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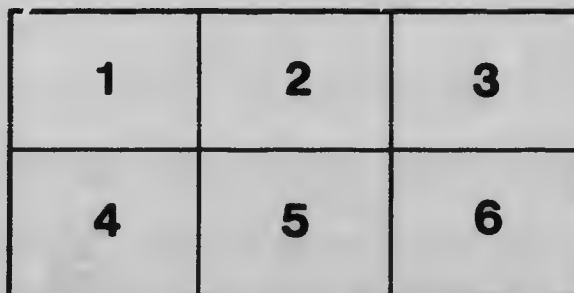
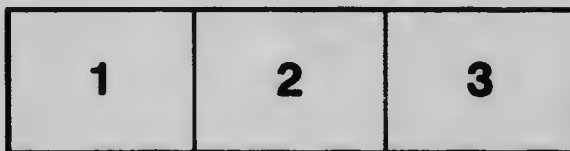
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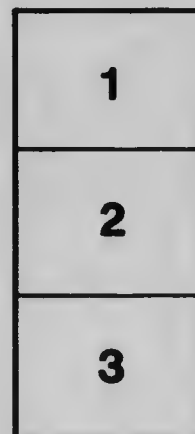
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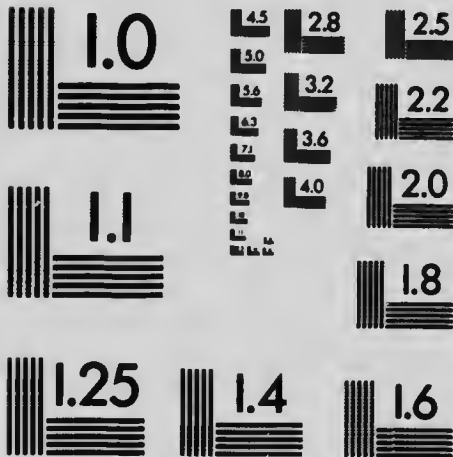
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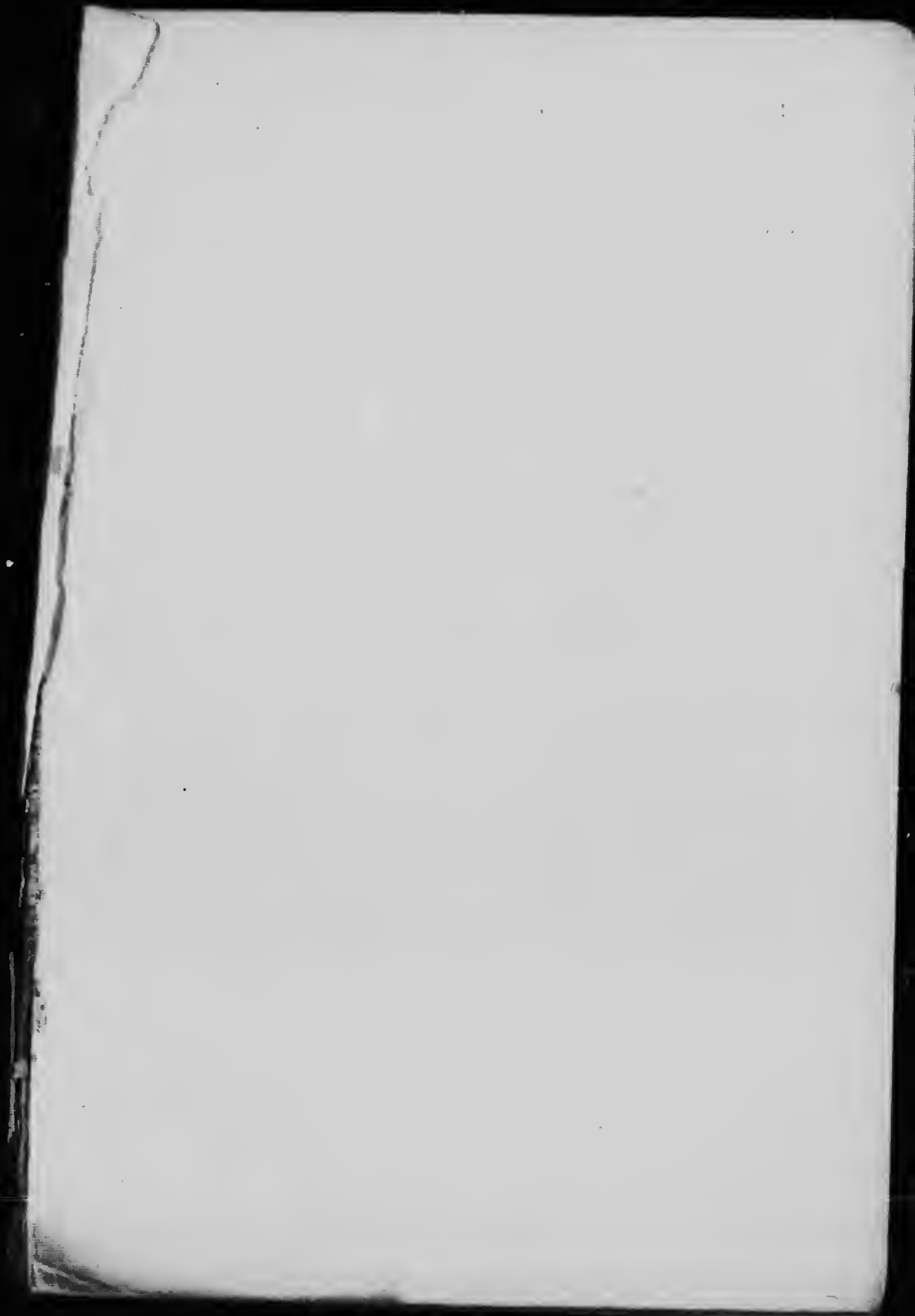
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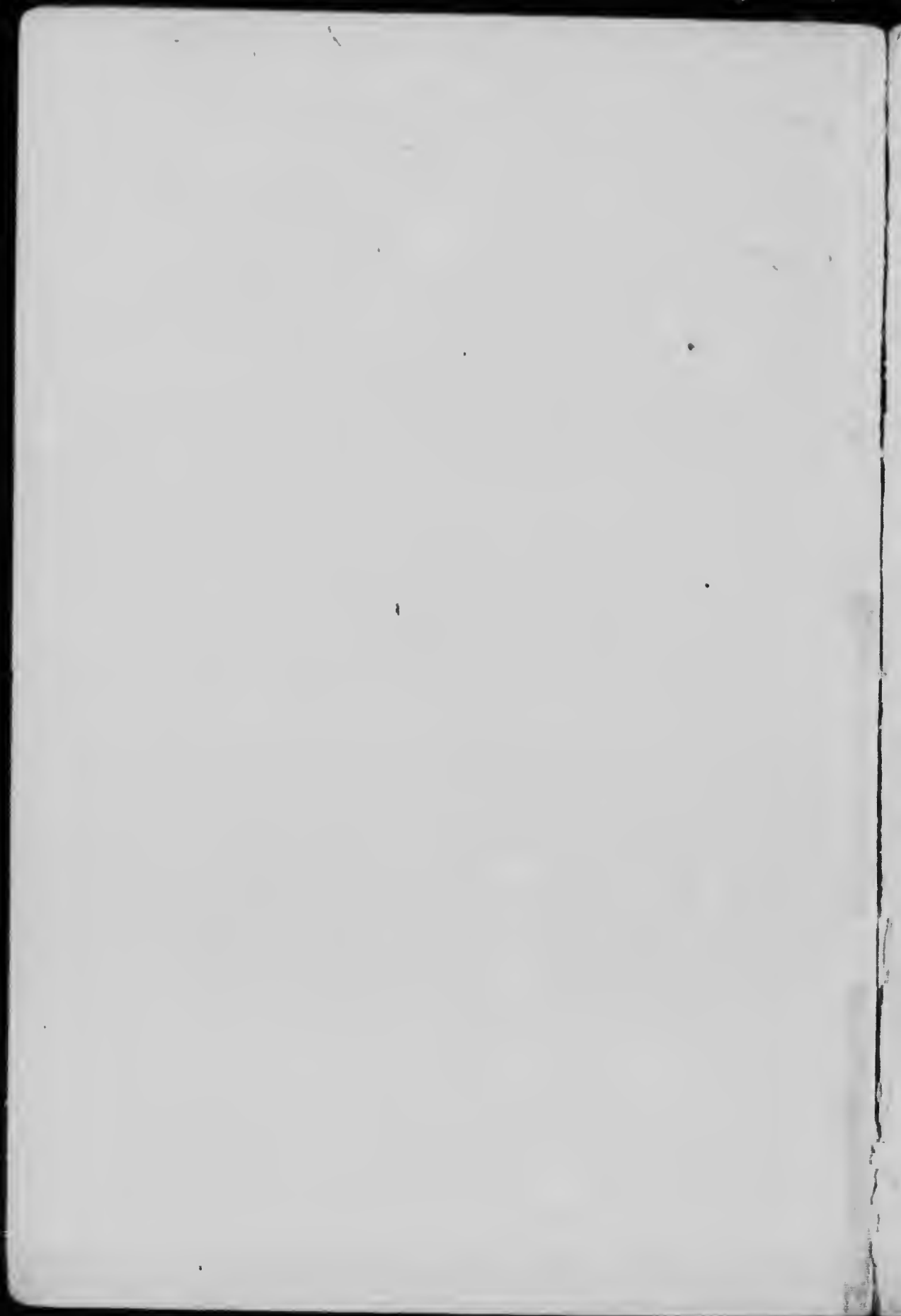
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AUTHOR OF "WEE MACGREGOR" AND "ON! CHRISTINA"

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I

MRS. ROBINSON conveyed sundry dishes from the oven, also the teapot from the hob, to the table.

"Come awa'," she said briskly, seating herself. "We'll no' wait for Macgreegor."

"Gi'e him five minutes, Lizzie," said Mr. Robinson.

"I'm in nae hurry," remarked Gran'paw Purdie, who had come up from the coast that afternoon.

"I'm awfu' hungry, Maw," piped a young voice.

"Whisht, Jimsie," whispered daughter Jeannie.

Said Mrs. Robinson, a little impatiently: "Come awa', come awa', afore everything gets spiled. Macgreegor has nae business to be that late." She glanced at the clock. "He's been the same a' week. Haste ye, John."

John opened his mouth, but catching his wife's eye, closed it again without speech.

Excepting Jimsie, they came to the table rather reluctantly.

"Ask a blessin', fayther," murmured Lizzie.

"Shut yer eyes," muttered Jeannie to her little

brother, while she restrained his eager paw from reaching a cookie.

Mr. Purdie's white head shook slightly as he said grace ; he had passed his five and seventieth birthday, albeit his spirit was cheerful as of yore ; in his case old age seemed to content itself with an occasional mild reminder.

John distributed portions of stewed finnan haddie, Lizzie poured out the tea, while Jeannie methodically prepared a small feast for the impatient Jimsie. Gran'paw Purdie beamed on the four, but referred surreptitiously at brief intervals to his fat silver watch.

It is eight years since last we saw the Robinson family. Naturally we find the greatest changes in the younger members. Jimsie from an infant has become a schoolboy ; he is taller, more scholarly, less disposed to mischief, more subdued of nature than was Macgregor at the same age ; yet he is the frank, animated young query that his brother was, though, to be sure, he has a sister as well as parents to puzzle with his questions. At thirteen Jeannie is a comely, fair-haired little maid, serious for her years, devoted to Jimsie, very proud of Macgregor, and a blessing to her parents who, strangely enough, rarely praise her, her chief end seems to be to serve those she loves without making any fuss about it.

As for John, he has grown stouter, and to his wife's dismay a bald spot has appeared on his crown ; his laughter comes as readily as ever, and he is just as

prone to spoil his children. But by this time Lizzie has become assured that her man's light-hearted, careless ways do not extend to his work, that his employers have confidence in their foreman, and that while he is not likely to rise higher in his trade, he is still less likely to slip back. She is proud of the three-roomed modern flat in which she and hers dwell, and her sense for orderliness and cleanliness has not lost its keenness. In person she is but little altered: perhaps her features have grown a shade softer.

"Ye see, Maister Purdie," John was explaining, "Macgregor's busy the noo at a job in the west-end, an' that's the reason he's late for his tea."

"Deed, ay. It's a lang road for him to come hame," said the old man. "An' is he still likin' the pentin' trade?"

"Ay, ay. An' he's gettin' on splendid—jist splendid!"

"It's time enough to be sayin' that," Lizzie interposed. "He's no' ony further on nor a lad o' his age ought to be. I'm no' sayin' he's daein' badly, fayther; but there's nae sense in boastin' about what's jist or'nar'?—Na, Jimsie! it's no' time for jeelly yet. Tak' what Jeannie gi'es ye, laddie.—Ay, the least said——"

"But his employer's pleased wi' him; he tell't me as much, wife," said John. "An' if ye compare Macgregor wi' that young scamp, Wullie Thomson——"

"Oh, if ye compare a man wi' a monkey, I

daresay it's no' sae bad for the man. But, really, John——"

"Maw, where was the man wi' the monkey?" enquired Jimsie through bread and butter.

"I'll tell ye after," whispered Jeannie, and forthwith set her mind to improvise a story involving a human being and his ancestor.

"It's easy seen," said Gran'paw, once more consulting his watch, "that Macgregor's workin' for his wages. Surely he'll be gettin' overtime the nicht. I hope his employer's a kind man."

"I've nae doot about that," Lizzie returned. "He gi'es Macgregor money for the car when he's workin' in the west-end."

"That's a proper maister!" cried Mr. Purdie, while John smiled as much as to say, "Ay! he kens Macgregor's value!"

"An' I'm thinkin'," Lizzie continued, "that Macgregor walks hame an' keeps the pennies to buy ceegarettes."

"What?" exclaimed the old man; "has the laddie commenced the smokin' a'ready?"

"Oh, naething to speak aboot," said John, a trifle apologetically. "They commence earlier than they did in your day, I suppose, Maister Purdie. No' that I wud smoke a ceegarette if I was paid for 't."

"He's far ower young for the smokin'," observed Lizzie.

"I can smoke," declared Jimsie indiscreetly. Jeannie pressed his arm.

John guffawed, Gran'paw looked amused until

Lizzie demanded: "What's that ye're sayin', Jimsie?"

"But I'm no' a reg'lar smoker," mumbled Jimsie, crestfallen.

"Ay," said John, with a jocular wink at his father-in-law, "ye're feart ye singe yer whiskers, ma mannie."

"John," said Lizzie, "it's naething to joke about. . . . Jimsie, if ever I catch ye at the smokin', I'll stop yer Seturday penny, an gi'e ye castor ile instead. D'ye hear?"

"Hoots!" cried Gran'paw, "that's a terrible severe-like punishment, Lizzie!"

"I wud rayther tak' ile twicet an' get ma penny," quoth Jimsie.

"Hear, hear!" from John.

Lizzie was about to speak when the bell rang.

Jeannie slipped from her chair. "I'll gang, Maw," she said, and went out.

"It's Macgreigor," remarked John. "Ha'e ye kep' his haddie hot for him, Lizzie?"

"What for wud I dae that?" retorted Mrs. Robinson in a tone of irony, going over to the oven and extracting a covered dish.

"Haw!" laughed John. "I kent ye had something there!"

"What for did ye ask then?"

She came back to the table as her son entered, a very perceptible odour of his trade about him—an odour which she still secretly disliked though nearly three years had gone since her first whiff of it. "What kep' ye?" she enquired, pleasantly enough.

It is possible that Macgregor's dutiful greeting to his grandfather prevented his answering the question. He appeared honestly glad to see the old man ; yet compared with his own the latter's greeting was boisterous. He returned his father's smile, glanced at his mother who was engaged in filling his cup, winked at his young brother, and took his place at the table, between the two men.

"Ye'll be wearied," remarked John.

"No' extra," he replied, stretching his tired legs under cover of the table.

"Did ye walk ? " his mother asked, passing him his tea.

"Ay."

"It'll be three mile," said John.

Jeannie came from the fire and put a fresh slice of toast on his plate. He nodded his thanks, and she went to her place satisfied and assisted Jimsie who had got into difficulties with a jam sandwich that oozed all round.

"What way did ye no' tak' the car, laddie ? " enquired Lizzie.

"I'd as sune walk," he replied, shortly.

"It's fine to save the siller—eh, Macgregor ? " said Mr. Purdie.

Macgregor reddened.

"It's something new for Macgregor to dae that," Lizzie quietly observed.

"Tits, wumman ! " muttered John.

"Wi' their cheap cars," put in Mr. Purdie, "Glesga folk are like to loss the use o' their legs. It's terrible to see the number o' young folk that winna walk if

they've a bawbee in their pooch. I'm gled to see Macgregor's no' yin o' them." He patted Macgregor's shoulder as he might have done ten years ago, and the youth moved impatiently.

"I'm no' complainin' o' Macgregor walkin' when he micht tak' the car," said Lizzie, "but I wud like to see him puttin' his savin's to some guid purpose."

At these words Macgregor went a dull red, and set down his cup with a clatter.

"Ha'e ye burnt yer mooth?" asked John, with quick sympathy.

"Naw," was the ungracious reply. "It's nae-body's business whether I tak' the car or tramp it. See's the butter, Jeannie."

There was a short silence. An outbreak of temper on Macgregor's part was not of frequent occurrence. Then John turned the conversation to a big fire that had taken place in Glasgow the previous night, and the son finished his meal in silence.

At the earliest possible moment Macgregor left the kitchen. For some reason or other the desire to get away from his elders was paramount. A few minutes later he was in the little room which belonged to him and Jimsie. On the inside of the door was a bolt, screwed there by himself some months ago. He shot it now. With a towel that hung on the door he rubbed his wet face savagely. He had washed his hands in turpentine ere leaving the scene of his work.

He donned a clean collar. As he was fixing his Sunday tie a summons came to the door. He went and opened it, looking cross.

"Weel, what are ye wantin', Jimsie?"

"Did ye bring ma putty, Macgregor?"

"Och, I clean forgot."

Jimsie's face fell. "Ye promised," he complained.

Macgregor patted the youngster's head. "I'll bring it the morn's nicht, as sure as death," he said. "I'm sorry, Jimsie," he added apologetically.

"See an' no' forget again," said Jimsie, and retired.

Macgregor closed the door and attended to his tie. Then he looked closely at his face in the mirror hanging near the window. He was not a particularly good-looking lad, yet his countenance suggested nothing coarse or mean. His features as features, however, did not concern him now. From his vest pocket he brought a knife, with a blade thinned by stone and polished by leather. He tried its keen edge on his thumb, shook his head, and applied the steel to his boot. Presently he began to scrape his upper lip. It pained him, and he desisted. Not for the first time he wished he had a real razor.

Having put the knife away, he looked at his watch—his grandfather's prize for "good conduct" of eight years ago—and proceeded hastily to brush his hair. His hair, as his mother had often remarked during his childhood, was "awfu' ill to lie." For a moment or two he regarded his garments. He would have changed them had he had time—or was it courage?

Finally he took from his pockets a key and two pennies. He opened a drawer in the old chest, and

placed the pennies in a disused tobacco tin, which already contained a few coins. He knew very well the total sum therein, but he reckoned it up once more. One shilling and sevenpence.

Every Saturday he handed his wages to his mother, who returned him sixpence. His present hoard was the result of two weeks' abstinence from cigarettes and walking instead of taking the car. He knew the job in the west-end would take at least another week, which meant another sixpence, and the coming Saturday would bring a second sixpence. Total in the near future :—two shillings and sevenpence. He smiled uncertainly and locked up the treasure.

A minute later he slipped quietly into the passage and took his cap from its peg.

The kitchen door opened. "Whaur are ye gaun, Macgregor?" his mother asked.

"Oot," he replied briefly, and went. Going down the stairs he felt sorry somehow. Sons often feel sorry somehow, but mothers may never know it.

When Lizzie, hiding her hurt, had shut the kitchen door, Mr. Purdie said softly: "That question an' that answer, ma dear, are as auld as human natur'."

As Macgregor turned out of the tenement close he encountered his one-time chum, Willie Thomson. Macgregor might not have admitted it to his parents, but during the last few weeks he had been finding Willie's company less and less desirable.

Willie now put precisely the same question that Mrs. Robinson had put a minute earlier.

"I'll maybe see ye later," was Macgregor's evasive response, delivered awkwardly. He passed on.

"Ha'e ye a ceegarette on ye?" cried Willie, taking a step after him.

"Na."

"Ye're in a queer hurry."

"I'll maybe see ye later," said Macgregor again, increasing his speed in a curious guilty fashion.

Willie made no attempt to overtake him. He, too, had been finding a certain staleness in the old friendship—especially since Macgregor had stopped his purchases of cigarettes. Willie was as often out of employment as in it, but he did not realise that he was in danger of becoming a mere loafer and sponge. Yet he was fond of Macgregor.

Macgregor passed from the quiet street wherein he lived into one of Glasgow's highways, aglow with electric light, alive with noise out of all proportion to its traffic. He continued to walk swiftly, his alert eyes betraying his eagerness, for the distance of a couple of blocks. Then into another quiet street he turned, and therein his pace became slower and slower, until it failed altogether. Beneath a gas lamp he questioned his watch, his expression betokening considerable anxiety.

It was a fine October night, but chilly—not that he gave any sign of feeling cold. For a space he remained motionless, gazing up the street. Possibly he would have liked a cigarette just then.

As though rousing himself, he moved abruptly and proceeded slowly to the next lamp post, turned about and came back to his first halting-place, where

he turned about again. For a long half-hour he continued to stroll between the two posts. Few persons passed him, and he did not appear to notice them. Indeed, it may as well be frankly admitted that he shamefully avoided their glances. When at last he did stop, it was with a sort of jerk.

From one of the closes a girl emerged and came towards him.

II

MACGREGOR'S acquaintance with Jessie Mary was almost as old as himself; yet only within the last three months had he recognised her existence as having aught of importance to do with his own. This recognition had followed swift on the somewhat sudden discovery that Jessie Mary was pretty.

The discovery was made at a picnic, organised by a section of the great drapery store wherein Jessie Mary found employment, Macgregor's presence at the outing being accounted for by the fact that in a weak moment he had squandered a money gift from his grandparents on the purchase of two tickets for Katie, his first love (so far as we know), and himself. The picnic was a thorough success, but neither Macgregor nor Katie enjoyed it. It was not so much that anything came between them, as that something that had been between them departed—evaporated. There was no quarrel; merely a dulness, a tendency to silence, increasing in dreariness as the bright day wore on. And, at last, in the railway compartment, on the way home, they sat, crushed together by the crowd, Katie dumb with dismay, Macgregor steeped in gloom.

Opposite them sat Jessie Mary and her escort, a

young man with sleek hair, a pointed nose, several good teeth, and a small but exquisite black moustache. These two were gay along with the majority of the occupants of the carriage. Perhaps in her simple sixteen-year-old heart Katie began to realise that she was deserted indeed; perhaps Macgregor experienced prickings of shame, not that he had ever given or asked promises. Still, it is to be hoped that he did not remember then any of Katie's innocent little advances of the past.

Affection 'twixt youth and youth is such a delicate, sensitive thing, full of promise as the pretty egg of a bonny bird, and as easily broken.

Macgregor was caught by the vivacious dark eyes of Jessie Mary, snared by her impudent red mouth, held by the charm of her face, which the country sun had tinted with an unwonted bloom. Alas for the little brown mouse at his side! At briefer and briefer intervals he allowed his gloomy glance to rest on the girl opposite, while he became more and more convinced that the young man with the exquisite moustache was a "bletherin' idiot." Gradually he shifted his position to the very edge of the seat, so as to lessen his contact with Katie. And when Jessie Mary, without warning, presented to his attention her foot in its cheap, stylish shoe, saying: "I wish ye wud tie ma lace, Macgreegor," a strange wild thrill of pride ran through his being, though, to be sure, he went scarlet to the ears and his fingers could scarce perform their office. There were friends of Jessie Mary who declared that Macgregor never would have noticed her at all that day had

she not been wearing a white frock with a scarlet belt; but that was grossly unfair to Jessie Mary. The animation and fresh coquetry of eighteen were also hers.

Nigh three months had gone, autumn had come, and here in a dingy side-street the captivated youth had lingered on the bare chance of a glimpse of the same maiden in her every-day attire, his mind tormented by his doubts as to his reception, should she happen to appear.

And now she was approaching him. For the life of him he could neither advance nor retire. Still, such of his wits as had remained faithful informed him that it was "stupid-like" to do nothing at all. Whereupon he drew out his watch and appeared to be profoundly interested in the time. At the supreme moment of encounter his surprise was, it must be confessed, extremely badly managed, and he touched his cap with the utmost diffidence and without a word.

"Hullo!" Jessie Mary remarked carelessly. "Fancy meetin' you, as the man said to the sassige roll!"

It had been a mutton-pie at their last meeting, Macgregor remembered, trying to laugh. Some comfort might have been his had he known that this flippancy, or its variant, was her form of greeting to all the young men then enjoying her acquaintance. Jessie Mary usually kept a joke going for about three months, and quite successfully, too.

"Did ye no' expect to meet me?" He stumbled over the words.

Jessie Mary laughed lightly, mockingly. "I wasna aware yer best girl lived in this street."

"It—it's no' the first time ye've seen me here," he managed to say.

She laughed again. "Weel, that's true. I wonder wha the girl is." He would have told her if he could, poor boy. "But I must hurry," she went on, "or the shops'll be shut."

"Can I no' gang wi' ye?" he asked, with a great effort.

"Oh, ye can come as far as Macrorie's," she answered graciously, mentioning a provision shop.

Young love is ever grateful for microscopic mercies, and Macgregor's spirit took courage as he fell into step with her. Jessie Mary was a handsomely built young woman; her shoulder was quite on a level with his. There were times when he would fain have been taller; times, also, when he would fain have been older, for Jessie Mary's years exceeded his own by two. Nevertheless, he was now thinking of her age without reference to his own. He was, in fact, about to speak of it, when Jessie Mary said:

"I'm to get to the United Ironmongers' dance on Friday week, after a'. When fayther was at his tea the nicht, he said I could gang."

She might as well have poured a jug of ice water over him. "Aw, did he?" he murmured feebly.

"Ye should come, Macgreegor," she continued "Only three-an'-six for a ticket admittin' lady an' gent."

"Och, I'm no' heedin' aboot dancin'," said

Macgregor, knowing full well that his going was out of the question.

"It'll be a splendid dance. They'll keep it up till three," she informed him.

With his heart in his mouth he enquired who was taking her to the dance.

"Oh, I ha'ena decided yet." She gave her head a becoming little toss. "I've several offers. I'll let them quarrel in the meantime."

Perhaps it was some consolation to know that she had not decided on any particular escort, and that the rivals were at war with one another. While there is strife there is hope.

"Ay; ye'll ha'e plenty offers," he managed to say steadily, and felt rather pleased with himself.

"I'm seriously thinking o' wearin' pink," she told him as they turned into the main street. "It's maybe a wee thing common, but I've been told it suits me."

Macgregor wondered who had told her, and stifling his jealousy, observed that pink was a bonny colour.

. . . "But—but ye wud look fine in ony auld thing." Truly he was beginning to get on.

So, at least, Jessie Mary seemed to think. "Nane o' yer flattery!" she said with a coquettish laugh.

"I wud like fine to see ye at the dance," he said with a sigh.

"Come—an' I'll gi'e ye a couple o' dances—three, if I can spare them." Hitherto Jessie Mary had regarded Macgregor as a mere boy, and sometimes as a bit of a nuisance, but she was the sort of young

woman who cannot have too many strings to her bow.
"I can get ye a ticket," she added encouragingly.

For an instant it occurred to Macgregor to ask her to let him take her to the dance—he would find the money somehow—but the idea died in its birth. He could not both go to the dance and do that which he had already promised himself to do. Besides, she might laugh at him and refuse.

"It's nae use speakin' aboot the dance," he said regretfully. Then abruptly: "Yer birthday's on Tuesday week, is't no'?"

Jessie Mary looked at him. His eyes were on the pavement. "Wha tell't ye that?"

"I heard ye speakin' aboot yer birthday to somebody at the picnic."

"My! ye've a memory!"

"But it's on Tuesday week—the twinty-third? I was wantin' to be sure."

"Weel, it's the twinty-third, sure enough." She heaved an affected sigh. "Nineteen! I'm gettin' auld, Macgreigor. Time I was gettin' a lad! Eh?" She laughed at his confusion of face. "But what for d'ye want to ken aboot ma birthday?" she innocently enquired, becoming graver.

The ingenuousness of the question helped him.

"Aw, I jist wanted to ken, Jessie Mary. Never heed aboot it. I hope ye'll enjoy the dance—when it comes." This was quite a long speech for Macgregor to make, but it might have been even longer had they not just then arrived at the provision shop.

"Here we are," said she cheerfully. She had the decency to ignore the smile of the young man behind

the counter—the young man with the sharp nose and exquisite black moustache; nor did she appear to notice another young man on the opposite pavement who was also gazing quite openly at her. “Here we are, an’ here we part—to meet again, I hope,” she added, with a softer glance.

“I’ll wait till ye’ve got yer messages,” said Macgregor, holding his ground.

She gave him her sweetest smile but one. “Na, Macgregor; it’ll tak’ me a while to get the messages, an’ I’ve ither places to gang afterwards. Maybe I’ll see ye floatin’ aroun’ anither nicht.”

“But I’m no’ in a hurry. I—I wish ye wud let me wait.”

Her very sweetest smile was reserved for the most stubborn cases, and she gave it him now. But her voice though gentle was quite firm. “If ye want to please me, Macgregor, ye’ll no’ wait the nicht.”

He was conquered. She nodded kindly and entered the doorway.

“Guidbye, Jessie Mary,” he murmured, and turned away.

There were no other customers in the shop. Jessie Mary took a seat at the counter. The young man, stroking his moustache, gave her a good-evening tenderly.

“I’m to get to the dance,” she said, solemnly.

The young man’s hand fell to his side. “Wi’ me?” he cried, very eagerly.

“I ha’ena made up ma mind yet, Peter. I want a pair o’ kippers—the biggest ye’ve got.”

III

THE outside of the shop had been painted but recently. Above door and window were blazoned in large gilt letters the words :

STATIONERY AND FANCY GOODS.

Just over the doorway was very modestly printed in white the name of the proprietor :

M. TOD.

What the *M* stood for nobody knew (or cared) unless, perhaps, the person so designated ; and it is almost conceivable that she had forgotten, considering that for five and thirty years she had never heard herself addressed save as Miss Tod.

For five and thirty years M. Tod had kept her shop without assistance. For five and thirty years she had lived in the shop and its back room, rarely going out of doors except to church on Sunday mornings. The grocer along the way had a standing order : practically all the necessities of life, as M. Tod understood them, could be supplied from a grocer's shop. A time had been when M. Tod saved money ; but the last ten years had witnessed a steady shrinking of custom, a dwindling in hopes for a

peaceful, comfortable old age, a shrinking and dwindling in M. Tod herself. A day came when a friendly customer and gossip was startled to behold M. Tod suddenly flop to the floor behind the counter.

A doctor, hastily summoned, brought her back to a consciousness of her drab existence and dingy shop. She was soon ready to go on with both as though nothing had happened. The doctor, however, warned her quite frankly that if she did not take proper nourishment, moderate exercise and abundance of fresh air, she would speedily find herself beyond need of these things.

M. Tod did not want to die, and since she never laughed at anything she could not laugh at the doctor. To some of us life is like a cup of bitter physic with a lump of sugar at the bottom, but no spoon to stir it up with; life, therefore, must be sweet—sooner or later.

On the other hand, obedience to the doctor would involve considerable personal expenditure, not to mention the engaging of an assistant. When M. Tod had reckoned up the remnants of her savings and estimated her financial position generally, she incontinently groaned. Nevertheless, she presently proceeded to prepare a two-line advertisement for the *Evening Express*. She was still in the throes of composition—endeavouring to say in twenty words what she thought in two hundred—when Mr. Baldwin, traveller for a firm of fancy-goods merchants, entered the shop. Acquainted with his kindly manner in the past, she ventured to confide to him her present difficulties.

Mr. Baldwin was not only sympathetic but helpful.

"Why," said he, "my niece Christina might suit you—in fact, I'm sure she would. She is nearly sixteen, and only yesterday finished a full course of book-keeping. More than that, Miss Tod, she has had experience in the trade. Her aunt before her marriage to—er—myself—had a little business like your own, at the coast. I had thought of getting Christina a situation in the wholesale, but I believe it would be better for her to be here, for a time at least. I know she is keen on a place where she can have her own way—I mean to say, have room to carry out her own ideas." Mr. Baldwin halted in some confusion, but speedily recovered. "Anyway," he went on, "give her a trial. Let me send her along to see you this evening."

M. Tod assented, possibly because she feared to hurt the traveller's feelings. "Nearly sixteen" and "keen on a place where she can have her own way" did not sound precisely reassuring to the old woman who had no experience of young folk, and who had been her own mistress for so long.

That evening Christina came, saw and, after a little hesitation, conquered her doubts as to the suitability of the situation. "I'll manage her easy," she said to herself while attending with the utmost demureness to M. Tod's recital of the duties required of her assistant—"I'll manage her easy."

Within six months she had made good her un-uttered words.

It was Saturday afternoon. M. Tod was about to

leave the shop for an airing. Time takes back no wrinkles, yet M. Tod seemed younger than a year ago. She had lost the withered, yellowed complexion of those who worship continually in the Temple of Tannin; her movements were freer; her voice no longer fell at the end of every sentence on a note of hopelessness. Though she had grown some months older, she had become years less aged. She glanced round her shop with an air of pride.

From behind the counter Christina, with a kindly, faintly amused smile, watched her.

"Ay," remarked M. Tod, "everything looks vera nice—vera nice, indeed, dearie. I can see ye've done yer best to follow ma instructions."

It had become a habit with M. Tod to express observations of this sort prior to going out, a habit, also, to accept all Christina's innovations and improvements as originally inspired by herself. Even the painting of the shop, which, when first mooted by the girl, had seemed about as desirable as an earthquake, had gradually become her very own bright idea. Happily Christina had no difficulty in tolerating such gentle injustices; as a matter of fact, she preferred that her mistress should be managed unawares.

"Tak' a squint at the window when ye gang oot," she said, pleasantly. "Ye ha'ena seen it since it was dressed. There's a heap o' cheap trash in it, but it's trash that draws the public noo-a-days."

"Oh, I wudna say that, dearie," said the old woman. "I've aye tried to gi'e folk guid value."

"Ay! Ma aunt was like that—near ruined

hersel' tryin' to gi'e the public what it didna want. What the public wants is gorgeousness—an' it wants it cheap. Abyssinian Gold an' papermashy leather an' so on. See thon photo-frames!"—Christina pointed—"the best sellin' photo-frames ever we had! In a week or so, they get wearit sittin' on the mantel-piece, an' doon they fa' wi' a broken leg; in a fortnight they look as if they had been made in the year ten B.C.! Behold thon purses! Safer to carry yer cash in a paper poke, but the public canna resist the real, *genuine* silver mounts. Observe thon——"

"Weel, weel," Miss Tod mildly interrupted, "it's maybe as ye say, an' I canna deny that custom's improvin'. But it's a sad pity that folk winna buy the best——"

"Oh, let the folk pity theirsels—when they get sense—an' that'll no' be this year. Gi'e them what they want, an' never heed what they need. That's the motto for a shop-keeper. Come ower here for a minute till I sort yer bonnet, or ye'll be lossin' twa o' yer grapes. I hear figs an' onions is to be the favourite trimmin' next Spring. Ye could dae wi' a new bonnet, Miss Tod."

"So I could," the old woman wistfully admitted as she submitted her headgear to her assistant's deft fingers. "I couldna say when I got this yin."

"Oh, I'm no' keen on dates. But"—encouragingly—"we'll tak' stock next week, an' when we've struck the half-year's balance I'll no' be surprised it ye tak' the plunge an' burst a pound-note at the milliners." Christina administered a final pat to the ancient bonnet. "Noo ye're ready for the road."

See an' no' catch cold. I'll ha'e the kettle at the bile against yer return at five."

"I'll no' be late," replied M. Tod who, to tell the truth, was already wishing it were tea-time, and moved to the door.

"I suppose," said Christina, "ye wudna care to call at the Reverend Mr. McTavish's an' politely ask for payment o' his account—consistin' chiefly o' sermon-paper. He's a whale for sermon-paper!"

"Oh, dearie, dearie, I couldna dae that," faltered M. Tod, and made her escape.

"If that account isna paid sune," Christina murmured, "I'll ha'e to gang masel' an' put the fear o' death into the man. Business is business—even when it's releegious."

She looked round the shop to discover if aught required her attention; then being satisfied that nought could be improved, she seated herself on the stool and prepared to do a little book-keeping.

As she dipped her pen, however, the door of the shop was slowly opened, the bell above it banged, and a young man—so she reckoned him—came in. In her quick way, though she had never seen him before, she put him down in her mind as a purchaser of a half-penny football paper. But having recovered from the alarm of the bell and carefully shut the door, he hesitated, surveying his surroundings.

Christina flung back her thick plait of fair hair, slipped from the stool, and came to attention.

"Nice day," she remarked in her best manner. She contrived to get away from the vernacular in her business dealings.

"Ay," The young man smiled absently.

"Nice teeth," thought Christina. (That Macgregor's teeth were good was entirely due to his mother's firmness in the matter of brushing them during his younger days. He was inclined to be proud of them now.)

"Just take a look round," she said aloud.

Macgregor acknowledged the invitation with a nod.

"Was it anything special you wanted to see?" she enquired.

Macgregor regarded her for a moment. "I had a look at yer window," he said, his eyes wandering once more, "but I seen naething dearer nor a shillin'."

"Oh!" exclaimed Christina. Then recovering her dignity—"The window is merely a popular display. We have plenty of more expensive goods within." She felt pleased at having said "within" instead of "inside."

At the word "expensive" Macgregor shrank. "Aboot half-a-croon?" he said diffidently, taking a step towards the door.

"Half-a-crown *and* upwards," said Christina very distinctly. As a matter of fact, the shop contained few articles priced as high as two shillings, the neighbourhood not being noted for its affluence; but one of Christina's mottoes was "First catch your customer and then rook him." "Oh, yes," she added pleasantly, "our goods at half-a-crown are abundant."

For a moment Macgregor doubted she was laughing at him, but a veiled glance at her earnest face

reassured him—nay, encouraged him. He had never bought a present for a lady before, and felt his position keenly. Indeed, he had left his home district to make the purchase in order that he might do so unrecognised.

So with a shy, appealing smile he said :

"It's for a present."

"A present. Certainly!" she replied, lapsing a trifle in the excitement of the moment. "Male or female?"

Macgregor gave her an honest stare.

"Is it for a lady or gent?" she enquired, less abashed by the stare than annoyed with herself for having used the wrong phrase.

"Lady," said Macgregor, with an attempt at boldness, and felt himself getting hot.

"Will you kindly step this way?" came the polite invitation.

Macgregor proceeded to the counter and bumped his knee against the chair that stood there.

"Useful or ornamental?"

"I—I dinna ken," he answered between his teeth.

"I'll break that chair's neck for it some day!" cried Christina, her natural sympathy for suffering getting the better of her commercial instincts. Then she coughed in her best style. "Do you think the young lady would like something to wear?"

"I dinna ken, I'm sure." Macgregor pushed back his cap and scratched his head. "Let's see what ye've got for wearin' an'—an' no' for wearin'."

Christina, too, nearly scratched her head. She

was striving to think where she could lay hands on articles for which she could reasonably charge half-a-crown.

Without very noticeable delay she turned to a drawer, and presently displayed a small green oblong box. She opened it.

"This is a nice fountain-pen," she explained. "It's price has been reduced——"

"Aw, I'm no' heedin' aboot reduced things, thank ye a' the same."

"I'll make it two shillings to you," Christina said persuasively. "That's a very drastic reduction." Which was perfectly true. On the other hand, the pen was an old model which she had long despaired of selling. "Nothing could be more suitable for a young lady," she added, exhibiting the nib. "Real gold."

But Macgregor shook his head.

With apparent cheerfulness she laid the pen aside. "It's for a *young* lady, I think you said?"

"Ay, it's for a young lady, but she's no' that young either. Aboot ma ain age, maybe."

Christina nearly said "about twelve, I suppose," but refrained. She was learning to subdue her tendency to chaff. "I perceive," she said gravely.

"Is she fond of needlework?"

"I couldna say. She's gettin' a pink dress, but I think her mither's sewin' it for her."

"A pink dress!" muttered Christina, forgetting herself. "Oh, Christopher Columbus!" She turned away sharply.

"Eh?"

"She'll be a brunette?" said Christina calmly, though her cheeks were flushed.

"I couldna say," said Macgregor again.

Christina brought forward a tray of glittering things. "These combs are much worn at present," she informed him. "Observe the jewels."

"They'll no' be real," said Macgregor doubtfully.

"Well—a—no. Not exactly *real*. But everybody weers—wears imitation jewellery nowadays. The west-end's full of it—chock-a-block, in fact." She held up a pair of combs of almost blinding beauty. "Chaste—ninepence each."

"Ay," sighed Macgregor, "but I'm no' sure——"

"Silver belt—quite the rage—one shilling."

Macgregor remembered the scarlet belt at the picnic. He had a vague vision of a gift of his in its place. He held out his hand for the glittering object.

"You don't happen to know the size of the lady's waist?" said Christina in a most discreet tone of voice.

"I couldna say." He laid down the belt, but kept looking at it.

"Excuse me," she said softly, lifting the belt and fastening it round her waist. She was wearing a navy skirt and a scarlet flannel shirt, with a white collar and black tie. "My waist is just about medium." She proceeded to put the combs in her hair. "Of course they would look better on a brunette." She permitted herself the faintest of smiles. "But you can see how they look when they're being worn."

Was there a hint of mockery in the bright grey-blue eyes? Macgregor did not observe it; nor was he shocked by the crudity and gaudiness of the ornaments in broad daylight. But perhaps the general effect was not so shocking. Christina, having previously experimented with the ornaments, had a pretty good idea of how they appeared upon her. It would be difficult to describe precisely what Macgregor thought just then, but it is to be feared that he made the sudden and unexpected discovery that Jessie Mary was not the only pretty girl in the world.

"I'll tak' them," he said uneasily, and put his hand in his pocket.

"Thank you," said Christina. "Will that be all to-day?"

"Ay; that'll be a'." He had purposed spending the odd penny of his fund on a birthday card, but for some undefinable reason let the coin fall back into his pocket.

Christina proceeded to make a neat parcel. "You're a stranger here," she remarked pleasantly.

"Ay. But I dinna live far awa'." Now that the ordeal was over, he was feeling more at ease. "Ye've a nice shop miss."

"Do you think so? I'm very glad you got something to suit you in it. Thank you! Half-a-crown—two-and-six exactly. *Good afternoon!*"

It may be that Macgregor would have stopped to make a remark or two on his own account, but just then an elderly woman entered the shop.

"Guidbye, Miss," he murmured, touching his cap, and departed with his purchase.

Christina dropped the silver into the till. To herself she said: "I doobt he's no' as green as he's cabbage-lookin'." Aloud: "Nice day, Mrs. Dunn. Is your little grandson quite well again?"

IV

FOR some weeks Macgregor had nourished an idea of making the birthday presentation with his own hands. In fancy he had beheld his own gallant proffering of the gifts, and Jessie Mary's shy acceptance of the same. Why he should have foreseen himself bold and Jessie Mary bashful is a question that may be left to those who have the profound insight necessary to diagnose the delicate workings of a youthful and lovelorn imagination. At the same time he had harboured many hopeful fears and fearful hopes, but to divulge these in detail would be sacrilege.

On the day following the purchase of the gifts, however, his original plan, so simple and straightforward, would seem to have lost something of its attractiveness. Perhaps he was suddenly assailed by the cowardice of modesty; possibly he argued, in effect, that the offering would gain in importance by impersonal delivery. At all events, he endeavoured, on the way to church, to borrow from Willie Thomson the sum of threepence—the charge for delivery demanded by a heartless post-office. Unfortunately Willie's finances just then were in a most miserable state, so much so that on this very

morning he had been compelled to threaten his aunt, with whom and on whom he lived, with the awful vow never to enter a church again unless she supplied him with twopence on the spot. (This, of course, in addition to the customary penny for "the plate.")

He jingled the coins in his pocket while he confided to Macgregor his tale of a hard world, and continued to do so while he waited for the sympathy which past experience of his friend led him to expect.

It was therefore something of a shock to Willie when Macgregor, privately fondling the penny which he had not spent on a birthday card, replied: "I could manage wi' the tuppence, Wullie. An' I'll pay ye back on Seturday, sure."

"Eh?" Willie stopped jingling and clutched his coins tightly.

Macgregor repeated his words hopefully.

"Aw, but I canna len' ye the tuppence," said Willie, almost resentfully; adding, "But I'll gi'e ye a ceegarette or twa when I buy some."

"I'm no' wantin' yer ceegarettes," Macgregor returned, his eyes on the pavement.

Willie shot at him a curious glance. "What for d'ye want the tuppence? Ha'e ye been bettin' on horses?"

For a moment Macgregor was tempted to plead guilty of that or any other crime on the chance of gaining the other's sympathies and pence. Instead, however, he answered with caution: "I'll maybe tell ye, if ye'll len' me the tuppence."

Willie laughed. "I'm no' sae green. Ye best get yer fayther to gi'e ye the money."

"Clay up!" snapped Macgregor, and remained silent for the rest of the journey.

Had the money been required for any other object in the world, Macgregor would probably have gone straightway to his father and frankly asked for it. But the limits of confidence between son and parent are reached when the subject is a girl. Nevertheless, it was to the boy's credit that he never dreamed of attempting to obtain his father's help under false pretences.

That night he came to the dismal decision to deliver the package himself at Jessie Mary's door, at an hour when Jessie Mary would be certain to be out. There was nothing else for it, as far as he could see just then.

The following morning's light found him at his work—no longer, alas! in the far west-end with its windfall of pennies for the car, but in the heart of the city. The man under whom he worked found him so slow and stupid that he threatened to report him to his employer. Altogether it was a dreary day, and Macgregor, who usually paid enough attention to his duties to escape the burden of time, was more than glad when the last working hour had dragged to its close.

He went home by an unaccustomed though not entirely unfamiliar route. It led him past the shop wherein he had made the birthday purchases on Saturday afternoon. The window was more brightly illuminated than the majority of its neighbours; the garish contents were even more attractive than in daylight. Macgregor found himself regarding them

with a half-hearted interest. Presently he noticed that one of the sliding glass panels at the back of the window was open a few inches. This aperture permitted him to see the following : A hand writing a letter on a sloping desk, a long plait of fair hair over a scarlet shoulder, and a youthful profile with an expression very much in earnest yet cheerful withal.

Macgregor could not help watching the writer, and he continued to do so for several minutes with increasingly lively interest. He was even wondering to whom the letter might be written, when the writer, having dipped her pen too deeply, made a horrid, big blot. She frowned and for an instant put out her tongue. Then, having regarded the blot for a space with a thoughtful gaze, she seized the pen and with a few deft touches transformed the blot into the semblance of a black beetle. Whereupon she smiled with such transparent delight that Macgregor smiled also.

"What are ye grinnin' at ?" said a voice at his elbow.

He turned to discover Willie Thomson. At no time in the whole course of their friendship had he felt a keener desire to hit Willie on his impudent nose. "Naething," he muttered shortly. "Are ye gaun hame ?"

"Ay," said Willie, noting the other's discomposure, but not referring to it directly. "This isna yer usual road hame."

"Depends whaur I'm comin' frae," returned Macgregor, quickening his pace. "Ha'e ye got a job yet, Wullie ?" he enquired more graciously.

"I tried yin the day, but it's no' gaun to suit me. But I've earned ninepence. I can len' ye thon thruppence, if ye like."

"Aw, I'm no' needin' it noo."

"Weel, ha'e a ceegarette." Willie produced a yellow packet.

"Na, I'm no' smokin', Wullie."

"What's wrang wi' ye?"

"Naething . . . What sort of job was ye tryin'?"

Willie told him, and thereafter proceeded to recount as many grievances as there had been hours in his working day. Macgregor encouraged him to enter into all sorts of detail, so that home was reached without reference to the shop window which had caused him amusement.

"So long," said Willie, lighting a fresh cigarette. "Maybe see ye later."

"Ah, it's likely," Macgregor replied, and turned into the close, glad to escape.

"Haud on!" cried Willie.

"What?" Macgregor halted with reluctance.

Willie sniggered. "I seen ye wi' Jessie Mary the ither nicht."

"Did ye?" retorted Macgregor feebly.

"Ay; an' if I was you, I wud let girls alane. They're nae fun, an' they're awfu' expensive."

With which sage advice Willie walked off.

Macgregor made up his mind not to leave the house that evening, yet eight o'clock found him at the foot of the street wherein Jessie Mary lived. But he did not go up the street, and at the end of five minutes he strolled the way he had taken two hours earlier.

As he approached a certain shop the light in its window went out. He marched home quickly, looking neither right nor left.

On the following evening he hired a small boy for the sum of one halfpenny to deliver the package to Jessie Mary at her abode, and straightway returned to the parental fireside, where he blushed at the welcome accorded him.

That night, however, fate willed it that John Robinson should run out of tobacco. Macgregor, who had been extremely restless, expressed himself ready to step down to the tobacco shop in the main street.

Here it must be mentioned that the gifts had reached Jessie Mary at precisely the right moment. They had raised her spirits from the depths of despair to at least the lower heights of hope. Only an hour before their arrival she had learned how the young man with the exquisite moustache had treacherously invited another young lady to accompany him to the Ironmongers' dance; and although to the ordinary mind this may appear to have been the simple result of a lack of superhuman patience on the young man's part, Jessie Mary could perceive in it nothing but the uttermost perfidy. So that until the arrival of Macgregor's present—"to J. M. from M. with best wishes" (an "l" had been scraped out where the second "w" now stood)—she had felt like tearing the pink frock to tatters and preparing for the tomb.

They met near the tobacconist's—on Macgregor's

home side, by the way—and he could not have looked more guilty had he sent her an infernal machine.

"It was awful kind o' ye," she said sweetly; "jist *awful* kind."

"Aw, it was naething," he stammered.

"They're jist lovely, an' that fashionable," she went on, and gradually led the conversation to the subject of the United Ironmongers' dance.

"Ye should come," she said, "an' see hoo nice I look wi' them on. The belt'll be lovely wi' ma pink frock. An' the combs was surely made for black hair like mines. Of course I tried them on the minute I got them."

"Did ye?" murmured Macgregor. Where was all the feverish joy, the soft rapture anticipated three nights ago? "Did ye?"—that was all he said.

She made allowance for his youth and the bashfulness she had so often experienced. "Macgregor," she whispered, slipping her hand through his arm, in the darkness of the street leading to her home, "Macgregor, I believe I wud suner dance wi' you than onybody else."

Macgregor seemed to have nothing to say. The touch of her hand was pleasant, and yet he was uneasy.

"Macgregor," she said presently, a little breathlessly, "I'm no' heedin' aboot ony o' the chaps that wants to tak' me to the dance. If ye had a ticket——" She paused. They had halted in the close-mouth, as it is locally termed. "I'm sayin',

Macgregor, if ye had a ticket——" She paused again.

The boy felt foolish and wretched. "But I canna gang to the dance, Jessie Mary," he managed to say.

She leaned closer to him. "It'll be a splendid dance—at least"—she looked at him boldly—"it wud be splendid if you and me was gaun thegether."

In his wildest of wild dreams he may have thought of kissing this girl. He might have done it now—quite easily.

But he didn't—he couldn't.

"Na; I canna gang," he said. "An'—an' ma fayther'll be waitin' for his tobacco. Guidnicht." He glanced at her with a miserable smile, and departed—bolted.

Poor Jessie Mary with her little natural vanities! Poor Macgregor! He went home hot and ashamed—he could not have told why. He did not grudge the gifts, yet vaguely wished he had not given them.

And he dreamed that night of, among other queer things, a shop window, a plait of fair hair on a scarlet shoulder, and a black beetle.

V

"MERCY, laddie!" exclaimed Mrs. Robinson, as her son entered the kitchen, a little late for tea. "What ha'e ye been daein' to yer face?"

The colour induced by the question seemed almost to extinguish the hectic spot at Macgregor's left cheek-bone.

"Washin' it," he answered shortly, taking his accustomed chair.

"But it's cut."

"Tits, Lizzie!" muttered Mr. Robinson. "Are ye for toast, Macgregor?"

"He's been shavin' his whiskers," said Jimsie. "Did ye no' ken Macgregor's gettin' whiskers, Maw?" he went on in spite of a warning pressure from sister Jeannie. "Paw, what way dae folk get whiskers?"

"Dear knows," returned his father briefly. "Lizzie, can ye no' gi'e Macgregor a cup o' tea?"

Lizzie lifted the cosy from the brown teapot. "Where did ye get the razor, Macgregor?"

"He hasna got a razor, Maw," said Jimsie. "He does it wi' a wee knife."

"Shurrup!" Macgregor growled, whereupon Jimsie choked and his eyes filled with tears.

"Macgregor," said his mother, "that's no' the way to speak to yer wee brither."

"Macgregor," said his sister, "I'll mak' ye a bit o' hot toast, if ye like."

"Ay, Jeannie," said John quickly, "mak' him a bit o' hot toast, an' I'll look after Jimsie." He turned the conversation to the subject of a great vessel that had been launched into the Clyde that morning.

Sullenly Macgregor took the cup from his mother's hand and forthwith devoted his attention to his meal. Seldom had resentment taken such possession of his soul. Another word from his mother or Jimsie, and he would have retorted violently and flung out of the room. The mild intervention of his sister and father had saved a scene. Though his face cooled, his heart remained hot; though hungry, he ate little, including the freshly made toast, which he accepted with a gracelessness that probably shamed him even more than it hurt Jeannie. Poor sensitive, sulky youth!—a hedgehog with its skin turned outside-in could not suffer more.

For the first time in the course of his married life John Robinson really doubted Lizzie's discretion. It was with much diffidence, however, that he referred to the matter after Macgregor had gone out, and while Jeannie was superintending Jimsie's going to bed.

"Lizzie," he began, eyeing his cold pipe, "did ye happen to notice that Macgregor was a wee thing offended the nicht?"

Mrs. Robinson did not halt in her business of polishing a bread plate. "Macgregor's gettin' ower easy offended," she said, carelessly enough.

John struck a match and held it without application to his pipe until the flame scorched his hardened fingers. "Speakin' frae experience," he said slowly, "there's twa things that a young man tak's vera serious-like. The first——"

"Wha's the young man?"

"Macgregor. . . . Aw, Lizzie!"

"Macgregor's a laddie."

"He's a young man—an' fine ye ken it, wife!"

Lizzie put down the plate and took up another.

"An' what does he tak' serious-like?" she enquired, coolly.

"Firstly," said John, with a great effort, and stuck.

"Ye'll be preachin' a sermon directly," said she.

"Can ye no' licht yer pipe an' speak nateral?"

"Hoo can I speak nateral when I ken ye're makin' a mock o' me?"

"Havers, man!" she said, becoming good-humoured lest he should lose his temper; "licht yer pipe. I'm listenin'."

John lit his pipe in exceedingly methodical fashion.

"Weel, Lizzie," he began at last, "I jist wanted to say that when a young man's gettin' hair on his face, ye—ye shouldna notice it."

"I didna notice it."

"Weel, ye shouldna refer to it."

"It was the cut I referred to."

John sucked at his pipe and scratched his head.

"That's true," he admitted. "Still, if yer sister had a wudden leg, ye wudna refer to the noise on the stair. It wasna like ye, Lizzie, to hurt Macgreegor's feelin's."

Mrs. Robinson put down the plate with an unusual clatter. Hurt Macgreegor's feelings!—She?—The idea! "Are ye feenished?" she snapped.

John nerved himself. "There's anither thing that it's best no' to refer to—anither thing that a young man tak's vera serious-like. When a young man begins to tak' an interest in the lassies——"

"Oh, man, can ye no stop haverin'?" she cried.

"Ha'e ye forgot the laddie's age?"

"It's the shavin' age, an' that means——"

"Ma brither Rubbert was nineteen afore he put a razor to his face."

"Yer brither Rubbert was never what I wud ca' a female fancier. Of course that wasna his fau't; he was jist as the Lord made him, and he's turned oot a vera successful man, an' for a' we ken his wife Sarah's maybe better nor she's bonny. But yer son Macgreegor——"

"Macgreegor wud never look at the lassies. He's ower shy."

"Whiles it's the kind that doesna look that leaps the furdest. But there's waur things in the world nor razors and lassies," said John, with a feeble laugh, "an' I jist wanted to warn ye no' to ask questions, even though ye should see Macgreegor weerin' his Sunday tie every nicht in the week! I hope ye're no' offended, Lizzie."

But it is to be feared that Lizzie was offended just

then. She had not been the better half for eighteen years without knowing it ; she had grown to expect her easy-going husband's cheerful acquiescence in practically all she did, and to regard her acceptance of his most mild remonstrances as a sort of favour. And now he was actually giving her advice concerning her treatment of her firstborn ! It was too much for her pride.

She set her mouth in a hard line, threw up her head, and proceeded with her polishing.

John waited for a couple of minutes, then sighed and took up his evening paper.

* * * *

Meanwhile Macgregor was having his troubles. He contrived to dodge Willie Thomson, who nowadays seemed always to be where he was not wanted, but the operation involved a *detour* of nearly a quarter of a mile, in the course of which he was held up by another youth of his acquaintance. Ten minutes were wasted in listening with ill-concealed impatience to fatuous observations on the recent play of certain professional footballers, and then he continued his journey only to fall, metaphorically speaking, into the arms of Jessie Mary emerging from a shop.

"Hullo, Mac ! I thought ye was deid !" was her blithe greeting, the 'sausage roll' phrase having at long last served its day. "Ye're in a hurry," she added, "but so am I, so ye can walk back to the corner wi' me."

Macgregor mumbled something to the effect that

he was in no special hurry, and, possibly in order to give a touch of truth to his falsehood, turned and accompanied her.

"Ye've no' been gi'ein' the girls a treat lately," she remarked. "I ha'ena noticed ye floatin' aroun'. Ha'e ye been keepin' the hoose at nicht?"

"Whiles," he replied, and enquired with some haste, "Hoo did ye enjoy the dance last week, Jessie?"

"Oh, dinna mention it!" she cried, with a toss of her head. "I didna gang to it."

"Ye didna gang to the dance!"

"If I had went, it wud ha'e meant bloodshed," she impressively informed him. "Ye see, there was twa chaps implorin' me to gang wi' them, an' they got that fierce aboot it that I seen it wudna ha'e been safe to gang wi' either. A riot in a ball-room is no' a nice thing. An' if I had went wi' a third party, it wud ha'e been as much as *his* life was worth. So I jist bided at hame."

Macgregor began, but was not allowed to complete, a sympathetic remark.

"Oh, I was glad I didna gang. The dance turned out to be a second-rate affair entirely—no' half-a-dizzen shirt fronts in the comp'ny. An' I believe there wasna three o' the men could dance for nuts, an' the refreshments was rotten."

They had now reached the appointed corner.

"Jist as weel ye didna gang, then," absently said Macgregor, halting.

"Come up to the close," said Jessie Mary. "I've something to show ye. Ay; it was jist as weel, as

ye say. But there's a champion dance comin' off on the nineteenth o' November—the young men o' the hosiery department are gettin' it up—naething second-rate aboot *it*. Ye should come to it, Macgregor." She touched his arm—unintentionally perhaps. "Plenty o' pretty girls—though I wudna guarantee their dancin'. I've no' decided yet wha I'll gang wi'." She paused. Macgregor did not speak. "Ye see, I'm parteec'lar wha I dance wi'," she went on softly, "an' I expec' you're the same. Some girls are like bags o' flour an' ithers are like telegraph poles, but there'll be few o' that sort at the hosiery dance. An' onyway"—she laughed—"ye could aye fa' back on *this* girl—eh?"

"I dinna think ye wud be that hard up for a partner," said Macgregor, suddenly stimulated by a flash of her eyes in the lamplight. "But I'm no' awfu' keen on the dancin'."

"Ye danced fine when ye was a wee laddie. I mind when ye danced the Highland Fling in the kitchen, on Hogmanay. That was the nicht I had to kiss ye to get ye oot o' the ring. Ye was ower shy to kiss me. An' you an' Wullie Thomson started a fightin', because he laughed. D'ye mind?"

"That's an auld story," he said, with embarrassment.

"I suppose it is," she admitted reluctantly. Then cheerfully: "Weel, here we are! But wait till I let ye see something." She halted at the mouth of the close and began to unbutton her jacket.

"Ye've never seen the belt since ye gi'ed it to me Macgregor. I weer it whiles in the evenin'. There

ye are ! It looks fine, does it no' ? Maybe a wee thing wide. I could dae wi' it an inch or twa tighter. Feel."

She took his hand and slid his fingers between the metal and the white cotton blouse. Jessie Mary had at least one quite admirable characteristic : she doted on white garments and took pride in their spotlessness. A very elemental sense for the beautiful, yet who dare despise it ? In these grimy days purity of any kind is great gain.

This girl's hunger for the homage and admiration of the other sex was not so much abnormal as unrestrained. Her apparent lack of modesty was in reality a superabundance of simplicity—witness her shallow artifices and transparent little dishonesties which deceived few save herself and the callowest of youths. Men "took their fun off her." And even Macgregor was not to be entrapped now. There is nothing so dead as the fallen fancy of a boy. Moreover, Macgregor was still at the stage when a girl's face is her whole fortune, when the trimmest waist and the prettiest curves are no assets whatsoever.

For a moment or two he fingered the belt, awkwardly, to be sure, but with as much emotion as though it were a dog's collar.

"Ay," he said, "ye're ower jimp for it." And put his hand in his pocket.

Then, indeed, it was forced on Jessie Mary that somehow her charms had failed to hold her youngest admirer. The knowledge rankled. Yet she carried it off fairly well.

"Ye're no' the first to tell me I've an extra sma' waist," she said, with a toss of her head. Then, as if struck by a remembrance of some duty or engagement: "But I've nae mair time to stan' gassin' wi' you. So long!" She ran briskly up the stone stair, humming a popular tune.

"So long," returned Macgregor, and resumed his interrupted journey, rather pleased than otherwise with himself. He realised, though not in so many words, that he had conducted himself in more manly fashion than ever before. It did not for a moment occur to him that he had left a big "Why?" behind him, not only in the mind of Jessie Mary, but in Willie Thomson's also.

His pilgrimage ended at the illuminated window of M. Tod's stationery and fancy goods shop. Jangling the few coppers in his pocket, he appeared to be deliberating a weighty problem of extensive purchases, while, as a matter of fact, he inwardly debated the most profitable ways of wasting a penny. While he would now gladly have given all he possessed—to wit, ninepence—to win a smile from the girl with the scarlet blouse and the ripe-corn-yellow pigtail, he was not prepared to squander more than he could help for the benefit of her employer. The opaque panels at the back of the window were closed, the door of the shop was composed chiefly of ground glass; wherefore he had no inkling as to which person he was likely to encounter at the receipt of custom. He was hoping and waiting for a customer to enter the shop, so that he might gain a glimpse of the

interior with the opening of the door, when suddenly the lights in the window were lowered. Evidently it was near to closing time.

Hastily deciding to "burst" the sum of one penny on the purchase of a pencil—an article for which he had more respect than use—he entered the doorway and turned the handle. He had forgotten the spring bell. When he pushed the door inwards, it "struck one"—right from the shoulder, so to speak. Who will assert that the ordinary healthy youth has no nerves? 'Tis a hoggishly healthy youth who does not bristle with them. The sturdy Macgregor wavered on the threshold; and as he wavered he heard behind him a badly stifled guffaw.

Next moment a hearty push in the small of the back propelled him into the shop. With a hot countenance he pulled up, guessing who had pushed him, and strove to look as if this were his usual mode of entering a place of business. In his confusion he missed the quick glance of the girl seated at the desk on the window-end of the counter. Her head was bent low over her writing. He noticed, however, that she was wearing a white blouse—which did not remind him of Jessie Mary—and that she had a scarlet bow at her neck.

"Yes, sir?" A mouse-like human being slipped from the back of the shop to the middle point of the counter. "Yes, sir?" it repeated, with an accent on the query. The girl at the desk took no notice.

Macgregor approached. "I was wantin' a pencil,"

he said in the tone of one requesting a pint of prussic acid.

"A pencil!" exclaimed the mouse-like human being, as though she had a dim recollection of hearing of such a thing long, long ago. "A pencil—oh, certainly," she added, more hopefully.

"Penny or ha'penny," murmured the girl at the desk.

"Penny or ha'penny?" demanded the mouse-like human being, almost pertly.

Men didn't expect change out of a penny! "A penny yin," said Macgregor with an attempt at indifference. He tried to look at the girl, but could not get his eyes higher than her elbow.

"A penny pencil!" The mouse-like human being assumed an expression suitable to a person who has just discovered the precise situation of the North Pole, but not the Pole itself.

"Top drawer on your left, Miss Tod," whispered the girl at the desk.

"Quite so, Christina," Miss Tod replied with dignity. There were times when she might have been accused of copying her assistant's manners. She opened the drawer, which was a deep one, peered into it, groped, and brought forth three bundles of pencils. With sudden mildness she enquired of the girl: "These? . . . Those?"

"No; them!" said Christina, forgetting her grammar and grabbing the third bundle. "Wait a minute." She slipped lightly from her stool and gently edged M. Tod from the position at the counter

which had been familiar to the latter for five-and-thirty years. "This," she said to Macgregor, laying the bundle in front of him, "is a special line. One dozen — price threepence." She looked over his head in a manner suggesting that it was quite immaterial to her whether he purchased the dozen or faded away on the spot.

But he had his dignity too. Producing three pennies from two pockets, he laid them on the counter, took up the bundle of pencils, said "Thank ye" to nobody in particular, and marched out. Nor did he forget to close the door behind him.

The stationer and her assistant regarded each other for several seconds.

"Dae ye think," said M. Tod slowly, "that that young man is a newspaper reporter?"

"No," replied Christina, with a sniff or two of her straight little nose.

"Or a pictur' artist?" said M. Tod, conveying the two bundles to the wrong drawer.

Christina, without a word, recovered them and put them into their proper places. She mounted her stool and whipped up a pen.

M. Tod sighed. "I never used to keep pencils at that price. They canna be vera guid."

"They're rotten."

"Oh, lassie!"

"Sell—or gang bankrupt," said Christina with enough bitter cynicism for twenty-one. "There's

a penny profit on the bundle. *Ex—cuse me.*" She dipped her pen.

* * * * *

As Macgregor was nearing his home, a prey to misery and wrath, a grinning face popped from a close-mouth.

"Haw! haw! Macgreegor! So ye're courtin', are ye?"

As the clock incontinently strikes when the hour has come, so struck Macgregor. And he struck so hard, that it was afterwards necessary he should see Willie Thomson to the latter's door. Alone again, he cast the bundle of pencils into a dark entry and made his way home.

His father opened the door, smiling a welcome. "Weel, Macgreegor——"

"I'm wearied," said the boy, and passed straight-way to his room and bolted the door. Jimsie was sleeping like a log, and was, as usual, occupying most of the bed.

Macgregor stood at the old chest of drawers that served as dressing-table, his elbows planted thereon, his face in his hands. He *was* wearied.

But under his tired eyes lay a small oblong package with a covering of newspaper. The neatness of it made him think of his mother; she had a way of making next to nothing look something important in a parcel.

Presently, wondering a little, he undid the paper. It contained one of his father's old razors.

Five minutes later he was enjoying a *real* shave.

The luxury was only exceeded by the importance he felt! And only two cuts that bled worth mentioning. . . .

How one's life may be changed in a short couple of hours!

But Macgregor was still without regret for having flung the pencils into the dark entry.

VI

CIRCUMSTANCE rather than circumspection was accountable for the fact that Macgregor followed the elusive, winding trail of love alone. The tender adventures of our 'teens usually consist in encounters between two boys and two girls; two friends who tacitly admit that they want to meet the girls; two friends who pretend that they do not want to see the boys at any distance; and to sum up, two pairs of young human beings with but a single thought—themselves. Also it may happen, now and then, that for lack of likelier company Prince Charming goes hunting with Master Fathead, while Princess Lilian Rose lays the scent along with Miss Gooseberry, which but adds plausibility to the assumption that neither sex has the courage of its inclinations. For, to be honest, there is no cowardice like that of lad's love; no hypocrisy like that of lass's. But, surely you remember! And if so it happened that in your own day you, perforce, fared solitary to the chase, you will sympathise all the more with the unheroic hero of this slight record.

In this respect Macgregor was not fortunate in his male friends. The oldest thereof, Willie Thomsom,

openly contemned the female sex, not omitting his aunt; the others confined their gallantries to the breezy pastimes of pushing girls off the sidewalk, bawling pleasantries after them, and guffawing largely at their own wit or the feminine *repartee*. Their finer instincts were doubtless still dormant. The only mortals worthy of respect were sundry more or less prominent personages whose feet or fists were their fortunes. In these days the adoration of the active by the inert is, one hopes, at its zenith of inflation. Again, to put it now in metaphor, Macgregor's friends could do with a brass band in scarlet uniform all the time, but they had no use for a secret orchestra of muted strings. All of which was perfectly natural—just as natural as Macgregor's inexplicable preference for the secret orchestra. Spring comes early or late; the calendar neither foretells nor records its coming. A lad and a lass—how and when and why the one first realises that the other is more than a mere human being are questions without answers. Well, it is a mercy that the world still holds something that cannot be explained away. In one sense this boy was no more refined than his neighbours; in another they were coarser than he. Remains the fact that he followed the trail alone—or thought he did.

Willie Thomson, for one, was interested. He had been interested to the extent of grinning in Macgregor's early tenderness for little Katie, and to the extent of sniggering in his friend's bashful pursuit of Jessie Mary. But now the interest was that of the boy who discovers a nest just beyond his

hand and wonders what sort of eggs he will get if, somehow, he can reach it. On the whole, Willie resented his swollen nose and cut lip less than the recent ill-disguised attempts to avoid his company. The latter rankled. Truth to tell, without Macgregor he was rather a lonely creature, a kind of derelict. No one really wanted him. He was not without acquaintances, shirkers like himself; but in the congregation of loafers is no true comradeship. Without admitting it even to himself, he still admired the boy who had faithfully championed his cause—not always virtuous—in the past, whose material possessions he had invariably shared, whose stolid sense of honour had so often puzzled his own mischievous mind, whose home he had envied despite a certain furtive dread of the woman who ruled there. Altogether it may be questioned whether Willie's grudge was directed against his old friend and not against that which had caused his old friend's defection. At all events, he began to spare Macgregor any necessity for dodging, and took to shadowing him on his solitary strolls.

On the grey Saturday afternoon of the week rendered so eventful by his first real shave, Macgregor was once more standing by the window of M. Tod's shop. He was endeavouring to prop up his courage with the recollection of the fact that a fortnight ago, at the same hour as the present, there had been no old woman behind the counter, and with the somewhat rash deduction that no old woman was there now.

He was also wondering what he could buy for a

penny without making a fool of himself. The spending of a penny when there is absolutely nothing one wants to buy is not quite so simple a transaction as at first thought it may seem—unless, of course, the shop is packed with comestibles; and even then one may hesitate to choose. Besides, Macgregor was obsessed by the memory of the pencil transaction of three nights ago. Had he but kept his head then, and confined his purchase to a single pencil, he might now have had a fair excuse for requiring another. At any rate, he could have met suspicion with the explanation that he had lost the first. But who would believe that he had used, or lost, a whole dozen within the brief space of three days?

A wretched position to be in, for nothing else in the world of stationery was quite so natural and easy to ask for as a pencil—unless a——Why had he not thought of it before?—a pen! Saved! He would enter boldly, as one who had every right to do so, and demand to be shown some pencils—no, pens, of course. There were many varieties of pens, he knew, even in small shops, so his selection would take time—lots of time! If only he were *sure* the old woman wasn't there.

And just then the bell rang, the door of the shop opened and closed, and the old woman herself came out. In spite of her hat Macgregor recognised her at once. She turned her face skywards to make certain that it wasn't raining, gave a satisfied smirk, which Macgregor accepted with a fearful start, though it was intended for the window and its contents, and trotted up the street.

On the wave of relief, as it were, Macgregor was carried from the window to the entrance. Yet he had no sooner opened the door with its disconcerting note of warning than he wished he had delayed a minute or two longer. To retire, however, was out of the question. He closed the door as though he were afraid of wakening a baby, and faced the counter.

The girl was there, and wearing the scarlet blouse again. Laying aside the magazine which she had just picked up, she smiled coldly and said calmly: "Good-afternoon. Nice day after the rain."

In mentally rehearsing his entrance the previous night Macgregor had, among other things, seen himself raise his brand-new bowler hat. To his subsequent shame and regret, he now omitted to perform the little courtesy. That he should forget his manners was perhaps even less surprising than that he should forget the hat itself, which gripped his head in a cruel fashion.

"Ay," he said solemnly in response to the polite greeting, and advanced to the counter.

"Not just so disagreeable as yesterday," she added, a trifle more cordially.

"Ay—na." He glanced up and down the counter. "I—I was wantin' a pencil," he said at last.

"A *pencil*!" cried Christina; then in a voice from which all the amazement had gone: "A pencil—oh, certainly."

Macgregor reddened, opened his mouth and—shut it. Why should he make a bigger fool of himself by explaining that he had meant to say "a pen?"

Besides (happy thought!), the pen would be an excuse for calling another time.

Christina opened the drawer and paused, pursing her lips. Her tone was casual as she said: "I hope you found the dozen you bought lately quite satisfactory."

"Oh—ay, they were — splendid." Macgregor blushed again.

Christina smiled as prettily as any musical comedy actress selling guinea button-holes at a charity fête. She said: "I'll tell Miss Tod. She'll be delighted. It's a great saving, buying a dozen, isn't it?" Her hand went into the drawer. "Especially when one uses so many. It's hardly worth while buying a single pencil, is it?" Her hand came out of the drawer and laid a bundle in front of Macgregor. "Wonderful how they can do it for threepence!"

He stared at the bundle, his will fluttering like a bird under a strawberry net. Dash the pencils! —but she might be offended if——

"Some shops sell those pencils at a ha'penny each, I know," she went on; "and I believe some have the neck—I mean the cheek to ask a penny. Would you like me to put them in paper, sir?"

Recovering from the shock of the "sir," Macgregor shook his head, and laid three coppers on the counter.

"Thank you," said she. "Is there anything else to-day?"

Before he could answer, the door opened and an elderly man entered. At the ring of the bell Macgregor dropped the bundle; the flimsy fastening parted, and the pencils were scattered.

Christina checked an "Oh, crickey!" and turned to attend to the second customer while the first collected his purchases from the floor.

The elderly man wanted a newspaper only, but, thanks to Christina's politeness over the transaction, he went out feeling as if he had done quite a stroke of business.

"I think you should let me tie them up for you," she said to Macgregor, who was rising once more, rather red in the face.

"Thank ye," he said apologetically, handing her the pencils.

"Accidents will happen," she remarked cheerfully.

"If they didn't, there would be mighty little happening. I say, there's only eleven pencils here."

"The ither rolled ablow the counter. It doesna matter," he said.

"Oh, but that won't do. See, I'll give you another now, and get the one under the counter some day—next stock-taking, maybe." She began to make a parcel, then halted in the operation. "Are you sure there's nothing else to-day, sir?"

Macgregor didn't want to go just yet, so he appeared to be thinking deeply.

"Essay paper—notebooks," she murmured; "notepaper—envelopes—indiarubber——"

"Injinrubber," said Macgregor. (He would give it to Jimsie.)

She turned and whipped a box from a shelf. "Do you prefer the red or the white—species?" she enquired, and felt glad she hadn't said "sort."

"Oh, I'm no heedin' which," he replied generously, with a bare glance at the specimens laid out for his inspection.

"All the same price—one penny per cake. The red is more flexible." By way of exhibiting its quality, she took the oblong lengthwise between her finger and thumb and squeezed. To her dismay it sprang from her grip and struck her customer on the chin.

"Oh, mercy!" she exclaimed, "I didna mean—"

Recovering the missile from the floor, he said gravely: "My! ye're a comic!"

"I'm not! I tell ye I didna mean it. Did it hurt ye?"

"No' likely! I ken ye didna try it." He smiled faintly. "If ye had tried to hit me, ye wud ha'e missed me."

"If I had tried, I wud ha'e hit ye a heap harder," she said indignantly.

"Try, then." His smile broadened as he offered her the cake. "I'll stan' still."

Christina's sporting instinct was roused. "I'll bet ye the price o' the cake I hit ye." And let fly.

It went over his left shoulder.

"Ha'e anither shot," he said, stooping to pick up the rubber.

But as swiftly as it had gone her professional dignity returned. Macgregor came back to the counter to receive a stiff: "Thank you. Do you require anything else to-day?"

His mumbled negative, his disappointed countenance reproached her.

"Of course," she said pleasantly, as she put his purchases in paper, "I cannot charge you for the indiarubber."

"Aw, cheese it!" he muttered shortly, flinging a penny on the counter.

"I beg your pardon?"—this with supreme haughtiness.

"Oh, ye needna. An' ye can keep yer injinrubber—an' yer pencils forbye!" With these words he wheeled about and strode for the door.

Christina collapsed. A customer who paid for goods and then practically threw them at her was beyond her experience and comprehension.

"Here!" she cried. "Stop a minute! I—I was jist jokin'. Come back an' get yer things. We'll no' quarrel about the penny."

With his fingers on the handle he paused and regarded her half angrily, half reproachfully. He wanted to say something very cutting, but it wouldn't come.

"Please," said Christina softly, dropping her eyes.

"Ye'll get me into trouble if ye dinna tak' them."

"Eh?"

"Miss Tod wud be vexed wi' me for lossin' a guid customer. She wud gi'e me the sack, maybe."

"Wud she?—the auld besom!" cried Macgregor, retracing his steps.

"Oh, whisht! She's no' an auld besom. But I ken she wud be vexed." Christina sighed. "I suppose I'm to blame for——"

"It's me that's to blame," he interrupted.

"Here!" he said in an unsteady whisper, "will ye shake han's?"

After a momentary hesitation she gave him her hand, saying graciously: "I've no objections, I'm sure. To tell the truth," she went on, "I am not entirely disinterested in you, sir."

Macgregor withdrew his empty hand. "I—I wish ye wudna speak like that," he sighed.

"Like what?"

"That awfu' genteel talk."

"Sorry," she said. "But it gangs doon wi' maist o' the customers. Besides, I try to keep it up to please ma aunt. But it doesna soun' frien'ly-like, does it?"

"That's why I dinna like it," he ventured.

"I see. But if ye was servin' in a shop ye wud ha'e to speak the same way."

"I'm in the pentin' trade," he informed her, with an air of importance.

"I've a nose—but I like the smell fine. Ye're no' offended, are ye?"

"I'm no' that easyoffended. Is Miss Tod yer aunt?"

"Na, na; she's nae relation. Ma aunt is Mrs. James Baldwin." In the frankest fashion she gave a brief sketch of her position on the world's surface. While she spoke she seated herself on the stool, and Macgregor, without thinking about it, subsided upon the chair and leant his arm upon the counter. Ere she ended they were regarding each other almost familiarly.

Anon Macgregor furnished a small account of himself and his near relatives.

"That's queer!" commented Christina when he had finished.

"What?" he asked, anxiously.

"Ma Uncle James is a great frien' o' your Uncle Purdie. Your uncle buys a heap o' fancy things frae mine, an' he's often been in oor hoose. I hear he's worth a terrible heap o' money, but naebody wud think it. I like him fine."

"Ye wudna like ma aunt fine," said Macgregor.

"No' bein' acquaint wi' her, I canna say," Christina returned. "But I believe if it hadna been for her yer uncle wud never ha'e made his fortune at the grocery trade——"

"Her! What had she got to dae wi' 't?"

"Dear knows; but Uncle James says she egged him on to mak' money frae the day she married him. But mony a woman does that. I wud dae it masel'—no' that I'm greedy; I jist couldna endure a man that didna get on. I hate a stick-in-the-mud. It's a fac', though, that Mr. Purdie got the push-on frae his wife. An' Uncle James says he's no' near done yet: he'll be Lord Provost afore he's feenished. Ye should keep in wi' yer Uncle Purdie."

Macgregor scarcely heard her latter words. His Aunt Purdie responsible for his Uncle Purdie's tremendous success in business! The idea was almost shocking. From his earliest boyhood it had been a sort of religion with him to admire his uncle and despise his aunt. Could any good thing come out of Aunt Purdie?

"I doobt yer Uncle James doesna ken *her* extra weel," he said at last.

"Oh, ma uncle's a splendid judge o' character," she assured him. "Especially female character," she added. "That's why he married ma aunt an' adopted me. I took his name, like ma aunt did when she married him. It was a love match, in spite o' their ages. There's grander names, but nane better, nor Baldwin. In ma youth I called it Bald-yin to tease ma aunt when she was saft on him. But never heed about that the noo. D'ye ken what astonishes me about yersel'?"

"What?" asked Macgregor, startled.

"That ye're no' in the grocery trade."

"Me! What for wud I be a grocer?"

"What for are ye a penter? An' yer Uncle Purdie has nae offspring. My! if I had had a chance like you!" She heaved a sigh. "I'm sure yer uncle wud ha'e ta'en ye into his business. Ye canna be sae stupid that he wudna gi'e ye even a trial. Nae offence intended."

"I could ha'e been in the business if I had wanted," Macgregor replied, with some dignity. "He offered me a job when I left the schule. But, ye see, I aye had the notion to be a penter. I like to be movin' ma han's an' feet."

"An' what did yer parents say?"

"They canna thole Aunt Purdie. It was her that brought the message frae ma uncle—as if it was a favour. They said I was to choose for masel'."

"Pride's an awfu' thing for costin' folk cash," the girl remarked, with a shake of her head.

"Eh?"

"Naething," she replied. After a slight pause

she continued : " It's no' for me to speak about yer parents, but I hope ye'll excuse me sayin' that ye're a bigger fool than ye look."

" Wha—what d'ye mean ? "

" I didna mean to insult ye or hurt yer feelin's." Another pause. " D'ye no' want to get up in the world, man ? D'ye no' want to be a millionaire—or a thoosandaire, onyway ? "

" Me ? "

" Ay, you ! "

Across the counter he regarded her in a semi-dazed fashion, speechless. She was rather flushed ; her eyes danced with eagerness. Apparently she was all in earnest.

" Are ye gaun to be a penter a' yer life ? " she demanded.

" What for no' ? " he retorted with some spirit. " It's guid pay."

" Guid pay ! In ten year what'll ye be makin' ? "

" I couldna say. Maybe—maybe twenty-five shillin's ; maybe——"

" A week ? "

" Ay ; of course," he said, nettled. " D'ye think I meant a month ? "

" If ye was wi' yer uncle an' stickin' to yer business, I wud ha'e said ' a day ' ! Ma gracious goodness ! if ye was pleasin' a man like that, there's nae sayin' where ye wud be in ten year."

" Ach," he said, with an attempt at lightness, " I'm no' heedin'."

Christina doubled her fist and smote the counter with such violence that he fairly jumped on his seat.

"Ye're no' heedin'! What's the use o' bein' alive if ye're no' heedin'? But ye're a' the same, you young workin' men. Yer rule is to dae the least ye can for yer wages, an' never snap at an opportunity. An' when ye get aulder ye gang on strike an' gas about yer rights, but ye keep dumb enough about yer deserts, an'——"

"Here, haud on!" cried Macgregor, now thoroughly roused. "What dae you ken about it? Ye're jist a lassie——"

"I've eyes an' ears."

There was a pause.

"Are ye a—a suffragist?" he asked, weakly.

"I ha'ena quite decided on that p'int. Are you in favour o' votes for females? Aweel, there's nae use answerin', for ye've never thought about it. I suppose, like the ither young men about here, ye buy yer brains every Saturday done up in the sports edition o' the evenin' paper. Oh, Christopher Columbus! that's when *I* get busy on a Saturday night. Footba'—footba'—footba'!"

Macgregor swallowed these remarks, and reverted to the previous question. "What," he enquired a little loftily, "dae *you* expec' to be earnin' ten year frae the noo?"

Promptly, frankly, she replied: "If I'm no' drawin' thirty shillin's a week I'll consider masel' a bad egg. Of course, it a' depends on whether I select to remain single or itherwise."

This was too much for Macgregor. He surveyed her with such blank bewilderment that she burst out laughing.

He went red to the roots of his hair, or at any rate to the edge of his hat. "Oh, I kent fine ye was coddin' me," he said crossly, looking hurt and getting to his feet.

She stopped laughing at once. "That's the worst o' talkin' plain sense nooadays; folk think ye're only coddin'," she observed, good-humouredly. "I'm sorry I vexed ye." Impulsively she held out her hand. "I doobt we'll ha'e to shake again."

This, also, was too much for Macgregor. He seized her fingers in a grip that made her squeal.

And just then bang went the bell above the door.

Christina bit her lip and smiled through her tears as M. Tod entered the shop.

"Anything else to-day?" she enquired in her politest voice, and placed the little parcel under Macgregor's hand.

His reply was inaudible. His hand closed automatically on his purchase, his eyes met hers for the fraction of a second, and then he practically bolted.

"Young men are aye in sich a great hurry nooadays," remarked M. Tod, beginning to remove her gloves.

"He's the young man that bought the dizzen pencils the ither nicht," Christina explained, examining the joints of her right hand. "I've just been sellin' him anither dizzen."

"Dearie me! he *must* be a reporter on yin of the papers."

"He's a whale for pencils, whatever he is," Christina returned, putting straight the piles of periodicals that adorned the counter. "I doobt he

wud need to report wi' his feet forbye his han's to get through a dizzen pencils in three days. It's a bit o' a mystery aboot the pencils."

"A mystery!" exclaimed M. Tod, who was just about to blow into a glove.

Christina picked the neglected penny from the counter and dropped it into the till. "It's a case o' *cherchez la femme*," she said softly, with quite a passable accent.

"What's that?" murmured M. Tod.

"French," sighed Christina, making a jotting of her last sales, and taking a long time to do it.

M. Tod stared for a moment or two, shook her head, drew a long breath, and with the same inflated her glove.

VII

MACGREGOR was half-way home ere he comprehended the cause of the dull ache about his temples. He eased his hat and obtained relief. But there was no lid to lift from his mind, which seemed to be overcrowded with a jumble of ideas—old ideas turned topsy-turvey, some damaged, some twisted, and new ideas struggling, as it were, for existence. Moral earthquakes are not infrequent during our 'teens and twenties; by their convulsions they provide construction material for character; but the material is mixed, and we are left to choose whether we shall erect sturdy towers or jerry-buildings.

The boy was not, of course, aware that here was a crisis in his life. He was staggered and disturbed, just as he would have been had the smooth, broad street on which he walked suddenly become a narrow pass beset with rifts and boulders. The upheaval of his preconceived notions of girlhood had been sharp indeed. He had never heard a girl speak as Christina had spoken; it had never occurred to him that a girl could speak so. But while he felt hurt and vexed, he harboured no resentment; her

frank friendliness had disposed of that ; and while he was humbled, he was not—thanks to his modesty, or, if you prefer it, lack of cocksureness—grievously humiliated. It is not in the nature of healthy youth to let misery have all its own way.

Before he reached home he was able to extract several sips of comfort from his recent experience. He knew her name and she knew his ; they had discovered a mutual acquaintance (how we love those mutual acquaintances—sometimes !) ; they had shaken hands twice.

He spent the evening indoors—he might have done otherwise had not Christina said something about being busy on Saturday nights. He was patient with his little brother, almost tender towards his sister. He played several games of draughts with his father, wondering between his deplorable moves when he should see Christina again. He spoke in a subdued fashion. And about nine o'clock his mother anxiously asked him whether he was feeling quite well, and offered to prepare a homely potion. One regrets to record that he returned a rough answer and went off to bed, leaving Lizzie to shake her head more in sorrow than in anger while she informed John that she doubted Macgregor was "sickenin' for something." As Macgregor had not condescended to play draughts for at least two years, John was inclined to share her fears ; it did not occur to him to put down such conduct to feminine influence ; and an hour later, at her suggestion, he went to his son's room and softly opened the door.

" Oh ! ye're no' in yer bed yet, Macgregor ? "

" I'm jist gaun."

" What are ye workin' at ? "

" Jist sharpenin' a pencil. I'll no' be lang"—
impatiently.

" Are ye feelin' weel enough ? "

" I'm fine. Dinna fash yersel'."

John withdrew and reported to Lizzie. She was not satisfied, and before going to bed, about eleven o'clock, she listened at Macgregor's door. All she heard was: " Here, Jimsie, I wish to peace ye wud keep yer feet to yersel'."

She opened the door. " Laddie, are ye no' sleepin' yet ? "

" Hoo can I sleep wi' Jimsie jabbin' his feet in ma back ? "

She entered, and going to the bed removed the unconscious Jimsie to his own portion thereof, at the same time urging him into a more comfortable position. Then she came round and laid her hand on her first-born's brow.

" Are ye sure ye're a' richt, laddie ? "

" Ay, I'm fine. I wish ye wudna fash," he said shortly, turning over.

Lizzie went out, closing the door gently. On the kitchen dresser she set out the medicine bottle and spoon against emergencies.

Pernaps there is a mansion in Heaven that will always be empty—a mansion waiting to receive those who in their youth never snubbed their anxious parents. Ere the door closed Macgregor was pricked with compunction. He was sensitive enough for

that. But it is the sensitive people who hurt the people they care for.

In extenuation let it be said at once that the boy was enduring a dire reaction. It now appeared that Christina's friendliness had been all in the way of business. Socially (he did not think the word, of course) Christina was beyond him. Christina, for all he knew, sat at night in a parlour, had an aunt that kept a servant (and, maybe, a gramophone), was accustomed to young men in high collars and trousers that always looked new. Yes, she had shaken hands with him simply in order to get him to come back and buy another dozen of pencils.

He was very unhappy. He tossed from side to side until the voice of Jimsie, drowsy and peevish, declared that he had taken all the clothes. Which was practically true, though he did not admit it as he disentangled himself of the blankets and flung them all at his brother. He did not care if he froze—until he began to feel a little cold, when he rescued with difficulty a portion of the coverings from Jimsie's greedy clutch. He would not go to the shop again. But he would pass it as often as possible. He would get Willie Thomson to accompany him, and they would smoke cigarettes, and they would stop at the door when a customer was entering, and laugh very loudly. He would save up and take Jessie Mary to the dance—at least, he would think about it. After all, it might be more effective to go to the shop and buy more presents for Jessie Mary and—oh, great idea!—demand that they should be sent to her address!

The clock in the kitchen struck one. With any sympathy at all it would have struck at least five. It was like telling a person in the throes of toothache that the disease is not serious. By the way, one wonders if doctors will ever know as much about disease as patients know about pain. Speculation apart, it is a sorry business to flatter ourselves we have been suffering all night only to find that the night is but beginning. Still, there must have been something far wrong with the Robinsons' kitchen clock. Macgregor waited, but to his knowledge it never struck two. Indeed, it missed all the hours until nine.

Macgregor, however, presented himself in good time for the Sunday breakfast. His punctuality was too much for his mother, and she insisted on his taking a dose from the bottle on the dresser. Even youth is sometimes too tired to argue. "Onything for peace," was his ungracious remark as he raised the spoon to his lips.

Scotland in its harshest, bleakest period of religious observance could not have provided a more dismal Sabbath than Macgregor provided for himself. Although his mother gave him the option of staying at home, he accompanied his parents to church; although he came back with a good appetite, he refused to let himself enjoy his dinner; although he desired to take the accustomed Sunday afternoon walk with his father down to the docks (they had gone there, weather permitting, for years), he shut himself up in the solitude of his bedroom.

He spent most of the afternoon in putting points to his stock of pencils. How the operation should have occupied so much time may be explained by the fact that the lead almost invariably parted from the wood ere a perfect point was attained. Indeed, when the task was ended, he had comparatively little to show for his threepence save a heap of shavings, fragments and dust. His resentment, however, was all against M. Tod : he wished she had been of his own sex and size. He also wished she had kept an ice-cream shop, open on Sundays.—No, he didn't ! Christina wouldn't like working on Sundays ; besides, an awful lot of chaps hung about ice-cream shops. He wondered what church Christina attended. If he only knew, he might go there in the evening. (What our churches owe to young womanhood will never be known.) But there were scores of churches in Glasgow. It would take years to get round them—and in the end she might sit in the gallery and he under it. In the unlikely event of his again entering Miss Tod's shop, there would be no harm in asking Christina about her church and whether she sang in the choir. But stop ! if she didn't sing in the choir, she might think he was chaffing her. That wouldn't do at all. Better just find out about the church, and if he didn't get a view of her on his first visit he could try again.

There appears no reason why Macgregor's spirits should have gradually risen throughout these and other equally rambling reflections ; but the fact remains that they did so. By tea-time he was in a comely condition of mind. He made young Jimsie

happy with the cake of rubber and presented Jeannie surreptitiously with a penny, "to buy sweeties." He seemed interested in his father's account of a vessel that had been in collision the previous day. He did not scowl when his mother expressed satisfaction with the way in which he was punishing the bread and butter, and openly congratulated herself on having administered the physic just in time. Nay, more; he offered to stay in the house with Jimsie while John and Lizzie took an evening stroll and Jeannie went with a friend to evening service. No people are quite so easily made happy as parents, and when, out of doors, John suggested that Macgregor's weekly allowance should be raised to one shilling, Lizzie actually met him half-way by promising to make it ninepence in future.

During their absence Macgregor did his utmost to amuse Jimsie, who was suffering from an incipient cold, but shortly after their return he became restless, and ere long announced (rather indistinctly) his intention of going out for "twa-three" minutes.

Lizzie was about to ask "where?" when John remarked that it was a fine night and that he would come too. Thus was frustrated Macgregor's desire to take one look at the shuttered shrine with "M. Tcd" over the portal—a very foolish sort of desire, as many of us know—from experience.

In the circumstances Macgregor accepted his father's company with a fairly good grace, merely submitting that the walk should be a short one.

On the way home, at a corner, under a lamp, they came upon Willie Thomson in earnest and apparently

amicable conversation with Jessie Mary. Such friendliness struck Macgregor as peculiar, for since the days of their childhood the twain had openly expressed contempt and dislike for each other, and he wondered what was "up," especially when the sight of him appeared to cause Willie, at least, considerable embarrassment. But presently the happy idea flashed upon him that Willie had suddenly become "sweet" on Jessie Mary, and would accordingly need to be dodged no longer. He felt more friendly towards Willie than for some time past. His feelings with regard to Jessie Mary were less definite, but he was sure his face had not got "extra red" under her somewhat mocking glance.

"Ye're no' as thick 'wi' Wullie as ye used to be," his father remarked.

"Oh, we've nae quarrel," he returned. "What did ye say was the name o' that damaged boat ye saw the day?"

* * * * *

He went to bed not unhappy. He would find a way of getting to know Christina better and of proving to her that the painting trade was as good as any.

VIII

"YE'VE been in business a long time, Miss Tod," said Christina on Monday afternoon, looking up from the front advertising page of a newspaper; "so I wish ye wud tell me yer honest opinion o' business in general."

M. Tod paused in the act of polishing a fancy ink-pot (she had spasms of industry for which there was no need) and stared in bewildered fashion at her assistant. "Dearie me, lassie!" she exclaimed, "ye say the queerest things! Ma honest opinion o' business? I'm sure I never thought aboot——"

"I'll put it anither way. Supposin' ye was back at the schule, an' ye was asked to define business—ye ken what define means—what wud be yer answer?"

"Is it fun ye're after?" M. Tod enquired, a trifle suspiciously.

"I was never mair serious in ma life," Christina returned rather indignantly.

"I didna mean to offend ye," the other said gently. "But ye ken fine what business is—whiles I think ye ken better nor me, though I've been at it for near six-an'-thirty years."

"I'm not offended," said Christina, dropping the

vernacular for the moment. "And I merely desired to know if your definition of business was the same as mine."

It always made M. Tod a little nervous when her assistant addressed her in such correct speech. "Business," she began, and halted. She set the ink-pot on the counter, and tried to put the duster in her pocket.

"A few words will suffice," the girl remarked encouragingly, and took charge of the duster.

"Business," resumed the old woman, and quite unconsciously put her hands behind her back, "business is jist buyin' and sellin'." And she gave a little smile of relief and satisfaction.

Christina shook her head. "I suppose that's what they taught ye at the schule—jist the same as they taught me. If it wasna for their fancy departments, sich as physiology an' Sweedish drill, the schules wud be oot o' date. 'Jist buyin' an' sellin'!'—Oh, Christopher Columbus!"

M. Tod was annoyed, partly, no doubt, at discovering her hands behind her back, but ere she could express herself Christina added:

"In *ma* honest opinion business chiefly consists in folk coddin' yin anither."

M. Tod gasped. "Coddin'! D'ye mean deceivin'?"

"Na; there's a difference between coddin' an' deceivin'. Same sort o' difference as between war an' murder. An' they say that all's fair in love—I ha'e ma doobts aboot love—an' war. Mind ye, I'm no' sayin' onything against coddin'. We're a' in the same boat. Some cods wi' advertisin'—see

daily papers; some cods wi' talk; some cods wi' lookin' solemn an' smilin' jist at the right times. But we're a' coddin', cod, cod, coddin'! But we'll no' admit it! An' naebody wud thank us if we did."

The old woman was almost angry. "I'm sure I never codded a customer in ma life," she cried.

Christina regarded her very kindly for a second or two ere she returned pleasantly: "I wudna say but what you're an exception to the rule, Miss Tod. But ye're a rare exception. Even ma uncle—an' he's the honestest man in the world—once codded me when I was assistin' ma aunt at Kilmabeg, afore she got married. Wi' his talk an' his smiles he got me to buy things against ma better judgment—things I was sure wud never sell. If he had been dumb an' I had been blind, I would never ha'e made the purchase. But I was young then. Of course he didna want to cod me; it was jist a habit he had got into wi' bein' in business. But there's nae doobt," she went on calmly, ignoring M. Tod's obvious desire to get a word in, "there's nae doobt that coddin' is yin o' the secrets o' success. When ye consider that half the trade o' the world consists in sellin' things that folk dinna need an' whiles dinna want——"

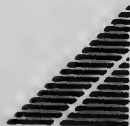
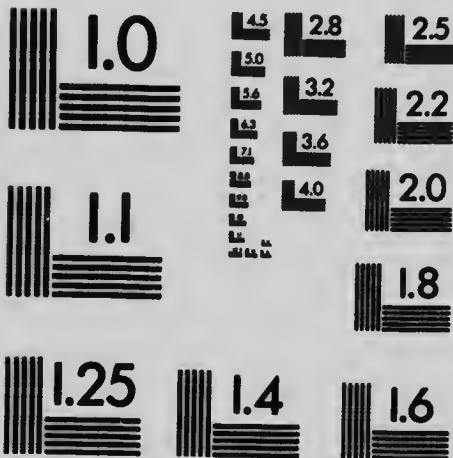
"Whisht, lassie! Ye speak as if naebody had a conscience!"

"I didna mean that," was the mild reply. "It's the only thing in this world that's no' easy codded—though some folk seem to be able to do the trick. For, of course, there's a limit to coddin' in business—fair coddin', I mean. But ye've taken ma remarks ower sericusly, Miss Tod."



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"I never heard sich remarks in a' ma days."

"I'm sorry I've annoyed ye."

"Ye ha'ena annoyed me, dearie. But I'm vexed to think ye've got sich notions in yer young heid." M. Tod sighed.

Christina sighed also, a little impatiently, and picked up the fancy ink-pot from the counter. "Hoo lang ha'e ye had this in the shop?" she enquired carelessly.

M. Tod shook her head. "Ten years, onyway. It wudna sell."

"It's marked eighteenpence."

"Ay. But when I had a wee sale, five year back, I put it among a lot of nick-nacks at threepence, an' even then it wudna sell. It's no' pretty."

"It's ugly—but that's nae reason for it no' sellin'." Christina examined the glass carefully. "It's no' in bad condition," she observed. "Wud ye part wi' it for ninepence?"

"Ninepence! I'll never get ninepence!"

"Never say die till ye're buried! Jist wait a minute." Christina went over to the desk and spent about five minutes there, while M. Tod watched her with intermittent wags of her old head.

The girl came back with a small oblong of white card. "Dinna touch it, Miss Tod. The ink's no' dry," she said warningly, and proceeded to place the inkpot and card together in a prominent position on the glass show-case that covered part of the counter. "Noo, that'll gi'e it a chance. Instead o' keepin' it in a corner as if we were ashamed o' it,

we'll mak' a feature o' it for a week, an' see what happens. Ye'll get yer ninepence yet."

Christina printed admirably, and her employer had no difficulty in reading the card a yard away even without her glasses. It bore these words :

ANTIQUE
NOVEL GIFT
MERELY 9D.

"If ye call a thing 'antique,' " explained Christina, "folk forget its ugliness. An' the public likes a thing wi' 'novel' on it, though they wudna believe ye if ye said it was new. An' as for 'gift'—weel, that adds to the inkpot's chances o' findin' a customer. D'ye see?"

"Ay," said the old woman. "Ye're a clever lassie, but I doobt ye'll never get ninepence."

"Gi'e me a week," said Christina, "an' if it doesna disappear in that time, we'll keep it till Christmas an' reduce it to a shillin'. But I think a week'll suffice."

M. Tod hesitated ere she gently said: "But ye'll no' try to cod onybody, dearie?"

Christina waved her hand in the direction of the card. "I'll leave the public to cod itsel'," she said. "Noo it's time ye was gettin' ready for yer walk."

* * * * *

It may have been that Christina, in the back of her mind, saw in Macgregor a possible customer for the ugly inkpot. At any rate, she was disappointed when the evening passed without his entering the

shop; she hoped she had not spoken too plainly to him on his last visit—not but what he needed plain speaking. She was not to know until later how Macgregor's employer had unexpectedly decreed that he should work overtime that night, nor how Macgregor had obeyed joylessly despite the extra pay.

He called the following evening—and found M. Tod alone at the receipt of custom. He had yet to learn that on Tuesdays and Thursdays Christina left business early in order to attend classes. He must have looked foolish as he approached the counter, yet he had the presence of mind to ask for a ha'penny evening paper. Fortune being fickle—thank goodness!—does not confine her favour to the brave, and on this occasion she had arranged that M. Tod should be sold out of that particular evening paper. So Macgregor saved his money as well as his self-respect.

On the morrow M. Tod, who still clung to the belief that the young man wrote for the papers, reported the incident to her assistant. Possibly Christina could have given a better reason than this for her subsequent uncertainty of temper, and doubtless it was mere absent-mindedness that accounted for her leaving the sliding panel to the window a few inches open after she had thrown it wide without any apparent purpose. And it is highly probable that Macgregor would have taken advantage of the aperture had he not been again working overtime on that and on the two following nights.

So it was not until Saturday afternoon that they met once more. Macgregor held aloof from the

shop until M. Tod appeared—of course she was later than usual!—and, after an anxious gaze at the sky, proceeded to toddle up the street. Then he approached the window. He was feeling fairly hopeful. His increased allowance had come as a pleasant surprise. Moreover, he had saved during the week fourpence in car-money and had spent nothing. He had fifteenpence in his pocket—wealth!

As he halted at the window, the panel at the back was drawn tight with an audible snap. For a moment he felt snubbed; then he assured himself there was nothing extraordinary in the occurrence, and prepared to enter the shop, reminding himself, firstly, that he was going to purchase a penholder, secondly, that he was not going to lose his head when the bell banged.

Christina was perched at the desk writing with much diligence. She laid down a pencil and slipped from her stool promptly but without haste.

"Good-afternoon, Mr. Robinson," she said demurely.

If anyone else in the world had called him "Mister Robinson" he would have resented it as chaff, but now, though taken aback, he felt no annoyance.

"Ay, it's a fine day," he returned, rather irrelevantly, and suddenly held out his hand.

This was a little more than Christina had expected, but she gave him hers with the least possible hesitation. For once in her life, however, she was not ready with a remark.

Macgregor having got her hand, let it go immediately, as though he were doubtful as to the propriety of what he had done.

"I've been workin' late every day this week excep' Tuesday," he said.

For an instant Christina looked pleased ; then she calmly murmured : " Oh, indeed."

" Ay, every day excep' Tuesday, till nine o'clock," he informed her, with an effort.

" Really ! "

He struggled against a curious feeling of mental suffocation, and said : " I was in here on Tuesday night. I—I didna see ye."

" I attend a shorthand class on Tuesday nights."

" Oh ! " He wanted very much to make her smile, so he said : " When I didna see ye on Tuesday, I was afraid ye had got the sack."

Christina drew herself up. " What can I do for you to-day, Mr. Robinson ? " she enquired with stiff politeness.

" I was jist jokin'," he cried, dismayed ; " I didna mean to offend ye."

Christina's fingers played a soundless tune on the edge of the counter ; her eyes gazed over his head into space. She waited with an air of weary patience.

" I was wantin' a pen—a penholder," he said at last, in a hopeless tone of voice.

" Ha'penny or penny ? " she asked without moving.

" A penny yin, please," he said humbly.

She turned and twitched a card from its nail, and laid it before him. " Kindly take your choice," she said, and moved up the counter a yard or so. She picked up a novelette and opened it.

Macgregor examined and fingered the penholders for nearly a minute by the clock ere he glanced at

her. She appeared to be engrossed in the novelette, but he was sure he had hurt her feelings.

"I was jist jokin'," he muttered.

"Oh, you wanted a ha'penny one." She twitched down another card of penholders, laid it before him as if—so it seemed to him—he had been dirt, and went back to her novelette.

Had he been less in love he would surely have been angry then. Had she seen his look she would certainly have been sorry.

There was a long silence while his gaze wandered, while he wondered what he could do to make amends.

And lo ! the ugly inkpot caught his eye. He read the accompanying card several times ; he fingered the money in his pocket ; he told himself insistently that ninepence was not worth considering. Once more he glanced at the girl. She was frowning slightly over the page. Perhaps she wanted him to go.

"I'll buy that, if ye like," he said, pointing at the inkpot.

"Eh ? " cried Christina, and dropped the novelette.

"Beg your pardon," she went on, recovering her dignity and moving leisurely towards him, "but I did not quite catch what you observed." She was pleased that she had used the word "observed."

"I'll buy that," repeated Macgregor. "What's it for ? "

"It's for keeping ink in. It's an inkpot. The price is ninepence."

"I can read," said Macgregor, with perhaps his first essay in irony.

Christina tilted her chin. "I presume you want it for a gift," she said haughtily.

"Na ; I'm gaun to pay for it."

"I meant to give away as a gift." It was rather a stupid sentence, she felt. If she had only remembered to use the word "bestow."

The boy's clear eyes met hers for a second.

"It holds a great deal of ink," she said, possibly in reply to her conscience.

"I'll buy a bottle o' ink, too, if ye like," he said recklessly, and looked at her again.

A flood of honest kindness swamped the business instinct of Christina. "I didna mean that !" she exclaimed, flopping into homely speech ; "an' I wudna sell ye that rotten inkpot for a hundred pound !"

It will be admitted that Macgregor's amazement was natural in the circumstances. Ere he recovered from it she was in fair control of herself.

"It's as good as sold to the Rev. Mr. McTavish," she explained. Her sole foundation for the statement lay in the fact that the Rev. Mr. McTavish was to call for a small parcel of stationery about six o'clock. At the same time she remembered her duty to her employer. "But we have other inkpots in profusion," she declared.

The limit of his endurance was reached. "Oh," he stammered, "I wish ye wudna speak to me like that."

"Like what ?"

"That fancy way—that genteel English."

The words might have angered her, but not the voice. She drew a quick breath and said :

"Are ye a frien' or a customer ?"

"Ye—ye ken fine what I want to be," he answered, sadly.

Now she was sure that she liked him.

"Well," she said, slowly, "suppose ye buy a ha'penny penholder—jist for the sake o' appearances—an' then"—quickly—"we'll drop business." And she refused to sell him a penny one, and, indeed, anything else in the shop that afternoon.

It must be recorded, however, that an hour or so later she induced the Rev. Mr. McTavish to buy the ugly inkpot.

"It wasna easy," she confessed afterwards to M. Tod, "an' I doobt he jist bought it to please me; but it's awa' at last, an' ye'll never see it again—unless, maybe, at a jumble sale. He was real nice aboot it, an' gaed awa' smilin'."

"I hope ye didna deceive the man," said M. Tod, trying not to look gratified.

"I told him the solemn truth. I told him it was on ma conscience to sell the inkpot afore anither day had dawned. It's no' every day it pays ye to tell the truth, is it?" The last sentence was happily inaudible to the old woman.

"But, lassie, I never intended ye to feel ye had ta'en a vow to sell the inkpot. I wud be unco vexed to think——"

Christina gave her employer's shoulder a little kindly, reassuring pat. "Na, na; ye needna fash yersel' aboot that," she said. Then, moving away: "As a matter o' fac', I had compromised myself regardin' the inkpot in—in anither direction."

Which was all Greek to M. Tod.

IX

FOR a fortnight it ran smoothly enough. There were, to be sure, occasional ripples: little doubts, little fears, little jealousies: but they passed as swiftly as they appeared.

Macgregor, having no overtime those weeks, contrived to visit the shop nightly, excepting Tuesdays and Thursdays, Christina's class nights. He paid his footing, so to speak, with the purchase of a ha'penny evening paper—which he could not well take home since his father was in the habit of making a similar purchase on the way from work. M. Tod was rarely in evidence; the evenings found her tired, and unless several customers demanded attention at once (a rare event) she remained in the living-room, browsing on novelettes selected for her by her assistant. She was given to protesting she had never done such a thing prior to Christina's advent, to which Christina was wont to reply that, while she herself was long since "fed up" with such literature, it was high time M. Tod should know something about it. Only once did the old woman intrude on the young people and prevent intimate converse; but even then Macgregor did not depart unhappy, for Christina's farewell smile

was reassuring in its whimsicality, and in young love of all things seeing is believing.

It must not be supposed, all the same, that she gave him much direct encouragement; her lapses from absolute discretion were brief as they were rare. But the affections of the youthful male have a wonderful way of subsisting on crumbs which hope magnifies into loaves. Nevertheless, her kindness was a definite thing, and under its influence the boy lost some of his shyness and gained a little confidence in himself. He had already taken a leap over one barrier of formality: he had called her "Christina" to her face, and neither her face nor her lips had reproved him; he had asked her to call him "Macgregor"—or "Mac" if she preferred it, and she had promised to "see about it."

On this November Saturday afternoon he was on his way to make the tremendous request that she should allow him to walk home with her when her day's work was over. He was far from sure of himself. In the reign of Jessie Mary—what an old story now!—he would not have openly craved permission, but would have hung about on the chance of meeting her alone and in pleasant humour. But he could not act so with Christina. Instinct as well as inclination prevented him. Moreover, he had been witness, on a certain evening when he had lingered near the shop—just to see her with her hat on—of the fate that befel a young man (a regular customer, too, Christina told him afterwards) who dared to proffer his escort off-hand. Christina had simply halted, turned and pointed, as one might

point for a dog's guidance, and after a long moment the young man had gone in the direction opposite to that in which he had intended. To Macgregor the little scene had been gratifying yet disturbing. The memory of it chilled his courage now. But he was not the boy to relinquish a desire simply because he was afraid.

He broke his journey at a sweet-shop, and rather surprised himself by spending sixpence, although he had been planning to do so for the past week. He had not yet given Christina anything; he wanted badly to give her something; and having bought it, he wondered whether she would take it. He could not hope that the gift would affect the answer to his tremendous request.

Coming out of the sweet-shop he caught sight of the back of Willie Thomson, whom he had not seen for two weeks. Involuntarily he gave the boyish whistle, not so long ago the summons that would have called the one to the other with express speed. Now it had the reverse effect, for Willie started, half turned, and then walked quickly up a convenient side-street. The flight was obvious, and for a moment Macgregor was hurt and angry. Then with sudden sympathy he grinned, thinking, "He'll be after Jessie Mary, an' doesna want me." He was becoming quite grateful to Willie, for although he had encountered Jessie Mary several times of late, she had not reminded him of the approaching dance, and he gave Willie credit for that.

A few minutes later Macgregor stood at the counter that had become a veritable altar. Not

many of us manage to greet the girls of our dreams precisely as we would or exactly as we have rehearsed the operation, and Macgregor's nerves at the last moment played him a trick.

In a cocky fashion, neither natural nor becoming, he wagged his head in the direction of the living-room and flippantly enquired: "Is she oot?"

To which Christina, her smile of welcome passing with never a flicker, stiffly replied: "Miss Tod is out, but may return at any moment."

"Aw!" he murmured, "I thought she wud maybe be takin' her usual walk."

"What usual walk?"

His hurt look said: "What have I done to deserve this, Christina?"

And she felt as though she had struck him. "Ye shouldna tak' things for granted," she said, less sharply. "I didna think ye was yin o' the cheeky sort."

"Me!" he cried in consternation.

"Weel, maybe ye didna mean it, but ye cam' into the shop like a dog wi' twa tails. But"—as with a sudden inspiration—"maybe ye've been gettin' a rise in yer wages. If that's the case, I'll apologise."

He shook his head. "I dinna ken what ye're drivin' at. I—I was jist gled to see ye——"

"Oh, we'll no' say ony mair aboot it. Maybe I was ower smart," she said hastily. "Kindly forget ma observations." She smiled apologetically.

"Are ye no' gaun to shake han's wi' me?" he asked, still uneasy.

"Surely!" she answered warmly. "An' I've got a bit o' news for ye, Mac." The name slipped out; she reddened.

Yet her cheek was pale compared with the boy's. "Oh!" he exclaimed under his breath. Then with a brave attempt at carelessness he brought from his pocket a small white package and laid it on the counter before her. "It—it's for you," he said, forgetting his little speech about wanting to give her something and hoping she would not be offended.

Christina was not prepared for such a happening; still, her wits did not desert her. She liked sweets, but on no account was she going to have her acceptance of the gift misconstrued. She glanced at Macgregor, whose eyes did not meet hers; she glanced at the package; she glanced once more at Macgregor, and gently uttered the solitary word:

"Platonic?"

"Na," he replied. "Jujubes."

Christina bit her lip.

"D'ye no' like them?" he asked anxiously.

The matter had got beyond her. She put out her hand and took the gift, saying: "Thank ye, Mac; they're ma favourite sweeties. But—ye're no' to dae it again."

"What kin' o' sweeties did ye think they was?" he asked, breaking a short silence.

"Oh, it's o' nae consequence," she lightly replied.

"D'ye no' want to hear ma bit o' news?"

"Deed, ay, Christina." Now more at ease, he settled himself on the chair by the counter.

"Weel,—ye'll excuse me no' samplin' the jujubes the noo; it micht be awkward if a customer was comin'—weel, yer Uncle Purdie was visitin' ma uncle last night, an' what d'ye think I did?"

"What?"

"I asked him for a job!"

"A job!" exclaimed Macgregor. "In—in yin o' his shops?"

"Na; in his chief office."

"My! ye've a neck—I mean, ye're no' afraid."

"Ye dinna get muckle in this world wi'oot askin' for it."

"What did he say?" the boy enquired, after a pause.

"He said the job was mine as sune as I was ready to tak' it. Ye see, I tell't him I didna want to start till I had ma shorthand an' typewritin' perfec'. That'll tak' me a few months yet."

"I didna ken ye could typewrite."

"Oh, I've been workin' at it for near a year, but I can only get practisin' afore breakfast an' whiles in the evenin'. Still, I think I'll be ready for the office aboot the spring, if no' earlier."

Macgregor regarded her with sorrow mingled with admiration. "But what way dae ye want to leave here?" he cried, all at once realising what the change would mean to him.

"There's nae prospects in a wee place like this. Once I'm in a big place, like yer uncle's, I'll get chances. I want to be yer uncle's private secretary——"

"Ye're ower young."

"I didna say in six months." Her voice changed.
"Are ye no' pleased, Mac?"

"Hoo can I be pleased when ye're leavin' here? Can ye no' stop? Ye're fine where ye are. An' what'll Miss Tod dae wantin' ye?"

"I'll get uncle to find her another girl—a pretty girl, so that ye'll come here for yer stationery, eh?"

"If ye leave, I'll never come here again. Could ye no' get a job behind the counter in yin of ma uncle's shops?"—clutching at a straw.

"I'll gang further in the office. If I was a man I daresay I wud try the shop. If I was you, Mac, I wud try it."

"I couldna sell folk things."

"In a big business like yer uncle's there's plenty work besides sellin'. But I suppose ye'll stick to the pentin'."

"Ay," he said shortly.

"Weel, I suppose it's nane o' ma business," she said good-humouredly. "But, bein' a frien', I thought ye wud ha'e been pleased to hear ma news."

Ere he could reply a woman came in to purchase note-paper. Possibly Christina's service was a trifle less "finished" than usual; and she made no attempt to sell anything that was not wanted. Macgregor had a few minutes for reflection, and when the customer had gone he said, a shade more hopefully:

"Ye'll no' be kep' as late at the office as here. Ye'll ha'e yer evenin's free, Christina."

"I'll ha'e mair time for classes. I'm keen on learnin' French an' German. I ken a bit o' French

already ; a frien' o' ma uncle's, a Frenchman, has been gi'ein' me lessons in conversation every Sunday night for a while back. It'll be useful if I become a secretary."

"Strikes me," said Macgregor, gloomily, "ye've never ony time for fun."

"Fun?"

"For walkin' about an'—an' that."

"Oh, ye mean oot there." She swung her hand in the direction of the street. "I walk here in the mornin'—near a mile—an' hame at night ; an' I've two hours free in the middle o' the day—uncle bargained for that when he let me come to Miss Tod. As for loafin' about on the street, I had plenty o' the street when I was young, afore ma aunt took me to bide wi' her at Kilmabeg. The street was about the only place I had then, an' I suppose I wud be there yet if ma aunt hadna saved me. D'ye ken, Mac," she went on almost passionately, "it's no' five years since I wanted a decent pair o' shoes an' a guid square meal. . . . Oh, I could tell ye things—but anither time, maybe. As for spendin' a' yer spare time on the street, when ye've ony other place to spend it, it's—weel, I suppose it's a matter o' taste ; but if I can dae onything wi' ma spare time that'll mak' me independent later on, I'm gaun to dae it. That's flat!" Suddenly she laughed. "Are ye afraid o' me, Mac?"

"No' likely!" he replied, with rather feeble indignation. "But whiles ye're awfu'—queer."

At that she laughed again. "But I'm no' so badly off for fun, as ye call it, either," she resumed

presently. "Noo an' then uncle tak's auntie an' me to the theatre. Every holiday we gang to the coast. An' there's always folk comin' to the hoose——"

"Auld folk?"

"Frae your age upwards. An' next year, when I put up ma hair, I'll be gettin' to dances. Can ye waltz?"

Macgregor gave his head a dismal shake. "I—I doobt ye're ower high-class," he muttered hopelessly. "Ye'll no' be for lookin' at me next year."

"No' if ye wear a face like a fiddle. I like to look at cheery things. What's up wi' ye?"

"Oh, naething. I suppose ye expec' to be terrible rich some day."

"That's the idea."

"Wi' at'll ye dae wi' the money? I suppose ye dinna ken."

"Oh, I ken fine," she returned, with an eager smile. "I'll buy auntie a lovely cottage at the coast, an' uncle a splendid motor car, an' masel' a big white steam yacht."

"Ye're no' greedy," he remarked a little sulkily.

"That'll be merely for a start, of course. I'll tak' ye a trip roun' the world for the price o' a coat o' pent to the yacht. Are ye on? Maybe ye'll be a master-penter by then."

"I—I'll never be onything—an' I'm no' carin'," he groaned.

"If ye lie doon in the road ye'll no' win far, an' ye're likely to get tramped on, forbye. What's wrang wi' ye the day?" she asked kindly.

"Ye—ye jist mak' me miserable," he blurted out, and hung his head.

"Me!" she said innocently. "I'm sure I never meant to dae that. I'm a hard nut, I suppose; but no' jist as hard as I seem. Onything I can dae to mak' ye happy again?"

The door opened, the bell banged, and a man came in and bought a weekly paper.

"Weel?" said Christina when they were alone.

"Let me walk hame wi' ye the nicht," said Macgregor, who ought to have felt grateful to the chance customer whose brief stay had permitted him to get his wits and words together.

"Oh!" said Christina.

"I'll wait for ye as long as ye like."

Some seconds passed ere Christina spoke. "I'm not in the habit of being escorted——" she began.

"For ony sake dinna speak like that."

"I forgot ye wasna a customer. But, seriously, I dinna think it wud be the thing."

"What way, Christina?"

"Jist because, an' for several other reasons besides. My! it's gettin' dark. Time I was lightin' up." She struck a match, applied it to a long taper, and proceeded to ignite the jets in the window and above the counter. Then she turned to him again.

"Mac."

Something in her voice roused him out of his despair. "What, Christina?"

"If ye walk hame wi' me, I'll expect ye to come up an' see ma aunt an' uncle. Ye see, I made a

sort o' bargain wi' them that I wudna ha'e ony frien's that they didna ken about."

Macgregor's expression of happiness gave place to one of doubt. "Maybe they wudna like me," he said.

"Aweel, that's your risk, of course. But they'll no' bite ye. I leave the shop at eight." She glanced at her little silver watch. "Mercy! It's time I was puttin' on the kettle. Miss Tod'll be back in a jiffy. Ye best gang, Mac."

"I'll be waitin' for ye at eight," he said, rising. "An' it's awfu' guid o' ye, Christina, though I wish ye hadna made that bargain——"

"Weel, I like to be as honest as I can—ootside o' business. If ye dinna turn up, I'll forgive ye. Noo——"

"Oh, I'll turn up. It wud tak' mair nor your aunt an' uncle——"

"Tits, man!" she cried impatiently, "I'll be late wi' her tea. Adieu for the present." She waved her hand and fled to the living-room.

Macgregor went home happy in a subdued fashion. He found a letter awaiting him. It was from Grandfather Purdie; it reminded him that his seventeenth birthday was on the coming Monday, contained a few kindly words of advice, and enclosed a postal order for ten shillings. Hitherto the old man's gift had been a half-crown, which had seemed a large sum to the boy. But ten shillings!—it would be hard to tell whether Macgregor's feeling of manliness or of gratitude was the greater.

Mrs. Robinson was not a little disturbed when her

son failed to hand over the money to her to take care of for him, as had been the custom in the past, and her husband had some difficulty in persuading her to "let the laddie be in the meantime."

Macgregor had gone to his room to make the most elaborate toilet possible.

"You trust him, an' he'll trust you," said John. "Dinna be aye treatin' him like a wean."

"It's no' a case o' no' trustin' him," she returned a little sharply. "Better treat him like a wean than let him think he's a man afore his time."

"It's no' his money in the bank that tells what a chap's made o', Lizzie. Let us wait an' see what he does wi' it. Mind ye, it's his to dae what he likes wi'. Wait till the morn, an' then I'll back ye up in gettin' him to put a guid part o' it, onyway, in the bank. No' that I think ony backin' up'll be necessary. If he doesna want to put it in the bank, he'll dae it to please us. I'll guarantee that, wife."

"If I had your heart an' you had ma heid," she said with a faint smile, "I daresay we wud baith be near perfec', John. Aweel, I'm no' gaun to bother the laddie noo. But"—seriously—"he's been oot an awfu' lot at nicht the last week or twa."

"Courtin'," said John, laughing.

"Havers!" she retorted. "He's no' tlie sort."

"Neither was I," said John, "an' look at me noo!"

And there they let the subject drop.

At seven o'clock Macgregor left the house. At the nearest post-office he had his order converted

into coin. In one of his pockets he placed a couple of shillings—for Jeannie and Jimsie. He had no definite plans regarding the balance, but he hoped his mother would not ask for it. Somehow its possession rendered the prospect of his meeting with the Baldwins a thought less fearsome. He would tell Christina of his grandfather's gift, and later on, perhaps, he would buy—he knew not what. All at once he wished he had a *great* deal of money—wished he were clever—wished he could talk like Christina, even in the manner he hated—wished vague but beautiful things. The secret aspirations of lad's love must surely make the angels smile—very tenderly.

He reached the trysting place with a quick heart, a moist brow, and five and twenty minutes to spare.

X

FROM five to seven o'clock on Saturdays M. Tod and her assistant did a fairly brisk trade in newspapers ; thereafter, as Christina often thought, but refrained from saying, it was scarcely worth while keeping the shop open. A stray customer or two was all that might be expected during the last hour, and Christina was wont to occupy herself and it by tidying up for Sunday, while M. Tod from the sitting-room bleated her conviction, based on nothing but a fair imagination and a bad memory, that the Saturday night business was not what it had been twenty years ago. The old woman invariably got depressed at the end of the week ; she had come to grudge the girl's absence even for a day.

Christina was counting up some unsold periodicals, chattering cheerfully the while on the ethics of modern light literature. The door opened with a suddenness that suggested a pounce, and a young woman, whom Christina could not recollect having seen before, started visibly at the bang of the bell, recovered herself, and closed the door carefully. It was Christina's habit to sum up roughly the more patent characteristics of new customers almost before they reached the counter. In the present

case her estimate was as follows : " Handsome for the money ; conceited, but not proud."

" Good-evening," she said politely.

" Evenin'," replied the other, her dark eyes making a swift survey of the shop. She threw open her jacket, already unbuttoned, disclosing a fresh white shirt, a scarlet bow and a silver belt. Touching the belt, she said : " I think this was got in your shop."

Christina bent forward a little way. " Perhaps," she said pleasantly. " I couldn't say for certain. We've sold several of these belts, but of course we haven't the monopoly."

It may have been that the young woman fancied she was being chaffed. Other customers less unfamiliar with Christina had fancied the same thing. At all events her tone sharpened.

" But I happen to ken it was got here."

" Then it *was* got here," said Christina equably. " Do you wish to buy another the same ? I'm sorry we're out of them at present, but we could procure one for you within——"

" No, thanks. An' I didna buy this one, either. It was bought by a young gentleman friend of mines."

" Oh, indeed !" Christina murmured sympathetically. Then her eyes narrowed slightly.

" I came to see if you could change it," the young woman proceeded. " It's miles too wide. Ye can see that for yersel'."

" They are worn that way at present," said Christina, with something of an effort.

" Maybe. But I prefer it tight-fittin'. Of course I admit I've an extra sma' waist."

" Yes—smaller than they are worn at present."

" I beg your pardon ! "

" Granted," said Christina absently. She was trying to think of more than one male customer to whom she had sold a belt. But there had been only one.

The dark eyes of the young woman glimmered with malignant relish.

" As I was sayin'," she said, " I prefer it tight-fittin'. I've a dance on next week, an' as it is the belt is unsuitable, an' the young man expec's me to wear it. Of course I couldna tell him that it didna fit me. So I thought I would jist ask ye to change it wi'oot lettin' on to hi' a." She gave a self-conscious giggle.

" I see," said Christina, dully. " But I'm afraid there's only the one size in those belts, and, besides, we can't change goods that have been worn for a month."

" Oh, so ye mind when ye sold it ! " said the other maliciously. " Ye've a fine memory, Miss ! But though I've had it for a month—it was part o' his birthday present, ye ken—I've scarcely worn it—only once or twice, to please him."

There was a short silence ere Christina spoke. " If you are bent on getting the belt made tight-fitting, a jeweller would do it for you, but it would cost as much as the belt is worth," she said coldly. " It's a very cheap imitation, you know," she added, for the first time in her business career decrying her own wares.

It was certainly a nasty one, but the young woman almost succeeded in appearing to ignore it.

"So ye canna change it—even to please ma young man?" she said mockingly.

"No," Christina replied, keeping her face to the foe, but with difficulty.

Said the foe: "That's a pity, but I daresay I'll get over it." She moved to the door and opened it. She smiled, showing her teeth. (Christina was glad to see they were not quite perfect). "A sma' waist like mines is whiles a misfortune," she remarked, with affected self-commiseration.

Christina set her lips, but the retort *would* come. "Ay," she said viciously; "still, I suppose you couldn't grow tall any other way."

But the young woman only laughed—she could afford to laugh, having done that which she had come to do—and departed to report the result of her mission to the youth known as Willie Thomson.

"Wha was that, dearie?" M. Tod called from the living-room.

Christina started from an unlovely reverie. "Merely a female," she answered bitterly, and resumed counting the periodicals in a listless fashion.

The poison bit deep. The cheek of him to suggest walking home with *her* when he was going to a dance with that tight-laced girl next week! No doubt he admired her skimpy waist. He was welcome to it and her—and her bad teeth. And yet he had seemed a nice chap. She had liked him for his shyness, if for nothing else. But the shy kind were always the worst. He had very likely been taking

advantage of his shyness. Well, she was glad she had found him out before he could walk home with her. And possibly because she was glad, but probably because she was quite young at heart, tears came to her eyes. . . .

When ten minutes had passed, M. Tod, missing the cheerful chatter, toddled into the shop.

"What's wrang, dearie? Preserve us! Ha'e ye been cryin'?"

"Cryin'!" exclaimed Christina with contempt. "But I think I'm in for a shockin' cauld in ma heid, so ye best keep awa' frae me in case ye get the infection. A cauld's a serious thing at your time o' life." And she got the feebly protesting old woman back to the fireside, and left her there.

* * * * *

At eight o'clock Macgregor saw the window lights go out and the shop lights grow dim. A minute later he heard an exchange of good-nights and the closing and bolting of a door. Then Christina appeared, her head a little higher even than usual.

He went forward eagerly. He held out his hand and—it received his gift of the afternoon unopened.

"I've changed my mind. I'll bid you good-night and—good-bye," said Christina, and walked on.

Presently he overtook her.

"Christina, what's up?"

"Kindly do not address me any more."

"Any more?—Never?—What way?—"

She was gone.

He dashed the little package into the gutter and

strode off in the opposite direction, his face white, his lip quivering.

If Macgregor seemed in the past to have needed a thorough rousing, he had it now. For an hour he tramped the streets, his heart hot within him, the burden of his thoughts—"She thinks I'm no' guid enough."

And the end of the tramp found him at the door of the home of Jessie Mary. For a wonder, on a Saturday night at that hour, she was in. She opened the door herself.

At the sight of the boy something like fear fell upon her. For what had he come thus boldly?

He did not keep her in suspense. "Will ye gang wi' me to that dance ye was talkin' aboot?" he asked abruptly, adding, "I've got the money for the tickets."

A curse, a blow even, would have surprised her less.

"Will ye gang, Jessie?" he said impatiently.

For the life of her she could not answer at once.

Said he: "If it's Wullie ye're thinkin' o', I'll square him."

"Wullie!" she exclaimed, a cruel contempt in the word.

"Weel, if raeboddy else is takin' ye, will ye gang wi' me?"

"Dae—dae ye want me, Macgreegor?"

"I'm askin' ye."

She glanced at him furtively, but he was not looking at her; his hands were in his pockets, his mouth was shaped to emit a tuneless whistle. She tried to laugh, but made only a throaty sound.

It seemed as if a stranger stood before her, one of whom she knew nothing save his name. And yet she liked the stranger and wanted much to go to the dance with him.

The whistling ceased.

"Are ye gaun wi' somebody else?" he demanded, lifting his face for a moment.

It was not difficult to guess that something acute had happened to him very recently. Jessie Mary suddenly experienced a guilty pang. Yet why Macgregor should have come back to her now was beyond her comprehension. Yon yellow-haired girl in the shop could not have told him anything—that was certain. And though she had not really wanted him back, now that he had come she was fain to hold him once more. Such thoughts made confusion in her mind, out of which two distinct ideas at last emerged: she did not care if she had hurt the yellow-haired girl; she could not go to the dance on Macgregor's money.

So gently, sadly, she told her lie; "Ay, there's somebody else, Macgregor." Which suggests that no waist is too small to contain an appreciable amount of heart and conscience.

A brief pause, and Macgregor said drearily:

"Aweel, it doesna matter. I'll awa' hame." And went languidly down the stairs.

"It doesna matter." The words haunted Jessie Mary that night, and it was days before she got wholly rid of the uncomfortable feeling that Macgregor had not really wanted her to go to the dance, and that he had, in fact, been "coddling" her.

Whereas, poor lad, he had only been "coddling" himself, or, at least, trying to do so. By the time he reached the bottom step he had forgotten Jessie Mary.

Once more he tramped the streets.

At home Lizzie was showing her anxiety, and John was concealing his.

When, at long last, he entered the kitchen, he did not appear to hear his mother's "Whaur ha'e ye been, laddie?" or his father's "Ye're late, ma son." Their looks of concern at his tired face and muddy boots passed unobserved.

Having unlaced his boots and rid his feet of them more quietly than usual, he got up and went to the table at which his mother was sitting.

He took all the money—all—from his pockets and laid it before her.

"There's a shillin' each for Jeannie an' Jimsie. I'm no' needin' the rest. I'm wearied," he said, and went straightway to his own room.

John got up and joined his wife at the table. "Did I no' tell ye," he cried, triumphantly, "that Macgreegor wud dae the richt thing?"

Lizzie stared at the little heap of silver and bronze.

"John," she whispered at last, and there was a curious distressed note in her voice, "John, d'ye no' see?—he's gi'ed me ower much!"

XI

As a rule tonics are bitter, and their effects very gradual, often so gradual as to be hardly noticeable until one's strength is put to some test. While it would be unfair to deny the existence of "backbone" in Macgregor, it is but just to grant that the "backbone" required stiffening. And it is no discredit to Macgregor that the tincture of Christina's hardier spirit which, along with her (to him) abundant sweetness, he had been absorbing during these past weeks, was the very tonic he needed, the tonic without which he could not have acted as he did on the Monday night following his dismissal.

Of this action one may say, at first thought, that it was simply the outcome of an outraged pride. Yet Macgregor's pride was at best a drowsy thing until a girl stabbed it. It forced him to Jessie Mary's door, but there failed him. Throughout the miserable Sunday it lay inert, with only an occasional spasm. And though he went with it to the encounter on Monday, he carried it as a burden. His real supporters were Love and Determination, and the latter was a new comrade, welcome, but not altogether of his own inspiring.

He did not go to the shop, for he had neither

money nor the petty courage necessary to ask it of his parents. On the pavement, a little way from the door, he waited in a slow drizzle of rain. He had no doubts as to what he was going to do and say. The idea had been with him all day, from early in the morning, and it *had* to be carried out. Perhaps his nerves were a little too steady to be described as normal.

When eight o'clock struck on a neighbouring tower, he did not start or stir. But across the street, peering round the edge of a close-mouth, another boy jerked his head at the sound. Willie Thomson was exceedingly curious to know whether Saturday night had seen the end of the matter.

Christina, for no reason that she could have given, was late in leaving the shop; it was twenty minutes past the hour when she appeared.

She approached quickly, but he was ready for her.

"No!" she exclaimed at the sight of him.

He stepped right in front of her. She was compelled to halt, and she had nothing to say.

He faced her fairly, and said—neither hotly nor coldly, but with a slight throb in his voice:

"I'll be guid enough yet." With a little nod as if to emphasise his words, and without taking his eyes from her face, he stood aside and let her go.

Erect, he followed her with his eyes until the darkness and traffic of the pavement hid her. Then he seemed to relax, his shoulders drooped slightly, and with eyes grown wistful he moved slowly down the street towards home. Arrived there he shut himself up with an old school dictionary.

Dull work, but a beginning. . . .

"Guid enough yet." Christina had not gone far when through all her resentment the full meaning of the words forced itself upon her. "Oh," she told herself crossly, "I never meant him to take it that way." A little later she told herself the same thing, but merely impatiently. And still later, lying in the dark, she repeated it with a sob.

As for the watcher, Willie Thomson, he set out without undue haste to inform Jessie Mary that once more Macgregor had been left standing alone on the pavement. Somehow Willie was not particularly pleased with himself this evening. Ere his lagging feet had borne him half way to the appointed place he was feeling sorry for Macgregor. All at once he decided to spy no more. It would be rather awkward just at present to intimate such a decision to Jessie Mary, but he could "cod" her, he thought, without much difficulty, by inventing reports in the future. Cheered by his virtuous resolutions, he quickened his pace.

Jessie Mary received him in the close leading to her abode. She was in an extraordinarily bad temper, and cut short his report almost at the outset by demanding to know when he intended repaying the shilling he had borrowed a fortnight previously.

"Next week," mumbled Willie, with that sad lack of originality exhibited by nearly all harassed borrowers.

Whereupon Jessie Mary, who was almost a head taller, seized him by one ear and soundly cuffed the other until with a yelp he broke loose and fled into the night, never to know that he had been punished for that unfortunate remark of Macgregor's

—"it doesna matter." Yet let us not scoff at Jessie Mary's sense of justice. The possessors of greater minds than hers, having stumbled against a chair, have risen in their wrath and kicked the sofa—which is not at all to say that the sofa's past has been more blameless than the chair's. Life has a way of settling our accounts without much respect for our book-keeping.

Jessie Mary felt none the better of her outbreak. She went to bed wishing angrily that she had taken Macgregor at his word. The prospects of obtaining an escort to the dance were now exceedingly remote, for only that afternoon she had learned that the bandy-legged young man in the warehouse whom she had deemed "safe at a pinch," and who was the owner of a dress suit with a white vest, had invited another girl and was actually going to give her flowers to wear.

Willie went to bed, too, earlier than usual, and lay awake wondering, among other things, whether his aching ear entitled him to a little further credit in the matter of his debt to Jessie Mary—not that any length of credit would have made payment seem possible. For Willie was up to the neck in debt, owing the appalling sum of five shillings and ninepence to an old woman who sold newspapers, paraffin oil and cheap cigarettes, and who was already threatening to go to his aunt for her money—a proceeding which would certainly result in much misery for Willie. He was "out of a job" again; but it isn't easy to get work, more especially when one prefers to do nothing. To some extent Macgregor was to blame for his having got into debt

with the tobacconist, for if Macgregor had not stopped smoking, Willie would not have needed to buy nearly so many cigarettes. Nevertheless, Willie's thoughts did not dwell long or bitterly on that point. Rather did they dwell on Macgregor himself. And after a while Willie drew up his legs and pulled the insufficient bedclothes over his head and lay very still. This he had done since he was a small boy, when lonesomeness got the better of him, when he wished he had a father and mother like Macgregor's.

And, as has been hinted, neither was Christina at ease that night.

Indeed, it were almost safe to say that of the four young people involved in this little tragi-comedy, Macgregor, yawning over his old school dictionary, was the least unhappy.

XII

ON the fifth night, at the seventh page of words beginning with a "D," Macgregor closed the dictionary and asked himself what was the good of it all. His face was hot, his whole being restless. He looked at his watch—a quarter to eight. He got up and carefully placed the dictionary under a copy of "Ivanhoe" on the chest of drawers. He would go for a walk.

He left the house quietly.

In the kitchen Lizzie, pausing in her knitting, said to John: "That's Macgregor awa' oot."

"It'll dae him nae harm," said John. "He's becomin' a great reader, Lizzie."

"I dinna see why he canna read ben here. It's cauld in his room. What's he readin'?"

"The book he got frae his Uncle Purdie three year back."

"Weel, I'm sure I'm gled if he's takin' an interest in it at last."

"Oh, 'Ivanhoe' 's no' a bad story," remarked John. "Whiles it's fair excitin'."

Said Jimsie from the hearthrug: "He doesna seem to enjoy it much, Paw."

"Weel, it's no' a funny book."

"It's time ye was in yer bed, Jimsie," said Mrs. Robinson. "It's ower late for ye."

"Aw, the wean's fine," said John.

Jeannie laid down her sewing. "Come on, Jimsie, an' I'll tell ye a wee story afore ye gang to sleep."

"Chaps ye!" Jimsie replied, getting up.

When the two had gone, Lizzie observed casually: "It's the first nicht Macgregor's been oot this week."

"Weel, ye should be pleased, wumman." John smiled.

A pause.

"I wonder what made him gi'e up a' his siller on Seturday nicht."

"Same here. But I wudna ask him," said John, becoming grave. "Wud you?"

She shook her head. "I tried to, on Sunday, but someway I couldna. He's changin'."

"He's growin' up, Lizzie."

"I suppose ye're richt," she said reluctantly, and resumed her knitting.

From the darkest spot he could find on the opposite pavement Macgregor saw Christina come out of the shop, pass under a lamp, and disappear. He felt sorely depressed during the return journey. The dictionary had failed to increase either his knowledge or his self-esteem. He wondered whether History or Geography would do any good; there were books on these subjects in the house. He realised that he knew nothing about anything except his trade, and even there he had to admit that he had learned less than he might have done. And yet he had always wanted to be a painter.

The same night he started reading the History of England, and found it a considerable improvement on the Dictionary. He managed to keep awake until the arrival of Julius Cæsar. Unfortunately he had taken the book to bed, and his mother on discovering it in the morning indiscreetly asked him what he had been doing with it. "Naething special," was his reply, indistinctly uttered, and here ended his historical studies, though for days after Lizzie left the book prominent on the chest of drawers.

The day being Saturday, the afternoon was his own. Through the rain he made his way furtively to a free library, but became too self-conscious at the door, and fled. For the sum of threepence a picture house gave him harbourage, and save when the scenes were very exciting he spent the time in trying not to wonder what Christina would think of him, if she thought at all. He came forth ashamed and in nowise cheered by the entertainment.

In the evening he went once more to watch her leave the shop. M. Tod came to the door with her, and they stood talking for a couple of minutes, so that he had more than a glimpse of her. And a spirit arose in him demanding that he should attempt something to prove himself, were it only with his hands. It was not learning, but earning, that would make him "guid enough yet"; not what he could say, but what he could do. There would be time enough for speaking "genteel English" and so on after—well, after he had got up in the world.

For a moment he felt like running after Christina

and making her hearken to his new hope, but self-consciousness prevailed and sent him homewards.

"Hullo!" From a close came a husky voice, apologetic, appealing.

"Hullo, Wullie!" Macgregor stopped. He was not sorry to meet Willie; he craved companionship just then, though he had no confidence to give.

"Are ye for hame?"

"Ay."

"I--I'll come wi' ye, if ye like, Macgreegor?"

"Come on then."

Willie came out, and they proceeded along the street without remark until Macgregor enquired—

"Where are ye workin' the noo, Wullie?"

"I'm no' workin'. Canna get a job. Dae ye ken o' onything?"

"Na. What kin' o' job dae ye want?"

"Onything," said Willie, and added quickly,

"An' I'll stick to it this time, if I get the chance."

After a short pause—"My fayther got ye a job before," said Macgregor.

"I ken. But I wud stick—"

"Honest?"

Willie drew his hand across his throat.

"Weel," said Macgregor, "I'll tell ma fayther, an' ye can gang an' see him at the wor'ks on Monday."

"I'll be there. Ye're a dacent chap, Macgreegor."

Neither seemed to have anything more to say to the other, but their parting was cordial enough.

Next day, Sunday, was wet and stormy, and there was no afternoon stroll of father and son to the docks. John was flattered by Macgregor's ill-concealed disappointment—it was like old times. Per-

haps he would not have been less flattered had he known his boy's desire to tell him out of doors a thing that somehow could not be uttered in the house. Macgregor spent the afternoon in studying secretly an old price-list of Purdie's Stores.

The following night, while returning from the errand of previous nights, he again encountered Willie.

"So ma fayther's gaun to gi'e ye a job. He tell't me it was fixed."

"Ay," said Willie, "but he canna tak' me o' for a fortnicht."

"Weel, that's no lang to wait."

For a few seconds Willie was mute; then he blurted out—"I'm done for!"

"Done for!" exclaimed Macgregor, startled by the despair in the other's voice. "What's wrang, Wullie?"

"I'm in a mess. But it's nae use tellin' ye. Ye canna dae onything."

"Is't horses?" Macgregor asked presently.

"Naw, it's no' horses!" Willie indignantly replied.

How virtuous we feel when accused of the one sin we have not committed!

The next moment he clutched Macgregor's arm. "Come in here, an' I'll tell ye." He drew his companion into a close. "I—I couldna tell onybody else."

From the somewhat incoherent recital which followed Macgregor finally gathered that the old woman to whom Willie owed money had presented her ultimatum. If Willie failed to pay up that night she would assuredly not fail to apply to his aunt first thing in the morning.

"Never heed, Wullie," said Macgregor, taking his friend's arm, and leading him homewards. "Yer aunt'll no' kill ye."

"I wish to—— she wud!" muttered Willie with a vehemence that shocked his friend. "She's aye been ill to live wi', but it'll be a sight harder noo."

"Wud the auld wife no' believe ye aboot gettin' a job in a fortnicht? She wudna? Aweell, she'll believe me. Come on, an' I'll speak to her for ye."

But the "auld wife" was adamant. She had been deceived with too many promises ere now. At last Macgregor, feeling himself beaten, disconsolately joined Willie and set out for home. Neither spoke until Macgregor's abode was reached. Then Macgregor said:

"Bide here till I come back," and ran up the stair. He knew his father was out, having gone back to the works to experiment with some new machinery. He found his mother alone in the kitchen.

"Mither," he said with difficulty, "I wish ye wud gi'e me five shillin's o' ma money."

He could not have startled her more thoroughly.

"Five shillin's, laddie! What for?"

"I canna tell ye the noo."

"But——"

"It's no' for—for fun. If ye ask me, I'll tell ye in a secret this day fortnicht. Please, mither."

She got up and laid her hands on his shoulder and turned him to the full light of the gas. He looked at her shyly, yet without flinching. And abruptly she kissed him, and as abruptly passed to the dresser drawer where she kept her purse.

Without a word she put the money in his hand. Without a word he took it, nodded gravely, and went out. In one way Lizzie had done more for her boy in these three minutes than she had done in the last three years.

Macgregor had a sixpence in his pocket, and he added it to the larger coins.

"She can wait for her thruppence," he said, giving the money to the astounded Willie. "Awa' an' pay her. I'll maybe see ye the morn's nicht. So long!" He walked off in the direction opposite to that which Willie ought to take.

But Willie ran after him; he was pretty nearly crying. "Macgreegor," he stammered, "I'll pay ye back when I get ma first wages. An' I'll no' forget—oh, I'll never forget. An' I'll dae ye a guid turn yet!"

"Ye best hurry in case she shuts her shop," said Macgregor, and so got rid of him.

While it is disappointing to record that Willie has thus far never managed to repay Macgregor in hard cash, though he has somehow succeeded in retaining the employment found for him by John, it is comforting to know that his promise to do Macgregor a good turn was more than just an emotional utterance. When, on the following Wednesday and Friday nights, he stealthily tracked Macgregor to the now familiar watching place, his motives were no longer curious or selfish, but benevolent in the extreme. Not that he could bring himself to sympathise with Macgregor in the latter's devotion to a mere girl, for, as a matter of fact, he regarded his

friend's behaviour as "awfu' stupid"; but if Macgregor was really "saft" on the girl, it behoved him, Willie, to do what he could to put an end to the existing misunderstanding.

On the Friday night he came regretfully to the conclusion that the "saftness" was incurable, and he accordingly determined to act on the following afternoon. By this time his knowledge of the movements of M. Tod and her assistant was practically as complete as Macgregor's, so that he had no hesitation in choosing the hour for action. He had little fear of Macgregor's coming near the shop in daylight.

So, having witnessed the exit of M. Tod, he crossed the street, and examined the contents of the window, as he had seen Macgregor do so often. He was not in the least nervous. The fact that he was without money did not perturb him: it would be the simplest thing in the world to introduce himself and his business by asking for an article which stationers' shops did not supply. A glance at a druggist's window had given him the necessary suggestion.

On entering he was seized with a most distressing cough, which racked him while he closed the door and until he reached the counter.

"A cold afternoon," Christina remarked in a sympathetic tone.

"Ay. Ha'e ye ony chest protectors?" he hoarsely enquired.

For the fraction of a second only she hesitated. "Not exactly," she replied. "But I can recommend this." From under the counter she brought a quire

of brown paper. "It's cheaper than flannel and much more sanitary," she went on. "There's nothing like it for keeping out the cold. You've only got to cut out the shape that suits you." She separated a sheet from the quire and spread it on the counter. "Enough there for a dozen protectors. Price one penny. I'll cut them out for you, if you like."

"The doctor said I was to get a flannel yin," said Willie, forgetting his hoarseness. "Ha'e ye ony nice ceegarettes the day, miss?"

"No."

"Will ye ha'e ony on Monday?"

"No."

"When d'ye think ye'll ha'e some nice ceegarettes?"

Christina's eyes smiled. "Perhaps," she said solemnly, "by the time you're big enough to smoke them. Anything else to-day?"

"Ye're no' sae green," he said, with grudging admiration.

"No," said she; "it's only the reflection." She opened the glass case and took out an infant's rattle. "Threepence!"

Willie laughed. "My! ye're a comic!" he exclaimed.

"Children are easily amused."

There was a short pause. Then Willie, leaning his arms on the edge of the counter, looked up in her face and said:

"So you're the girl that's mashed on Macgreegor Robi'son." He grinned.

A breath of silence—a sounding smack.

Willie sprang back, his hand to his cheek. Christina, cheeks flaming, eyes glittering, teeth gleaming, hands clenched, drew herself up.

"Get oot o' this!" she cried. "D'ye hear me! Get oot——"

"Ay, I hear ye," said Willie resentfully, rubbing his cheek. "Ye're ower smart wi' yer han's. I meant for to say——"

"Be quiet!"

"—you're the girl Macgregor's mashed on—— an' I——"

Christina stamped her foot. "Clear oot, I tell ye!"

"—I wudna be Macgregor for a thoosan' pounds! Keep yer hair on, miss. I'll gang when it suits me. Ye've got to hear——"

"I'll no' listen." She put her hands to her ears.

"Thon girl, Jessie Mary, took a rise oot o' ye last week, an' it was me that put her up to it. Macgregor gi'ed her the belt, richt enough, but that was afore he got saft on you——"

"Silence! I cannot hear a word you say," declared Christina, recovering herself and her more formal speech, though her colour, which had faded, now bloomed again.

"I'll cry it loud, if ye like, so as the folk in the street can hear. But ye can pretend ye dinna hear," he said ironically. "I'm no' heedin' whether ye hear or no'."

"I wish you would go away, you impertinent thing!"

"Macgregor——" he began.

Once more she covered her ears.

"Macgregor," proceeded Willie, with a rude wink, "never had ony notion o' takin' Jessie Mary to the dance. She was jist coddin' ye, though I daursay she was kin' o' jealous because ye had cut her oot. So I think ye should mak' it up wi' Macgregor when ye get the chance. He's awfu' saft on ye. I wudna be him for a——"

"Go away!" said Christina. "You're simply wasting your breath."

"Dinna let on to Macgregor that I tell't ye," he continued, unmoved, "an' if Jessie Mary tries it on again, jist you put yer finger to yer nose at her."

"If you don't go at once, I'll——"

"Oh, ye canna dae onything, miss. I'll forgi'e ye for that scud ye gi'ed me, but I wud advise ye no' to be so quick wi' yer han's in future, or ye'll maybe get into trouble." He turned towards the door. "I daursay ye ken fine that Macgregor watches ye leavin' the shop every nicht——"

"What *are* you talking about?"

"Gi'e him a whistle or a wave the next time. There's nae use in bein' huffy."

"That's enough!"

Willie opened the door. "An' ye best hurry up, or ye'll maybe loss him. So long. I'll no' tell him I seen ye blushin'."

Christina opened her mouth, but ere she could speak, with a grin and a wink he was gone. She collapsed upon the stool. She had never been so angry in her life—at least, so she told herself.

XIII

JOHN ROBINSON and his son sat on a pile of timber at the docks. Dusk was falling, and the air that had been mild for the season was growing chill.

John replaced his watch in his pocket. "It's comin' on for tea-time. Are ye ready for the road, Macgregor?"

"Ay," said the boy, without stirring.

For two hours he had been struggling to utter the words on which he believed his future depended.

"Weel," said John, getting out his pipe preparatory to lighting it on passing the gate, "we best be movin'."

It was now or never. Macgregor cleared his throat.

"The pentin' trade's rotten," he said in a voice not his own.

"Eh?" said John, rather staggered by the statement which was without relevance to any of the preceding conversation. "What's rotten about it?"

"Everything."

"That's the first I've heard o' 't. In fac', I'm tell't the pentin' trade is extra brisk the noo."

"That's no' what I meant," Macgregor forced himself to say. "I meant it was a rotten trade to be in."

John gave a good-humoured laugh. "Oh, I see! Ye dinna like the overtime! Aweel, that's nateral at your age, Macgregor"—he patted his son's shoulder—"but when ye're aulder, wi' a wife an' weans, maybe, ye'll be gled o' overtime whiles, I'm thinkin'."

"It's no the overtime," said Macgregor.

"What is't, then? What's wrang wi' the trade?" The question was lightly put.

"There's—there's nae prospec's in it for a man."

"Nae prcspec's! Hoots, Macgregor! there's as guid prospec's in the pentin' as in ony ither trade. Dinna fash yer heid aboot that—no' but what I'm pleased to ken ye're thinkin' aboot yer prospec's, ma son. But we'll speak aboot it on the road hame."

"I wish," said Macgregor, with the greatest effort of all, "I wish I had never gaed into it. I wish I had gaed into Uncle Purdie's business."

John sat down again. At last he said: "D'ye mean that, Macgregor?"

"Ay, I mean it."

For the first time John Robinson felt disappointed—in a vague fashion, it is true, yet none the less unpleasantly disappointed—in his son.

"But ye've been at the pentin' for three year," he said a little impatiently.

"I ken that, fayther."

"An' ye mind ye had the chance o' gaun into yer uncle's business when ye left the schule?"

"Ay."

"But ye wud ha'e naething but the pentin'." Macgregor nodded.

"Maybe ye mind that yer Aunt Purdie was unco offended, for it was her notion—at least, it was her that spoke aboot it—an' she declared ye wud never get a second chance. D'ye no' mind, Macgregor?"

"I mind aboot her bein' offended, but I dinna mind aboot—the ither thing," Macgregor answered dully.

"But *I* mind it, for she was rale nesty to yer mither at the time. In fac', I dinna ken hoo yer mither stood her impiddence. An', in a way, it was a' ma fau't, for it was me that said ye was to choose the trade that ye liked best—an' I thocht I was daein' the richt thing, because I had seen lads spiled wi' bein' forced into trades they didna fancy. Ay, I thocht I was daein' the richt thing—— An' noo ye're tellin' me I did the wrang thing."

"Fayther, it's me that's to blame. I—I didna mean to vex ye."

"Aweel, I dinna suppose ye did," said John sadly. "But for the life o' me I canna see hoo ye can hope to get into yer uncle's business at this time o' day. . . . But we'll be keepin' yer mither waitin'."

He rose slowly and Macgregor joined him. At the gate John apparently forgot to light his pipe. They were half way home ere he spoke.

He put his hand round his son's arm. "Ye're no' to think, Macgregor, that I wud stan' in yer road when ye want to better yersel'. No' likely! I never was set on bein' a wealthy man masel', but naethin' wud mak' me prooder nor to see you gang up in the world; an' I can say the same for yer mither. An' I can see that ye nicht gang far in yer uncle's business, for yer uncle was aye fond o' ye,

an' I think ye could manage to please him at yer work, if ye was tryin'. *But*—ye wud need yer aunt's favour to begin wi', an' that's the bitter truth, an' she's no' the sort o' body that forgets what she conseeders an affront. Weel, it'll need some thinkin' ower. I'll ha'e to see what yer mither says. An' ye best no' expec' onything. Stick to the pentin' in the meantime, an' be vera certain afore ye quit the trade ye're in. That's a' I can say, ma son."

Macgregor had no words then. Never before had his father seriously spoken at such length to him. His heart was heavy, troubled about many things.

Eight o'clock on Monday night saw him at the accustomed spot ; on Wednesday night also he was there. If only Christina had been friends with him he would have asked her what he ought to do. Yet the mere glimpse of her confirmed him in his desire to change his trade. On the Wednesday night it seemed to him that she walked away from the shop much more slowly than usual, and the horrid thought that she might be giving some other "man" a chance to overtake her assailed him. But at last she was gone without that happening.

On the way home he encountered Jessie Mary. She greeted him affably, and he could not but stop.

"Lovely dance on Friday. Ye should ha'e been there. Ma belt was greatly admired," she remarked.

"Was it ?"

"I think I've seen the shop where ye bought it," she said, watching his face covertly.

"It's likly," he replied, without emotion.

Jessie Mary was relieved ; evidently he was without knowledge of her visit to the shop. Now that the world was going well with her again she bore no ill-will, and was fain to avoid any. For at the eleventh hour—or, to be precise, the night before the dance—she had miraculously won back the allegiance of the young man with the exquisite moustache, who served in the provision shop, and for the present she was more than satisfied with herself.

So she bade Macgregor good-night, a little patronisingly perhaps, and hurried off to reward her recovered swain with the pleasant sight of herself and an order for a finnan haddie.

Macgregor was still in the dark as to whether his father had mentioned to his mother the subject of that conversation at the docks. John had not referred to it again, and the boy was beginning to wonder if his case was hopeless.

On the Friday night, however, just when he was about to slip from the house, his mother followed him to the door. Very quietly she said :

"When ye come in, Macgreegor, I want ye to tell me if ye're still set on leavin' the pentin'. Dinna tell me noo. Tak' yer walk, an' think it ower, seriouslike. But dinna be late, laddie."

She went back to the kitchen, leaving him to shut the door.

It was not much after seven o'clock, but he went straightway in the direction of M. Tod's shop. For the first time in what seemed an age, he found himself at the familiar, glittering window. And lo ! the glazed panel at the back was open a few inches.

Quickly he retreated to the edge of the pavement, and stood there altogether undecided. But desire drew him, and gradually he approached the window again.

Christina was sitting under the lamp, at the desk, her pretty profile bent over her writing, her fair plait falling over the shoulder of her scarlet shirt. She was engaged in pencilling queer little marks on paper, and doing so very rapidly. Macgregor understood that she was practising shorthand. No doubt she would be his uncle's private secretary some day, while he——

All at once it came to him that no one in the world could answer the great question but Christina. If the thing didn't matter to Christina, it didn't matter to him; it was for her sake that he would strive to be "guid enough yet," not for the sake of being "guid enough" in itself. Besides, she had put the idea into his head. Surely she would not refuse to speak to him on that one subject.

Now all this was hardly in accordance with the brave and independent plan which Macgregor had set out to follow—to wit, that he would not attempt to speak to Christina until he could announce that he was a member of his uncle's staff. Yes, love is the great maker of plans—also, the great breaker.

Coward or not, it took courage to enter the shop. Christina looked up, her colour deepening slightly. "Hullo," she said coolly, though not coldly.

It was not a snub anyway, and Macgregor walked up to the counter. He came to the point at once.

"Wud ye advise me to try an' get a job frae ma uncle?" he said, distinctly enough.

"Me?" The syllable was fraught with intense astonishment.

"Ye advised me afore to try it," he said, fairly steadily.

"Did I?"—carelessly.

It was too much for him. "Oh, Christina!" he whispered reproachfully.

"Well, I'm sure it's none of my business. I thought you preferred being a painter."

The pity was that Christina should have just then remembered the existence of such a person as Jessie Mary, also the fact of her own slow walk from the shop the previous night. Yet she had forgotten both when she opened the panel at the back of the window a few inches. And perhaps she was annoyed with herself, knowing that she was not behaving quite fairly.

He let her remark concerning his preference for the painting pass, and put a very direct question.

"What made ye change yer mind about me that night?"

"What night?" she asked flippantly, and told herself it was the silliest thing she had ever uttered.

She had gone too far—she saw it in his face.

"I didna think ye was as bad as that," he said in a curiously hard voice, and turned from the counter.

Quick anger—quick compunction—quick fear—and then:

"Mac!"

He wheeled at the door. She was holding out her hand. Her smile was frail.

"Are ye in earnest?" he said in a low voice, but he did not wait for her answer.

She drew away her hand, gently. "Dinna ask me ony questions," she pleaded. "I—I didna really mean what I said that night, or this night either. I think I was off my onion"—a faint laugh—"but I'm sorry I behaved the way I did. Is that enough?"

It was more than enough; how much more he could not say. "I've missed ye terrible," he murmured.

Christina became her practical self. "So ye're for tryin' yer uncle's business——" she began.

"If he'll gi'e me the chance."

"Weel, I'm sure I wish ye the best o' luck."

"Then ye think I ought to try?" This with great eagerness.

"If ye've made up yer mind it's for the best," she answered cautiously.

He had to be satisfied with that. "Will I let ye ken if it comes off?"

She nodded. Then she glanced at her watch.

"Can—can I get walkin' hame wi' ye, Christina?" It was out before he knew.

She shook her head. "Uncle said he wud come for me; he had some business up this way. If ye wait a minute, ye'll see him. I'll introduce ye. He'll be interested seein' ye're a nephew o' Mr. Purdie."

"Oh, I couldna. I best hook it. But, Christina, I can come to-morrow, eh?"

She laughed. "I canna prevent ye. But I'll no' be here in the afternoon. Uncle's takin' auntie an' me to a matinée, an' I'll no' be back much afore six."

"Weel, I'll meet ye at eight an' walk hame wi' ye."

"Will ye?"

"Oh, Christina, say 'ay.'"

"I'll consider it."

And he had to be satisfied with that, too, for here the noisy door opened to admit a tall, clean-shaven, pleasant-featured man of middle-age.

"Hullo, uncle!" cried Christina.

Macgregor fled, but not without gaining a quick smile that made all the difference in the world to him.

Ten minutes later he hurried into the home kitchen.

"Mither, I've decided to leave the pentin'." The moment he said it his heart misgave him, and the colour flew to his face. But he need not have doubted his parents.

"Weel, ma son," said John soberly, "we'll dae the best we can wi' yer Aunt Purdie."

"Jist that," said Lizzie.

And that was all.

An urgent piece of work had to be done the following afternoon, and he was later than usual, for a Saturday, in getting home. He found his mother preparing to go out, and his father looking strangely perplexed.

"She's gaun to see yer Aunt Purdie," said John in a whisper.

Macgregor looked from one to the other, hesitated, and went over to Lizzie. He put his hand on her arm.

"Mither, ye're no' to gang. I—I'll gang masel'."

Then, indeed, Lizzie Robinson perceived that her boy was in danger of becoming a man.

XIV

To press the little black button at the door of his aunt's handsome west-end flat was the biggest thing Macgregor had ever done. As a small boy he had feared his Aunt Purdie, as a schoolboy he had hated her, as a youth he had despised her; his feelings towards her now were not to be described, but it is certain that they included a well-nigh overpowering sense of dread; indeed, the faint thrill of the electric bell sent him back a pace towards the stair. His state of perspiration gave place to one of miserable chillness.

A supercilious servant eyed his obviously "good" clothes and bade him wait. Nevertheless, a sting was what Macgregor needed just then; it roused the fighting spirit. When the servant returned, and in an aloof fashion—as though, after all, it was none of her business—suggested that he might enter, he was able to follow her across the hall, with its thick rugs and pleasantly warm atmosphere, to the drawing-room, without faltering. Less than might have been expected the grandeur of his surroundings impressed—or depressed—him, for in the course of his trade he had grown familiar with the houses of the rich. But he had enough to face in the picture without looking at the frame.

Mrs. Purdie was seated at the side of the glowing

hearth, apparently absorbed in the perusal of a charitable society's printed list of donations.

"Your nephew, ma'am," the servant respectfully announced and retired.

Mrs. Purdie rose in a manner intended to be languid. Macgregor had not seen the large yet angular figure for two years. With his hat in his left hand he went forward holding out his right. A stiff, brief handshake followed.

"Well, Macgregor, this is quite an unexpected pleasure," she said, unsmiling, resuming her seat. "Take a chair. It is a considerable period since I observed you last." Time could not wither the flowers of language for Mrs. Purdie. "You are getting quite a big boy. How old are you now? Are your parents in good health?" She did not wait for answers to these inquiries. "I am sorry your uncle is not at home. His commercial pursuits confine him to his new and commodious premises even on Saturday afternoons." (At that moment Mr. Purdie was smoking a pipe in the homely parlour of Christina's uncle, awaiting his old friend's return from the theatre.) "His finance is exceedingly high at present." With a faint smack of her lips she paused, and cast an inquiring glance at her visitor.

Macgregor saw the ice, so to speak, before him. The time had come. But he did not go tapping round the edge. Gathering himself together, he leaped blindly.

In a few ill-chosen words he blurted out his petition.

Then there fell an awful silence. And then—he could hardly believe his own ears!

There are people in the world who seem hopelessly unloveable until you—perforce, perhaps—ask of them a purely personal favour. There may even

be people who leave the world with their fountains of goodwill still sealed simply because no one had the courage or the need to break the seals for them. Until to-day the so-called favours of Aunt Purdie had been mere patronage and cash payments.

Even now she could not help speaking patronisingly to Macgregor, but through the patronage struggled a kindliness and sympathy of which her relations so long used to her purse-pride, her affectations, her absurdities, could never have imagined her capable. She made no reference to the past; she suggested no difficulties for the present; she cast no doubts upon the future. Her nephew, she declared, had done wisely in coming to her; she would see to it that he got his chance. It seemed to Macgregor that she promised him ten times all he would have dreamed of asking. Finally she bade him stay to dinner and see his uncle; then perceiving his anxiety to get home and possibly, also, his dread of offending her by expressing it, she invited him for the following Sunday evening, and sent him off with a full heart and a light head.

He burst into the kitchen, bubbling over with his wonderful news. During its recital John gave vent to noisy explosions of satisfaction, Jeannie beamed happily, Jimsie stared at his transformed big brother, and Lizzie, though listening with all her ears, began quietly to prepare her son's tea.

"An' so she treated ye weel, Macgreegor," said John, rubbing his hands, while the speaker paused for words.

"She did that! An' I'm to get dooble the wages I'm gettin' the noo, an' I've to spend the half o'

them on night classes, for, ye see, I'm to learn *everything* aboot the business, an' then——"

Said Lizzie gently: "Wud ye like yer egg biled or fried, dearie?"

* * * * *

It was nearly eight o'clock when he reached the shop, and he decided to wait at a short distance from the window until Christina came out. He was not going to risk interruption by the old woman or a late customer; he would tell his wonderful tale in the privacy of the busy pavement, under the secrecy of the noisy street. Yet he was desperately impatient, and with every minute after the striking of the hour a fresh doubt assailed him.

At last the lights in the window went out, and the world grew brighter. Presently he was moving to meet her, noting dimly that she was wearing a bigger hat than heretofore.

She affected surprise at the sight of him, but not at his eagerly whispered announcement:

"I've got it!"

"Good for you," she said kindly, and refrained from asking him, teasingly, where he thought he was going. "It was lovely at the theatre," she remarked, stepping forward.

"Dae ye no' want to hear aboot it?" he asked, disappointed, catching up with her.

"Of course," she said cheerfully. "Was yer uncle nice?"

"It was ma aunt," he explained somewhat reluctantly, for he feared she might laugh. But she only nodded understandingly, and, relieved, he plunged into details.

"Ye've done fine," she said when he had finished—for the time being, at anyrate. "I'm afraid it'll be you that'll be wantin' a private secretary when I get that length."

"Dinna laugh at me," he murmured reproachfully.

"Dinna be ower serious, Mac," she returned. "Ye'll get on a' the better for bein' able to tak' a joke whiles. I'm as pleased as Punch aboot it."

He was more pleased, if possible. "If it hadna been for you, Christina, I wud never ha'e had the neck to try it," he said warmly.

"I believe ye!" she said quaintly.

"But it's the truth—an' I'll never forget it."

"A guid memory's a gran' thing! An' when dae ye start wi' yer uncle?"

"Monday week."

"That's quick work. Ye've beat me a' to sticks. Dinna get swelled heid!"

"Christina, I wish ye wudna——"

"I canna help it. It's the theatre, I suppose. Oh, I near forgot to tell ye, yer uncle was in when we got hame frae the theatre. I hadna time to speak to him, for I had to run back to the shop. Hadna even time to change ma dress. I think yer uncle whiles gets tired o' bein' a rich man an' livin' in a swell house. Maybe *you'll* feel that way someday."

He let her run on, now and then glancing wistfully at her pretty, animated face. The happiness, the triumph, he had anticipated were not his. But all the more they were worth working for.

So they came to the place where she lived.

"Come up," she said easily; "I tell't auntie I wud maybe bring ye up for supper."

Doubtless it was the shock of gratification as much as anything that caused him to hang back. She had actually mentioned him to her aunt !

"Will ma uncle be there ?" he stammered at last.

"Na, na. Ye'll see plenty o' *him* later on !"

"Maybe yer aunt winna be pleased——"

"Come on, Mac ! Ye're ower shy for this world !" she laughed encouragingly.

They went up together.

Christina had a latch-key, and on opening the door, said :

"Oh, they haven't come home yet. Out for a walk, I suppose. But they'll be home in a minute. Come in. There's a peg for your hat."

She led the way into a fire-lit room and turned up the gas. Macgregor saw a homely, cosy parlour, something like his grandfather's at Rothesay, but brighter generally. A round table was trimly laid for supper. In the window a small table supported a typewriter and a pile of printed and manuscript books, the sight of which gave him a sort of sinning feeling.

"Sit down," she said, indicating an easy-chair.

"Auntie and uncle won't be long."

He took an ordinary chair, and tried hard to look at his ease.

As she took off her hat at the mirror over the mantelpiece she remarked : "You'll like uncle at once, and you'll like auntie before long. She's still a wee bit prim."

He noticed that her speech had changed with entering the house, but somehow the "genteel English" did not seem so unnatural now. He supposed he would have to learn to speak it, too, presently.

"But she is the best woman in the world," Christina continued, patting her hair, "and she'll be delighted about you going into your uncle's business. I think it was splendid of you managing your aunt so well."

Macgregor smiled faintly. "I doobt it was her that managed me," he said. "But, Christina, I'll no' let her be sorry—nor—nor you either."

"Oh, I'm sure you'll get on quickly," she said, gravely, bending to unbutton her long coat.

"I intend to dae that," he cried, uplifted by her words. "Gi'e me a year or twa, an' I'll show ye!"

She slipped out of the coat, and stood for a moment, faintly smiling, in her best frock, a simple thing of pale grey lustre relieved with white, her best black shoes, her best thread stockings, her heavy yellow plait over her left shoulder.

The boy caught his breath.

"Just a minute," she said, and left the room to put away her coat and hat.

Macgregor half turned in his chair, threw his arms upon the back and pressed his brow to his wrist.

So she found him on her return.

"Sore head, Mac?" she asked gently, recovering from her surprise, and going close to him.

"Let me gang," he whispered; "I—I'll never be guid enough."

The slight sound of a key in the outer door reached the girl's ears. She gave her eyes an impatient little rub.

She laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Cheer up!" she said, almost roughly, and stooping quickly, she touched her lips to his hair, so lightly, so tenderly, that he was not aware.

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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