she is, grandpapa?"

"I don't know," answered Mr. Kippen awkwardly.

"Would you be glad, grandpapa?"

Mr. Kippen had a sensation as of ice-cold water trickling down his back.

"Of course he would be glad, dearie," his wife put in, coming to his rescue.

"I wasn't sure," said Pearl, with the candour which made her at times so appalling. "But I am glad he would be glad. You see, he never mentions her to me, and I thought perhaps somehow or other he didn't love my mama. I do, with all my heart, and soul, and strength, as God says we ought to love."

Tears came into her eyes, but with a touch of the Kippen spirit she flicked them away.

"And," she intimated, with a decisive look in her face, "I wouldn't love anybody who didn't love my mama, because she's the best mama that ever lived."

Mr. Kippen swallowed something which was exceedingly hard to get down, but his countenance was stoically impassive.

"I can't make out what's become of her," Pearl observed after a minute's pause, laying her head sadly to one side. "If I only knew where she is, I'd go to her in spite of everybody."

"We'll see about the trains in the morning," said Mr. Kippen abruptly. "Now, run away and play."

He was getting afraid of her; it was impossible to guess where she might light next, and the only safe

plan was to silence her. But Pearl, now as always, had a mind of her own.

"I don't want to play," she returned.

"You'd better," said Mr. Kippen. "And to-morrow perhaps your papa will write for you."

"Or come for me," suggested Pearl. "Dear papa," she cried, clapping her hands in sudden joy, "do come for your own sweetheart, and come quick."

"You'd better go and play," repeated Mr. Kippen, as though he had resolved she should enjoy herself and was not to be balked.

For reply, she mounted a chair and looked straight and close into his eyes—those stern eyes that had so often struck fear into men who thought themselves brave.

"You *are* a funny man," she told him, patting his face as though he were a baby; "and I don't believe you want me to go and play."

She put a hand on each shoulder, bending a little closer. Then, as if under a sudden impulse, her arms were tight about his neck.

"Catch me," she cried, swinging herself clear of the chair.

"There, there," said Mr. Kippen, as if in protest. "Was ever such a child?"

But he was in no haste to be rid of his burden.

CHAPTER XI

LADY STAPLETON did not forget Herrick in his hour of tribulation. When she learned that he had left Lumley Beacon and betaken himself to the haunts of the erring and the unfortunate, she resolved with her customary benevolence to seek him out and comfort him.

"I have had a most favourable account of him from the Bishop," she said, in mentioning the matter to her husband; "very favourable indeed. The Bishop says he is just a splendid man."

"And, of course, the Bishop knows what he's talking about," returned Sir Theodore.

"Of course," said Lady Stapleton with emphasis, as if a Bishop's judgment were infallible and only heretics would dream of doubting the fact.

"Yes," observed Sir Theodore. "Pretty shrewd for all he's a Bishop. Always thought he would do well in business."

"Really," cried Lady Stapleton on a note of protest, "you're getting frightfully commercial, frightfully! When you get to heaven, if you don't take care, you'll be reckoning up the angel Gabriel himself, to see if he's a good business man, as you call it."

"Well," submitted Sir Theodore cheerfully, "there might be worse qualities even in an angel."

"I do believe Sam Kipper is spoiling you," declared Lady Stapleton severely.

"He has certainly taught me some wrinkles, if that's what you mean," owned her husband. "I don't say he's precisely the sort of person to embrace and play the bosom friend with, and all that; but he has the finest head for affairs of any man I ever knew. I don't know where we should be without him."

"Best fish in the sea, I suppose," rejoined Lady Stapleton, with the faintest suspicion of a sneer; for in spite of the family connection she secretly despised commerce. Somehow it seemed to have an eternal odour of tar and fish and greasy machinery.

"Best we can find, anyway," was the response. "And I may tell you that others have envied us, and tried to hook him by very splendid bait indeed. But what do you mean to do for Herrick?"

"Encourage him," replied Lady Stapleton, with a fine discernment of what he was likeliest to need.

"In what?" asked Sir Theodore bluntly. "Don't you think he would just as soon be let alone? I would, if I were in his place."

"You would if you were in his place," responded Lady Stapleton, arching her brows meaningly.

"Don't imagine," he hastened to explain, "that I shouldn't be dreadfully cut up if I were in his position. Only I should want to be miserable in my own way."

"I know, dear," said Lady Stapleton. "Weeping with one eye while keeping a sharp look-out for a new wife with the other."

"Never!" he returned with emphasis. "I am satisfied."

"Don't vow too much, Theo, for fear you might regret it," Lady Stapleton admonished, wagging her head at him. "With you men grief is what beauty is with us women—skin deep. There, don't protest. Out of sight, out of mind."

"Then do you suppose that Kippen's unfortunate son-in-law is off for a lark?" inquired Sir Theodore.

"How can you?" his wife demanded reproachfully. "The Bishop says he feels his position most acutely. A poor man; that in spite of all that has happened he simply adores his wife, and that he'll certainly die if something isn't done for him."

"Umph!" said Sir Theodore. "Pretty certain he'll die anyway, isn't he? People do mostly, more's the pity. Well, by all means save him if you can. Good deeds, they say, are never wasted. Met him once, and I liked him, though I don't take much stock in parsons. And he's got the most delightful little creature in the world for a daughter. Saw her the other night, and she made love to me out of hand; only a child, my dear, only a child. Treats our managing director as if you treat your poodle, and that takes nerve, I can tell you. If she doesn't make some man sit up with palpitation of the heart some day it is because she'll go to heaven early in her career, that's all. And her wife, as I recall her, was a nice girl, too. Yes, assuredly, save him if you can."

"I will try," said Lady Stapleton purposefully. "It is our duty to do good, and I will try."

In fulfilment of these charitable intentions, therefore, Herrick was informed that Lady Stapleton, having heard with the deepest interest of his new work, meant to gratify herself by paying him a visit and hoped to have an opportunity of expressing her sympathy with his noble efforts in the cause of

humanity. Herrick, too, ought to have been gratified by such kindness ; but human nature is imperfect and illogical.

"Wish she would stay at home," he said to himself, not without some feeling of alarm, thus unconsciously confirming Sir Theodore's conjecture.

But she had announced her pleasure, which had all the force of a Royal command, and there was nothing for it but to prepare himself for the ordeal.

With the wisdom of experience he consulted Miry concerning the reception.

"Fond of addressin' meetins', aint she, sir?" Miry inquired.

"Yes," he replied. "She seems to enjoy public meetings."

"All right, let 'er 'ave one then," Miry advised. "The folks 'ere won't object to a bit of spoutin' if it's made worth their while."

"That's necessary, you think?" he asked.

"If she's to 'ave wot she would like, sir," Miry answered crisply.

"We've had several extras lately," he said reflectively.

"If ye could make it extras all the time, sir, the folks round 'ere would be mighty well pleased," observed Miry, well knowing what evoked enthusiasm in that region. "They don't take on much with religion, so far's I can see ; but they're always keen's a hungry dog on wot goes with it."

"All right then, Miry," Herrick returned. "Will you take the business in hand?"

Accordingly a gala night was arranged, with entertainment that brought a thronging and eager audience. The scene of festivity was a hall, sombre enough in its every-day aspect, but transformed for the occasion into

a palace of delight, brilliant with light and gay with ornament. There were embellishments of flower, fern, and palm which made a humourist inquire gravely if the whole botanical gardens had been taken over or commandeered. There was a piano of the kind denominated "grand"; there were performers who made the audience heave and roar as from an overdose of laughing gas, and weep in pity as at the spectacle of intolerable woe. Miry, as chief organiser and general manageress, appeared for one brief hour to realise her notion of Paradise—a whole crowded company given over to absolute and perfect bliss. O'Ryan genially rubbed shoulders with men and women with whom fate and duty forced him into doubtful or downright disagreeable relations elsewhere. Even Herrick's face glowed with a subdued gladness.

The whole programme of amusement was a thing of joy, but what preceded it was better still. For it seemed that the entire contents of all the cook and pastry shops within a radius of half a dozen miles were bought up for the feast in a reckless disregard of cost. "Tuck in and spare not" was the motto, and never was injunction more loyally honoured. Mr. Deakin, being for once perfectly sober and in a fit condition to testify, voluntarily took his affidavit that for "a teetotal blow out" the affair was A1, and filled him with satisfaction.

"The swill aint up to much, maybe," observed Mr. Deakin, "but the guzzle—well, look at me : I've 'ad to let out my waist-belt three 'oles—honest."

Mrs. Deakin, who forgot old grievances and antipathies, also attended, and expressed similar sentiments. Mrs. Merrishaw and Albert Charles were likewise of the company. But Merrishaw himself was not present.

"Will you come?" Herrick asked him, for the two were now in close touch.

"Would you expect me?" was the response.

And Herrick, understanding a proud man's mind, answered frankly "No." All the same, the absentee lacked nothing that he was likely to enjoy. Herrick saw to that in a way that could not hurt a pride at all times sensitive and just then sorely wounded.

When the feasting and diversion were over, and the company therefore in a mood to be edified, a carriage arrived at the hall door, and out of it stepped Lady Stapleton, with Sir Theodore and another, a stranger to such scenes, in attendance. The stranger was Mr. Kippen.

Having to visit London on business, he travelled up as escort and equery to Pearl, who insisted on attending the *fête*, carrying all her cargo of antiquities with her. She pressed him to accompany her to the meeting, "to see papa and have some fun," the promise of fun being emphasised as an inducement likely to appeal to a man of his years and tastes.

"Fun!" cried Mr. Kippen. "Good gracious, child! Do you imagine I come to London for fun? I'll see you, perhaps, after it's all over."

But next afternoon Sir Theodore remarked to him casually: "By the way, my wife is going to speak somewhere in the East End to-night. Will you come?"

"It isn't much in my way," replied Mr. Kippen, hoping to escape.

"Nor in mine," said Sir Theodore with a wry face. "But I've got to go all the same, if there's to be peace in the house. It will be a kindness if you keep me in countenance. I'm sure I don't know why my wife takes to that sort of thing: but she does, and will be

hugely pleased to see you there. Besides, I understand Mr. Herrick is to be chairman."

That would have been the best of reasons for declining; but as the best of reasons cannot always be stated, Mr. Kippen gracefully, if reluctantly, smothered his objections and made one of the Stapleton party.

On his arrival Pearl, in her self-assumed rôle of hostess, took him in charge. "Papa," she cried, impatient of the formalities of receiving Lady Stapleton. "Papa, here's grandpapa. Didn't you see him?"

The two men looked at each other doubtfully and with instinctive keenness. At the same time Herrick held out his hand.

"I did not expect this pleasure, sir," he said.

"Umph," responded Mr. Kippen. "I hope you find it a pleasure."

His manner was frigid and ambiguous, though for appearances sake he took the proffered hand. Fortunately for the peace of both, Pearl skipped off to Miry, and the company in general was engaged with Lady Stapleton as the chief attraction of the moment. With a hurried apology for the brevity of the greeting to his father-in-law, Herrick hastened to introduce her, remarking appositely that in reality she needed no introduction—a happy stroke which evoked enthusiastic applause and a cloud of dust.

Taking a chair beside Sir Theodore, Mr. Kippen sat with a tight mouth and keen eyes grimly surveying the massed faces of the great unwashed while his son-in-law was speaking. There were probably a thousand persons present, and the ten commandments certainly were not written on their countenances. So this was the sort of material on which the idealistic Herrick spent his time and his energies. Excluding the platform the entire assembly, Mr. Kippen reckoned, did not

represent a £5 note in combined capital. He supposed this was the submerged tenth about which idle people prated and bothered their neighbours so much.

Assuredly most of those before him seemed to have been quite recently submerged in elements that were not to be considered too icy. Were such men and women worth saving? He almost snorted aloud at his own mental question. Saving!

"Gaol-birds, gallows-birds," said Mr. Kippen to himself, noting the types that so-called philanthropy liked to fuss over. "For tu'pence they'd sandbag us, for half-a-crown they'd cut our throats without scruple."

It is not to be inferred he was afraid. Fear was not in his composition. Yet he was not sorry to see the giant form of O'Ryan rear itself near the door, and to note that it was supported by lesser forms in uniform. Never before had he looked on such a gathering—so suggestive of crime, so openly disdainful of respectability.

"If some of these fellows got into the bank," reflected Mr. Kippen, "there'd be a fine ploy."

With so many manifest criminals at liberty he was surprised that the records of crime were not blacker. In a kind of moral appraisal he particularly noted the women, observing to himself that they were worse-looking than the men. His glance fell on Mrs. Deakin and she grinned at him; he was not sure she did not wink. Brazen hussies! He did not know, he did not suspect, who had lately been associating with these very women.

These thoughts occupied him even while Lady Stapleton in her mellow well-tuned voice gave counsel that was received with vociferous cheering, probably, as Mr. Kippen fancied, because those who applauded had no intention of taking the advice they approved

so noisily. He marvelled why she should trouble herself beating the air in such a fatuous fashion, and supposed it was another instance either of the incurable vanity or the hopeless high-falutin nonsense of women. She bored him with her impracticable counsels of perfection, and he was not in the least surprised to catch Sir Theodore yawning furtively behind his open hand. Poor man! no doubt he had much of this sort of thing to endure.

While all this was going on, while Lady Stapleton poured forth golden wisdom as from an exhaustless store, while the audience clapped and stamped and shouted, and Sir Theodore strove valiantly to keep awake, and Mr. Kippen sat with grim disapproval and contempt on his formidable face, a woman stole unseen out of the unknown darkness and halted before the door outside. Though she was no criminal she had the look of indescribable apprehension which marks the hunted and all such, as from fear or shame, would avoid the eyes of their fellows.

A constable whom she had not noticed spoke to her and she started back in fright; but on being asked, not unkindly, if she meant to enter, she immediately advanced through the vestibule to the inner door. There she stopped, shaking in terror or excitement or both. Making an effort to calm herself, she inclined her ear to listen. Far away, dim and indistinct as in a dream, she could hear the even mellifluous flow of speech from the platform, broken by the rude stamping of feet and the clapping of hard hands.

Thrilling icily at her own temerity, she pushed one wing of the swing door slightly ajar. A puff of heated air came out, suffusing her cold, damp face. She could see nothing clearly; but the breathings of a great multitude astir with interest mingled with the

drumming in her ears and the fierce painful beating of her heart.

Should she enter? Before she could answer her own question she had pushed the door a little farther ajar and peered in. An area of massed heads, suggesting a parterre of bulbs and bobbing flowers, met her vision. Her eye advanced to the platform, and the row of faces there turned forward seemed to be staring at her. She drew back as if to fly, letting the door close. But she remained motionless, every nerve and muscle taut, every pulse suspended. Then a quick sensation, half shiver, half thrill, passed through her.

Taking a deep, long breath to screw up her courage, she cautiously pushed the door ajar again, and to the tiny chink thus made applied her eye. It went straight to the platform this time, ignoring the intervening mass of heads. Lady Stapleton, still pursuing her eloquent course, seemed to hold her audience as by a magnet. Taking courage from the fact, the woman at the back pushed the door by fractions of an inch further open, keeping her face to the aperture.

For a moment her eyes were dazzled, so that the hall and its occupants jiggled and whirled in one irresponsible maze. Then all at once, as if a crank were turned in the delicate machinery of the brain, a change came over her. From being blindly excited she was conscious of becoming almost preternaturally calm. The figures on the platform were now quite plain, grouped on each side of Lady Stapleton. On three of these her gaze was fixed with burning intensity—Herrick, Mr. Kippen, and Pearl.

Was it the magnetism of that intense gaze which made Herrick look as by chance to the door? He gave a quick start of alarm, which luckily no one

noticed, and stared as one who beholds an apparition. What he saw were a pair of glittering eyes fixed with a fearful intentness on himself and a small section of a deathly white face. Next instant both face and eyes had disappeared. In the same moment, too, Lady Stapleton sat down in a wild tumult of applause.

Herrick scarcely knew what had happened, and had no time to think. For he was immediately on his feet saying something, not utterly incoherent or irrelevant, he hoped, concerning the great goodness of Lady Stapleton. Pearl, listening attentively to his eulogy, drew her brows together almost as Mr. Kippen might have done in a moment of dissent or disapproval. Nor was she at any pains to be ultra-polite when the proceedings ended, and Lady Stapleton beamed upon her condescendingly.

"And how are you, dear?" inquired the great woman, patting her. "Quite happy?"

"No," replied Pearl primly.

"Not happy!" said Lady Stapleton in surprise. "Dear me!"

"No," repeated Pearl, her mouth tight and defiant. It was on her tongue to add, "And you know why." But fortunately her father's intervention prevented that deadly speech.

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CHAPTER XII

FOR Herrick there was no sleep that night. When Pearl was tucked in bed at his own quarters, safe as love could make her, and so weary from the day's excitements that she nodded over her prayers, he put on hat and overcoat and slipped back into the night, that vision of the burning eyes and the peering, bloodless face before him like an actual presence. To judge by his feeling of time he had been searching for ages; yet it now seemed that his quest was in reality but beginning, and that into a few hours—into a single hour—were crowded all the hopes, the despair, the anguish of suspense and longing of all the long weeks since desolation first came upon him. Here was the crisis—come, as the manner of crises is, with an appalling shock of terror and unexpectedness. Before morning dawned he must find those eyes and that white face or die.

It puzzled him to understand why he had not left everything and rushed to them when they appeared at the chink in the door, and could only attribute his failure to confusion of faculties and loss of nerve. Had he shrunk from causing a scene? Perhaps. He could not tell. He knew only that now a fierce tide of resolution poured through him from crown to sole, that he

was as a man roused to his last desperate chance, and trembling with ardour and fear of failure.

A minute he stood at the street door, his face upturned to the stars, then luminous and serene above the murk of London, and silently prayed for aid. If sincerity makes prayer effective, that petition, that cry of the heart in the night, could not fall upon a callous or heedless ear.

Casting a quick glance at the windows behind him, as if half afraid of being seen, he walked away with a hurried step, going in the direction of the mission. An uncanny hush was on the multitudinous city, as if the devouring monster lay resting, gorged with prey. London slept; or at any rate slept as much as it ever sleeps. Compared to the usual din the silence was tomb-like. Yet Herrick's keen ear was conscious of deep movements and breathings, like the slow heaving of a distant sea after the tumult of tempest. Stolid figures in great coats and helmets moved with grotesque deliberation along vacant streets, flashing lanterns hither and thither, or paused inquiringly at corners. Other figures there were, too, flitting phantoms that appeared a moment in the light, glanced furtively right and left, and then plunged into darkness again. Of such is the homeless, houseless population of London between one and four in the morning.

It was with these figures that Herrick was concerned. When he spied them ahead he quickened his pace, trying to overtake them; when he noticed them behind he wheeled in the hope of meeting them; when they bolted into lanes and alleys he pursued. Some shrank from him in dismay, some were angry at his inquisitiveness, and some would have made friends for a night's partnership in law-breaking. He was often in peril because he went recklessly into places which sane men

avoid except under police protection and in the respectable hours of day. No thought of danger crossed him. He would have walked without hesitation into a lion's den had his quest appeared to lead him thither. But out of every court and alley, out of every hole and cranny, he turned with increasing heart-sickness.

In the dusk of morning, Miry, hastening to her jam-factory, came upon him.

"Lor', sir," she cried, drawing up as if confronted by a ghost. "You 'ere at this time of day, and," she added, with a keen look into his face, "you aint well."

He made an effort to pull himself together.

"I have been out all night," he answered simply; "all night, Miry."

Miry's experienced eye saw that he was indeed dead weary. In truth his legs could scarcely bear him up, so that his walk had degenerated into something between a lurch and a stagger. A stranger looking on casually might have imagined he was painfully making his way home from a public-house.

Spying a coffee stall near by, one of the restaurants on wheels for the early toiler, Miry made for it at a run. "A cup of yer strongest and 'ottest, quick," she called to the man in charge while yet a dozen yards away. "Now then, buck up; if you aint in a hurry I am."

She laid down a shilling and hastened off with the coffee, calling over her shoulder that she would return presently for her change.

"D'ye mind, sir?" she said half apologetically, presenting the steaming, fragrant cup to Herrick. "'Taint served up just as fine as it might be, but do you good, sir, this raw mornin'."

He took the proffered cup gratefully and drank it off.

"There 'e aint, sir," cried Miry in delight. "Like as not ye aint 'ad nothin' to eat all the blessed night. It don't do to tramp the streets hours and hours in that way, specially at night."

"Many do, Miry," Herrick smiled.

"Anyway," rejoined Miry, "them as aint got to and aint used to it shouldn't. That's all. Lookin' for somebody, sir?"

"Yes," he replied. "Looking for somebody. Miry, have you ever known what it is to look for some one you want very much to find and fail?"

"'Ad that experience 'mong others," returned Miry.

"And what did you do?" he asked, almost as a child might appeal to its mother in a difficulty. Miry seemed so strong, so self-reliant, so great a contrast to his own weakness, that he was glad as it were to take refuge in her strength and resolution.

"Oh!" was the answer, "just got on as best I could. Only plan, so far's I can make out."

He regarded her in admiration. The much vaunted Spartan courage never went beyond that.

"You are a brave girl, Miry," he said, a peculiar thrill in his voice.

"Never struck me, sir," responded Miry, blushing in the grey cold light. "'Taint very brave to do wot's got to be done, is it?"

"If all thought like that the world would be peopled by heroes and heroines," said Herrick.

"'Course," admitted Miry, still warmly suffused, "'taint, maybe, just as easy as it looks to keep goin' as if nothin' 'appened, when ye feel as if ye wanted to die. But it don't do no good to kick or sit down and cry as I've ever found out, even when yer 'eart's broke. It'll pick up again if it gets a chance—only it aint a thing to be put in splinters and nursed like a broken

arm. It's got to take its swing and make the best of things as they come along."

"I said you are a brave woman, Miry," he told her. "I repeat it."

His friends would call her illiterate. Yet had she not found out for herself all that the schools had ever taught them and him, ay, and more, of the knowledge that is most essential?

"Miry," he asked, as on a sudden thought, "can you take a day off?—on full pay, I mean."

"If you've got anything you want me to do, sir," replied Miry.

Absence might mean that her place in the jam-factory would be filled by another, but she did not say that.

"It's this," Herrick explained. "My little girl—she's staying with me just now—has invited herself to a holiday. I don't want to disappoint her; but I am afraid I shall not be able to go out with her to-day. I could trust her with you, if you would take charge of her."

"Miss Pearl!" cried Miry in beaming delight. "Lor', sir, shouldn't I just love to 'ave 'er."

"Will you come at nine o'clock then, and have breakfast with her?" he said. "Arrangements can be made then. You know my place."

"Yes, sir, I know it," returned Miry, "and you may expect me for sure."

Some hours later, when Pearl, rosy and bright eyed, left her room to kiss papa good-morning, she found him lying on a couch, dressed, as he came in from his night's quest. Her heart, perhaps, rather than her eye told her that something was amiss. She could see that he was fatigued; she suspected that he had not been in bed or slept at all, and her eager welcome was

turned to concern. But with the instinct of the nurse and the mother she hid her alarm by an effort to soothe and cheer him.

"Never mind," she said, patting him as if he were a baby and she a wise woman, strong to comfort and encourage. "We're to have a holiday to-day, aren't we? and that will make you feel better."

"Ah!" he responded with forced animation. "The holiday. Yes. Come, I have something to tell you."

She nestled beside him, and he told her of the arrangement with Miry.

"I'd rather have you," she returned, her face clouded in disappointment.

He explained Miry's wide and peculiar knowledge, her devotion, and finally her pride in being chosen as chaperon. "And, oh! by the way," he added, "she's to be here at nine o'clock for breakfast. Why, it's nearly nine now. We must hurry up to be ready for her."

It was the easiest way of silencing protests which he had not strength of mind to meet; and Pearl, who spied adventure under the guidance of Miry, assented, with but one regret—that she must leave him alone.

"Only for a little while," he told her, "and when you return you'll have a lot to tell me."

He little guessed what he was to hear.

Punctually at the appointed hour Miry appeared, arrayed in her best, which was gaily coloured and conspicuous, according to local fashion. Breakfast was eaten in a running fire of questions from Pearl, who had an energy as remarkable as Miry's own and an ardour beyond comparison.

"Now," she announced as soon as the hasty breakfast was over, "I am ready."

"You'll take care of her, Miry," Herrick said by

way of final injunction. "Don't forget she's all I have."

"Don't you worry, sir," was the confident response. "She won't come to no 'arm with me, leastways not if I can 'elp it."

He saw them off, watching as long as they were in sight. Then he went back to his couch, cold, shivering, spent, decrepit as with extreme old age.

Pearl and Miry were not out half an hour when in turning a corner they met Albert Charles, whistling softly to himself.

"'Ullo, goin' to school?" Miry remarked in greeting. Albert Charles grinned meaningly. Going to school! not likely. He was out for a holiday.

"There's been a row on at our place," he informed them with the glee of the unregenerate boy. "And a jolly good one too."

"Tell us something new," returned Miry with elaborate indifference.

"But this one's bigger than the ordinary rows," he rejoined with a gleam of pride.

Miry warned him by a look not to be frivolous, yet she condescended to ask:

"Who's been rowin' now?"

"Oh! the usual lot," was the reply.

"Tell us about it," put in Pearl with an eagerness which surprised her guide.

"Well, it was like this," said Albert Charles promptly; "Mrs. Deakin she pops in her head and sings out to mother, 'Good morning, Mrs. Merrishaw; coming round the corner?' 'No,' says mother, 'not to-day, thank you.' 'How's that?' says Mrs. Deakin. 'Did that Gospel show upset ye last night? There's a pretty bad taste in my own mouth after it, I must confess.'"

"The wicked nasty woman!" exclaimed Pearl indignantly.

"Oh, that's nothing," Albert Charles assured her. "Ha, ha, ha!" says Mrs. Deakin; "off your liquor, eh? I warned ye not to go. Them diseases are catching. But you'll be all right if it's taken in time. Come along." "No, thank you," says mother again. "You're not coming?" says Mrs. Deakin. "No," says mother, beginning to get annoyed. "I had a better opinion of you," says Mrs. Deakin. "I had, and that's a fact." "Don't have any opinion of me, please," says mother; "I don't want you to." "Oh! you don't, eh!" says Mrs. Deakin. "No," says mother. "All I want of you is to go away and let me alone." Well, Mrs. Deakin she bounces off, pretty red in the face."

"Couldn't be anything else if she tried," put in Miry.

"That's so," Albert Charles agreed. "Only this time she was blazing. But mother she didn't seem to mind. 'I'm done with her,' she says to dad. 'It was a bad, bad day for me when I first saw her; but I'm done with her.' By and by she went out, and after a while I hears a hullybaloo at the foot of the stairs. Of course I ran down."

"Of course," said Miry.

"And sure enough," pursued Albert Charles, too intent on his tale to pay any heed to the interruption, "there they were at it again, poker and tongs. Only this time mother had the Strange Lady with her. You know her?"

Miry nodded. "Yes," she said; "I know her. Well?"

"Well! it appears that Mrs. Deakin met them there and went for them both, and the Strange Lady was crying fit to break her heart. In the middle of it dad came down too, and when he saw what was up he

grips Mrs. Deakin by the arm. 'Hold on,' says he. 'Hold on. Long ago I made it a rule never to meddle with a woman, but, by the powers above, if you don't stop, I'll——'"

He stopped suddenly as if the threat were not to be repeated.

"What?" asked Pearl breathlessly.

"Something that would make Mrs. Deakin sit up, anyway," said Albert Charles. "Then she begins to shout for old man Deakin to come quick and protect his lawful wedded wife and all that. He came rubbing his eyes as if he didn't see proper, and Mrs. Deakin she says, pointing to dad, 'Go for him; wallop him for all you're worth.' 'What for?' says Deakin, not appearing to like the job. 'What for?' says Mrs. Deakin, as savage as could be. 'Your poor wife is insulted and abused and you ask what for? Go for him, if you're a man.'

"Well, at that, Deakin looked dad all over. 'No,' says he, as if speaking to himself. 'Some things is reasonable and some unreasonable. He's a bigger man than me.' 'You coward,' says Mrs. Deakin. 'I'd like to wallop you, I should.' But Deakin just put his pipe in his mouth and went away shaking his head. 'Not reasonable,' says he. 'Not reasonable. You ought to see that. A small dog's a fool to tackle a big un.' Then everybody looked at everybody else, because there was no more to do I suppose, and dad sees me. 'Out with you,' says he. 'This isn't the place for you. Out with you and play.' And here I am," ended Albert Charles, as joyously as if the world were one vast recreation ground and life an unbroken holiday.

"Is the Strange Lady there now?" Miry asked, disentangling the one item that interested her.

"She was 'bout ten minutes ago," was the answer.

"The Strange Lady!" repeated Pearl, as though a figure from the realms of romance were projected on her imagination. "I should like to go and see her, and then I could see your home too, Albert Charles."

At the great festival in honour of Lady Stapleton she fed him assiduously with cake, partly from natural kindness of heart, partly because his sauciness pleased her. Their footing was therefore that of old friends. But Albert Charles took the suggestion of a visit from such a lady with an amused smile.

"Wouldn't like it," he responded laconically.

"Why?" she asked.

"Taint nice," he replied, falling unconsciously into the familiar mode of speech.

"You mean it *isn't* nice," she rejoined in a tone of rebuke.

He nodded good-humouredly, his eyes sparkling in amusement.

"Then why don't you speak properly?" she demanded. "If you were at my school they'd give you an imposition for speaking like that."

"Shouldn't mind so long's they didn't give me bread and water," he returned irreverently. "But about the other thing, chuck it."

"Whatever does he mean?" asked Pearl, appealing to Miry.

"He means," was the reply, "that you'd better give up the idea of payin' 'im a visit in 'is own 'ome."

"Rude boy," observed Pearl, smiling upon the offender. "But we're not to be turned away by rudeness, are we, Miry? Come. And you," addressing Albert Charles with the mien of a princess, "can show us the way if you like."

His impolite objection was the most cogent of reasons for taking her own course.

"All right," said Albert Charles genially. "Only don't blame me if you don't like it."

When they reached the Merrishaw tenement there was peace, though in climbing the stairs (for Pearl, somewhat to Miry's disquietude, persisted to the end) they could hear Mrs. Deakin's aggrieved voice declaring loudly that some people were hypocrites and gave themselves intolerable airs. Pearl paused at the sound of fury; but Miry whispered to go on. "She's a shameful woman, dear," said Miry. "Don't you listen to her words."

Next minute Albert Charles, who was in advance as scout, glancing over his shoulder, remarked, "Here you are," and pushed open a door.

Pearl craned her head and peered into the darkness, but for a moment could make nothing out distinctly. Then two women took shape in the gloom—one Mrs. Merrishaw, whom she knew, the other the Strange Lady, as she guessed.

As she looked the latter rose, as if drawn to her feet by some mystic invisible power, staring wildly. Pearl, too, held her breath, her eyes fast on the white face turned to her. Then, with a piercing scream, as of sudden agony or delirious joy, she sprang forward, her hands stretched out.

"Mama, mama, mama!" was the cry that rang round the room and echoed down the emptiness without. Mama's arms opened to receive her; and the two, so tragically separated, so unexpectedly united, tottered back upon a chair locked together.

A moment Miry stood petrified, but only a moment. Stepping hastily forward, she said something in Mrs. Merrishaw's ear, and then as hastily turned and left the room.

If Miry ever made speed in her life, and she ran

many races in various causes, it was then. When her strained ribs seemed to be cracking she spied a cab, hailed it, and giving Herrick's address, jumped in, with instructions to drive as for life and death.

"Wait for me," was the order when she stepped out.

She climbed to Herrick's quarters as on wings, but on entering could only gasp out an appeal to come at once.

"Has anything happened to Pearl?" he cried, startled out of his weariness.

"No, sir," was the answer; "she is safe, quite safe. But I want you to come quick, quick, if you please, sir."

He had never seen her panting and helpless with excitement before, and the sight was alarming.

"Yes," he told her, "I'll come at once. You are quite sure that Pearl is safe. Don't be afraid to tell me if anything has happened."

"Something has happened, sir," was the response; "but Miss Pearl is safe."

Assured on that point, he followed her downstairs, and was silently shown into the waiting cab. Miry gave the second address, instructing the cabman as before to drive fast.

"Is it to be a weddin' or a fun'ril, miss?" cabby asked, looking shrewdly in her face.

"A fun'ril for you if you don't make haste," he was crisply told.

"Where are you taking me and what is it, Miry?" Herrick asked when they started.

"I can't tell 'e, sir," was the mystifying answer. "Don't 'ave no fear 'bout Miss Pearl; but you must see with your own eyes what it is. And ye won't ask me no more questions, will ye, sir?"

"If you wish it so, Miry," he replied ; and the rest of the journey was made in silence.

On alighting she told the cabman once more to "wait." Then she led the way up the dark stairs in such eager haste that all unconsciously she seized Herrick's hand to pull him on.

All at once she stopped.

"Another minute, sir," she said mysteriously. "You're cool, are ye?"

"Quite cool," he answered, wondering at her question. "Why?"

"You'll see, sir, in half a minute," she returned as mysteriously as before. She was about to add something, but changed her mind. Stepping forward instead, she pushed the door gently open and popped her head in, taking care to see neither Mrs. Herrick nor Pearl.

"Mrs. Merrishaw," she said, "will 'e come 'ere and bring Albert Charles with you?"

"Now, sir," she said to Herrick, as they passed out.

He entered, and she shut the door quickly behind him.

"Best by 'emselves for a little while," she remarked to Mrs. Merrishaw, drawing a deep breath ; "and I'm sure you don't mind."

CHAPTER XIII

THE door opened presently and Herrick appeared, leading his wife by the hand. The faces of both were wet and drawn, yet a close observer would have noted that through the tears there glimmered a soft, mystic light, the harbinger of spring in the heart. They had not indeed found peace. The tumult, the passion, the agony of longing and despair, the shock of joy, almost as distressing as the shock of disaster or of grief, were too recent for that. But hope had returned like Noah's dove, with glad intelligence and unspeakable auguries.

They moved weakly and in absolute silence, he gazing straight before him out of blurred eyes, she with head bent as though afraid to meet the day. Pearl followed, wide-eyed and awed by the mystery of it all. Thus they descended the stairs and passed out into the street, where Miry, to ease and disguise her feelings, was volubly chaffing the cabman. Albert Charles laughed hugely over the bout of gibe and repartee; but his mother stood looking away with an absent air, as if neither hearing nor seeing what went on.

With a warning look to the man on the box Miry

made haste to open the cab door, and Herrick handed his wife in, Pearl squeezing beside her as if determined there should be no more parting. Before taking his seat himself he turned to thank Miry.

"You have been our good angel to-day," he said, in a low voice. "Will you come with us?"

But Miry shook her head. "Not this time, sir," she replied. "I'll be with you by and by, never fear."

In the strangeness of her joy she could have embraced him before all the world—rare evidence of emotion in Miry—but contented herself with the alternative of giving the cabman instructions in a manner which he considered unnecessarily brusque. "No cheek," she warned him. "You do as you're told. Yer paid for it, ain't 'e?"

When the Herricks were off Albert Charles was again despatched to his play, and the ladies reascended the stairs. Half way up they were confronted by Mrs. Deakin. Sniffing a sensation, that alert and enterprising woman had promptly dropped her grievances to spy, and from what she saw drew swift and decided conclusions.

"Ain't it nice to be good?" was her scornful greeting. "Oh, my!"

"Feel that way?" returned Miry indifferently. "Must be a long time since you 'ad the feelin' last."

"Course, you always feel so," rejoined Mrs. Deakin, her arms akimbo, as though to give a deadlier force to the sarcasm. "Yes, course ye do. There's some dogs' mouths as butter won't melt in, they say."

"Is it a row ye want?" inquired Miry amiably. But it was Mrs. Deakin's policy to ignore the challenge.

"Wot 'ave ye gone and done with the currick?" she asked, her face gleaming maliciously.

"Wot you did with yer honesty and most of yer beauty," was the retort; "put 'im out of sight."

"Best plan, too," said Mrs. Deakin with a guffaw, "seein' as there's another woman round. Men ain't to be trusted, be they, m' dear? and even curricks is human. Lor' l to think of it."

Miry's eyes flashed dangerously.

"Look 'ere," she said in the tone that meant business; "ye may say wot ye like 'bout me. It don't matter a drunk man's whistle. But ye ain't goin' to let yer dirty tongue loose on 'im that's too good to wipe 'is boots on ye—not so long's I'm by. And the best advice I can give is this, don't try."

"You threaten me at my own door!" cried the other, changing her manner.

"Oh dear me! no," returned Miry. "I'm only advisin' ye for yer own good. 'Cause sunthin' 'll 'appen if ye ain't careful with that tongue of yours."

"If I was 'arf yer size," retorted Mrs. Deakin, prudently retiring a step, "I'd jolly well punch yer 'ead for ye!"

As she spoke a figure heaved itself painfully from a recess behind, and Mr. Deakin loomed in the doorway, pipe in mouth.

"Wot's that I 'ear 'bout punchin' 'eads?" he demanded thickly.

"'Pears she's thinkin' of punchin' mine," replied Miry, relapsing into the mood of indifference.

Mr. Deakin drew himself up and looked at his wife, then at Miry, then again at his wife, as if carefully estimating the pugilistic abilities of each.

"'Taint a fair match," he said, with the air of an umpire giving judgment. "You're out of trainin'," inclining his head towards his wife; "and she," jerking it at Miry, "is a prize un. No, 'taint a fair

match. Wot ye want to punch 'er 'ead for?" he asked, as if it had just occurred to him it might be well to find out the cause of dispute.

"For 'er bloomin' impudence an' 'cause she jolly well deserves it," snapped Mrs. Deakin. "An' if you was anything as called itself a proper man ye'd save me the trouble."

"I see," said Mr. Deakin, as if considering the point. "I see. But ye aint told me wot's up."

"S' far's I can make out she don't approve of Mr. Herrick," said Miry contemptuously.

"The little passon chap," cried Mr. Deakin. "Lor' bless 'e, 'e's as 'armless as a suckin' dove, 'e is. Jolly little blow out of 'is last night, though I must say as it did leave me a bit dry; 'ad to look in somewhere on my way 'ome. But 'e aint arf bad for all that," added Mr. Deakin with a solemn wag of the head. "Not arf bad. Let 'im be," he told his wife. "Why'd ye go an' punch 'eads for 'im? 'E wouldn't like it; an' 'taint 'cordin' to 'Oyle. Chuck the idear. That's wot I say."

"Better take her in 'then, for fear she gets 'urt," said Miry, with a withering glance at his wife, and without more ado swept on.

In the room above she plumped on the bed as at once the handiest and most spacious seat in the room.

"Oh dear!" she said, fetching a deep breath; "if this aint the funniest, rummiest old world, to be sure. An' the older it grows the rummier it gets. Makes me think I'm dreamin' or walkin' in my sleep or sunthin'. Who'd 'ave thought that that blessed little hangel of a Miss Pearl was comin' 'ere to find 'er lost mother, or that our beautiful Strange Lady was Mr. Herrick's wife, as 'e was all the time lookin' for? Ye don't want no story-book yarns arter that, do ye?"

"No," Mrs. Merrishaw agreed, answering at random. Her thoughts were busy and far away.

Suddenly Miry sat up, a new expression on her face.

"I s'pose you'll be up an' off, same's Mrs. Herrick," she said, her shining eyes fixed on Mrs. Merrishaw. "You're a lidy, too, an' ye needn't be a-denyin' of it."

Mrs. Merrishaw's response was to cover her face with her hands and burst into a fit of sobbing.

"There," cried Miry, getting to her feet, "I've gone and done it now. But don't you be takin' on 'bout it, Mrs. Merrishaw. Don't, please. There, there!"

Meanwhile Herrick reached the seclusion of his own room, taking his treasure with him. He set her in his best chair, and kneeling before her, covered her trembling hands with kisses. She would have drawn them away as unworthy of such honour; but he held them fast, held them as if he would never again let them go. He did not speak, save in incoherent murmurs. Speech was trivial, and utterly inadequate for the thoughts and feelings which surged within him.

"When we meet our beloved in heaven," he had once said, "we shall gaze on them, caress them in speechless joy."

That sacred rapture was his already. He was in heaven and had found his beloved. It did not occur to him to ask any questions. It was enough that she was here, actually before him, that he could hold her, fondle her, look into her face—the face he had despaired of ever seeing again.

And if he was beyond speech, so was she. An on-looker might have said that she sat in a listless apathy. If there was an appearance of apathy, it was the seeming apathy of overpowering emotion, the emotions of a shame, a contrition, a gladness too deep for words.

Pearl saved them both. Though at first awed into silent wonder, she speedily recovered the activity and volubility of her age. She chattered like a whole colony of birds on a spring morning; she asked embarrassing questions, luckily never waiting for an answer; she related scraps of adventure, laughing merrily at the recollection of comic incidents; she hung over her mother, smoothing her hair, patting her, kissing her passionately all over head and face. Finally she snuggled into the vacant lap, and the nervous arms instantly coiled about her in a tense grip. Thus ousted, Herrick got to his feet, regarding the two with dim eyes. They could never be happier; he would leave them so, locked in each other's love, and seize the chance of attending to another matter of pressing urgency.

When he told them that he was going out for a little, his wife looked up quickly, as to say, "Leaving me already?" Her eyes were troubled, as though she were afraid that her new-found happiness might prove to be only a pleasant dream.

"I won't be away long," he said in answer to her look. "Pearl, darling, you take care of dear mama, and get her anything she may want."

"Yes," returned Pearl, with a tighter hug, "I'll take care of her. She's not going to get away any more, never you fear."

"See to it, then," he told her.

With an abruptness which his wife did not misunderstand he stooped and kissed them both. Then turning away swiftly, he left them.

Outside he hailed the first procurable cab, and hastened to Mr. Kippen's hotel.

"He is her father and ought to know without delay," he told himself.

But he was too late. Mr. Kippen was already at the bank ; so he followed to the region of mammon which surrounds Throgmorton Street. But again he was too late. Mr. Kippen was engaged with Sir Theodore Stapleton and the other directors, and the door was shut against intrusion.

"Can't my card be sent in?" he asked an official innocently, not understanding the sanctity of board meetings.

"Not while the board is sitting," he was told.

"But the matter is very urgent, very urgent indeed, and I know Mr. Kippen would like to be apprised of it," he argued.

The official could not help that. Orders were orders, and the board was not to be disturbed unless one were a fool or pined for dismissal. Herrick was therefore shown into the waiting-room, to cool his feverish impatience and ponder the sacredness of the inner circles of finance.

It was a shock of disappointment to be turned in there, but he made the best of the situation, entertaining himself with wild fancies of what might be happening in his rooms. Suppose that in obedience to some fearful impulse, some feeling of shame or dread, his wife were to fly again. Would not the last flight be worse than the first? His distracted imagination pictured her making frantic efforts to get away, with Pearl as frantically trying to hold her. A dozen times he was on the point of rushing away without waiting to see Mr. Kippen. But he restrained himself, and the interminable minutes passed somehow. When he could endure no longer the official returned to say that the board meeting was over, and he would try to get at the managing director, though he was by no means sure of success. He glanced at the card handed

to him, looked more closely, as though to make sure of the name, and then with a quick, curious expression looked from under his brows at the owner. Herrick was in no doubt as to the meaning of that look. The tale of disgrace was known even in the London office, he reflected with a cold thrill.

The official went his way and almost the next minute was back, saying that Mr. Kippen would see his visitor at once in the directors' room, where he was now alone.

CHAPTER XIV

WITH racing pulses and a giddy head Herrick entered the august presence.

"I have news for you, sir, or I would not intrude at such a time," he said, as excuse and greeting.

"You seem agitated," returned the great man, shaking hands stiffly. "Sit down. Have you been waiting long?"

Judged by his feeling of time the waiting had extended to several centuries, but Herrick answered uneasily :

"No, thanks ; not very long."

"The staff have positive instructions that no one is to be admitted while a board meeting is going on," said Mr. Kippen. "Well ! your news ?"

For an instant the air about Herrick's eyes seemed full of fiery, whirling motes.

"Gracie is found," he said, as if gulping for breath. "Gracie is found."

Mr. Kippen sat up square and rigid, his strong massive face paling perceptibly.

"Gracie is found," he repeated slowly, as if to assure himself. "Where ?"

"Not far from our place of meeting last night."

"Has she been there all the time?"

"I don't know. I cannot tell you. I did not take time to ask her."

"And who found her? You?"

"No; it was Pearl, quite by chance—a most fortunate Providential chance, and I came at once to tell you, sir."

Mr. Kippen rose slowly to his feet, his face exceedingly grim.

"I am not at all sure that you would not be bringing me better tidings if you told me she was dead," he said.

"Oh! my God I don't say that, sir," cried Herrick in a voice of dismay. "You cannot mean it."

"I am a plain man," responded Mr. Kippen, "in the habit of saying what I mean, and I repeat that I think I should be better pleased if you told me she was dead. To be decently dead is to be safe from harm and out of the way of dishonour. To be alive is not always so. But we must take such things as they happen to come. Well, now that she's found, what do you mean to do?"

"I mean to do what I always meant if she were found," answered Herrick. "Take her back to Lumley Beacon."

"Are you in your senses?" demanded Mr. Kippen sharply. "Take her back to Lumley Beacon, where every one knows her story and would point the finger? Yes, as certainly as human nature is human nature. Have you still to discover how the world gloats over a scandal?"

"There are things, sir," returned Herrick, with a courage that surprised himself, "in which the world and its judgment are less than nothing. I am not going to run away from fear of malice, nor is Gracie."

But I believe the people of Lumley Beacon would welcome her back with genuine sincerity and no notion of pointing the finger. They loved her when she was with them, they will love her when she is again among them. And her own peace of mind will be infinitely greater by returning and facing the ordeal, whatever it may be. Fortunately for us, mistakes can be atoned for."

"Don't delude yourself," rejoined Mr. Kippen impatiently. "Don't run away with any such idea. A mistake like hers is never atoned for, at any rate in this world. Pitch sticks, and all the fine sentiment in the world cannot alter the fact."

"We fall to rise again," said Herrick earnestly. "But that is beside the point. I came to ask you, to beseech you, to come to Gracie and speak a word to her. Will you come?"

"And break my solemn oath in the first moment of testing!" returned Mr. Kippen. "Do you think then that I am a man to be blown about like a dry leaf by every chance puff of wind that blows? When a certain thing happened I thought well over it and swore that, daughter of mine or no daughter of mine, I would cut her out of my life for ever. You may tell me that was harsh, unfatherly, and all the rest of it. Perhaps. I am not a man who has ever studied refinements of sentiment. But before you judge take care you understand my position; see to it that you know what it is to sit in my chair and bear my responsibilities. Within the last hour, to go no farther back, I have put through a transaction of nearly a million sterling. I practically hold in my hand a capital of three millions, a reserve of equal amount, and over fifty millions of public deposits. I make it my business to see how every pound of

that is employed, because every pound has to return its quota of profit."

"It is a tremendous responsibility, sir," said Herrick, almost in awe.

"A responsibility which few theoretic gentlemen are able to realise," was the response. "Very well! all that implies an implicit confidence on the part of directors, shareholders, and public. Perhaps I need not tell you that in financial matters confidence is the most delicate thing in all the world. Once shaken it is rarely ever set right again. And the least mistake, the least suspicion, the least breath of scandal is enough to destroy it for ever. No allowance is made for human imperfection or frailty—no, nor for ill-luck. You see, then, how the taint of disgrace bears on the matter."

"Yes, sir, I see. I never saw it so clearly before."

"That's likely. If you will pardon me for being perfectly frank I will say this, that where I kept my place most men would have gone down like a foundered ship. I resolved not to go down if I could help it, and I have managed to keep that resolution, with what effort or difficulty doesn't matter now. But to keep afloat I had to cut away certain weights and encumbrances. In view of my duties, should I be wise, think you, in encumbering myself again? You see, the matter is not so simple as you may have imagined, and there is more to be said for my harshness than may have occurred to you. In conduct we cannot always follow the counsel of perfection given from pulpits; no, and what's more, we dare not always obey the dictates of our own hearts. Where is she now?"

"In my rooms," answered Herrick.

"Showing signs of distress, no doubt," said Mr.

Kippen. He paced across the room, wheeled, and faced his visitor. "Look here," he said hotly. "There was a time when she was the apple of my eye. Judge what it is to cut the apple of your eye out. Believe me, most forms of surgery are mild and merciful compared with such an operation. Well, I did it, setting my teeth like the harsh man I am, bearing the pain as best I could and saying never a word about it. But a man is never the same again after such an experience, never. I shall carry my scars to the grave. When I had reached the time at which a man likes to rest I threw myself afresh into work. Why? I will tell you quite frankly. To forget myself, to give myself no opportunity to think of anything but duty. When a man does that don't you think he really knows the meaning of misery?"

Herrick bowed his head in silence. The question needed no answer.

"There's another thing," pursued Mr. Kippen. "The last time you and I talked together you told me the fault was mine. Make no apologies or retractions now, please. It was a blow between the eyes, delivered straight from the shoulder. You were tried, I own. I insisted, and I am glad I did. Better the blunt truth than any number of sweet lies. Mr. Herrick, put to it, spoke what was in his heart. It was a stunner to me. I am not sure that I have got over it yet. Yes, for your wife's disgrace her father was to blame."

"Don't, sir," cried Herrick piteously. "Don't. Let the past be past."

"Not so loud, if you please," returned Mr. Kippen. "There may be curious ears about. For to tell you the truth this matter is not merely between you and me. Well, I have thought of that home-thrust at dead

of night, and I may confess to you it has made me sweat coldly in my bed."

"If you overlook the past, sir," said Herrick, himself beginning to sweat coldly under this ordeal, "I hope and believe we shall be able to restore Gracie to happiness."

"By taking her back to Lumley Beacon," said Mr. Kippen.

"By having you in the first place come to see and forgive her," was the response. "Will you come now?"

"There stands an oath in the way," replied Mr. Kippen. "Besides, I leave for home this evening, and have much pressing business to get through before going."

"By your love for Gracie, sir," pleaded Herrick, like one clutching at his last chance for life, "I implore, I adjure you to come to her. Your forgiveness would be the beginning of new happiness."

"You have forgiven her?" responded Mr. Kippen shrewdly.

"I never had anything to forgive," was the quick reply. "If she made one mistake, I made a thousand mistakes to set against it. It never entered my thoughts I had anything to forgive her, and I haven't. I know in my heart of hearts, and you know, too, that for all that's come and gone, before God she is a good and noble woman. If an angel were to descend on London this minute and take the purest-hearted being in it by the hand, that being would, I believe in my soul, be Gracie."

A great glow suffused him. It seemed that he stood an inch taller on that gallant declaration, and that he had courage for anything. Mr. Kippen was regarding him intently, a curious light in his eyes.

"Knowing what you know, would you marry her again?" he asked.

"Why does a man marry a woman?" was the response.

"Because he loves her, I suppose," said Mr. Kippen. "I suppose because he loves her."

"Then, sir," said Herrick, "you have answered your own question. For I never loved Gracie as I love her now."

"Aye," returned Mr. Kippen, an odd vibration in his voice. "That's brave language."

"It is better than brave," Herrick rejoined; "it is true. And," he continued, striking while the iron was hot, "there is another whose love for her we ought not to forget in this moment. For her mother's sake, then, I ask you to come to her now. You know very well that the best news you could take home would be that with your own eyes you saw Gracie and with your own hands touched her, that although she was lost she is found, and that with God's help we will make her all she ever was, aye, and more, because she is more precious than ever she was before, a thousand times."

Instead of answering, Mr. Kippen took a quick, agitated turn round the room, then facing Herrick he said abruptly and almost brusquely:

"Give me the address."

The strong face twitched as he spoke, and there was a quaver in the imperative voice.

CHAPTER XV

MR. KIPPEN went home that evening, bearing the glad tidings, and, most illogically for a man of his views and temper, rejuvenated by twenty good years at least. For once the mile-a-minute express seemed to crawl. He was possessed by that buoyant impatience of youth, that ineffable desire to leap forth, spread wing and hasten on with the aerial celerity of a hawk.

"This will knock her speechless," he observed mentally, thinking of his wife. "Clean speechless. I can see her face as she hears."

A glorious thrill as of returned boyhood passed through him, and he caught himself on an impulse to break into song.

"Tut, tut," he reflected; "this will never do. I mustn't be ridiculous."

And to be sure Mr. Kippen venting his gladness like some irresponsible young blade untouched by care would certainly have made all who knew him stare. Yet when grave people are disposed to hilarity it is generally well with them.

Throughout the journey Mr. Kippen never once thought of finance. Not a single scheme for increasing dividends and outstripping rivals occurred to him. The managing director, in fact, lapsed to the condition

of a mere man with simple human emotions ; a father simmering, bubbling with feelings which he could not name and had no thought of analysing. Felicity and analysis never go together.

At his own request Pearl accompanied him.

"You two are best by yourselves for a time," he told her father and mother, trying with indifferent success to take the unexpected cordial, the gush of sunshine into the heart, as a trivial, casual incident in the routine of life. "She'll keep me awake on the journey, and then she can look after her grandmother in going to Lumley Beacon. For of course," added Mr. Kippen, "*she'll* want to see for herself. Women always do."

In the new turn of the drama Pearl, as by prescriptive right, assumed the rôle of honour. Had she not found mama, and did not the fate of them all hang on that wonderful and happy discovery? And in his conduct towards her Mr. Kippen was again absurdly illogical. He who was wont to denounce the "indigestible trash" so often given by fatuous adults to children, secretly and with guileful intent provided himself with a huge packet of sweets. This he produced from a mysterious black bag in the first mile of the journey, and held out to Pearl with a meaning smirk, as though the pair were long leagued in roguery.

"You'll be ill," he warned her, marking her energy and enthusiasm ; but he made no attempt to withdraw the temptation. She laughed at his fears with the confident superiority of her age. He need not worry ; she was willing to take risks, and thought she might be able to finish the sweets without breaking down. He smiled affably. She was not surprised at his good humour. Everybody was in good humour, for the

best of reasons. The whole world was once more happy. Mama was found.

Both began to tingle excitedly as they sighted the Rushborough furnaces, the elder hardly less than the younger.

"Won't grandmama be glad!" cried Pearl, pressing her face against the window in an effort to see through rolling clouds of smoke. "She'll be so glad she'll just sit down and cry. Don't you think so?"

"Very likely," replied Mr. Kippen, remembering with a shock how emotion affects women. If they're glad they cry; if they're sorry they cry. Grief and joy alike bring them to tears. They have an inordinate taste for the luxury of weeping.

Now Mr. Kippen, like the majority of his sex, disliked the sight of a woman in tears. It offended his dignity. Besides, it was embarrassing. Therefore in the Kippen household tears were tabooed. Yet he felt that the rule was about to be broken, and that it would be idle, if not unseemly, to protest. Feminine weakness must have its way for once. The prospect, oddly enough, did not annoy him. Nevertheless, being a man, he would avoid a scene if avoidance were humanly possible.

"Pearl," he said, laying his head knowingly to one side, as if planning a great joke. "What do you think? You shall tell grandmama the news all by yourself. Wouldn't that be fun?"

Pearl fell in with the suggestion gleefully. It suited her humour to impart the news that fairly bubbled to be out; but in the crucial moment Mr. Kippen was nearly caught, as it appeared, through a lack of his customary self-control.

"You have news, Samuel," cried his wife, reading the thoughts of his heart in his face.

Mr. Kippen coughed uneasily.

"She has," he returned, indicating Pearl, and colouring as in the confusion of detected guilt. "Heigh ho! it's a tiresome business this going up to London. I've had a time of it."

Though Pearl had been coached for the great scene, the ardent gleam of her eyes warned him to be quick in getting off. With a "Well! Pearl, dear, tell grandmama," he slipped away, congratulating himself on the success of his stratagem.

"Best so," he reflected. "They can carry on as they like by themselves. This sort of thing shakes a man. Bless me! how Gracie must have held me by the heartstrings after all."

As a man and a father he might honestly indulge his feelings in strict privacy; but as managing director he must behave circumspectly, even in the bosom of his family. No sentiment, no weakness, nothing unworthy of his high calling and granite character.

But he was not yet safe. His self-congratulations on a happy and tactful escape were scarcely over when his wife broke in upon him, her eyes streaming.

"Forgive me, Samuel," she said, "I had to come to you. She's found--my darling's found!"

"She's found," responded Mr. Kippen. The words came slowly, and a listener might have sworn they vibrated with happiness.

"You saw her?"

"Yes, I saw her. And—and I may just as well tell you at once that I think we have a daughter again. There now, there. Don't go and make yourself ill because you chance to be happy. You'll get used to the feeling. Gracie's all right. She wants you at Lumley Beacon presently. And now, if you don't mind, I have some things to attend to. To-morrow I

will talk of it all with you. Just think that Gracie's well. That'll keep you going better than anything I can do or say."

"Of course," he told himself, when she was gone, "she won't sleep a wink to-night; not a wink. And to-morrow her eyes will be as red as if I had been thrashing her. Women are strange things, especially when they're mothers. I am glad Pearl is here; she'd be too much for me alone."

CHAPTER XVI

MEANWHILE Herrick hurriedly made arrangements for leaving London and returning to Lumley Beacon. It was no easy ordeal to part with his friends.

"I leave you, but I shall never forget you," he told Dalrymple, about whom his soul was knit. "All blessing and success upon you. If the truth were known or understood, you and the like of you would be accounted the real heroes of the nation."

"One day," responded Dalrymple quietly, "the truth will be known. In the meantime we serve in hope, though the task is sometimes difficult and discouraging. For—but never mind that ; the capital of Britain is in many respects a doleful subject, and this is the time of your happiness. May it be all that your friends would wish ! You can never have more than you deserve. Farewell."

And so, with a grip of the hand and a look of the eyes that were more than any speech, they parted.

Miry was perhaps most sorrowful of all at Herrick's going, though she did not disguise her joy at the cause. But it meant the loss of another friend from a diminishing circle. Miry, in fact, was beginning to make the common discovery that youth passes and time grows heavy and irksome.

"You'll come to see us," Herrick told her, with that blithe sense of happiness which lights and irradiates the whole world. "You must come to see us—often—often."

Miry smiled as at the fond fancies of a boy.

"Should like to," she answered. "But 'olidays don't come much my way. And when they do—well, I gen'rally mess round 'ere. Always sunthin' to be done. I aint set eyes on the green trees and flowers of the country for years."

"You'll be charmed with them in Lumley Beacon, then," he returned warmly. "It's a beautiful place, Miry, a wonderfully beautiful place. And spring will make it like Paradise."

"I can fancy it, sir," said Miry half dreamily, as if she were conjuring up its sylvan delights. "I 'ear so much of beautiful places all over England that I wonder and wonder why people ever leave 'em and come to London, which aint beautiful, leastways round 'ere. No, and they don't find it no Paradise some of 'em, neither. But it's my 'ome, if I 'ave one, and I've got so's I don't mind, p'raps because I don't know no better. The first thing I remember is the London streets, and they'll be the last, too, I expect. And 'times I seem to feel I shouldn't mind 'ow soon I was done with 'em."

"Getting a little tired, Miry?" he said, looking kindly into her face.

"Oh I I'm fit enough," was the reply. "Fit enough for work, anyway; and I can still 'elp a bit as I go along. But sometimes, sir, I look at an old cab 'oss crawlin' along between its shafts, 'ardly able to keep on its poor old legs, and I say to myself, 'It's a case of goin' on till you drop with you,' and I can't 'elp feelin' that it's just the same with me. But that don't matter," she added quickly, as if brushing the

dismal thought away. "There's them that can't stand it so well. Now, sir, if the Merrishaws could 'ave a little while among the trees and flowers and birds it might 'elp 'em to pull up. They'll never come to any good 'ere."

"Please God they will not remain here," he said fervently.

"May I tell you sunthin', sir?" said Miry, regarding him curiously.

"It will be a favour if you do," he replied.

"Well, then," said Miry, "for a while past there's been one goin' and comin' round 'ere that people called the Strange Lady. I 'appened to run across 'er when she first came, and I've watched 'er ever since."

"Yes," said Herrick, with a sharp breath.

"We know now who she is, sir," pursued Miry. "But any one three-quarters blind of both eyes could see at any time she was no common sort. We know our own kind, 'ere, when we see 'em, sir, and we saw at once she was different. Of course, I 'ad no idea wot brought 'er, and 'taint none of my business to ask questions. Well! Mrs. Merrishaw and 'er found each other out. P'raps God arranged it so. I dunno. Anyway, there they were, strangers, both of 'em in a way with the same feelings, 'bout old times and all that. I could see it plain in their faces when they were together. Till then Mrs. Merrishaw 'peared to 'ave lost 'er grip on things—didn't care much wot 'appened; you know the feelin', sir. But as soon's the Strange Lady came there was a change. There was them about Mrs. Merrishaw that tried to pull 'er down and keep 'er down—the kind's pretty thick, as you know—but I could see her beginnin' to struggle; and often when she didn't think it I caught

'er lookin' so sad-like at 'er 'usband and 'er boy. Is it true, sir, that Mr. Merrishaw 'as 'eaps and 'eaps of learnin'?"

"Quite true," replied Herrick, with emphasis. "He's a great scholar, Miry, a very great scholar."

"So I've 'eard," said Miry. "Well, it don't do 'im much good 'ere. No, and 'is sort don't last—didn't think 'e'd 'old out so long. I think he kind of feels the game's nearly played out. And that 'minds me of sunthin'. The other night when I was goin' somewhere, to the mission likely, I came upon a lot of people talkin' loud and laughin'—a drunken lot outside a public-'ouse, and there 'e was in the middle of 'em. 'Pears they were coaxin' 'im to go in, an' by the look of 'im 'e wanted to go pretty bad. But 'e wouldn't all the same. 'It's a promise,' he told 'em. 'I can't break my promise.' 'Oh, ye can't, can't ye?' they laughed, jeerin' like. 'Come, and we'll show ye 'ow. Who made ye promise? That new Gospel snipe, eh?' Beggin' yer pardon, sir, I think they meant you. 'Don't tempt me,' says 'e. 'I am blistering dry, but don't tempt me. I mustn't. I won't,' and with that he actually turns and runs away."

"Thank God!" said Herrick, with a deep sigh. "Thank God for giving him strength to keep that promise."

"Yes, sir," continued Miry. "'E kept it all right, and it took some keepin', I could see that. Only I'm afraid as keepin' promises ain't much good now. Looks as if it was with 'im as it was with the foolish virgins you was tellin' us about the other evenin'—too late. But it's different with Mrs. Merrishaw and the boy; and wot I wanted particular to say, sir, is this, that if they're saved, if they get their chance, the

Strange Lady done it ; and I thought you would like to know."

"Yes," said Herrick, his voice quivering. "You, were right, Miry. I like to know. Thank you for telling me."

"Oh ! tellin's easy, aint it, sir ?" returned Miry. "And now things bein' as they are, why, ye see, some of us is that glad and that sorry we don't just know 'ow we feel, or if we'd like best to laugh or cry. If we could do both at the same time we should like it, and that's a fact. But you aint got no reason to be sorry, sir, and that makes us glad, 'specially for the sake of the Strange Lady."

"Won't you come and tell her that yourself, then, Miry ?" asked Herrick.

"Better not, sir," was the reply. "Might upset 'er at a time when she don't need no upsettin'. You can tell 'er. And don't forget Miss Pearl, please. She's the gladdest of the lot, I think. You're goin' soon, sir ?"

"At once," he answered. "That is, just as soon as we can get ready."

"That's right," said Miry, with a shrewd glance into his thin, worn face. "This aint the 'ealthiest place in the world, and that's a fact."

"And what of you, Miry, and those who remain with you ?" he asked.

"Oh !" returned Miry, "some of us is used to it and don't mind, and the rest do as they can. We'll amuse ourselves by tryin' to keep the old show a-goin'. 'Pears to be the only way."

Her tone had changed. She laughed lightly, as her manner was when she desired to disguise deep feeling. Herrick (not for the first time) regarded her with profound pity and admiration. He recalled that

pathetic reference to the old cab horse. For all her seeming lightness, her high spirits, and her levity, Miry had that deep sense of the tragedy of things which comes of reflection and hard experience, and he thought how fortunate he and his really were in comparison.

"She stays to fight on while I run away," he told himself.

Beside her he felt cowardly and selfish. She had borne bravely what would have broken him down long ago; yet here she was fronting the dark future with the bravest of smiles. There were people even in the modern world, he thought, as valorous as Hector. He was about to express something of this when Albert Charles entered the mission, panting as from a race. Miry turned to him inquiringly.

"Well, sonny," she said; "'pear to be in a mighty 'urry, don't 'e? Wot's up now?"

"Mrs. Deakin is at it again," was the answer. "Dad's out, old man Deakin's helpless, and mother wants to know if you'll come to her at once."

"The old game, eh?" observed Miry. "Ye see, sir, we aint likely to die for want of fun to keep the blood movin'." And then blithely to Albert Charles, "All right, I'll be with you in 'arf a minute, and we'll see wot can be done to make Mrs. Deakin mind her own business."

"Deal with her gently, Miry," said Herrick, marking the gleam of battle in her eye.

"Supposin' a bear 'appened to break loose at the Zoo and started to worry people, would ye stroke it for sake of peace?" returned Miry. "Gentleness is for 'em as understand it; and I'm feared Mrs. Deakin aint of the number, no, nor any of 'er sort. But we'll see. Goodbye, sir."

She shook hands hastily and hurried off with Albert Charles as though impatient to get away. To a stranger her abruptness might have seemed rude. But Herrick did not misunderstand.

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CHAPTER XVII

ON an afternoon soon afterwards, a sudden electric excitement thrilled Lumley Beacon from its centre to its remotest lane and cottage. For a cloud of witnesses, whose bare word was as good as any Bible oath, attested vehemently that a carriage, not owned locally, passed through the town on its way to the Vicarage, and that the occupants were none other than Mr. and Mrs. Herrick.

As we know, Mrs. Herrick's tragic and mysterious disappearance was the theme of infinite speculation and manifold theories in ale-house and domestic circle. But the hardiest sensation cannot last for ever. Other interests arise; other scandals claim attention. There came a day when the moving tale of the Vicar's wife lapsed to a mere reminiscence, something to be talked of half-wistfully over a pipe or a mug of ale, or at the chance meeting of housewives enjoying a gossip after the day's work.

"She won't be heard of no more, poor thing," said Lumley Beacon, with a sigh of regret that so promising a mystery should after all have to be dismissed as insoluble. "Ah! yes, the last trump's the only thing that'll find her now."

But behold like a fire in the night the whole sensa-

tion revived. With a unanimity worthy of so great an occasion, Lumley Beacon proceeded to take a fit, if somewhat agitated, interest in this new and absorbing fact of its existence. It would have turned out in rousing welcome from its youngest baby in arms to its oldest man and woman on crutches, if only it got warning of the return. Since that was denied, it could only keep an eye on the Vicarage to see what would happen next; and it put its whole heart into the business of watching.

What happened was not what any of the watchers expected. The good folk who knew Herrick and waited to greet him in his old haunts were distressed and disappointed by the news that he had returned to take to his bed.

On the very first night, not many hours indeed after his arrival, there came upon him the strange sensation of a reeling head which intimates that Nature has peremptorily taken matters into her own hand. Shock upon shock, suspense, weariness, hope, despair, and then sudden ravishing joy, were too much for the dwindled strength. In the moment of triumph Herrick was prostrate.

"A breakdown of the most serious kind," said the doctor gravely.

"I am very sorry, my love," Herrick remarked, turning a bloodless face to his wife. "Never mind. You are here and all is well."

Thus was Lumley Beacon shut out. So it sat down to wait, smoking its pipe, drinking its ale, gossiping, and wondering how *she* would bear herself in this new and unexpected crisis.

A crisis makes or unmakes, according to the spirit it works on. To Grace Herrick it brought, not wailing nor frenzied dismay, but a wondrous, an inspiring sense

of peace. A new power came to her, a new light shone on her path, the magic power and light of a love tenfold intensified.

In London, while gathering her energies after the great discovery, she had asked herself in cold terror what she should do on returning to Lumley Beacon; and lo! Heaven provided the answer for her.

"Thank God," she said fervently, "for permitting me to be here now!"

Mrs. Kippen, under charge of Pearl, arrived from Rushborough beside herself with joy and fear and eagerness. Mrs. Herrick had looked forward to the meeting with unnerving trepidation; yet when it came she bore herself with a composure which astonished her mother.

"Leslie is very, very ill," she said simply, as in explanation; "I am nursing him."

And to Pearl, who would fain have rushed shouting in glee to papa, "Hush, darling; dear papa must not be excited. You shall go to him by and by." He would get better; her love was about him. It seemed she had never known love till now.

His illness was subtle and baffling—that is to say, without specific name in the common vocabulary. He was parched and wakeful. The moments of sleep were fitful and uneasy; and often in his unquiet slumbers he would moan or call out in a voice of keen disappointment; or again, in an access of dreaming fondness, he would murmur his wife's name, repeating it as though finding comfort in the mere act. At such times she would cover her face, fighting to suppress the sobs that tore her heart. Was ever love so deep, so absorbing, so wonderful, so poignant as his?

While lying awake and too weak to speak, he would

follow her with a yearning gaze that drew as by an irresistible spell. Once as she bent over him drawn in this way he whispered :

"Dearest, I am very happy. God is good to restore you to me. This may be death. It isn't hard to die—only——"

He stopped, his great eyes—they had grown very wide—looking fondly into hers.

"What, sweetheart?"

"I shouldn't like to go just yet—not just yet. Ah! Gracie, how I love you!"

She made no response, at any rate audibly. She only bent a little closer, the tears that were not to be held back wetting his white face. He stroked her hair, murmuring how beautiful it was; he took her hand and fondled it, pressing it to his lips again and again. Thus held, she slipped to her knees, and before he knew what was happening, a passionate cry of pleading broke from her. "Gracious God, spare my beloved, spare him to me! Have mercy; let it not be said I killed him."

With a sudden energy he roused himself, and bending over her, laid both hands on her head. "Let us pray together," he said.

Outside, Mrs. Kippen, on her way to the sick-room, halted, listened an instant, and then turned away. On the stairs she met the doctor. "They are by themselves," she told him in a low voice. "Will you come with me a moment?"

"Perhaps they don't need me," he remarked, noting the peculiar expression on her face.

"If you don't mind," she replied; "perhaps not, just at present."

But a few days later he entered with boisterous, infectious cheerfulness.

"Ah-ha!" he cried at sight of the patient's face. "We're picking up—I know we are; wonderfully, quite wonderfully. In fact, we're doing so well that we'll be up and out in no time."

"The spring is outside, is it not, doctor?" asked Herrick.

"As sappy, and blossomy, and exuberant, and fragrant as it can be," was the reply. "Bless my heart, it's everywhere."

"I feel it," said Herrick, with a deep breath as if to inhale the invigorating perfume. "It comes even to the sick-bed."

"Bringing health," returned the doctor, rubbing his hands in huge satisfaction. "Ay, the spring's about, the spring's about—with new life, new life. That's the special beneficence of spring, that it comes to deprive me of my patient. Mrs. Herrick, I have the happiness to tell you that your husband is fast getting beyond the need of my care."

Mrs. Herrick made no reply: but her eyes, resting on her husband's face, told something of the joy and gratitude she felt.

For Lumley Beacon Vicarage and its inmates spring came with a double portion of blessing. But it was not so everywhere. When Herrick was once more out, breathing the incense of copse and flower-bed and laying schemes for the benefit of certain people in London, there reached him a brief, stern note which gave him a shock of pain. It was from Merrishaw, and ran thus:

"I have just strength enough to tell you that at last the distemper called life has nearly run its course. While you are returning happy—and may felicity be yours all the days of your life—I am going swiftly to

the far bourne. Yes, my friend, at last, at last. *This is the end, the last end of Heracles.* You will recall the context. The wanderer, the erring one, is within sight of the portals of home. What matters it if they are dark?

"I dare not go back on the past, least of all with you, because in this solemn hour I would be composed if I could. I make no complaint. Why should I? Any wise man speaking the honest truth would tell me that I reap exactly as I sowed. So be it. You and I once dreamed ardent dreams. They have not come true for me: but let that pass.

"It is not for myself I write; nothing can matter for me now—nothing. But my wife and child!—ah! there's the pang. Will your goodness do for them what I know is in your heart? One whom I will not name has already brought back their feet to the right way. My blessing on her. When I am gone they will take back my discarded, dishonoured name. Some day my boy may redeem it—if he is saved from his father's sin, his father's curse. Forgive me for laying this charge on you. Some day my own family may forgive and take pity. The rest is silence. Hail and farewell! God bless you and yours."

Herrick read the letter in silence and then handed it to his wife.

"They must come to us," he said presently, his eyes glistening.

"Yes," she agreed quietly; "I should like them to come. They were both good to me. I will write at once, so that the dying man may know and be comforted."

"Do," said Herrick.

While all these things were going on Lumley Beacon lay impatiently in wait for an opportunity to express

its sentiments over the romance of Fate which brought back its Vicar and his lost wife and restored them to happiness. It did this eventually in its own warm, large-fisted, whole-hearted manner, though it never pretended to know exactly all that happened.

"Life is a queer thing," observed one of its wise men sagaciously. "Life is an astonishing queer thing."

"Yes," agreed another; "and if you ask me, our Vicar and his good lady have gone and tasted the queerest side of it. Reckon they had a mighty bitter taste in their mouths for a while, though everything be all right and proper now."

"Oh!" rejoined the first sapiently; "it don't do people no harm to find out that there's bitter as well as sweet in this world, and that most of us are expected to taste 'em both, just to get a proper understanding of things."

"P'raps so," assented the other. "But 'spite of all they do be telling tales, they do for sure."

"And they'll go on telling 'em," was the response. "Sure as tongues was made for talking they'll go on telling 'em. But bless ye, tales don't break no bones, though they're sometimes hard enough on the feelings, and sore feelings are just about as bad as sore bones, and that's a fact."

Lumley Beacon was content to leave it at that. If there were any sceptics, and there always are sceptics, they were fully and finally convinced that all must be well again when Lady Stapleton, the renowned and fashionable Lady Stapleton, called at the Vicarage, stayed nearly two hours, and was seen by at least a score of trustworthy witnesses taking a most affectionate leave of Mrs. Herrick. All must be well since Fashion thus signifies its approval.

THE END.

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