

THE
HAT SHOP
-
MRS.C.S.PEEL

Miss Harriet - Emily Beckett

The
"Osplenade Hotel"
Yonke Ontario
Canada.

CPS
396
BB
7762

20

Mrs C.S. Peck =

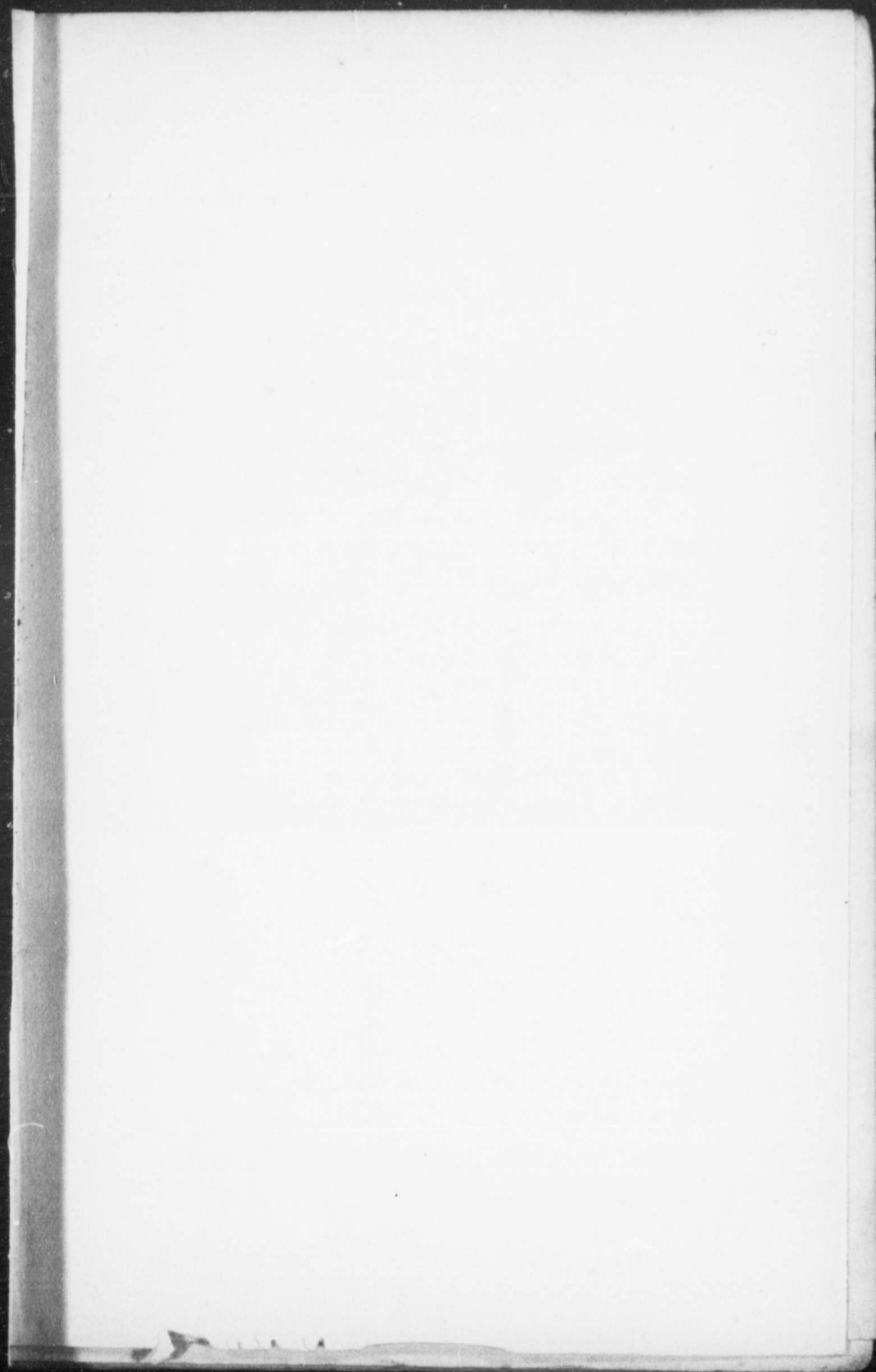
Constance
Dorothy
Evelyn

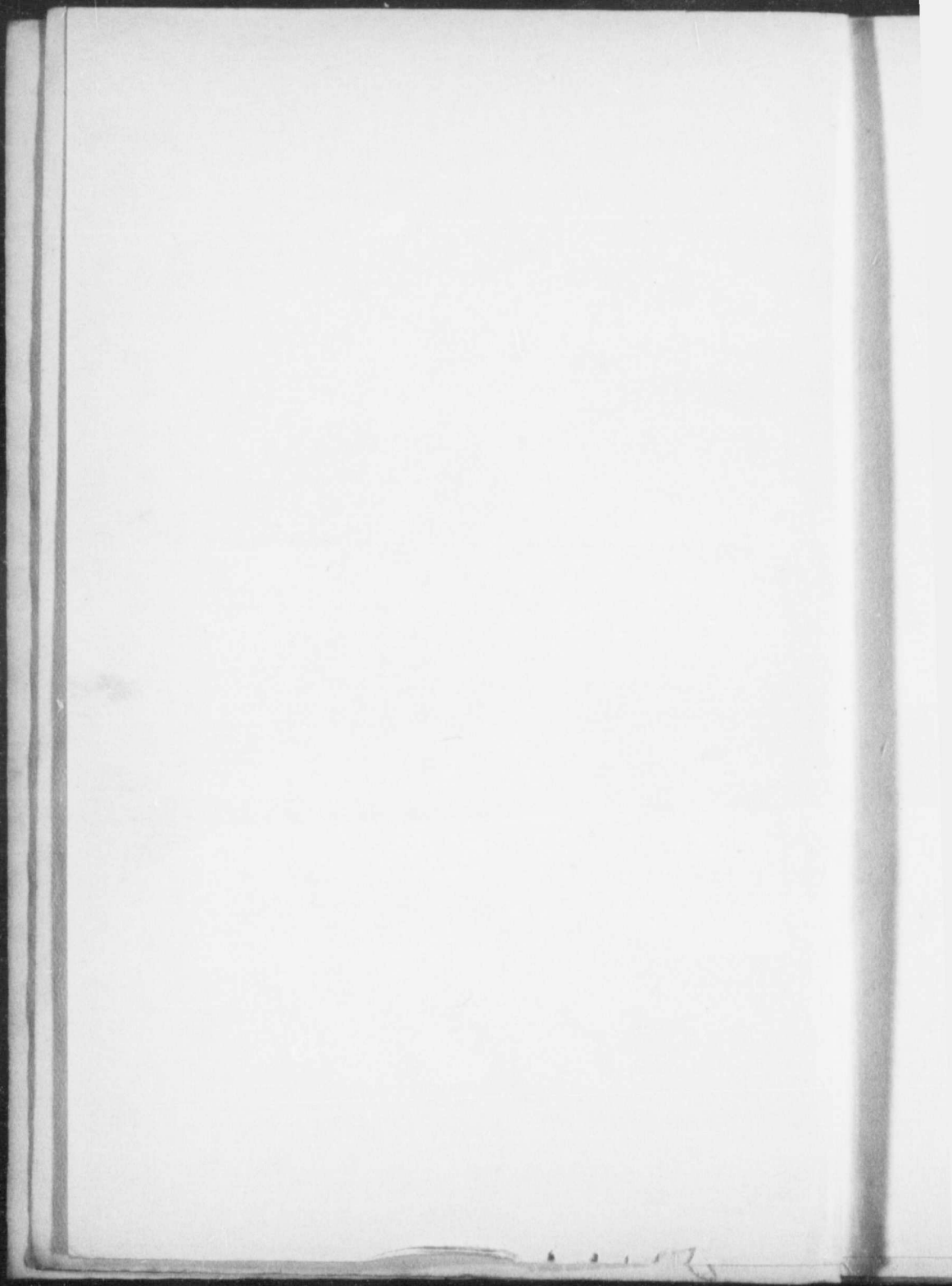
UK author

1914

1st Canadian

UK sheets
Bell + Coakburn
Spine imprint





THE HAT SHOP



THE
HAT SHOP

BY MRS. C. S. PEEL



LONDON: JOHN LANE THE BODLEY HEAD
NEW YORK: JOHN LANE COMPANY
TORONTO: BELL & COCKBURN MCMXIV

PR6031

E29

H37

1914

P*4*

THE ANCHOR PRESS, LTD., TIPTREE, ESSX.

09602077

THE HAT SHOP

"Every one—man and woman—should be obliged to earn his living, and to earn it hardly, for at least six months of his existence. It should be as much a part of his education as learning to read and to write, for most of the trouble in life is due to the fact that one-half of the world does not know how the other half lives."—MARGOT.

THE HAT SHOP

CHAPTER I

“**I**T'S a dog's life, a dog's life—a dog's life,” hummed the girl, as she sat with knees crossed, a dark blue velvet hat perched upon the uppermost, while her fingers manipulated a trio of biscuit-coloured feathers. Arranged to her liking, she lifted the hat from her knee to her head, ceased her monotonous little song and moved across the room to one of the large mirrors which hung upon the walls. The glass reflected a girl some twenty-five years of age, of medium height, with a well-developed figure, large brown eyes, and quantities of dark hair. As she tilted the hat to a more becoming angle and bent one of the skilfully wired plumes further to the right, every movement was brisk and determined.

“If that respectable gorgon won't let her have it now, I give it up. But I don't mind betting that it will be the ribbon bow after all. Doris, my child”—addressing a tall, pretty girl who was sitting at a table fashioning flowers out of pale-coloured scraps of satin—“I don't like the mauve toque there. Put it next to the black velvet Reboux and bring

the Carlier model here. Then run up to the work-room with Miss Philippa Purfleet's hat, ask Mademoiselle to sew the feathers as I have arranged them and to send it down at once."

As she finished speaking, the door opened.

"Good morning, Mademoiselle Margot, good morning, Doris," said Madame Delaine.

Elizabeth Earl, in business life known as Madame Delaine, was a tall, slight woman of thirty-four. Her figure was graceful, her complexion, once markedly beautiful, still pleasing, contrasting as did her dark lashed blue eyes and well-marked eyebrows with prematurely grey but crisply waving hair.

She was dressed with extreme simplicity in well-cut blue serge.

"I am late this morning," she observed. "Nina had a bilious attack, the telephone rang whenever I tried to have my bath, and Mrs. Frogmore indulged in a tantrum. On thirteen days out of a fortnight that woman dictates to me what we shall eat, and feeds me on beef when she knows I want mutton; then when I am particularly tired or busy she becomes incapable of making a rice pudding without detailed instructions. She's everything that I detest, and yet I suppose I shall endure her until the day of my death. Doris, I think you might put that fur model with the pink lining in the window. I feel as if it would bring us luck. Anything doing this morning, Mademoiselle? Come down with me while I take off my things. I want to

speak——” The expression of her wish was interrupted by the entrance of a small, stout woman who advanced importantly. Mademoiselle Margot moved to meet her, and Madame retired to the other end of the shop and began to take off her gloves.

“Good morning,” said the customer in a comfortable, common voice. “Now, I wonder if you can find something that will suit me. I read a piece in the *Outlooker* about you. It said you’d been making a red velvet hat for Lady Boothe. She and Sir Richard Boothe’s coming to stay with us next week.” She waited to allow the full importance of this statement to be felt.

“Yes,” said Margot pleasantly, “we make a good many hats for Lady Boothe—and dresses also,” she added, with the true saleswoman’s desire not to lose an opportunity.

“Oh, you make dresses too; p’raps I’ll have a look at them one of these days.”

The letter “h” seemed to present some difficulty to the speaker. She approached it warily and pronounced it with care.

Toque and veil removed, the trying-on process began. The customer sat in front of a large glass, tightly encased in stays of the wrong shape, while Mademoiselle set elegant pieces of millinery upon her much crimped toupee.

“Now, don’t you give me nothing that’s not suitable,” she ordered. “I don’t hold with mutton dressed as lamb, and yet there’s no need for any

lady to add to her age. Then there's my position to consider. I don't grudge payin' for what's 'an—handsome."

Margot removed a brown toque and arranged a small black velvet feathered hat upon the head of the good lady, who studied her reflection in the glass with complacency.

"Well," she remarked tolerantly, "if you asked me I should say it was a trifle dowdy."

"Perhaps, yes, madam," agreed Margot discreetly. "It would look more *chic* with some handsome green feathers in place of the black."

"That's an idea. I like a bit of colour myself," allowed the customer.

Madame Delaine, who had been watching the scene with some amusement, took some feathers from a show case and approached.

"I think Mademoiselle is right," she observed. "These deep green feathers would be very becoming."

The stout person stared at the new-comer.

"This is Madame Delaine," explained Margot.

"Why, I thought you were a customer," replied the lady.

Elizabeth's appearance seemed to impress her.

"So you think the green feathers would be the thing?" she queried. "It's to wear with a black costume and sables. My husband—Sir Albert Butts—I'm Lady Butts—" she paused again, as an actress pauses to allow her point its due effect. "Sir Albert don't refuse me anything in reason."

And there's few ladies who have better sables than me, though I says it as perhaps shouldn't. You may know my husband's name," she turned towards Madame Delaine. "He was made Mayor of Lindlingham this last year and received the Prince of Wales. He's bought a country place about three miles out from Lindlingham. Money's not been stinted—six bathrooms, and Maple to decorate from kitchen to attic. We're having a 'ouse—" she coughed hastily, "house warmin' next week, and Sir Richard—he being Liberal member—and Lady Boothe 'll be among the guests. There'll be a big meeting, with Sir Albert presiding and me and the other ladies on the platform." The speaker paused and turned to the glass once more to study her round, red countenance.

Madame Delaine held the green feathers in position.

"It's stylish, there's no saying it isn't," she criticised. "And I suppose as I can trust you that it's the latest thing. Yes! I doubt if I'll do better."

"The price with the green feathers will be five guineas and a half," said Margot.

"Well, I can say with truth I'm one as prices don't matter to, my dear," said the customer benevolently.

She took a fat gold purse from the table. "Five pounds ten for ready money," she remarked, the thrift inherited from her hard working ancestry penetrating through the thin veneer of fashionable woman.

Margot moved away to write and receipt the bill, and the customer replaced her toque and began to arrange her veil.

Madame Delaine took the ends, tied and pinned them neatly, the stout lady studying the reflection of the tall, distinguished-looking woman meanwhile.

"Well, looking at you, I should have said you're a lady yourself," she hazarded.

"Well—er—yes, I suppose I am," replied Mrs. Earl, much amused.

"I shouldn't have thought as you'd care to wait on other ladies," went on the good soul. "You should make your young girls do that."

Madame Delaine smiled. "I don't tie veils for every one," she observed, "but of course for special customers like yourself, Lady Butts, I make an exception."

Lady Butts beamed. "Well, no doubt you'll see me again soon, I shall be coming to London a bit later. I'm staying at the 'yde Park 'otel, if your young lady will see my hat is sent there."

She paused for a moment, then extended a podgy hand in a tight kid glove. Elizabeth shook it with due deference, Margot opened the door, and Lady Butts departed to her waiting taxi.

"In our next *Outlooker* notice," said Margot, "we will mention the fact that Lady Butts has ordered a black hat with green feathers. Lady Butts will thus become our lifelong friend and remunerative customer."

Madame Delaine laughed. "Such are the uses

of advertisement," said she. "Now I must interview Miss Emmett before I go round the workrooms."

Left alone, Mademoiselle Margot, assisted by Doris, replaced the disarranged hats and restored the showrooms to their accustomed state of order.

In a West End London street chiefly inhabited by milliners, dressmakers, and hairdressers, the premises of Madame Delaine, purveyor of "Modes et Robes," shone by reason of their spotless white paint and gilt lettering.

On entering the shop it was evident that in the outset the premises had been built for private occupation. To make the most of light and space and to display the vendor's wares to advantage, a large shop front had been substituted for the original window, and the narrow hall and front and back rooms connected by means of arches. White papered walls almost hidden by white framed looking-glasses, white chairs, a green carpeted floor, and a couple of small white dressing tables with swing mirror, hand mirror, huge lace and flower trimmed pincushion, together with some thirty white enamelled millinery stands on which were arranged hats of every description, completed the furnishing of the millinery showroom. From the hall, stairs led up to a half landing where a partially opened door allowed a glance at a fitting-room decorated and furnished to correspond with the showroom. Another half flight gave access to a second showroom, again all white and green and mirror hung, and to a second fitting-room, especially

adapted for the trying on of dresses by electric light.

Above, again, were the domains of the head milliner, Mademoiselle Bizet, and her assistants; and the skirt and bodice rooms reigned over by Madame Green, cutter and fitter. In these regions the floors were bare, the walls whitewashed, and in each room hung large documents provided by the Home Office, setting forth the rules to be observed in workrooms. Long deal tables and wooden chairs furnished these chambers, while near each door protruded the mouths of speaking tubes connecting workroom with showrooms and office. The rooms were warmed by gas stoves on which irons were heating, and a faint smell caused by hot metal passing over damp material and by the paste and wet sparterie used by the milliners pervaded the upper part of the house, while a slight vibration and low hum of sound proclaimed the presence of the treadle sewing machines.

In these upstairs rooms worked the women who made the gowns and hats destined, perhaps, to play a part in moulding the fate of their wearers.

Four stories below in the basement was situated the office, mainspring of all this complicated machinery, and the girls' meal-room. In the latter the frugal tea provided by the house was dispensed, and here those girls who could not afford to lunch at restaurants, however humble, cooked and ate their midday meal, and on wet days read their novelettes in the dinner-hour.

In the office, a large front room with stock cupboards, and furnished with a roll-top desk, a formidable array of account, reference books and files, table, chairs, telephone and speaking tubes, sat Miss Emmett, the book-keeper, a picture of youthful middle class respectability, honest, reliable, a perfectly trained machine. Here came the travellers of houses dealt with by the firm to show their wares; here three times a day appeared the apprentices with lists of materials needed in their respective workrooms; and here in conclave sat Madame Delaine and Mademoiselle Margot discussing, designing, arranging, issuing orders—referring to the business-like and taciturn Emmett on matters of general management and finance; and here, too, brief moments of leisure were spent and lunch and tea consumed.

Mademoiselle Margot, in private life Margaret des Vœux, born of a French father and an English mother, had been educated chiefly in Paris, to find herself at the age of nineteen an orphan, and owing to the financial collapse of her father's affairs with an income of £70 a year.

By no means intimate with her few English relations, and possessed of none on her father's side, clever, energetic, independent, this young girl decided to put her knowledge of languages and of the art of dress to some practical use. On the recommendation of her maid, formerly a milliner in Paris and London, she installed herself in a convent and eventually obtained a position as junior

saleswoman in a large millinery house at a salary of £1 a week, her good appearance, charm of manner, educated handwriting and knowledge of three languages being regarded as worth that sum, notwithstanding her absolute ignorance of her chosen business.

To a girl who had known only the luxurious side of life, the change was indeed great, and had it not been for Margot's perfect health and the fact that her means enabled her to afford a nourishing meal in the middle of the day, she might have fared worse. For eighteen months she worked at Messrs. Rhone and Rovers, learning every hour not only the details of her trade, but the joys and hardships which make up the life of the working woman, member of a world entirely unknown in normal cases to girls of Margot's social status. At the end of that time she decided to take a month's holiday and to seek to better her position. This she proposed to do by obtaining the post of first saleswoman in a private firm, where she would be in a position to learn more of the financial management of a business than is possible in a large house.

After one or two experiences of situations, unsatisfactory for one reason or another, Madame Delaine engaged Margaret des Vœux as manageress and head saleswoman at a salary of fifty shillings a week and five per cent. commission on the orders of all customers she might introduce.

As Margot cast a final glance at the arrangement of the showroom, tipped up a hat so that it showed

a delicious lining of shell pink aerophane against its border of fur, the door opened and two ladies advanced.

"Heavens," murmured the girl as she moved to meet them, "if it's the ribbon bow after all, I shall bite her."

Doris, again engaged in fashioning satin rose-buds, at once brought forward chairs, relieved the ladies of their umbrellas, and stood awaiting further developments.

"Madame's feather hat," demanded Margot of her assistant, as she returned the somewhat frigid but polite salutations of the two ladies and smiled her ever-ready smile.

The customers of uncertain age and colouring, clothed in dimly tinted fabrics, sat awaiting the coming of the hat, while Margot discoursed pleasantly of the weather and the *modes* and helped the younger lady to remove her veil.

Doris reappeared, and at the sight of the hat a gleam of interest lit up the face of the owner. The elder sister pressed her pale lips together in disapproval.

"There," said Margot as she arranged the hat on the unbecomingly dressed head of greyish fair hair, "I really think that is charming—don't you, madame?" she queried brightly of the elder lady.

The question elicited no reply. The younger woman looked at herself in the glass and then turned nervously to receive the hand mirror proffered

by the attentive Doris; again she studied her appearance, then threw an appealing glance at her sister.

"I really think, Veronica—indeed, Veronica, I really think——"

Veronica remained dumb.

"Are the feathers a little too high? I can easily lower them," suggested Margot.

"Oh yes, I think they are a little high. If they were lower, Veronica?"

Veronica spoke. "They may be high or they may be low, Philippa—they are unsuitable. I said it from the first—unsuitable. You should have a neat ribbon bow. Mademoiselle knows that I said a neat ribbon bow."

"Yes, madame, it is true; but Miss Philippa so much desired a feathered hat—so soft, so becoming——"

Philippa raised her pale eyes to the hat and again dropped them. A faint flush suffused her poor meek face. Her glance wavered from the mirror to her sister, to Margot, again to the mirror.

"But Veronica——" she ventured.

With trembling hands this middle-aged woman lifted the hat from her head.

"A nice ribbon bow," she said faintly, then busied herself with hat and veil.

Veronica rose, bowed coldly to Mademoiselle Margot and left the shop, her sister followed, nervously fumbling at her glove. As she reached the door she turned and looked again.

"I have always wanted a feather hat," she said sadly to herself; and Margot saw the tears in her eyes.

"Let me send it to you just as it is," cried the girl impulsively.

Miss Philippa drew herself up. "My sister thinks that a nice ribbon bow would be more suitable," she said gently and coldly.

Doris shut the door. "My goodness," she remarked as she returned to her roses, and then again, "my goodness."

CHAPTER II

“GOOD MORNING, Miss Emmett,” said Madame Delaine as she entered the office. “Any letters of interest?”

“Good morning, Madame Delaine,” replied the Emmett primly. “Yes, Madame Delaine, there are several letters. The landlord——”

“Never mind the landlord, he can wait. What else?”

“Well, Madame Delaine——”

The owner of that name, unseen to the Emmett, made a ferocious grimace in her direction. Miss Emmett was one of those genteel persons whose code ordains that no question shall be answered without a repetition of the questioner’s name. In times of stress this habit irritated her superiors to the pitch of madness.

“But an Emmett is an Emmett,” Madame Delaine would declare when calm. “You must either put up with its manners and customs or send it away. And it’s such a worthy Emmett. No, we must wait until Providence in the shape of a commercial traveller removes it to a genteel and

congenial circle where it will take tea, a seat on a couch, and use a serviette."

The unconscious culprit continued her tale.

"Mrs. Mark Tolput wants shooting hats on approval—something in a mauvish purple."

"She would," interjected madame; "people with mauvish purple faces always want mauvish purple hats. It's a law of nature."

"Yes, Madame Delaine. And Mrs. Kent Morley has sent a post-dated cheque for January and quite a heated letter. Lady More would like some smart hats on approval to-night, and Miss Lomax wants to change her fitting. She says she'll come at eleven to-morrow, but Madame Green says it isn't possible. Miss Humphrey orders shirts sent to her country address, and Fiennes would like a cheque."

"So should I," said Madame Delaine. "Oh, dear, who would keep a shop?"

"A dog's life, as I always say," agreed Margot cheerfully, entering the office at that moment, "but, thank heaven, a sense of humour makes even a hat shop bearable. The Miss Purfleets have just been in. Miss Philippa's got to have that ribbon bow, and what Bizet will say when she has to trim the hat again is more than I know!

"Sort out what you think will be suitable for the approval orders, and I will look them over when I have been round the workrooms, please, Miss Emmett," ordered Madame Delaine, as she departed on her tour of inspection.

From that time onwards there was no rest for

Madame and her underlings. Miss Lomax's change of plans necessitated a revision of the fitting list kept by Miss Fort, the assistant saleswoman, whose duties lay chiefly in the dressmaking department, and part of whose work it was to provide Madame Green and Miss Emmett with copies of the list. Madame Delaine permitted no amateur and haphazard methods in her business, which was organised in a manner creditable to a far larger establishment.

Madame Green proved obdurate with regard to Miss Lomax, a customer greatly disliked owing to her disagreeable manner and complete disregard of the convenience of anyone but herself.

"I have arranged all the work so that Miss Lomax shall be ready for Thursday, and not one minute earlier can I make it." Madame Green's thin, delicate, refined face, sad and severe, set in lines of still greater severity as she gave her verdict. "The Countess of Rigstock will be here in half an hour, Madame. She's on the stand, if you'd see if you like the drapery. I did think a line of gold tissue might take off from her size."

Madame Green invariably spoke as if her customers and their gowns were one and the same; and, after twenty-five years of a life spent for the most part in making dresses, it was not surprising that the persons who wore them appeared to her but as moving monuments of material, achieved by means of pins, needles, thread, tackings, cuttings, and fittings. "Mrs. Fronde is ready for this afternoon," she continued. "I told her you wanted her to have

the long line ; but you know what she is, and there's the tunic short across the knees, taking inches off her."

"Silly soul," said Madame Delaine. "Still, if she's pleased that's the great thing. Ask Miss Emmett for a piece of gold tissue and we'll try it on Lady Rigstock. I believe you are perfectly right about it, you clever woman."

If Madame was, as the workrooms sometimes agreed, "a tartar and that particular," it was also admitted that she never spared praise when praise was due, and "she did treat you as a human being," said the girls.

As Madame turned to leave the room, she glanced for a moment at a pretty, pale girl whose eyes were red with crying.

"Oh, Madame Green," she called, as she reached the door, "I wish you would——" The fitter followed her on to the landing and Madame Delaine shut the door. "What is the matter with Emmie?" she said, in a low voice.

"She's dreadfully upset this morning. Her mother was taken ill last night; they had to get the doctor. Emmie says she's sure there's something very wrong, though her mother's better again for the moment, but not a soul to do a hand's turn for her. They've but lately moved and don't know the neighbours. Her father's been off drinking and lost his work or Emmie would have asked for a day, but she can't afford to lose it. If girls did only know," ended Madame Green darkly.

"Well, Emmie ought to know if anyone does,"

replied Madame Delaine. "We shall have to spare her, I suppose. She can go, can't she, Madame? Tell her to run off, and no one else need know that Miss Emmett will make it all right about her wages. I must go to Mademoiselle Bizet now, but I shall be ready for Lady Rigstock's fitting."

Mademoiselle Bizet was slightly flushed and her red hair looked more fiery than usual as she responded rather glumly to Madame's greeting. The offending blue velvet hat with its biscuit-tinted feathers sat upon a stand in front of her and she glared at it balefully.

Bizet would make a hat, would alter that hat; but, did it appear in her workroom again, the saleswomen prepared for trouble; a third appearance and the milliner ran through an unvarying programme of temper, threats of resignation, tears and ultimate repentance. If more than usually distracted Mademoiselle Margot was deputed to take her out to see the *modes*, to lunch at some French restaurant where they discoursed volubly of La Belle France, Paris and its joys, and the superiority of the French *cliente* over the English customer, and of French hats over what Bizet would term with scorn "that Engleesh thing which look like what you call a pie."

But if Mademoiselle Bizet was trying she had her virtues: she was honest, punctual, hardworking. Her workroom was admirably managed, her directions, in voluble and most original English, obeyed to the letter, and for the employer or the

client who could appreciate her handiwork she would spend herself ungrudgingly.

To-day, however, Madame Delaine had news of a kind to banish all thoughts of the blue velvet bone of contention.

"Lady Sarah is going to be married again, and we are to make all her hats," she announced.

"*Mon Dieu!* that is news—my stars, the piece of luck," Mademoiselle was beaming. "Miladi, she is a pleasure to make the hats—so *chic*. I will send to my sister, she who is *première chez Mirette*, for the latest style. *Sapristi!* there they do understand the hat."

"Thank you, mademoiselle, that will be a great help and we need not begin them for another fortnight, so there will be plenty of time. How about Miss Curtis's hat—is it finished? She will call for it at one o'clock."

"Roon-na, the hat of Mees Curtees—so madame that should be well."

The worker addressed as Roona handed to Madame the hat to which she was putting the finishing touches. She was a lovely, fragile-looking girl, her red-brown hair picturesquely dressed and threaded with a blue ribbon, her white throat exposed by her blouse of lace and embroidery. This girl's clothes were not such as one would expect to see upon one earning twelve shillings a week in a millinery workroom; indeed, she herself seemed out of place, and her beautiful brown eyes and red lips looked sullen and discontented. As Roona

moved Madame's quick eyes caught the flash of a diamond on her hand. When she looked again the ring had disappeared.

It was not until ten minutes to two that Madame Delaine and Mademoiselle Margot were free to repair to the office.

"There is a fitting at half-past two, no time to go home to lunch, and I'm much too tired to stir. Is Ernest in? No, I suppose he has gone to his dinner. What are you going to do about lunch, Miss des Vœux?"

"I ordered mine," said Margot. "I knew it would be impossible to go out. Will you share my cold tongue and my brown loaf, and we'll make tea? Tea, tea, what should we do without tea! When I am an old maid, living on my large fortune of £70 a year, I shall wear a shawl, keep a parrot and a cat, and drink tea seven times a day." As she chattered the girl spread a sheet of clean tissue paper on the table, and from a cupboard produced the materials for the meal. "Nellie!" she called. "Nellie, put the kettle on, and run out and get some milk. Madame wants some tea."

Nellie, the youngest dressmaker's apprentice, who had been gossiping with her companions, appeared with a jug, and in company with a penny departed on her errand.

"Have you gathered anything more about Roona?" asked Madame Delaine, as they began their meal.

"She has been late two mornings this week and

twice there have been telephone messages for her. The last time I spoke sharply, and said that our girls did not receive telephone calls when at business, unless of real importance, and I refused to give any message. Roona seems sulky and discontented. I think the girl is very delicate—she always has a cough. Bizet tells me that she has left her father and has gone to live with her mother, who is maid now to a lady in a flat. Roona does not say much, but Bizet seems to think that the lady in the flat is not quite all that she might be, and that she lends Roona clothes and takes her about to theatres and restaurants. I don't wonder that the child has left her father, he is scarcely ever sober, and of course the mother has to keep him. Roona shares her mother's room, so that is a saving. I don't know what we can do, but I am afraid the girl will come to no good."

"Poor little wretch! A drunken, out-of-work butler for a father, and a mother who allows her to live under the care of a woman of the *demi-monde*! And, add to that, good looks and a nature which hankers after luxury. I'm sure I don't know why half of these girls keep straight. The path of virtue on twelve shillings a week cannot be alluring. If Roona is late again let me know, and I will make it an excuse for a talk with her. What about the Golliwog? Is she still inseparable from Roona?"

"I fancy that the Golliwog and Roona have had a quarrel. They never go out in the lunch-hour

now, and I don't think they leave together in the evening. Golly is a silly thing, but I really don't think there is any harm in her."

Miss Briggs, known in the office as the Golliwog, was a thin, long nosed girl with large blue eyes and a pink and white skin, whose coarse black hair was built up into a surprising erection of rolls and puffs. She was of an excitable and sentimental nature, easily moved to tears or a feeble display of temper, and for some time past had attached herself like a limpet to the haughty Roona.

At this moment the summoning whistle was heard and Margot fled upstairs.

Miss Emmett, who had been sitting in the show-room while Doris was off duty, returned to the office; at two-thirty the apprentices appeared with their lists, and Madame Delaine was summoned to decide whether Miss Stanley should have her pink satin evening gown cut square or V-shaped.

For four years had Madame Delaine devoted her attention to providing *modes, robes et blouses* for those of the public who elected to patronise her establishment.

Mélanie Elizabeth, the third daughter of Colonel and Mrs. Talbot, had at the age of twenty-four married Hugh Earl, a young man of good family possessed of some £500 a year of his own and earning £800 as an engineer in a large and successful firm. Colonel and Mrs. Talbot had died during Elizabeth's married life, leaving to their three daughters a very moderate portion of £3,000 apiece,

for on Colonel Talbot's death his affairs were found to be in a highly unsatisfactory condition, the expenses of life as the colonel of a smart Hussar regiment, with an extravagant wife, three pretty daughters, and a taste for gambling, having reduced his by no means large means to a few thousand pounds.

Elizabeth's eldest sister, always a girl of serious tastes and for some time past greatly interested in social reform, was living in an East End settlement and devoting her life to working amongst the poor.

The second sister, married young, was now the mother of three children and wife of a husband in whom she felt a mild interest, and in whose large income and social position she found considerable satisfaction. Both sisters were much attached to the clever, energetic Elizabeth.

When, by the sudden death of her husband from pneumonia, she at the age of twenty-eight was left a widow with one little girl of two years old, the sisters were full of sympathy, and later of plans for her future.

Mary offered to leave her settlement and share a flat with the young widow, while Meriel begged her to instal herself and the small Nina at Roydon for as long a time as she might please. So great had been the shock of Hugh's death to his wife that, after all business affairs were settled, Elizabeth decided to let her house, in which she could no longer afford to live, to send Nina and her nurse, an

elderly woman who had been nurse and then maid to the Talbot girls, to Roydon, and to depart to some quiet German mountain inn alone, there to regain control of her aching nerves. It was during this time of solitude that Elizabeth's real mental development began.

As a child she had been amusing, lovable, at times flaringly ill-tempered and outwardly almost cruelly indifferent to the opinions of the people with whom she lived. Mrs. Talbot, beautiful, witty, ill-educated, but of keen intelligence, liked her children when they amused her, and at all other times left them to the care of nurse or governess, chosen or rather seized upon without any careful inquiry. "It's quite a chance if you find the right person, however much you fuss," she would observe. A kind providence sent Nana to take charge of the first infant Talbot, and to her incessant care they all three owed their excellent health and much of the happiness of their childhood. As they grew older Nana proved so useful in the household that Mrs. Talbot, who, after seven years of such service as no money can repay, would have sent Nana away without a qualm, kept her on as housekeeper-maid and engaged any governesses who might happen to present themselves at the moment she required them, provided they were sufficiently cheap. This erratic upbringing had widely different results on the three widely different temperaments of her daughters. In the mind of idealistic Mary one governess, a fervently religious neurotic girl, sowed,

as she would have termed it, "the good seed of the faith." On Meriel's placid unimaginative mind these teachings made no impression, while the hysterical, illogical outpourings of this "humble follower of Christ," this "lamb in God's fold," planted in Elizabeth's critical, fastidious nature a dislike of "religion," softened only by years of experience and the toleration which age and knowledge bring.

Elizabeth developed into a remarkably pretty girl, with some of her mother's wit and more than her mother's charm of manner. Hidden by this attractive veneer was a disposition which combined faults in almost stronger proportion than virtues. Elizabeth was truthful, affectionate, forgiving, generous, with a keen love of justice and honour, but impatient, irritable, overbearing, critical, and intolerant of stupidity, failure, and pretence. She had a gift for verbal portraiture, and the temptation to let her tongue run away with her now and again was not to be gainsaid.

A vivid nature needing careful education and wise control, it received neither, except in a minor degree from the example of Nana, whose stern common-sense and devotion to duty invariably appealed to Elizabeth. From her mother the girl learned that to be ugly, boring, or in any respect a social failure, was unforgivable; she also observed that in that lady's estimation people existed to provide amusement or to be used in other ways; that human organisms of a lower class were created merely to

serve those of a higher social grade, and except when this service brought the two in contact need not be taken into account.

From her father Elizabeth learned little, for she scarcely ever saw him, but she absorbed the vague idea that husbands were a necessary social figure-head, so to speak, but when achieved of little real importance, though apt at times to be peevish or blustering. Her sisters Mary and Meriel did not affect Elizabeth greatly in her girlhood, though she was fond of them and very proud of Meriel's beauty. Mary's real piety might have influenced Elizabeth more had it not been wrapped up in the language of hyperbole. Such phraseology offended Elizabeth's taste and she regarded her eldest sister's little books and sacred cards, her fastings and self-denials, with affectionate contempt, though she never failed to appreciate the beauty of Mary's character. Meriel was totally different from her sisters. She had inherited the best physical points of her handsome father and pretty mother, was placid, rather pleased with herself and with the world in general, mildly interested in her food, her frocks, and willing to do what other people did if the doing did not necessitate too great an expenditure of energy. An exquisite waxwork of intelligent mechanism would have replaced her with quite tolerable satisfaction.

Elizabeth's girlhood had not been happy: she grew almost to dislike her mother as she realised her utter selfishness and the cruel use to which she put her delicate wit. Like many another child,

however, she learned from her parent's faults; and so learning decided that she would try to control her own quick speech and take thought for the welfare of others.

A little scene between her mother and a servant which she happened to witness set her mind groping in another direction. Hitherto she had accepted the fact that there was a class who commanded and a class who obeyed. Now she wondered why this should be, and, watching life more intelligently, her sense of justice met with frequent outrage.

At this time, too, she began to understand something of the humiliation of money debts, and determined fiercely that she personally would pay her way with scrupulous honesty. Thus did Elizabeth's moral growing pains rend her as she groped blindly after an ideal, which she felt must exist but did not know how to approach.

Meanwhile her impulsive temperament led her into many troubles. From the age of fifteen she flirted, partly because she really liked her victims and partly from curiosity. Later on this experimental fervour led her into an affair with a married man, which ended somewhat seriously, for the object of her investigations fell deeply in love with her, young as she was. Had he not possessed a wife who loved him better than he deserved and also with wisdom, the consequences might have proved serious for the innocently naughty explorer in the realms of passion.

The wife, however, took the situation in hand and Elizabeth emerged from this experience minus any fancy for her adorer, but full of admiration for his wife and of understanding and repentance of her own behaviour. This friendship for a woman of strong character ten years older than herself did much to educate the young girl, and she grieved acutely when, twelve months later, her dear friend died in giving birth to her third child. Grief taught Elizabeth much, and though now only eighteen she had learned something of what wifhood and motherhood may mean.

It was at this period that Sir James Hirst came into her life and a very real friendship had its birth.

A few months later Meriel became engaged to Lord Roydon, to the great relief of her parents, whose financial affairs were considerably embarrassed, Meriel rather liked her betrothed and placidly enjoyed her social importance, the *trousseau* and the wedding presents. Elizabeth studied her sister and Jock Roydon and added to her stock of knowledge.

To Jimmy Hirst, with whom she could speak frankly without seeming to depreciate her sister, she confided her sympathy for Roydon.

"Meriel is lovely and quite nice, but it is a waste of time to love her. She likes to be liked, not to be loved. I feel sorry for Jock. He's a person who could love really well."

After Meriel's marriage, life became more pleasant for Elizabeth, as she stayed for months at a time at

Roydon and played the part of aunt very nicely to the important first born. Meriel endured the coming of her baby in a spirit of placid boredom; after the birth of the child she looked at it kindly from time to time, and even held it in her arms for a few minutes occasionally.

But Elizabeth, much to her own surprise, loved the tiny, ugly thing. She was really rather ashamed of her weakness, but indulged it in private, and when the child became older was astonished and delighted because he loved her in return.

Elizabeth had grown up, imagining babies to be domestic nuisances which occurred, and whom persons called Nannies seemed to appreciate; but until her friendship with the wife of her adorer came to pass she had no knowledge of small children, and carelessly supposed that they were regarded in other homes as she had been regarded in hers.

It was while staying at Roydon that Elizabeth met Hugh Earl and fell in love, which she did with her habitual impulsiveness. The engagement endured for two years, by which time Hugh's income was considered sufficient to support the young couple. During that time, Elizabeth quarrelled fiercely with her Hugh at intervals, forgave him or allowed him to forgive her and at the age of twenty-four was married from the Roydon town mansion in great state, and settled down in a lovely little house decorated and furnished for her by her affectionate brother-in-law.

Hugh Earl was a clever, quiet, reserved man,

deeply devoted to his fascinating but difficult Elizabeth. Naturally, two such different temperaments clashed now and again. When Elizabeth felt nervous and irritable and, as she expressed it, "spoiling for a fight," his determination to remain silent exasperated her. "There's a devil in you," Elizabeth would tell him, "a horrid dumb devil. It makes me feel as if I could scream, or elope with some one, or buy five expensive hats all at once. Which would annoy you most, dear? The hats, I expect." Hugh disliked extravagance.

"I can't help it," Hugh would own; "when you get into a temper, Bet, I can't speak. I would if I could, darling; only then, you know, we should both say all the dreadful things we don't really mean and never forgive each other."

"No, we shouldn't," said Elizabeth, "we should say them so fast we shouldn't remember what we'd said, and then we should feel much better."

Elizabeth's life at this time was concerned with her husband, the management of the pretty house, and her social engagements. She lived through three years of sheer enjoyment, cut short by the death of her father, indirectly resulting from a fall while hunting, and the tragic death from cancer of her still young and attractive mother.

Six months later a daughter was born to Hugh and Elizabeth. Elizabeth was seriously ill at the time and extremely delicate for some months after. It was when scarcely recovered from this physical

and mental turmoil that her husband came home feverish and out-of-sorts after a long day in Manchester and a journey in damp clothes. Two days later Elizabeth was a widow.

CHAPTER III

FOR nearly eighteen months did Elizabeth roam the world, staying at first quite alone in a quiet German mountain hotel, then, with her nurse and child, moving from place to place as the fancy took her. Eventually she returned to London, rented a flat, disinterred her furniture and set herself to take up life amongst her many friends on an income of £600 a year. To a woman of such extravagant tastes and generous nature this was no easy matter.

Even in her husband's lifetime, when her income had been over £1,400 a year, it had been only a strong sense of duty which had prevented her from running into debt. Now on much diminished means she was as determined as before to pay her way honestly and to give Nina every educational advantage.

Less than six months of life in London on her small income showed Elizabeth that she must alter her ways if she would live within her means, and it was then that idea of becoming a woman of business took possession of her thoughts. Opportunities to marry again had been presented to her,

but, although she now entered into the amusements of society and enjoyed the companionship of men, she felt no desire to take another husband. As time passed she began to feel that a life spent in managing her small flat, mothering the extremely independent Nina, whose devoted Nana could scarcely be induced to leave her except for a very occasional "afternoon out," going to parties and endeavouring to make £60 do the work of £150 in the matter of a dress allowance, was not sufficient occupation for a young woman with an active brain. Anxious to employ her energies, she began to work with Mary Talbot at the Settlement, and gained some knowledge of life amongst those who live on the edge of hunger and destitution.

But though Elizabeth's character was softening and expanding, and her wit and sympathy made her well liked by those among whom she worked, she did not feel that she could give her life to the poor; her intense physical repulsion to the dirt, the smells and the ugliness of poverty could not be overcome. Also, as time passed she became less and less in sympathy with the teachings of the Church, the outward observances of which she had accepted hitherto, as any average young girl accepts the fact that she must say "please" and "thank you" and eat her soup in the approved fashion.

Mary Talbot, a woman of beautiful character with the temperament of the true religious leavened with much common sense, was an earnest High

Churchwoman, and her sister's lack of faith troubled her sorely.

As Elizabeth's mind developed and she studied the ways of the world, her views differed more and more from those of Mary. She began to sympathise with the feminist movement, and, although never a follower of the extremists, became an adherent of the women's suffrage party.

The more she worked amongst the poor the more did she come to the conclusion, rightly or wrongly, that ministers of churches should confine their attentions to the spiritual needs of the people and cease to act as unpaid labour bureaux officials and poor law guardians.

If our spirits were rightly awake, the horrors which we tolerate so complacently could not exist, thought Elizabeth. Let the churches light the lamps of our souls, then they may leave to each individual the conduct of life.

To Elizabeth the terrible sufferings of the poor mothers and children whom she visited, caused by the annual child-bearing which these miserable women underwent, was a horror. Returning from a round of visits in company with the parish nurse, Elizabeth turned upon her sister.

"They have no right to these babies," she cried. "People who breed consumption, insanity, epilepsy! Even when healthy their circumstances are seldom such that they can afford to bring up more than three or four children decently. What did I see last night? A woman in her wretched bed, already in the

pains of labour, clutching a stick to protect her from the assaults of a drunken husband. A fireless room, a cupboard empty of food. Three little cold, whimpering, hungry brats locked out on the stairs to sleep as best they might, and a frightened harassed girl of ten trying to help her groaning mother and pacify her father. Preach to the rich if you will, but for heaven's sake teach these poor souls a different creed."

"They need not marry," answered Mary. "But if they marry they must fulfil the will of God."

"The will of God!" cried the enraged Elizabeth. "Is it the will of God that such brutalities should be? The will of God! It is the revenge of outraged nature."

But to Mary these ideas were repugnant, mischievous, immoral, and although the sisters loved each other as before they ceased to be associated in their work.

The pinch of narrow means made itself felt more and more in Elizabeth's *ménage*; she could not afford to go here and there, staying in this country house, acting in those theatricals, attending this or that ball. The cost of the necessary tips, clothes, and cabs, was beyond her means. And even if she could have lived the life of a rich woman, such an existence no longer contented her. She felt restless, unsatisfied. For the sake of occupation she went about with Meriel, now in town for the season, and occasionally they would beguile Mary from her slums, put her into some tidy clothes and take her

to Ranelagh or Hurlingham to breathe fresh air and to remind her that a world outside the Mile End Road and its purlieus still existed.

To-day the sisters had motored down to Hurlingham, ostensibly to see the final of the Inter-Regimental Polo, in reality to enjoy a gossip.

They had chosen chairs at the end of the long line of spectators and had dragged them slightly apart from the others and set them sideways, so that they might talk undisturbed and at the same time look at the crowd and at the polo.

Elizabeth was engaged in reviling her poverty-stricken condition. "If I were really poor," she complained, "I should have to dust and sew and cook and take care of Nina. Then I should have plenty to do, though I should do it all very badly. As it is, while I can keep Nana and my horrid old Frogmore I have to attend merely to my domestic fal lals and furbish up my clothes. I might teach Nina if I could, but I couldn't. My methods of expressing myself do not show a deep knowledge of the rules of grammar, do they, Meriel?" she queried laughingly.

Meriel was beautifully dressed as usual, but she was growing fat and had already a double chin. This annoyed her when she thought of it, but characteristically she preferred not to think of it rather than be troubled to diet and take exercise. She nodded placidly in answer.

"But I really wish I could make some money," Elizabeth continued. "It is so boring to be badly

off, and I should like to educate Nina well and take her about the world when she grows up."

"Of course," assented Meriel. "Oh, Bet, do look at that woman! How can people make such guys of themselves! Mirette wanted me to have a gown with one of those dreadful little tails. I asked her if her servant was a dog that she should wear this thing. But why don't you come and stay with us? You know we should love to have you, and then you'd have enough money for your clothes and oddments."

"You're a dear and I love you, Merry, but a little of me goes a long way. I do better alone. There is Mrs. Leitter—no, don't look, or she'll come and talk to us and I want to talk to you. She has worn that black hat all the summer and there's been a different coloured feather in it every day. I believe she has a feather for every day in the week and puts them all on together for Sunday. All the same, Merry, I do wish I could make some money. If I were a dressmaker, at any rate Nina and I could be decently dressed, which we never shall be on £600 a year."

"You're so silly, Betty. Why don't you go and get a frock at Mirette's and put it down to me? What is the use of having money if I can't spend it as I like? All the same, you look awfully nice."

"Do I?" said Elizabeth. "I think I'm growing into an ugly old hag. Mary dear, do put your hat straight. How much was it that dad left us, Meriel? Anyhow, I know I have £628 a year, and

if £628 why not £600? £28 a year isn't much use, is it."

"I shouldn't think so," allowed her sister, who, having at the age of twenty married a man with £15,000 a year, had not the same respect for £28 a year which might be felt by persons in other circumstances.

"£28 a year means about £800 or £900 capital. I should think I could start a shop on that. Don't you?"

"Oh yes," agreed Meriel, knowing nothing whatever about it. "But if I were you I'd have a hat shop."

"Yes, I think I will," assented her sister. "I feel more at home with a hat. Pin it, Mary—you'll never make it stay on like that."

"My hats never stay on," admitted Mary. "My head's such an odd shape."

"You should buy some hair and build it up to the right shape," Meriel suggested.

"No," said Mary, "that wouldn't do at all. My plaits and things would always be dropping off. I haven't time for such fripperies."

"I was talking to Ethel Lyon about a shop the other day," went on Elizabeth. "She says I should be an owl to do it. She was in a hat shop for three months, you know, and said she couldn't stand it. But I'm not Ethel, and if I began it I would stand it."

This suggested a new train of thoughts to Meriel.

"But, Betty, you would have to stand, you know—

all the time, and I always think standing is so tiring. I always have to sit down when I am being fitted."

Elizabeth was not listening. Her eyes followed a particularly repulsive red hat which passed at that moment. With half her brain she was condemning the hat, with the other she was continuing her arguments in favour of a business career.

"If I was in a shop all day I couldn't run about spending money, so even if I didn't make anything I might save something."

"But if you keep a shop," objected Mary, "who is to look after Nina? I think you ought to see more of her, Bet."

"Perhaps you are right," allowed Elizabeth, "and yet, honestly, Mary, I do not think that you are. I am an impatient, irritable person (of course I know that I ought not to be, but the fact remains that I am) and the constant care of a child worries me. As for teaching, I could not attempt it, for, as you know, I am profoundly ignorant. I often try to find out how the children whom we know are being educated, and it seems to me that it must be necessary to learn how to teach, otherwise one would just mix bits of knowledge into the child as one mixes plums into a pudding. Intelligent experts, such as Nina's tutor make their pupils think for themselves; they teach them how to learn."

"Yes," agreed Mary. "Nina was showing me some of her work, and the system of teaching seems to be admirable."

"You admit," went on Elizabeth, "that Nana can wash and dress and tend my infant, and that Mr. Walters guides her feet along the educational way with success. Then I hold that children need the society of other children. (They ought always to be born in pairs!) To be continually in the company of their elders is not good for them; grown-up folk are alternately over-stimulating and unnecessarily repressive. As things are, Nina looks to me for kissing and cuddling, for conversation, amusement, and sympathy. She does not connect me with the scoldings and tears and the tiresomenesses of life."

"I don't feel that it is the ideal arrangement," Mary still objected.

Elizabeth laughed. "Neither do I, but then I'm not an ideal mother, and I'm sure Nina isn't an ideal child. I don't see how you can make hard and fast rules about mothers and children, because you must take their temperaments into account. Given Nina and given me as we are, and not as we might be, I feel that we could easily have too much of each other."

"I think your theory might lead to great unhappiness for a child," objected Mary. "Suppose the nurse was unkind and the teacher inefficient?"

"Oh dear," sighed her sister. "I'm not preaching a sermon on the upbringing of the young, Mary, and I daresay my ideas are all wrong, but I think they suit Nina and I think they suit me. All the same, I am sure that mothers should always be

on the watch and never take it for granted that nurses and teachers are kind and good. Nana might suddenly become a morphia maniac or Mr. Walters suffer from his liver. In either case probably they would be disagreeable to Nina. So I do not relax my vigilance. And after all our toil and trouble I daresay my daughter will run away with the boot-black."

"I want some tea," said Meriel, who took not the slightest interest in the conversation. So they moved off to the lawn in front of the house and drank their tea and listened to the band, and Elizabeth continued to ponder the question of shop-keeping. The idea became more and more enthralling.

"Mary," she broke out. "I must have something to do. My life bores me to distraction. I can't and won't work amongst your poor; but why should I not try to build up a business, an honest business? I should like to treat my workers well and give my customers good value for their money. It seems to me that to run a shop in which women are employed, and to pay them decently and treat them decently, is something quite worth doing."

Mary agreed. "But if you are trading to make a profit I'm afraid you will not be able to pay your workers more than the market rate or permit shorter hours of work," she suggested.

"There is much in what you say, my clever dear," agreed Elizabeth, "but I think it is worth while to

spend £900 on the experiment. In any case, it is always interesting to study life from a new point of view."

Thus in due time Elizabeth Earl became Madame Delaine—purveyor of *modes, robes et blouses*.

CHAPTER IV

FOR three years and a half Madame Delaine had kept a shop. Needless to say she found the long hours of confinement within doors irksome, and she had not been working for three months before she realised her profound ignorance of the trade upon which she had embarked. But, though ignorant, Elizabeth was endowed with common sense, and wisely had elected to begin her operations on a modest scale in order that she might purchase experience at small expense.

Her shop at first consisted of the ground floor and basement, a packing-room and a large, top-floor workroom, the other five rooms being let to the Misses Okeby and Brown, specialists in hair treatment, face massage, manicure and chiropody (for ladies only), as ran the modest legend upon their price lists and signboard.

Madame Delaine's staff consisted of herself and Miss Furley, a young woman of twenty-five, who professed to be well versed in all the branches of her profession, able to keep books and stock, to buy and to act as saleswoman when required.

The workroom staff comprised Mademoiselle

Bizet and three assistants, the milliner having been lured to these shores by her cousin, Lady Roydon's French maid, and by a desire to learn English in order to enhance her value when she should return to Paris.

As Elizabeth was ignorant of book-keeping, she arranged with her banker that one of the clerks should examine the books once a month and prepare a half-yearly audit, the earning of a little extra money out of business hours being made advisable by the advent of infant number two into the clerk's family.

In these days Madame Delaine concerned herself with millinery only. Possessed of a large circle of relations, friends, and acquaintances, most of whom agreed that Elizabeth was frightfully silly to shut herself up in a hat shop in order to lose money, but who nevertheless came to buy a hat partly out of friendship and partly out of curiosity, she had the advantage of beginning her career with a numerous *clientèle*.

Elizabeth's hats were good, her customers agreed; and well they might be, for in her ignorance she journeyed to Paris and bought largely from expensive houses to find that she must sell at a heavy loss, and that more often than not her smartest models were voted too "extreme" by her English customers, who, although they liked to imagine that their clothes came from Paris, invariably refused to put on any garment that was genuinely French.

After two years' trading Madame Delaine discovered that she must augment the £400 capital to which she had prudently limited herself.

Customers took long credit, while the trade demanded monthly payment, became insistent at three months, and firm in their demands when six months had elapsed. She also discovered that the curiosity of her friends once satisfied, but few of them remained as customers. They felt that to employ a woman of their own world was a bore. It would be difficult to speak plainly if a hat were a failure, and still more disagreeable to be dunned for their accounts, and although Elizabeth with her usual sense became when in her shop "Madame Delaine, Milliner," and ceased to be Mrs. Hugh Earl, a woman in good society, yet even she could not but feel that as a rule it was more pleasant to trade with strangers than with people who were known to her socially.

For a new business and one dealing with millinery only, the turnover had been at first satisfactory, though Elizabeth's extravagant methods of buying had absorbed the profits that she would otherwise have made. Costly models, too large a stock, errors in pricing, and wasteful house-keeping had their effect in reducing her profits, and at the end of her two first years of trading she found that she had worked from ten o'clock in the morning until five, six, seven, and eight at night, with the result that she had avoided making a loss, a fact for which, as Mr. Tuke, a partner in one of the wholesale firms

with which she dealt and with whom she had become on friendly terms, was kind enough to tell her she deserved some praise.

Mr. Tuke had little opinion of lady traders, but the pluck and sustained energy shown by Elizabeth appealed to him, and he gave her much valuable information as to the financial management of her affairs.

At this period Elizabeth had begun to suspect that her assistant, Miss Furley, though moderately conscientious, hard working, and a fair book-keeper, had not as much knowledge of the millinery trade as she had professed. She was incapable of controlling the employees, and at times was argumentative and politely exasperating with customers. It was then that Madame decided to engage a second saleswoman and to keep blouses and *lingerie* in addition to hats, for, as her friend Mr. Tuke assured her, it is almost impossible in these days to make money out of millinery alone.

For some eight weeks in the spring season and for another six weeks in the autumn, the average *modiste* is worked to the limit of her endurance; during August and September, January and February, she does not pay her expenses. Millinery is emphatically a season business, while blouses and underclothing are what is professionally known as "bread and butter" trade.

Unfortunately, no sooner had Madame Delaine begun to grasp the right principles of trading, had engaged a showroom assistant and bought a stock

of underclothing and blouses, than she sickened with a severe attack of influenza, intensified so her doctor declared by overwork and worry. So ill was she, that when at length she began to recover, her nerves were in such a state that an immediate return to her shop was impossible.

A long visit to Roydon restored her health, but on returning to work after three months' absence, it became evident that the new saleswoman and Miss Furley were so occupied in practising the art of polite aggravation as to interfere seriously with the organisation of the business. The percentage of gross profit was unsatisfactory, the turnover slightly lower, and examination of the letter file showed that as the profits decreased complaints had increased.

Many women in such a position would have tired of a venture which gave few signs of success. Not so Madame Delaine; that which she had set out to do she would do, were it possible. She had a real love of hard work, and although her generous nature showed itself in the treatment of her workpeople and the too lavish manner in which even yet she made her purchases, she had in her the makings of a keen woman of affairs, and that absorbing interest in the building up of a business generally supposed to be characteristic of the man rather than of the woman.

Madame Delaine now set herself to reorganise the duties of her staff, and by careful advertisement to extend her *clientèle*. The task was made harder by

a slight delicacy of health, the result of her recent illness, and by the tiresome behaviour of Miss Braithwaite, the saleswoman, and Miss Furley.

Miss Braithwaite lost no opportunity of stating that she was a lady, and proved one of that tiresome order of young women who appear to consider that to be a lady covers a multitude of sins. Her appearance was good, her manner charming, but conform to Madame's rules she would or could not, and many were the reproofs which she called down upon her elegantly waved head by failing to write addresses correctly, to note whether a parcel must be sent by rail or post, and if it was Mrs. Jones or Mrs. Smith who desired a *bandeau* in her hat.

Elizabeth, who like Mr. F.'s aunt, "hated a fool," and whose temper was by no means meek, sometimes wondered why Miss Braithwaite did not tender a week's notice and depart; but, like many other fools of her calibre, she wept when severely reprov'd, recovered, and continued her imbecile way untaught by experience. If Miss Braithwaite was tiresome, Miss Furley was at times no less so. At heart furiously jealous of her colleague's claims to gentle birth, she was ever on the watch to detect the slightest difference in treatment between herself and Miss Braithwaite on the part of Madame. If she imagined herself slighted, and her imagination was active, she sulked for hours. Both girls, however, were honest and respectable, and Miss Braith-

waite popular with her customers, so Madame, anxious to learn every detail of her trade before making any changes, waited to part with these annoying young people until her plans were more fully formed.

In spite of the extreme fatigue from which she suffered, Elizabeth attended evening classes at the Regent Street Polytechnic, and so gained a knowledge of dressmaking, while by the kindness of Mr. Tuke she was able for a small fee to arrange several interviews with a very clever girl, head saleswoman in the employ of a well-known milliner and dress-maker.

Ethel Horrocks, or Sophie Fulgarney, as Elizabeth at once christened her new acquaintance, might well have been the model for Sir A. W. Pinero's heroine. Elizabeth would bid her to dinner and take a pleasure in providing especially attractive fare, greatly appreciated by a girl who "lived in." During dinner Ethel was invariably on her best behaviour, but later, when tucked up on the sofa and provided with a cigarette, her tongue was unloosed and she gave utterance to her opinions of life as it presented itself to her widely opened twenty-six year old eyes.

"Do tell me how you began your career?" asked Elizabeth one evening, after Sophie, otherwise Ethel, had been instructing her in the correct method of making out estimates.

"Well," replied Miss Ethel, nothing loath to talk of her own affairs, "you see, there were seven of us

at home. And all of us have done well," she added with pride. "Home was Windsor. It's a quiet place in some ways but not in others. My father had a very good business as chemist in a small way, but of course it wasn't enough to keep us all at home doing nothing, Madame Delaine. Amy, my eldest sister, used to help mother with the house and the little ones. She's married now, with four of her own, and a very good husband, though I wouldn't have cared to take him. The sister younger than me, Enid, took up nursing. A pretty girl she is—in a nursing home in Wetherpole Street. Enid could tell you things that you'd be surprised at! It's a hard life, up and down stairs from seven in the morning, but she gets a bit of fun sometimes. Though what it's going to lead to is more than I see, and so I tell her. But daddy always said that I had the business head of our family."

"I am sure he was right," agreed Elizabeth.

Ethel smiled. "Well, when I was fifteen I left school, though I still took piano lessons in the evening and taught in the Sunday-school. Mother was careful, and we kept ourselves select, we girls. It was a question what I should do, but all along I'd had a feeling for millinery. I used to look in the windows of Colthorpe's, not just like the other girls, but thinking all the time how things were made. I do believe if I'd taken up that line I might have been head milliner, designing my own models by now. Some of them get £7 or £8 a week, Madame Delaine."

"Do they really?" replied Elizabeth, suitably impressed.

Ethel flowed on. "Well, I went as a millinery apprentice to Colthorpe's, half-a-crown a week and my tea, picking up the pins, running the errands, making head-linings and *bandeaux*, and keeping my eyes open all the time for what I could learn. They'd a clever milliner there then, and she kept us well at it. We apprentices had to be in the rooms at eight forty-five sharp, and we had an hour for dinner and half an hour for tea. You're apprenticed for a year, and then you're an improver. I could have done many more things than they let me long before the end of the year, but they don't like you to get on too fast in a workroom."

"Why?" queried Madame.

"Well, you see, it's the competition," explained Ethel, who generally began her sentences with "well" and often added "you see."

Madame saw.

"By the time I'd been an improver for six months I was getting on for seventeen, and very tall; with my hair up I looked older. It seemed that Madame Colthorpe had had her eye on me, and one day she sent for me and asked if I'd like to be a showroom apprentice. The showroom young ladies used to give themselves airs over we workroom girls, and there was one, Muriel Martin, who lived next door to us (her father was only the cashier at Firth's the grocer), and I thought I should like to put her in her place, so I said 'Yes, madame.' I thought, too,

that there was more chance for me in the showroom, for if you get to be a buyer you earn good money. There are girls I know who make their £300 and £400 a year. So the next week I put on my black dress and did up my hair like the pictures in the *Ladies' Pictorial*, and no one would have thought I was only sixteen and seven months.

"The apprentices had to dust the showrooms, and put out the stock, and run about for the saleswomen. It wasn't easy always, and some of the saleswomen did take it out of you. They taught you to pack at Colthorpe's, I will say. I wanted to get on, so I put up with it all. And I did get on."

"I think it is wonderful how you have got on," agreed Elizabeth. "What happened then?"

"Well, you see, Muriel Martin was senior to me, a junior saleswoman, but she'd been playing the giddy goat with a young gentleman at a Crammer's. If people knew as much about these Crammers' young gentlemen as I know they'd be more careful where they sent them," added Ethel wisely.

"I never knew what really did happen, but that girl *was* in a taking. I was sorry for her then, if I'd never liked her before. Her mother made out to my mother that she'd had a good business offer in London. She may have, I don't say she hadn't," allowed Ethel, with a charitable air. "Anyhow," she resumed, "I got her place, and I began to see more of madame. She was a good woman, if ever there was one, and kind to us girls." 'Fun,' she

used to say, 'fun—as much as you like, but I'll have no flightiness in my establishment.'

"She knew her business too. It was not what you'd call a smart house, but good steady trade, and mostly real ladies. Ladies living round about, you know. I've seen plenty of court gowns sent out of Colthorpe's: for titled ladies, too. You should try for court orders, Madame Delaine. They pay. Ladies don't go to court everyday, and they don't mind making a splash once in a way. I've known many a customer give thirty guineas for a court gown who'd never give more than twelve for a good dinner dress, and a court dress don't cost as much as two. It's the same with wedding gowns. When a girl's in love you can always put on the prices! Remember that, madame, for if you don't make where you can you'll never do a paying trade."

"But do you think it quite right to charge one person more than another for a thing that costs the same?"

Ethel opened her eyes still wider. "Right," she said slowly, "well, I don't know about right. You've just got to in business." She pondered for a minute, and burst out: "And I don't see why not. Look at the people who keep you waiting for your money! You must put on the prices for them. And the fussers! I've known ladies take up hours of time with first one thing and then another. They've got to pay for that. *You* have to pay for it right enough. *You* don't get

cutters and fitters and saleswomen for nothing. Time's money in business, as they say. Then there are customers who always beat you down. You say. "Three guineas, madame," and they say, 'Oh, I don't think I can give three guineas. Couldn't you make it for *me* for two and a half?'

"Why should you make it for two and a half? Three's the price, and at that, perhaps, you're only getting seventy-five per cent gross. With customers like that you *must* put on the price. We've ladies who as soon as they come in the shop up go the prices all round. When they've bought a four guinea hat for three they're pleased. And so are you. And what's the harm?"

"I don't know," laughed Elizabeth, "but I feel as if I'd rather not."

"There are plenty of things we'd rather not in this world," allowed Miss Horrocks, "but they have to be done just the same. You don't go into business out of kindness, you want to make money. You have to pay rent and rates and taxes, and salaries and book-keeping, and bad debts, and stand out of your money for months. Think of boxes and tissue and string too."

Elizabeth thought.

"And what about your time and your brains?" the girl went on. "If people don't want to pay, they should buy a shape and trimming, or a twelve and ninepenny ready-made; but it's the people who couldn't put on a wing to save their lives who want to get everything for nothing. It

takes real artists to make the hats we sell, and customers shouldn't forget it."

She paused for breath.

"There are times when I hate customers, Madame Delaine," she continued impressively. "Here are girls like us working day in, day out, some of us going without goodness knows what, and employers perhaps, for all the show, hard put to it to make expenses, let alone a profit, and yet in come these ladies out of their motor cars, and they'll haggle and haggle."

"But," said Elizabeth, "you must look at it from their point of view too. No one likes to pay more than they need, and some people, even though they possess motors, have very little money to spend on clothes."

"Well then I think they'd better be content to dress plainer," said Ethel. "When ladies of the other kind come with their bunches of gardenias and their jingling gold purses and their 'what do I care about the price, girl?' air I can put up with it! They're earning their clothes and earning them bitter hard. Ladies like you don't know what girls in our position know."

"No," said Elizabeth sadly, "it would be better if we did, but I am learning now. I only wish I had known sooner."

"I don't want every one to learn as I learned," said Ethel. For a moment she was silent. "But there's something about having been brought up respectable and select," she continued briskly,

"and here I am at twenty-six, head saleswoman and millinery buyer for Adolph's. It's a good position for a girl, isn't it, Madame Delaine?"

"It is indeed," said Elizabeth, with sympathy, "and I hope you will make lots of money and marry such a nice man—and come to me for your going-away hat," she added laughingly.

Ethel smiled the smile of possession.

"Well," she admitted, "I've no doubt I can settle myself when I'm ready. But it won't be yet. 'You don't see me marrying on nothing,' I said to him only the other day. Good heavens! Madame Delaine, I'd no idea it was so late, and you so tired too. And wasting your time just talking. But you understand about those estimates, don't you? In your business never less than seventy-five per cent. gross, and as much more as you can, or you'll show no net profit. When you've worked up to it, it will have to be a hundred. That's the rule with us, a hundred and as much more as you can get."

Ethel pinned her modish hat at the correct angle on her modishly arranged head, produced a powder puff from her bag purse, dusted her nice straight nose, and put on her gloves carefully.

"Good evening," she said elegantly, as she shook hands with Elizabeth. "I'm only too pleased to help you at any time. You mustn't let me trouble you," as her hostess moved to ring for the lift, "I shall be downstairs in a twinkling."

After a course of instruction from Sophie, other-

wise Ethel, added to the knowledge gained in other ways, Elizabeth at length decided to give her tenants notice and to blossom boldly forth in enlarged premises as vendor of *modes, robes et blouses*.

The fact that she now discovered Miss Furley in the conduct of a marked flirtation with the much married bank clerk, and that Miss Braithwaite had engaged herself to a pasty and penniless curate whose grandmother had been an Honourable, and whose love affair completely addled the few brains with which nature had endowed her, decided her that the time had come to employ a new staff.

A chat with a clever hard working girl, who acted as advertisement canvasser and editor of the Woman's Page of a paper in which Madame Delaine had advertised, resulted in an interview with Margaret des Vœux, to whom Madame took an immediate liking.

It was finally arranged that "Mademoiselle Margot" should begin her duties on the 15th of August, when Miss Braithwaite would leave. Miss Furley would remain for a fortnight, with Margot and Miss Emmett the new book-keeper, and then take her departure, leaving the new staff in readiness for the autumn season.

In August Elizabeth left town with her sister Mary, the seven-year-old Nina, and her inseparable Nana for a holiday by the sea, feeling physically worn out, but mentally full of interest in the prospects of her new departure.

CHAPTER V

NINA EARL at seven years old was a long thin child, minus a belated front tooth, plain but giving promise of future good looks.

Nana, an exceptionally astute woman whom life, not books, had educated, opined that Miss Nina would be a beauty and the clever one of the family.

"She has her brains from her father. Though I don't say, Miss Elizabeth, as you are wanting in them," she would add.

To her, Nina's mother was still the Elizabeth whose face she had washed, whose hair ribbons she had tied; but Nina was the child of her old age and loved beyond all.

Nina returned this affection with one almost as deep, and would have resented fiercely any slight shown to Nana, though she behaved extremely badly to the old woman at times. Nina had never been the angel-child of fiction. From an early age her hair was straight, her legs thin, her opinions definite, and her determination great.

In babyhood she had liked her father more than

her mother, and then and now considered any boy or man preferable to a member of the weaker sex.

At the age of seven she no longer went to a Kindergarten. She had made herself so unpleasant to the other little girls that she now learned her lessons in the company of a small boy, the child of a friend of her mother, under the care of a tutor who declared her to be possessed of exceptional brain power and most amenable to discipline, in direct contradiction to every opinion of former feminine teachers.

Nina and her mother were the best of friends. The child once informed her Aunt Mary, for whom she had a strong though condescending affection: "I don't often be a silly fool with mum."

She admired her mother's tall figure and blue eyes; and, although secretly grieved that her hair should be grey, would never admit that grey locks were not superior to those of brown, red, yellow or black.

Mary and her sister had arranged to share a tiny furnished house at Southwold, staffed by that disagreeable treasure Mrs. Frogmore and the invaluable Nana.

Nina, looking as like a boy as her delicate essentially feminine little face permitted, clad in blue serge knickerbockers, jersey and shady hat, ran wild to her heart's content, and, unlike most children to whom the beach is a passion, much

preferred to play in the tiny garden with a black kitten and a large family of toads, which she discovered under a board in a shady corner behind the tool-house.

When these joys palled she stood at the front gate talking with every one who would talk to her, and lying in wait for the pony boy, who became so enamoured of her unusual charms that when she could extract no more pence from her mother he generally allowed her to ride for *le bon motif* only.

At times Nana's sense of propriety rebelled, and Nina was washed and combed and taken to dig on the sand, where Nana did the digging, or to walk on the common. "Like a little lady, which sometimes I fear you'll never be," said Nana.

"I'd far rather be a pony boy," allowed Nina, "but, if I can't, I can't. So I shall stay at home with mum and have three little boys, and they can be pony boys if they like."

"And who do you think will marry you if you go on so, Miss Nina?" grieved Nana.

"I shan't be married," said Nina.

"Then you can't have three little boys," assured Nana—not with strict veracity.

"Well then, I *will* be married," agreed Nina placidly in an anything-to-please-you tone of voice.

"'Tisn't likely that anyone will ask you if you don't mend your ways," lectured Nana.

"Do you have to wait to be asked, Nansie?"

This was evidently a new point of view to the child.

"Indeed and you do, my dear," Nana assured her with feeling.

Nana was a spinster, a fact which she deplored only when enjoying a difference of opinion with Mrs. Frogmore, who was a deserted wife.

"Which is not to be wondered at," as Nana sometimes confided to Elizabeth when Mrs. Frogmore had indulged in a tantrum.

Nina considered the subject of marriage by request for quite five minutes, and at length disposed of it.

"Oh, well," she remarked, "I shall soon settle that," and walked off with her hands clasped behind her back and her most independent and devil-may-care air.

In those five minutes Nina had decided her fate. If little boys depend on marrying, and marrying on being asked, she would make her wishes known to Sir James Hirst the next time she saw him and all would be well.

Sir James was an old friend of Nina's mother. He had been a subaltern in the regiment commanded by Colonel Talbot, and on the death of his father had left the army and settled down to play the part of a considerable land-holder. He and Elizabeth had been the best of friends as boy and girl, and after her marriage Sir James and Hugh Earl had developed a very strong liking for each other.

Sir James had helped her in many ways since

her widowhood, and was apt to declare that when Lloyd George (whom he rather admired) had reduced him to beggary he would take the place of book-keeper and general factotum at the shop. Unlike most men of his class and upbringing, he liked women who worked, and was amongst the few intimate friends who did not try to dissuade Elizabeth from her commercial project.

"It will do her good," he told Mary. "She needs something of the kind. She is not a woman who can wander along the well-trodden walks of life with any pleasure—or indeed with very much profit."

Nothing less like a large land-owner and ex-officer of cavalry could be met with than James Hirst. Tall, thin, slightly stooping, clean shaven and rather bald, most people at first sight imagined him to be a barrister. As a youth he had been a good soldier, interested in and popular with his men, keen about his work, good at games and fond of sport, but even then his opinions were not always those of his companions.

He had a taste for architecture and went about, as his fellow subalterns said, "gawping at churches."

Good pictures and music he enjoyed though he knew nothing about them, but the subject which interested him keenly was the study of humanity.

On succeeding to his property, he left the army and took the affairs of his estate into his hands in

real earnest: "Trying to say 'thank you' for the very good dinner with which fate has provided me."

Sir James was a man who liked women and had women friends in many grades of life, but of real love affairs he had experienced but one, and that for a young girl almost forced into his arms by an ambitious debt-harried mother.

This girl of nineteen, delicate, neurotic, charmingly pretty, was desperately and secretly in love with a married man. In his absence she lived in a fever of miserable, useless regret, hating herself and her sin, almost hating her lover, yet knowing that when with him remorse for the past, resolutions for the future, would be swept away by the passionate joy of re-union. The life of the child was a mental hell. She likened herself to a mouse caught in a water trap, swimming round and round, striving, straining, hoping for a rescue which would never come; sinking at the last, still struggling, until the horrors of suffocation put an end to mental torture. Brought up in a debased religious faith sufficient to make death by her own hand impossible, yet insufficient to give her any peace in life, she was being slowly battered to death, the under tow of a dishonourable love sucking her each time a degree further into the depths while the waves of conscience drew her again towards shore. Hating herself still more for a cruelty foreign to her naturally gentle nature, she encouraged Sir James's attentions in order to gain some respite from her mother's

reproaches and fits of sullen temper. At times she even tried to bring herself to think of marrying him longing for the peace and protection which she felt that he could give, and yet even in her despair and degradation realising that to deceive him in repayment of his devotion was a depth of dishonour to which she could not fall.

At length her seducer, a man verging on middle age, on bad terms with his wife and already somewhat tiring of a girl who took life too seriously and caused him to feel decidedly ashamed of the black-guard part which he had played, was offered a temporary post in Canada in connection with a Land Company in which he had a large interest. Seeing an excellent opportunity of ending the affair, he accepted the offer, and after several hasty meetings and a final parting which left him for several days in a mood of ill-tempered repentance, departed out of her life. As for the girl, for a week she lay in bed incapable of thought or of feeling, deaf to the anxious scolding of her mother. At the end of that time she professed herself well again and began once more an existence in which she seemed to be a moving, talking waxwork whom people insisted upon regarding as a human being. But this deadening of all thought and feeling came to an end. That which her lover had assured her should never happen had happened, and the open shame, so terrible as to be almost unthinkable to a girl of her birth and upbringing, awaited her. Then it was, seeing how ill and unhappy his beloved

appeared, and putting it down to the misery of her home life, James Hirst made his offer of marriage.

Nearly insane with terror, the girl broke down utterly and confessed to what a pass she had come, wildly begging him to help her.

All the saint in the nature of this boy of twenty-four awoke. To him the sins of a woman against morality had always seemed so piteous, her punishment for a dual fault so unjust. He saw this girl, passionate by inheritance, unhelped by any moral training to understand and guard against herself, made an easy prey to her passions by her very virtues, her deep capacity for love, her unselfishness and sympathy, broken in mind and body while yet almost a child.

Her lover was powerless to help. His wife, utterly indifferent to his constant *amours*, provided they were discreetly arranged, but finding considerable solace in her social position and ample means, had no intention of submitting to the disagreeables of a divorce.

In spite, too, of James's wish that she should marry him and let him allow the child to pass as his own, she refused to do so.

"I will pay for my own sins," she would reply. "I have been wicked and now I will be good. If I could love you, perhaps it would be different, but I have finished with love. I will not have you punished for what I have done," and in his heart James knew that she was right.

It was he, however, who went to the mother and

protected the girl from the malice of a disappointed and vindictive nature.

His only confidants were Hugh and Elizabeth Earl, who took the girl into their house as a visitor while her mother was called abroad on imaginary business, and it was they who chaperoned their visitor to Germany and then left her in a pension ostensibly to study music until the return of her mother, in reality in an *appartement* under the care of a nurse.

When the time for the birth of the child arrived, she was so ill that Elizabeth and Sir James were both with her.

The woman pays. This woman paid, with hours of torture, to give birth to a still-born child.

Seven days later James Hirst said good-bye to a dead girl.

James Hirst's motor was standing at the garden door of the cottage at Southwold, and he, Elizabeth, and Mary Talbot, were leaning over the fence discussing and admiring the recent purchase.

Nina, divided between a wish to cling to the hand of her beloved Jimmy and to discourse with her lifetime friend and admirer, Bedell the chauffeur, rushed excitedly from one to the other, talking ceaselessly.

"When I've a lot of talk in me I can't stop," she assured her mother, who tried to stem the flow of words.

"It's no use, mum—you must do what Nana says to me, and 'just bear it.'"

On the other hand, when Nina was in the mood to be silent, her silence was such that it became quite impressive.

"So I thought I'd bring her to show you and put up at the hotel for a bit, and we can try her paces and see some of the country. I'm sure Mary's delighted to see me, even if you aren't, Elizabeth. You're such a capricious card," he laughed.

Mary smiled. "I'm always glad to see you, Jimmy, as you know. You're one of the nicest people I ever met, though, of course, I don't agree with you on many subjects."

"No, but we disagree so nicely," allowed Jimmy.

"Elizabeth, I believe you aren't quite such a scrag—I always tell you, my dear, you'd be a nice-looking girl with a bit more flesh on."

"Girl," interrupted Nina, "she's not a girl. If she was there wouldn't be me."

Bedell looked sedate, Jimmy twinkled, and Elizabeth laughed.

"Cease to show disrespect for my grey hairs," she cried, "and let us have tea."

That evening Nina went to bed weeping and unrepentant of her sins.

Easily excited, the arrival of Sir James, the new car, and the beloved Bedell had made her quite unmanageable. She hopped and jumped and talked

without ceasing, until the climax came, because Nana uprose and declared that Nina should no longer sit on the chauffeur's knee and kiss him when she felt so inclined.

Bedell, the soul of propriety, though he had known and loved Nina since her birth, acquiesced.

"You're growing a young lady now, Miss Nina," he said, "and must mind your ways."

"I'm not growing a young lady. I wouldn't be such a fool," she replied pertly, still clinging to him but watching Nana out of the corner of one eye.

"No, you're not growing a young lady," admitted Nana, with severity. "You're just but a naughty, ill-behaved little child. Leave go of Bedell at once, Miss Nina, and come to your bed."

Mrs. Frogmore now entered the fray. She was stirring sauce over the kitchen fire and turned a severe crimson face to her audience. She was an elderly dried-up looking woman, whose hair was always neat, her apron always clean, and with one eye—the other was quite sightless—she observed more than do most people who have the full use of both optics.

"You go out of my kitchen, miss," she observed coldly and firmly. "I've had enough talk in this last half hour to last me for this week."

Nina looked at each face in turn. Bedell, she knew she could vanquish, but Nana and Mrs. Frogmore she perceived were no longer amenable to coaxing or to reason.

"I don't want to sit on his knee any more," she observed with dignity. "I should if I did," she added, staring unblinkingly at the Frogmore. At the kitchen door she turned again: "And kiss him, too." She then shut the door in Nana's face.

In her bath, being extremely tired, she entered on the tearful stage because Nana refused to allow her "any time to be a walrus," and by the time hair-brushing and supper arrived she refused to eat or be brushed, and retired to bed in dire disgrace. Not even to her mother would she speak, nor would she say her prayers, and when Elizabeth bent to kiss her she wriggled under the clothes. That night when Elizabeth was in bed Nina gave a yawn, stretched, and remarked in a sleep-deadened voice: "I don't know that I'll be naughty again, mum."

She then opened one eye and looked crossly at her mother, and finally opened the other eye. Clambering out of her own bed into her mother's, she kissed her three times, clambered back again, repeated "Our Father" halfway through, and went to sleep.

The next day she refrained from kissing Bedell.

CHAPTER VI

IT was the 2nd of September and on the next day Elizabeth would again take up her rôle of Madame Delaine, returning to her shop to put all in readiness for the autumn season.

Mary, Nina, and Nana were to pay Lady Royden a visit, and the Frogmore would preside in lonely state at the flat, assisted by a lady who "went out to oblige."

After a month of capricious weather, to-day the sun was shining in good earnest, and Elizabeth and her party had planned an outing, partly to celebrate the last day of the visit, which all had enjoyed, and partly to leave a clear field for Nana and Mrs. Frogmore, who had one passion in common, and that for cleaning. Nana, of a kindly temperament, found many pleasures in existence, but to the austere Frogmore "a thorough clean" represented the chief joy of life.

For the last two days "the thorough clean" had been in progress, and Elizabeth, Mary, and Nina had been glad to lunch with James at the hotel, in order to give Mrs. Frogmore time to enjoy her soapy revels.

Sir James, who had returned to Southwold after a ten-days' shooting visit in Scotland, would depart on the morrow to his own house Priorshirst, there to make ready for some men who were due to shoot his partridges, but to-day he and Elizabeth had decided to motor to Aldeburgh for lunch, and to stop for tea on the moors between that little town and Dunwich, and so home by Blythburgh to a last homely meal in the cottage parlour.

Until it was time to start on their journey and while Elizabeth and Nana packed the tea, James volunteered to take Nina out on the sands, where they built a magnificent scenic railway, down which golf balls rushed in a most exciting manner.

Nina's tongue had never ceased wagging, but suddenly she became silent and sat down beside Sir James. She leant against his shoulder.

"Tired, little girl?"

Nina shook her head. "I've just remembered something," she replied.

James waited.

"Jimmy," she said suddenly, "just fancy my forgetting something so important. Did you know you couldn't have any little boys unless you were married?"

"Er—well," said Sir James, with cautious reserve.

"Of course I'd rather be a boy myself, but as I can't I'm going to have three little boys, or perhaps five. But Nana says you can't have little boys unless you're married. And when I thought about it I could see the sense of that," allowed Nina; "a

miss wouldn't have enough money to bring up a lot of little boys. I heard Mrs. Frogmore say, 'The men has the money and most else what they want in this world,' to Bedell yesterday. So you see I have to get married."

Sir James smiled. "I daresay you won't find it very difficult, Nina."

"But Nana says *you* must ask—not me," she observed pointedly.

Her hearer became preternaturally grave. "Suppose I don't ask?" he queried.

Nina looked rather flattened. Then she rubbed her cheek against his coat and cast a sidelong glance at him.

"I don't think you'd be so nasty," she murmured.

Sir James put his arm round this morsel of feminine guile. "Cheer up, Nina," he said. "You can't get married until you're a big girl, you know; and if you still want to marry me then, I think I can safely promise to consent."

"Right-oh," said the young lady, straightway casting off her pretty enticements. "I told Nana I'd manage it. Now let's go back and see if it's time to start. Can I sit by Bedell?"

"Faithless one," said James, "yes, you shall sit by Bedell."

They returned to find the motor at the gate.

"I shan't be ready for ages," cried Elizabeth from her window. "I've just had an idea for a motor bonnet that will stay on your head and not make you look like a picture postcard Odol-esque. Go and

get tidy, Nina, and put on your coat. As for Mary, I don't know where she is—asleep probably. She's fast turning into a dormouse."

Mary's head appeared at the second front window.

"I'm not asleep," she observed quite indignantly.

"Hurry up, you two, and don't talk so much," said Nina, with her wonted lack of respect.

Bedell appeared carrying the provision baskets, Nana followed, giving final touches to Nina's toilette. Mrs. Frogmore with her one eye, a feather broom in her hand, a check duster tied round her head, watched the scene from the kitchen door with her usual expression of piercing severity.

The expedition proved a great success. Nina was in a remarkably good mood, somewhat silent and devoting herself chiefly to her beloved Monk—a much worn biscuit-coloured plush monkey with pathetic, intelligent, boot-button eyes and a worsted work face; most unsuitably clad for the expedition in a white satin frock and a picture hat with a mangled pink feather.

After lunch and a dawdling walk about the little town, the party re-entered the car, which was soon running smoothly and almost silently through wood and moorland, past great stretches of blacky purple heather which now and again revealed a gleam of yellow gorse or of the grey-blue northern sea.

Elizabeth leaned back and shut her eyes while her thoughts drifted vaguely.

She wondered, as she had often wondered before :

What is the meaning of life? Why are we born? What is it that we are here to do? Why is one human being so fortunately placed, another, apparently, destined only to sin and suffer? What does it all mean?

"Talk about a dormouse," said Mary suddenly. "Wake up, Bet."

"I wasn't asleep," began Elizabeth; and then they all laughed.

Bedell was driving slowly along a rough grassy moor track.

"This seems a good place," said Sir James. "Stop here, Bedell."

Nina cast off her coat and cap and ran off to pick heather, while her elders carried their belongings to a low ridge sheltered by a bank of gorse, laid the cloth, and by the help of a contrivance of which Sir James was inordinately proud lit a fire and set the kettle to boil.

"It was all my own idea," he boasted, watching, with the air of a mother admiring the prowess of her first born, the flames as they leapt and quivered in the wind.

James's "idea" was a rusty old iron pot on three short legs such as night watchmen use for their fires, and certainly by means of this primitive stove he soon had the kettle boiling. After tea Nina departed to chat with Bedell, who was now having his meal.

Sir James lit a pipe and he and the sisters were soon deep in talk: the delightful intimate argu-

mentative converse of three persons of widely different temperament knit together by true affection.

They journeyed home through the fast falling dusk, Nina clasping an enormous bunch of heather for Nana and singing a monotonous song of her own composition.

Supper was not quite ready when they arrived, and Elizabeth and James wandered out into the little cliff garden at the back of the house to take a farewell look at the sea.

"Let us sit down for a few minutes," said Sir James.

The tide was nearly low. In the opalescent hazy dusk the sea seemed thick and oily, the waves creeping up the sands and leaving no fleck of surf.

Sir James broke the silence.

"I think you look better for your holiday, Eliza," he remarked, "but still rather a scrag."

His banter was half anxious, for Elizabeth still appeared delicate and worn.

Elizabeth laughed. "I feel quite well," she said, "and I'm champing with impatience to get to work again. I don't quite understand why I have such a passion for that shop," she continued. "I hate the people sometimes and wish them at Timbuctoo, and I fly into tempers and scold every one (my temper was never angelic, as you know, Jimmy), and yet when I'm away I am always planning what I will do when I get back."

Sir James whistled a bar or two of "In the

Shadows" and threw six stones with great care at an old tin on the sands below. Then he said :

"I sometimes think you had better marry me, Elizabeth."

The colour flushed into Elizabeth's face. "Heavens, dear James," she ejaculated. "You force me to play the early Victorian maid and murmur: 'But this is so unexpected.'"

James threw three more stones at the tin. "Would that be quite true?" he asked.

"No," said Elizabeth at length, "it is not quite true. I have thought once or twice lately that you——" she hesitated.

James looked at her, but she left her sentence unfinished. He took Elizabeth's hand and began to move one of the rings up and down her thin finger.

"We have known each other a long time. Fourteen, fifteen years, isn't it? And we have always been good friends. God knows you and Hugh stood by me well. We've both had our good times and our bad, and we've been more or less together in all of them. Don't you think that those years are a good foundation to build on?"

"Oh, Jimmy," she said, and her eyes were full of tears, "indeed I don't know. I'm such a different Elizabeth nowadays, I scarcely understand myself. And there's some of me locked up in the past that can never be unlocked," she added sadly. "I should like to love you, indeed I should like to love you—and that sounds as if I didn't love you, and I do. You know what I mean, Jimmy dear."

"Yes, I know, Elizabeth," he answered.

Nina's voice was heard in the distance: "Supper, supper, supper!" she chanted.

Jimmy laughed. "Cheer up, Eliza," he cried, "after all, there are some compensations in life!"

But as he helped her out of her garden chair he drew her to him and kissed her, and Elizabeth made no protest.

Nina, who, unseen, had witnessed the embrace, did not hesitate to speak her mind.

"If you may kiss Jimmy," she observed, "I do not see why I am not allowed to kiss Bedell."

After speeding Mrs. Frogmore by the seven-thirty train, Mary, Nina, and Nana by the ten-thirty, and helping to tidy up in company of a local char, Elizabeth left Southwold in Sir James's motor bound for Halesworth, where they bade each other good-bye. It was extremely hot, almost unbearably so.

"So perverse," thought Elizabeth. "Why couldn't it be hot when we wanted it to be hot?" Then she laughed, as she suddenly remembered a scene with Nina, then aged five, standing at the window grumbling fiercely at the rain. "Perhaps you'd better remember, Miss Nina, that it's the Almighty as sends the rain," Nana had said. To which Nina had replied: "Well, all I can say is He might just as well send the water-carts."

Elizabeth travelled in a third-class carriage in company with an old man, two young women, and

a flounced little girl with barley sugar-like hair, and five dead shrimps in a red and blue pail.

At Ipswich these travellers departed, leaving behind them in their needless flurry one of the shrimps. Their places were taken by a woman, two half-grown girls and two small boys, each laden with brown paper parcels. An old man addressed as "grandpa," assisted by a porter, with difficulty thrust through the window a still larger parcel tied up in a tartan shawl. This at length being disposed of on the rack, and grandpa having wobbled sadly away, the train started and the family arranged itself. The girls and their mother continued to embrace brown paper parcels, the coverings of which burst from time to time. In spite of the heat they were clothed as for the arctic regions. The two boys were evidently greatly excited and eager to see all that could be seen, but the girls had the early sense of responsibility and feminine understanding of the realities of life, which few men ever learn.

"Ma" was a small gipsy-like woman with that look of harassed content so often seen in the faces of mothers in poor circumstances. Her own clothes and those of her children were clean and tidy, but rather poverty stricken. The children consulted her on every subject and evinced a pretty affection for her and for each other.

Suddenly the elder girl half rose from her seat. A brown parcel fell from her clasp and burst upon the floor.

"Oh, ma," she cried, "I've gone and left it behind!"

The others stared inquiringly.

"The post card," she explained, "that grandma said I was to be sure send off. She'll be in such a taking."

"Poor grandma! she *will* be in a taking," murmured the younger girl, a plain, thin, anæmic child.

The mother began collecting the articles which the treacherous brown paper left exposed to the vulgar gaze. She stuffed them into an already bulging string bag.

It did not seem to occur to the stricken party that another post card could be obtained. Elizabeth came to the rescue. She had stamped post cards and a pencil in her dressing-case.

"I did feel bad about it," the girl explained. "Poor grandma, she would have taken on."

"Are you going far?" asked Elizabeth.

"To Canada, ma'am," said the mother rather sadly.

"Dad's there a'ready," volunteered the youngest boy shyly.

There was something about this family that appealed to Elizabeth, something tragic, touching, and yet absurd. The heat grew more oppressive and silence reigned. Elizabeth looked up from her book to see the younger girl sitting greenly pale, the tears slowly dropping down her face.

The mother looked too. "Let Lyddie come a'side of me," she said.

The little boys were greatly concerned, but their mother quieted them.

Elizabeth proffered fan and smelling salts, the boys taking a shy but politely suppressed interest in her dressing-case.

Biscuits were now produced from ma's string bag and the little boy begged Elizabeth's acceptance of one. She excused herself on the score of a recent meal. This refreshment was followed by the appearance of a small cornucopia-shaped bag of sweets, which was also handed to Elizabeth.

Here, the family seemed to say, is a return for your kindness, which you cannot refuse to accept. So Elizabeth ate a piece of magenta stickiness, the flavour of which wafted her back to an experience of her earliest youth. She tasted again the yellow hat of Noah presented to her by Nana, together with Shem, Ham, and Japheth, and an assortment of cream-coloured animals in a highly coloured ark.

At Liverpool Street Elizabeth saw the family into the omnibus for Euston and bade them God-speed—first providing an extra piece of string wherewith to restrain one of the brown paper parcels.

CHAPTER VII

THAT evening, alone in her flat, Elizabeth fell a victim to depression. She thought with envy of her sisters and of all other members of her little world away in the country, abroad or by the sea. She thought of little Nina asleep, and Nana, within call should her beloved child awake, supping with her crony, the Royden nurse, in the comfortable nursery. She pictured Mary dining deliciously at Meriel's exquisitely decked table, then drinking coffee out on the terrace. There would be other guests, and later bridge would be played in the beautiful white drawing-room, faintly scented with great bowls of roses, sweet peas, and mignonette. Then her thought travelled to Priorshirst, Sir James's Norfolk home, where he and five other men were now assembled, smoking and talking at their ease, and, after the fashion of Englishmen, well content to be free of womankind. But perhaps James was not quite so well content as his guests.

The thought gave Elizabeth some little comfort. She had received a sour welcome from Mrs. Frog-

more, who, travelling by the early morning train, and assisted by her who "went out to oblige," had put Elizabeth's bedroom and the dining-room in order and prepared an evening meal.

Mrs. Frogmore was annoyed that her mistress should have returned to the flat before there had been time to give it "a thorough clean." She opined that any lady who knew what was what would have arranged to pay visits at such a time, and she revenged herself upon the depressed Elizabeth by offering her, on a tray, a cup of bottled soup and two poached eggs, viands which she well knew her mistress regarded with loathing.

"Old demon! she might just as well have given me buttered eggs and some fruit," grumbled Elizabeth, becoming more and more irritable and miserable. She hated the flat: the rooms looked as all rooms look which have been uninhabited for weeks, and, as she gobbled a poached egg with her eyes shut (Elizabeth always declared that poached eggs made her think of the horrid eyes of bilious giants), she longed to give vent to her vexation by raging at Mrs. Frogmore. After a time her temper cooled together with the bottled soup, which she left untouched upon its tray in mute reproach. Still further pacified by a warm bath in her fastidiously appointed bathroom, she retired to her bed in company with an interesting novel, which Sir James had presented to her when they parted company at the station.

The next day Madame Delaine arrived at her shop to be met with smiles of welcome from the newly assembled staff, and in half an hour was immersed in business affairs.

During August those of the workpeople who were not making holiday had carried out the few orders obtainable, filling up their time by making what milliners call "everyday shapes," that is shapes of a kind which suit average faces, and which with little alteration are worn year after year, and in making a stock of head-linings and *bandeaux*. They had also unpicked and remade last year's stock into "bread and butter" models: that is, hats of that non-descript order which every milliner must keep for clients of a certain class, who dislike anything in the least "extreme," and whose headgear varies little from season to season, either in shape or material.

Feathers, ospreys, and mounts had been looked over, and, as both Margot and Mademoiselle Bizet had spent part of their holidays in Paris, Madame Delaine decided to trust to their knowledge and spare herself the fatigue and expense of a three days' visit to the "Shrine of Fashion."

Mademoiselle Marie Bizet, "*première*" at Mirette's, had made up for her sister wire shapes of some of the new models to be used by that exclusive house, and described to her colourings and methods of trimming.

Margot, in the wake of a rich American friend, had seen dresses and hats at several of the famous houses, and she and Bizet with Madame's consent

had visited some of the wholesale houses and made a few purchases of goods, which would not be seen in London for some months.

Madame Green was already occupied with orders, and was also preparing several black and white satin foundations for the chiffon and lace dresses then in fashion, for, in a well-managed business such as that owned by Madame Delaine, all preparations are made to mitigate as far as possible the season's rush.

After lengthy interviews with Madame Green, Mademoiselle Bizet and Mademoiselle Margot, and an examination of all the French fashion journals, Elizabeth decided to go out for the day in company with Mademoiselle Margot, to see how the London market was prepared to meet the approaching demands which would be made upon it.

Madame Delaine was learning the art of buying. She no longer purchased lavishly, and she naturally made use of every legitimate means to obtain ideas, but she was already known in the trade as a very honest buyer, and appreciated accordingly. She did not descend to practise the tricks of many of her fellow workers, who would visit a model house, take in a stock of ideas, and make no purchase; or give an order and then, on some flimsy pretext, return the model, after copying it.

At the houses where she dealt regularly, both in the city and north of Oxford Street, where most of the wholesale dress trade is carried on, the heads of the various departments knew her and Mademoiselle

Margot also, and when she explained that she had but just returned from her holiday and was looking round before making her purchases, they showed her their novelties, well knowing that goods would be bought in due time.

The millinery warehouses were an interesting sight, with their stock of velvet and felt shapes piled in baskets, and box after box of feathers and mounts set out. In summer the effect was far prettier owing to the masses of flowers which converted the barn-like rooms into veritable bowers.

Before visiting the trade houses, Elizabeth and Margot walked through Harrods, looked in the windows of the dress and millinery houses in Sloane Street and Knightsbridge, and then took a taxi to Bond Street, walking up that thoroughfare as far as Conduit Street, and so through Hanover Square to Regent Street, and from thence to Selfridge's.

This scrutiny of windows and the goods displayed in large stores is valuable to the "exclusive" private milliner and dressmaker, who must avoid styles which are being sold to the million, but at the same time be able to make use of many a clever idea obtained from the models exhibited by these houses.

At Selfridge's, while lunching, Madame and her manager discussed at length the affairs of the business. The half-yearly balance sheet showed a stationary turnover, and the question arose as to how the *clientèle* should be increased. Madame Delaine trusted in judicious advertisement; Margot was by no means sure that it paid to advertise on

the small scale possible with so limited a capital. From questions of finance the conversation passed to more personal matters.

"You will be thrilled to hear that Golly is engaged to be married," laughed Margot. "She met him at Margate and they are to be wed at Christmas. Golly is very coy and immensely pleased with herself. I gather that her 'fiancy' is in the boot trade, and earns good money. Golly hopes to stay with us through the season, she tells me. I have an idea that Bizet has also made a conquest, but she is very discreet."

"I hope she won't want to leave us yet awhile," said Elizabeth, "for, in spite of her tantrums, she really is a treasure. Any other matrimonial news, Mademoiselle?"

"No, I don't think so. Our other excitement is the new errand boy. You remember I told you that the lordly Ernest had left to better himself with a photographer. Now I've engaged a person called 'Eney' 'Ermit, but I shan't tell you anything about him. He shall be a delicious surprise. I am sure that Nina will adore him."

Elizabeth laughed. "I wait with impatience my introduction to 'Eney. But what about Roona?"

Margot's face fell.

"She has taken five weeks' holiday, and the other girls told Bizet that she was going with the lady of the flat to Bourne End, where she had a bungalow. She came back yesterday looking quite lovely and marvellously overdressed. I really don't know what

we ought to do about her. She is not a good example to the other girls, and yet if we dismiss her it may just tilt her over the edge."

"I think we must just wait and see how she goes on," said Elizabeth. "Bizet is fiercely respectable and the other girls nice as far as we know, and now that Golly is engaged, I expect she will be highly contemptuous of less regular affairs of the heart. How is Emmie's mother?"

"Quite recovered. She had to have an operation, and nearly died, poor soul. Where are we going now, Madame?"

"To Veltenham's?" suggested Elizabeth. "It is on the way to the other places."

Veltenham's is one of the largest wholesale dress houses, and deals in dressmaking and millinery materials of every description. It is mounted on rather a superior scale to that of most trade houses, having liveried commissionaires and an army of tricycle delivery boys in neat uniform.

Here, in the millinery model room, Elizabeth and Margot interviewed Miss Spicer, a clever little woman with a unique talent for translating Parisian models into English successes, the French model in its original state appealing only to an extremely limited class.

Elizabeth bought three models, one or two shapes and garnitures, and made herself acquainted with the prices of goods which appealed to her taste.

Her goal now was a smaller house in Margaret

Street, entirely given up to hat shapes, and what are known as "semi-trimmed," that is, the kind of hat worn in the country and at the seaside, the trimming being of an order to endure the effects of wind and weather. The "*formes*" at this house are rather more exclusive than those to be found at Veltenham's or in the generality of City houses, and the prices higher. Some half-dozen smart shapes were collected and a like number of country hats. Visits were paid to three or four more millinery houses, including the offices of several French agents, where Margot chose a few garnitures such as she had seen in Paris.

A belated tea at Fuller's terminated an exhausting but instructive day.

"We must do the City too," said Elizabeth, "and then I must take Madame Green round some of the dress houses; after that we will begin designing in good earnest. I shall make some sketches to-night for tea-gowns and evening frocks. Now for a taxi. Where shall I drop you? You need not go back to the shop, Mademoiselle?"

"No," said Margot. "I told Miss Emmett that probably we should be late, so she will lock up. If you will put me down at Hyde Park Corner I shall take a number fourteen home."

Elizabeth laughed. "I always admire people who can treat omnibuses in that mathematical fashion. It is quite too new fangled for me. I can only regard them as green Elephants, white World's Ends, and scarlet Cricklewoods. There's no romance

about journeying in a number fourteen, but if you set out in a green Elephant anything might happen."

"Such funny things do happen in omnibuses," said Margot. "I got into one the other evening which was going to the Zoo, and the moment I saw the passengers I realised that with propriety it could not go anywhere else. There was an old lady like a parrot, with green and yellow feathers in her bonnet, and a marmoset dressed as clergyman, and just as we were starting a hippopotamus, wearing a tail coat and top hat, clambered in. Have you ever noticed," she went on, "that there are only two kinds of old ladies—the birdy faced and the toady faced? One is thin and beaky and the other stretches wide-ways, and you always find that the birdy ones want bonnets with feathers. Then people with dun coloured hair, pale eyes, and no coloured complexions always like to dress in drab. I should like to know why these things are."

"Well," said Elizabeth, "of course people express themselves to some degree in their clothes."

"Which accounts for a German Frau in whose family I lived while I was learning German," laughed Margot. "Her passion in life was bedding. She had all her mattresses covered in blue checked stuff and the sheets trimmed with lace which she made with a crochet hook. Her figure was just like her own mattress and she dressed the part in six inch square checks trimmed with guipure. When she had added maroon kid gloves, a sailor hat, and elastic sided boots, the effect was arresting."

Elizabeth laughed. "I too once spent several months in Germany, and when I came home I understood why continental caricaturists always represent English women as being thin. They looked like bonnet pins after the German Fraus. When I am fat I shall live in Germany, where I defy you to be fatter than some one else, which must be such a comfort."

That evening when Elizabeth returned she saw at once that Mrs. Frogmore was in a better frame of mind. The flat was shining after its thorough clean, and a peace-offering in the shape of a tightly tied bunch of magenta china asters sat in a red vase.

To-night, dinner was served in due state in the dining-room and more china asters decorated the table.

Mrs. Frogmore could clean, she could also cook when desirous of doing so, and the fried sole, the omelette, and dish of fruit would have softened a sterner heart than that which inhabited Elizabeth's breast. She admired the china asters, the omelette, and the sole, and again domestic peace reigned.

The next morning Elizabeth was sitting in the office surrounded by fashion books, scissors, paste, drawing materials and the new pattern books, engaged in designing evening gowns, assisted by Margot, who was working out estimates, when there was a knock at the door.

"Come in," said Madame.

The door opened. Madame Delaine looked up, but for a moment saw nothing.

A squeaky voice remarking, "Mornin', miss," caused her to look again.

"Good morning," she replied politely.

"Mornin', miss," said the owner of the squeaky voice a second time, to which Margot replied.

"Good morning. This," she added, "is 'En—Henry Hermit."

"Yes, miss," squeaked Henry.

Henry was a minute boy with a crimson face covered with yellow freckles, orange hair which stood up stiffly, small green eyes, and a nose like a rudder, and, as his employers were to discover, a knowledge of the world which is not possessed invariably by persons of three times his age, which was fourteen and seven months. Henry had complied with the demands of the state as regards education, had received an excellent character from his schoolmaster, who reported him as being the only boy in a large and most well-brought-up family. He was now returned from a visit to the Home Office doctor.

"What did the doctor say, 'En—Henry?" queried Mademoiselle.

"Precious little, miss," replied Henry, and his manner inferred that that little was of no account. "Is there anything for me to do, miss? I've wasted a lot o' time this morning going to that there doctor."

"Fortunately," said Margot quite gravely, "we have not been very busy. Now I want you to go to Ovenden and Herbert's and match me this ribbon.

Bring patterns if you can't get the exact thing, three yards and one-eighth. Price, tenpence halfpenny."

"Yes, miss," said Henry, and departed, carefully shutting the door.

"'Enery 'Ermit is 'is name," said Margot, "and it's useless to struggle against it. He has been here a week and I adore him. Whatever befalls us, I feel sure that 'Enery will be equal to the occasion."

"He certainly seems unique," admitted Elizabeth, "and I fear for Nina's affections when she meets him."

Miss Emmett, carefully checking invoices at her desk, looked up.

"There was a letter from Miss Nina this morning, Madame Delaine," she remarked in her thin expressionless voice. "She wishes two new hats for her monkey. Shall the order be put in hand?"

"Give me the letter," said Elizabeth.

The letter, partly in round hand and partly in printed character, ran as follows :

"DEAR MISS EMMETT,

"I want hats for Monk. Beth calls him shabby. A green felt with wings and purple and a veil.

"With love from

"NINA.

"Purple is for motoring, like mum."

"Really, not very much more difficult to understand than the letters of many of our clients. I believe she wants a motor hat like the one I pinned together to show you. I will ask Mademoiselle Bizet to let one of the apprentices make them."

"Thank you, Madame Delaine." Miss Emmett appeared to regard orders for monkey's millinery as all in the day's work, and entered the order in the order book. She looked at the clock, arranged her papers, and went upstairs to release Doris, whose lunch hour had arrived.

Margot began to laugh. "I knew I had an Emmett tale for you. The other morning I was looking over some motor bonnets in the showroom when in came a customer. She was small, with brilliant yellow hair, and quite prettily painted. Her skirt was as tight and as short as a skirt could be. She wore patent leather shoes with white tops, and carried a satchel as large as herself, with 'Topsy' scrawled across it in huge gilt letters. This apparition asked for a shooting hat—to wear at her bungalow at Shoreham, and she paid for it. I telephoned to our Emmett to bring me some change. When Miss Topsy had departed, I said to dear Emmett, what do you make of that?"

"I don't quite understand, Mademoiselle Margot. Make of what?"

"Of our last customer," said I.

"Oh," said Emmett, and pondered.

"Oh," she ventured, "do you think perhaps that the lady was a *demi-blonde*?"

Elizabeth's chuckles were interrupted by a knock at the door, and 'Enery 'Ermit's rudder-like nose appeared, followed by the remainder of his small person.

"Sold out, miss," he remarked indignantly. "Nothing near it, they said, but I 'ad a good look. I don't trust those girls. 'You seem to think as seein's believin',' one of 'em said to me, but I said I hadn't come for no back chat. So I went on to Morgan's, and there's a pattern as you wouldn't know the difference, miss."

"Good boy," said Mademoiselle. "It's quite excellent for colour, isn't it, madame? Very well, 'Enery; three and one-eighth yards."

"Shall I get the lunches on me way back?" asked 'Enery. "It 'ud save time, miss."

"Madame and I are going out. Miss Emmett wants a fresh egg, a roll and one penny pat of butter. Then you must go to your dinner."

"Yes, miss," and again 'Enery departed, shutting the door slowly and painstakingly.

At one-thirty, when Miss Emmett descended to the office to eat her fresh egg and read the *Daily Mirror*, and Elizabeth and Margot went out to lunch, their choice fell upon a restaurant near by. In a first-floor room by an open window they could eat the inexpensive fare which the worker demands.

The room was very full. Here sat a group of women, young and inclining towards middle age, skilled and fairly well paid skirt and bodice hands,

in all probability. There, two smart-looking French women lunched together—*modistes* from shops near by. Workers of every grade in dress houses could be recognised by anyone with knowledge of the trade, from the head milliner or fitter ordering her meal of meat or fish and vegetables, to be followed by a sweet, to the improvers and apprentices, only too often dining on a glass of milk and a bun. These girls cast longing glances at the plates of other eaters. They, however, were better off than many of their colleagues, who could not afford to buy even milk or buns, and who brought their midday meal from home and ate as they walked about the streets, wet or fine—turned out of the workrooms during the lunch hour by the decree of a careful State, which nevertheless fails to demand of the employer that any meal room shall be provided.

After lunch Margot went back to the shop and Elizabeth turned into Harrods' to do some household shopping, and returned to find Margot, Doris, and Miss Fort all busily occupied in taking a *trousseau* order.

"Oh, how nice!" said the bride when Elizabeth approached. "I was so afraid you wouldn't be back yet, but I felt I must come and begin my *trousseau*. I'm so excited about it," she remarked naïvely. "The bother is," she continued, and her face fell, "that my mother is coming directly, and you know she has such *stern* ideas about clothes—especially about 'undies.' I believe she would like me to live in

tatting and tucks. And, after all it's *my trousseau*. So you must help me."

Elizabeth promised her assistance.

"Don't you think you could give us an idea of what you want to-day, and make an appointment for next week, when I shall have new models in hats and dresses to show you? It is really a little early yet. Mademoiselle Margot and the head milliner have just come back from Paris with quantities of pretty new ideas. When is the wedding to be?"

"In November, and I'm not going to leave everything to the last and look a haggard wreck. When my cousin got married she looked thirty, and was so peevish I wonder Captain Zelliet didn't jilt her. She had fourteen bridesmaids and she nearly went mad. They all wanted something different and quarrelled like cats. I'm going to have pages and little girls, because they'll have to do what they're told."

"Yes," said Elizabeth; "but, unless they are motherless orphans and unprovided even with aunts, I fear there will be the usual difficulties."

"Oh, bother," said the bride elect, "I'd forgotten that. Here's mother. Now, do remember what I said."

The business of choosing *lingerie* began in good earnest. Doris produced set after set of white garments tied with pink ribbons or with blue ribbons, embroidered, lace trimmed, hemstitched.

The mother of the bride elect was a pleasant,

dignified person, with a figure of quite the wrong shape, a toque which resembled a saucepan and early Victorian tastes. Her daughter, small, fair and flighty, would, as Elizabeth foresaw, develop into the picture post card type of beauty with alarming rapidity, when removed from maternal control.

At length this ill-matched pair were able to agree on a sufficient number of "undies" ("Underclothes, my dear child," said the mother), though the girl was becoming more and more mutinous.

Mother and daughter finally disagreed absolutely as to a nightdress.

"I must have that," said the daughter. "That" was a garment (or, as the elderly Frenchman had observed when showing his models to Madame Delaine, a most elegant "*cache-rien*") of pink *ninon de soie*, low necked, short sleeved, and plentifully inlet with Irish lace.

"My dear," said the mother, turning pinker than nature and her stays, which were tight in the wrong place, had made her.

"I don't see why I should be a frump and have nothing like anyone else."

"I do not think that any nice girl would wear such a thing," said the mother heavily.

Her daughter looked as if she could say more and she would, and flung her purse with a bang upon the table.

Arrangements were made for the following week, and adieux were said.

Just as the ladies had left, Doris came running downstairs with the purse. At the same moment the daughter reprecipitated herself through the shop door.

"Oh, I've left my purse," she cried breathlessly, "and please tell Madame Delaine to keep that nightgown for me. I'll pay for it myself, and I'll get my maid to come for it." Snatching up her purse she fled.

CHAPTER VIII

ON the morrow as Mrs. Earl was walking up Sloane Street to her shop, her thoughts intent upon little Miss Irma's *trousseau*, she suddenly became aware of a cap which was being waved in front of her, and there by her side trotted the orange haired 'Enery. Elizabeth greeted him with all the effusion which he seemed to expect, and having explained that he felt sure that she had not at first been aware of his presence, he departed in company with a large hat box of "'ats on appro." "The lady come in late just as we was closing and wanted 'em most particular."

Elizabeth spent a busy morning arranging models with Mademoiselle Margot, and working out some designs for evening dresses which could be made to pay at eight guineas: no easy task, for Elizabeth detested garments of the cheap showy order. Her labours were interrupted at intervals by travellers who arrived on the box seats of omnibuses, inside which the specimens of their stock were stored.

Mr. Smithers, one of Veltenham's many travellers, was quite a friend of the house, and generally paused for a chat with Madame Delaine.

A tall, thin man with blue eyes, a black moustache and a pink nose, he was a keen Territorial and politician, and, needless to say, a Conservative, for to Elizabeth's surprise she found that almost all the men with whom she came in contact in her work were bitterly opposed to the Radical Government, to whom they ascribed the prevailing dullness of trade.

Of the effect of a Conservative Government on trade Madame had no experience, but she often wondered upon what peg the travellers would hang their grumbles when the Liberals were no longer in power.

To-day, matters Territorial and political had faded from the mind of Mr. Smithers.

His comparatively new wife had presented him with a quite new baby, and he longed to confide his emotions to these sympathising females.

Madame and "Madermerselle" lent a ready ear to his recital. Miss Emmett, expressionless as ever, yet gave the impression that such converse was scarcely fitted for her genteel ears.

Mr. Smithers reluctantly departed and Mr. Scales took his place.

Mr. Scales travelled in millinery materials. He was a tall, good-looking youth, with fair curls and the languid charm of one who knows the sex.

Elizabeth loathed him, but, as he sold twenty-four inch velvet of good quality at a lower price than that of any other firm, she dissembled.

Mr. Scales booked an order for "half black vel

twenty-four inch piece price," and departed, flashing his fine eyes at Elizabeth, Margot, and the Emmett. The latter blushed a faint dull puce.

Elizabeth longed to slap her.

A whistle came from the speaking-tube and Margot hurried upstairs.

Shortly after Doris came running in, flushed and excited.

"Mademoiselle says could you come up, Madame," she panted. "Mrs. Fodsham Bailey is upstairs, and Mademoiselle would be glad if you could come."

Mrs. Fodsham Bailey was an elderly smart-looking woman, quite well known in society; in commercial circles she was equally well known as a most undesirable customer who obtained credit wherever possible and never paid an account until writted.

She had given an extensive order to Madame Delaine some six months ago, and it was only because the Emmett, an excellent woman of business in these respects, had declined to leave the goods without payment that the money had been at last forthcoming after acrimonious correspondence.

"Oh dear," sighed Madame as she mounted the stairs, "I wish the woman would stay away."

Mrs. Fodsham Bailey smiled affably. She was seated before a looking-glass and had removed her hat and veil.

Madame Delaine bowed somewhat coldly.

"You've really some excellent models," observed the customer blandly. She removed a brown beaver

hat from a stand, placed it on her head, and took it off again.

"A good hat," she said, "but not for me. Let me see that green velvet thing with the feathers."

Margot handed it to her in silence.

"Becoming, don't you think so, madame?"

"A little large, I think," said Madame.

"Do you?" said the lady carelessly.

She altered the angle of the hat slightly and calmly bent a feather so that it trailed over the brim.

Margot looked fierce.

Doris opened her mouth and shut it again.

Mrs. Fodsham Bailey took up her own hat and put it on her knees and removed her onyx-headed hat pins.

"Thank goodness," thought Elizabeth, "she's not going to buy anything."

At that moment a pin was thrust quickly through the green velvet hat.

Margot leaped forward. "Madame," she exclaimed, "oh, please!" The second pin was in place.

"I will take this hat," said the lady; "you can send my own;" and she moved placidly to the door, opened it, and was gone.

Elizabeth sat down and looked at Margot. Margot looked at Elizabeth. Doris gazed at the discarded hat with a stupefied expression.

"*Mon Dieu!*" said Margot.

"Give me that hat, Doris," she cried suddenly.

"One, two, three, five, seven feathers—good feathers.

We don't return that hat, madame, until we see our money."

Months afterwards those seven *tête de nègre* shaded feathers, cleaned and re-curled, arranged with incomparable skill by Bizet on a *tête de nègre forme*, were sold at a handsome price.

This was to be a day of excitements.

Elizabeth went out in the afternoon with Madame Green to cull information, and at ten minutes to seven had returned, and was sitting chatting with Margot in the office. The staff had left and the premises were in the hands of the cleaner.

The office door opened and 'Energ's nose appeared.

"Miss," he observed.

Margot jumped violently. "'Energ," she cried, "why haven't you gone long ago?"

"I did, miss," said 'Energ. "I come back for me knife."

"Well then, get your knife."

"I 'ave, miss," admitted 'Energ mysteriously. Then, putting his orange head a little further round the door, he added, "Mrs. Morton's asleep in the packing-room, miss."

"Asleep in the packing-room," cried both ladies.

"Yes, miss."

"But perhaps she's ill. We must go and see, Mademoiselle."

Margot was already half-way across the room.

"She's not *ill*, miss," said 'Energ, and followed in their wake.

Mrs. Morton did not present a pretty picture. She was a stout woman with scanty hair, and, unlike others of her class, she preferred a toque to the usual shapeless bonnet. In the toque was a large red velvet chrysanthemum, and this elegant piece of millinery hung over one ear. She sat upon a chair with her feet spread widely in front of her, and Elizabeth observed that she wore one button boot unbuttoned and one grey list slipper. Her face was purple and she snored.

Elizabeth and Margot had quite an affection for Mrs. Morton. On the occasions when they met her conversation was so breezy, her good humour so great

Mrs. Morton had discoursed on life to Elizabeth on more than one occasion.

"Yes, I'm married an' done for now. We most of us comes to it, and most of us wouldn't be 'appy if we didn't. Not as most of us is 'appy, any'ow, except when young and unthinkin'. I've 'ad me time and a good one. P'raps you didn't know, 'm, as I was on the 'alls; I was one of the 'Six Fascinatin' Fairies' troupe. Some good engagements I've 'ad. I'm not so old as I couldn't do a turn now, if it wasn't for me figger. You want your figger for the 'alls. I'd a leg for a tight, then."

Mrs. Morton looked anything but a "fascinatin' fairy" as she continued to snore. Her toque fell a little further over her right eye.

The ladies gazed at her helplessly. 'Enery stared with unastonished contempt.

"Ill, I don't think," he murmured. "Ill o' beer. You leave her to me, miss. I'll manage 'er."

Mrs. Morton gave a sudden and louder snore. She attempted to sit up, and made an ineffectual effort to restore her toque to its accustomed place.

"You leave 'er to me, miss," repeated 'Eney; and not knowing quite what else to do, these two women left the situation in the hands of the competent male.

How 'Eney dealt with the mountainous Mrs. Morton he did not divulge, but a quarter of an hour later he knocked at the office door.

"She's gone, miss," he announced. "I'll come early to-morrow morning and do a bit o' cleaning up. She won't be fit fer nothin' to-night."

The next day Margot met Elizabeth at nine o'clock and they journeyed to the city on the top of a motor omnibus. This vehicle they left at the east corner of St. Paul's Churchyard. Turning northward, they made their way to Wood Street, sacred to wholesale dress houses, and even at this early hour blocked with vans. How these vans ever disentangled themselves Elizabeth could not imagine, but as the goods ordered invariably arrived it was evident that the task was successfully completed somehow. As Elizabeth and Margot made their way along the narrow pavement, they met other women engaged on similar business. Every one hurried, yet at one point a large crowd had collected to waste time in looking at the struggles of a horse,

which had slipped on the greasy asphalt and was trying nervously to regain its legs. The drivers of the other vans watched the spectacle with a kind of indifferent interest, but it remained for Elizabeth to suggest that a piece of sacking under the animal's fore legs would provide secure foothold. The driver gazed at her with amused contempt as he carried out her request; even when the worth of her suggestion was proved he still seemed amused. Elizabeth's heart ached for all those animals, daily victims of the rough stupidity of their caretakers.

For hours did she and her assistant make their way from warehouse to warehouse. At the end of the morning she felt as if the world was created for the mere purpose of manufacturing clothes; that she inhabited a land of braids and ribbons, straws, felts, silks, serges.

Men gave all their energies to produce clothes, vast machines thundered, weaving material and again more material; cunning little machines hem-stitched, tucked, sewed galloons and laces. Women and yet more women, and yet again more women, toiled to produce clothes; the lives of children were sacrificed to their mothers' toil. People lied, cheated, bullied, entreated; and for what end? That human beings should follow the fashion: should be dressed in ugly, senseless garments; should replace those garments by others equally foolish.

"Oh dear," sighed poor wearied Elizabeth, "and yet misguided people despatch missionaries laden

with red flannel petticoats for the happy naked heathen."

Exhausted nature cried for food. No place offered but a tea shop.

Making their way between the crowded tables, Elizabeth and Margot found two vacant seats on a red plush seat in front of a greasy marble topped table. The air was hot and thick with the steam from tea and coffee urns.

A pale, bored girl appeared to take their order and smeared the table with a netted cloth. The choice of food was varied, the quality excellent, and the prices extraordinarily low.

The pale girl brought their coffee. When that was nearly cold she returned with plates of scrambled eggs. A young man at the next table, with mauve socks, a mauve tie, yellow boots, and his yellow hair arranged in an elegant curl, handed them a cruet with a dashing air. Two girls near by, who were eating scones and drinking hot milk, nudged each other, stared, and whispered. The appearance of these two elegant well-dressed women in such a place intrigued them.

"I wonder what made you join the army of clothiers, Miss des Vœux?" asked Elizabeth as they ate their admirably fresh eggs.

"Lack of cash," said Margot. "My father lost his all and left me—not penniless but nearly so. To become a *vendeuse* seemed my lot in life. I'm quite a happy *vendeuse*," she added, smiling engagingly at her employer.

"I am so glad you are happy," said Elizabeth, "but it must be a great change from your former life. Your father was a very rich man, was he not?"

"Yes," said Margot. "I had a capital time, and my father and mother spoiled me horribly. Poor dears, I used to think of them when I was in that convent."

"Convent," ejaculated Elizabeth, "were you going to be a nun?"

Margot laughed.

"No indeed, that would never be my *métier*, but I lived in a convent when I first came to London. My maid who had been a milliner at one time, both in Paris and in London, told me of it as a safe, cheap place in which to live. I thought in London my knowledge of French and German would help me, and of course I knew all the good shops in Paris and could go over to buy if necessary. So I came to the convent and had a bedroom there and stayed until I found work and saved a little money.

"Oh," she said shuddering, "how I hated it; though the sisters were dears."

"Tell me about it," begged Elizabeth.

"It was one of these tall London houses," explained Margot, "the door opened into a narrow hall and there was a sour, yellow, marbled paper on the walls. The paint was made to look like oak and there was linoleum on the floor. It was drab with yellow and brown patterns, and the hall always smelt of cabbage and scrubbing soap."

"Ugh!" said Elizabeth, "I know the smell."

"The dining-room was on the right. There the walls were a dirty, maroon colour. I think there had been a gold pattern on them once, but then it looked as if snails had crawled on it. You know the slimy little trails they leave on garden pailings?"

Elizabeth nodded.

"There was a gilt gas chandelier and a huge table and mahogany sideboard, but the chairs had rush seats like church chairs. Oh, the food! I only had breakfast and supper there and sometimes lunch on Sunday. There were always horrid remains of cold joints and greasy butter and cheese and great loaves of bread. We only had one table-cloth each week. I used to make up my mind not to look at it, but every morning I did; I had to. I couldn't help it. I used to count how many new stains there were since the day before. Of course there were hardly any servants, and the knives were never really clean. I hated to touch the smeary spoons and forks and the great thick white cups. Oh, I did hate it."

"You poor dear," sympathised Elizabeth.

"Then my bedroom," continued Margot. "I went up and up and up all those linoleum-covered stairs and there was more linoleum in my room; the pattern looked like horrid, white, staring eyes. The bed was lumpy and the washstand and chest of drawers were painted like mottled soap. There was a lovely old mahogany dressing-table with bits chipped off it, but I polished it nicely and put out my toilet things. Father gave me a lovely set just before he died and I always used them, though

gold and tortoiseshell brushes didn't look very suitable in my garret.

"My first berth was with Rhone and Rover, and of course I was very lucky to learn in such a good house, though in many ways it was horrid."

"Did you find the life very hard?"

"Yes, sometimes," replied Margot. "In the quiet time it was almost more tiring than in the seasons. There was nothing to do, but of course the hours were just the same. I had to be there at a quarter-to-nine and we shut up shop at six-thirty, but in the seasons we had to stay late to see our orders through. I often came home too tired to eat and thankful to get into that lumpy little bed in that hideous little room. As time went on I made friends with one or two cousins and they introduced me to people, so that I almost always dined out on Saturday and Sunday. I used often to stay in bed on Sunday until about twelve o'clock. Sometimes I read and sometimes I sat in bed and did my mending. My wretched legs used to ache so from the continual standing when we were busy."

"But you don't live at the convent now?" Elizabeth asked.

"Oh no. Directly I had learned something of English life and saw that it was *convenient* for a working girl to be very independent, and when I was earning more (my three languages and my wits only fetched £1 a week and my tea at first) I took a tiny studio flat in Fulham, and there I live with a telephone and a yellow cat to chaperone me."

"I hope they perform their duties satisfactorily," laughed Elizabeth.

"The cat—yes. The telephone—no," said Margot. "Gregory—he is called Gregory because he is the colour of Gregory's powder—is a most ill-tempered person. He has a short, harsh coat and great, yellow-green eyes, and unlike the Cheshire cat he growls when he's angry, which is almost always. As for the telephone! well we know the ways of the telephone, do we not, Madame?"

The youth with the mauve socks departed, swaggering gaily amidst admiring glances from the white aproned waitresses.

Elizabeth and Margot gathered their belongings together, paid their bill at the desk by the door and breathed again the comparatively fresh air of Cheapside.

Mounting a motor omnibus they journeyed home.

CHAPTER IX

“I WANT you to come from Friday to Monday,” wrote Meriel. “Don’t say you can’t leave that tiresome shop. I am going to have the bean-feast on Saturday and you must help me. Jimmy is coming and staying on for the shoot next week. We shall just be ourselves and the children until Monday.”

Elizabeth pondered. It was very hot and she wanted the cool green gardens of Roydon. She wanted Nina. She wanted to feel young and gay and rich and careless for a day or two.

On Friday afternoon she took the train to Roydon. At the little station Elizabeth emerged into an excited tangle of arms and legs and wagging tails. The Roydons, Mary Talbot, Jimmy, Nina and the three Roydon children, Bob, Beth, and Lancelot, with five dogs, had come to meet her.

Bob and Beth threw themselves upon their aunt regardless of Nina’s prior claims. That young lady stood aside, scowling and conversing in nonchalant tones with her beloved Monk. He wore a dirty white muslin frock, a motor bonnet and veil.

When her mother was set free, Nina greeted her coldly.

Packed into two motor cars the party journeyed swiftly home, and in honour of Elizabeth ate an excited tea on the terrace.

Nina, alone, remained cold and calm, and devoted herself to Monk. It was one of her peculiarities that she would seldom show affection for her mother in public, and, besides, she was seriously annoyed that her cousins should have forgotten her prior claims to welcome her mother.

After tea the children were reclaimed by their nurse and quiet reigned.

"Come for a stroll, Bet?" suggested her brother-in-law.

If Jimmy Hirst was unlike the typical cavalry officer, Jock Roydon could never have been mistaken for anything else.

He was a tall man of forty-five, broad of shoulder, narrow of flank, with a long narrow tanned face, a long thin nose, yellowish-red moustache and sleek yellowish-red hair. Left motherless at the age of five, he had been slowly stupefied in the most approved fashion, first by his nurses who had put food into him, clothes on to him, and implored him to be a little gentleman, then by an excellent governess who fed him on mental mince: a preparatory school gave another turn to the expensive machinery which manufactures an Englishman of the upper classes; Eton, Sandhurst, and the Hussar regiment commanded by Colonel Talbot had done the rest.

The result on a naturally affectionate, generous, and reserved nature was to produce a man, shy, but with a certain quiet charm of manner, kind, ever anxious to do his duty as he understood it; a man who went to church on Sunday morning when in the country, who gave generously in charity, and whose moral code was that which makes of many Englishmen an extraordinary mixture of immorality and stern virtue.

Lord Roydon had fallen deeply in love with Meriel Talbot. She seemed to him an ideal of womanhood. He repented bitterly of the errors of his past life, which until then had seemed so trifling, if indeed they could be regarded as errors at all. In the light of his love for this beautiful ignorant young girl they suddenly loomed forth not as errors but as sins; dark deadly sins against womanhood made sacred by this one woman. In a state of almost trembling bliss, cloaked by his habitual shy reserve, he married Meriel.

After fourteen years Jock still cherished an affection for his wife.

Roydon was a huge, ugly, bare grey house set in the midst of exquisite gardens. The chief rooms opened on to a wide terrace from which steps led to a flower-bordered path at the edge of a shallow river. A low stone bridge connected house and gardens with tennis and croquet courts, rose garden, and the walled kitchen garden. Behind the house were the stables, garage, and the home farm buildings.

Roydon was a place which clutched at the heart.

When far away the glint of sun through trees, the sound of water rippling over stones, stirred a dormant longing again to be amongst its beauties.

Elizabeth sighed with content as she leaned against the lichen-covered balustrade of the stone bridge.

Jock lounged at her side, smoking, while the sun set redly. There was a smell of burnt weeds. Slowly the autumn mist rose and the air turned chill.

Jock knocked his pipe out. "Chilly," he said, and together they made their way to the house.

In Elizabeth's large white panelled bedroom Nina, in nightdress and blue dressing-gown, her small brown face surrounded by curl rags, was sitting before the crackling wood fire, eating bread and milk. Monk, still in his motor hat, was propped against the fender, and his expressive boot-button eyes seemed fixed hungrily on the food.

Nana was arranging Elizabeth's toilet table, and Elizabeth patted her affectionately on the shoulder.

"Dear old Nana," she said.

Nana helped her mistress into her dressing-gown and put away her travelling-dress.

"I shall come for you in ten minutes, Miss Nina," she observed and left the room.

Elizabeth sat down by the fire.

Nina finished her bread and milk and suddenly administered a sound shake to the piteous faced monkey.

"Naughty boy," she said severely, and dumped

him down again, arose and sat upon her mother's knee and kissed her fiercely.

Elizabeth kissed the child and cuddled her close. For some time they sat silent, Nina curling and uncurling her thin brown toes in the warmth of the fire, Elizabeth pressing little caresses on the rag-bedizened head. Nina was in one of her silent moods. She said her prayers with her face tucked into her mother's neck, picked up Monk, and departed with Nana.

The evening was gay. Jimmy Hirst and Bob, the eldest son of the Roydon household, a thirteen-year-old youth of ready wit, home from school and allowed to sit up to dinner, kept the table in a continual ripple of laughter. After dinner they all played Coon Can.

Sir James's manner to Elizabeth showed no change. He had been on intimate terms with the three sisters for many years, but both Mary and Meriel had always regarded him as Elizabeth's special friend and expected him to show a preference for her society.

"I am going to bed early," announced Meriel. "The bean-feast is a fatiguing amusement. By the time it is over I feel as if my feet were three times too large for my shoes and my voice shrinks to a whisper. Do remember, Bet, that Mrs. Mullins has married again since you were here—a boy so like her own son that I never know one from the other. I shall ask the son after his wife and the husband after his mother one of these days. I believe the duchess is coming, tiresome old thing.

Still, a bean-feast without the duchess doesn't really give satisfaction. The duke means to come anyhow. He's a perfect treasure and trots round bumping to everybody. Put on your prettiest clothes, Bet. Perhaps you'll be a good advertisement, and Mrs. Dawes does love to see clothes. She walks round people absorbing every tuck and seam, and then buys a paper pattern, and she and Miss Tuckett concoct the most gorgeous contraptions."

"Oh! Miss Tuckett—how is the dear soul?" asked Elizabeth. "I must manage to see her."

"You'd better come down with me to-morrow," said Mary, "she's making me a gown."

"Oh, Mary," sighed her sisters simultaneously. Mary was entirely devoid of sartorial sense. She had to be clothed, and she desired to be clothed as cheaply and with as little trouble to herself as possible.

"I shall certainly come with you, Mary," said Elizabeth firmly.

The next morning the sisters made their way to the home of the modish Miss Tuckett, a little woman with a faded blond toupee, one leg shorter than the other, and a mouth full of pins.

Miss Tuckett beamed and set two chairs for them in the clean and stuffy parlour. The table was covered with a red and black mottled cloth of a texture which set Elizabeth's teeth on edge if she happened to touch it. On it lay several numbers of *Weldon's Journal*.

"Yes, I'm ready for you, Miss Mary, though it's been a struggle. I was working till two this morning. I've been that busy for her ladyship's party," she added proudly.

"What have you been making for the party?"

Clicking noises issued from Miss Tuckett. She hastily removed some pins from her mouth.

"It's my new plate, miss," she explained, "gives me so much trouble—I don't feel as I shall ever be really used to this one. Still, we must hope." There was another click and Miss Tuckett fed herself with a fresh supply of pins. "Mrs. Trimper—I've made a mauve *voile* for her," she continued as she helped Mary to remove her blouse and clothed her in a white calico lining quite three inches too narrow across the chest. "We took the design from a *Pictorial* she had, and an idea for the sash from one her ladyship wore to church one Sunday. I took the pattern in my mind's eye in the Psalms. It's three tucks and three frills round the skirt and some sweet lace on the bodice. You look out for it this afternoon, Mrs. Earl."

"I will indeed," promised Elizabeth. "Don't you think you might give Miss Mary a little more room over the chest?"

Miss Tuckett surveyed her labours. "It's a fault of mine—I'm apt to pinch 'em over the bust," she admitted. "That's easy righted from the under arm. Then I made a sweet *ninong de soie* for Miss Ethel Toney for this afternoon—Miss Blanche is going to wear her last year's freshened up.

We've took a width out of the skirt, and with one of these new collars you'd never know it."

"How clever of you! Don't you think it's still a little tight over the chest? This year it's the fashion to have everything so loose, isn't it?"

"Floppy, I call it," observed Miss Tuckett amiably.

Mary's figure now resembled that of a tightly stuffed bolster, and as she moved a pin flew out and dropped on the linoleum with a sharp tinkle.

"That feels more comfortable," she observed mildly.

"Should you mind if I showed you my idea?" coaxed Elizabeth.

"Mind," said Miss Tuckett indulgently, "why, we all have our ideas, don't we, miss? Excuse me, but I always think of you as Miss Elizabeth. A pretty young thing you were when you first came to stay with her ladyship."

Elizabeth unpinned and pinned, and Mary breathed more freely.

"And now here I am with a seven-year-old daughter. Has Nina been to see you?"

"An' indeed she has," cried Miss Tuckett. "Drat that plate! if you excuse the expression!" She clicked and resumed. "She came the very next afternoon and brought her monkey for a dress. 'You should ask your mamma to give you a nice doll, Miss Nina,' I says to her. But children are just like that."

"So," said Elizabeth, sticking in a final pin,

"you are coming to help us in the cloak-room this afternoon, are you not?"

Miss Tuckett gave no sign of the intense pleasure which this prospect afforded her. She answered with dignity that she should be very pleased to oblige her ladyship. "Her ladyship sent down to ask me last week."

"Her ladyship's party" was the one wild excitement of the year to Miss Tuckett. "Only the year before last I tacked the flounce of Her Grace," she never failed to tell her customers, who vaguely felt that such doings shed lustre on the bony hands of Miss Tuckett as she tacked their flounces. "The countess—she came with Her Grace—she wore bands cut on the bias, so you couldn't do better, Mrs. Brewer. I noticed as the lace yoke on the Honourable Mrs. Finnis' foulard was cut round, Miss Maud. She's something your figure, too."

And in the privacy of her family Lady Roydon termed the sacred party "a bean-feast!"

By a quarter to four the guests were arriving fast. They came in forty horse-power Limousines, in vehicles which resembled egg boxes on wheels and which rattled fearsomely, and on motor bicycles. An old-fashioned barouche with ponderous horses, fat coachman and bucolic young footman, trundled solemnly up to the front door, a smart Victoria and pair, the horses tormented by cruelly tight bearing reins fretted in its wake. That in its turn made way for governess car, bicycle, waggonette. An old gentleman and his wife, with an elderly

maiden sister in a bugled dolman, doddered along in a basket-work pony carriage, the driver fishing feebly at a small, unclipped and obstinate grey pony. The motor car of the duke snorted impatiently in its rear. The good man had come early.

"Did as I was bid, my dear," he said jauntily to Meriel, who stood at the door leading to the terrace, looking like a most expensive French doll.

"Antonia's coming later with the girls."

The duke, a handsome old man, was a great admirer of Lady Roydon.

"Deuced fine woman," he always opined, "just what a woman should be. Looks handsome, holds her tongue. Devilish good wife to Roydon. Boy, girl, and a spare boy."

His grace referred to the Hon. Bob, the Hon. Beth, and the Hon. Lancelot Fitzherne. The duke had inherited the title when a middle-aged man through three unexpected deaths, and having led a roving and adventurous life settled down to the duties of his position and married Lady Antonia Bourton, a stern, handsome creature in her early thirties. This lady presented him with a beautiful heir and twin daughters, who, provided as they were with good-looking parents, perversely elected to be plain, with that meek inconspicuous plainness which neither drilling nor dressing can alleviate. The duke and his duchess adored each other. He was pleasant to every one while she was pleasant only to her duke, poor people, young children, and animals. Of Meriel she disapproved.

"Roydon should have married in his own rank of life," she had said.

Antonia never interfered with her spouse's harmless little likings, and if it amused him to admire Meriel it was manifestly proper that Meriel should appreciate his amiability. For her own part she continued to disapprove of this plump peach-like young matron, though she showed her proper attentions at the proper times.

At the annual bean-feast Lord Roydon did his duty like an Englishman, talking with the men who gathered in groups upon the terrace and the lawns, and shyly conducting ladies to tea, while Meriel stood shaking hands and smiling placidly, assisted by her duke, who made a practise of chatting to every woman he met, young or old, whether he knew her or not, and who thereby achieved a popularity denied to many a better man. It was left to Elizabeth and Jimmy to remove the male youth of the neighbourhood from the gangs in which it herded and set it to work, accompanied by some of the numerous girls, to play tennis, croquet or clock golf.

The scarcity of men was marked, but of girls of all ages there were numbers, some smart, some pretty, but for the most part with little more than the charm of youth.

In the faces of those past early girlhood dissatisfaction with their fate might be read. These young women lived at home, as a rule on very moderate means.

"There is no need for them to earn their living," said their parents. In the secret recesses of their

minds those parents cherished the idea that their daughters would marry. But all the while they knew that the number of women in England exceeds the number of men.

All round them they saw elderly maiden ladies existing on pittances and yet they would not take warning.

Their girls came down to breakfast in neat short skirts and blouses, they arranged the flowers, they did a little dusting or mending, they worked sewing machines and furbished up their clothes, read novels, played hockey, tennis, croquet, belonged to pathetic little reading societies and "improved their minds," helped in the parish and decorated the church, and waited, hoping against hope, for the husband they never would wed, the children who never would be born.

Here and there one broke away from the ranks of these nice young English girls, who had no need to earn their living. And more girls were born to be brought up in the same way. Many of these, attired in white embroidered frocks tied with pale ribbons, were present, for all the children of the neighbourhood were bidden to the festivities. Their entertainment was undertaken by Mary, the cheerful Bob, and by Nina, who devoted herself sternly to the matter in hand and allowed no disobedience on the part of her charges. They had come to the party and they should partake of every pleasure the party could afford, or she would know the reason why.

A celebrated band played near the bridge. A

palmist told fortunes in a tent, a troupe of trained dogs went through their performance with anxious excited amiability, there was a marquee in which were ices and fruit and cooling drinks; the reception rooms were all thrown open, and in the dining-room and the ball-room a sumptuous tea was spread.

Later in the afternoon the duchess made her appearance and sat in state upon the terrace, receiving formal calls from persons of her acquaintance, to whom she behaved with almost royal condescension. The meek daughters, acting as ladies-in-waiting, assisted at these trying ordeals, until they were swept away by Elizabeth and Sir James, who made them drink champagne cup and eat ices and play at Aunt Sally until they became quite pink and excited.

For some mysterious reason Nina cherished an affection for the duchess and always insisted on kissing her fondly and leaning against the august person's knee. To-day she greeted her friend with even more than usual affection and led her to the tent inhabited by the performing dogs. To the child, absolutely unafraid, and to these intelligent animals the good lady unbent completely, as is often the habit of elderly persons who are accustomed to being treated with timid deference.

Elizabeth, who knew almost every one in the neighbourhood, moved about welcoming her friends. She had now attained that real kindness of heart which, when added to knowledge of the world and charm of manner, makes an ideal hostess, and she

had also the imagination to realise what "the bean-feast" represented to some of the guests.

The last part of the evening Elizabeth spent in hurrying round the grounds with the agitated wife of a neighbouring vicar, a tall, thin person with faded blue eyes, dressed in a holland coat and skirt and a burnt straw hat trimmed with marguerites, who was trying to shepherd her flock into the long waiting waggonette.

"We were one of the first to arrive," she confided, "and I do believe we shall be the last to go." This seemed to cause her great distress.

"But," said Elizabeth, "don't you think if you were my sister and gave a party (and she's taken such a lot of trouble to try and make it a nice party) you would be pleased if people stayed a long time?"

This point of view comforted Mrs. Steppings, and when, eventually, she found her vicar, her half-grown son and his school friend hot and hilarious playing at Aunt Sally in the company of the duke, the Ladies Juliet and Janet and Sir James, she felt that now indeed she was moving in the great world. And who shall blame her? Snob? Not at all. More nearly a saint.

Mrs. Steppings worked from morning until night, year in, year out, in the capacity of unpaid curate, wife, mother, mistress of a shabby vicarage, two incompetent servants and a half-witted garden boy. Everything that Mrs. Steppings would have liked to do or to have was too expensive. Even the waggonette, out of whose dingy green cushions sprouted tufts of

stuffing, drawn by the old grey horse with spring halt and a soured temper, was a luxury that could only be afforded on state occasions.

To her, dukes and baronets, beautifully dressed women, musicians in scarlet tunics, peaches, gold plate, and strawberry ice were Romance.

To Meriel, they were the bean-feast.

Yet Mrs. Steppings, jerking home behind her halting steed, envied no man anything.

CHAPTER X

THERE was a knock at the door of the office and Nellie, the youngest apprentice, appeared. On her face was an expression of alarmed importance.

"Oh, if you please, Madame Green says would you step up. Jessie's that ill Madame Green don't know what to do with her."

Elizabeth threw down the file of invoices through which she was looking and hurried upstairs.

In the skirt room work was at a standstill, Jessie lay huddled upon the floor, her eyes shut, her teeth clenched, shivering and moaning. Madame Green knelt by her.

"What is the matter, madame?" asked Elizabeth.

"Jessie didn't seem the thing this morning. She'd a headache, but she said she thought she could work it off. Then suddenly she'd have fallen out of her chair if Miss Smith hadn't caught her."

Elizabeth knelt down by the girl. Her pulse was faint and irregular, her feet and hands icy cold.

"Tell the girls to go on with their work," she whispered.

Madame Green gave the order and the girls reluctantly resumed their places.

"Nellie, go and light the stove in the little fitting-room, put the chair cushions on the floor and ask Mademoiselle to lend us her long coat. Alice, run to the chemist's and buy me some sal volatile; and you, Rosy, put on the kettle. Now, madame, if you will help me we will take her into the fitting-room. Jessie, Jessie—try and control yourself. Can you walk, do you think?"

Jessie moaned and her teeth chattered. With difficulty the two women lifted the girl and, supporting her on either side, almost carried her to the fitting-room. There they laid her on the floor.

"We'll take off her shoes and put her feet to the stove. Wrap the coat round her, please, madame. Are you in pain, Jessie?"

The girl began to sob hysterically.

"Now be quiet, my child," commanded Madame. "You are always such a good, sensible girl—you must not be silly now."

With difficulty Jessie controlled her sobs. Elizabeth, helped by Madame Green, was unfastening the flimsy blouse, the skirt and stays. The girl was painfully thin, her underclothing little more than rags.

Alice returned with the sal volatile and Elizabeth coaxed her patient to drink. Then, laying her down again and wrapping her warmly in the coat, she drew Madame Green outside the door.

"What ails the child?" she asked.

"Half starved," said Madame Green grimly. "She told us she couldn't fancy her breakfast. It's my belief there was none to fancy. She's a reserved girl and she doesn't say much, but I believe she has to keep her mother."

"What does she earn—fourteen shillings a week, is it not?"

"Yes, madame. And, as far as work goes, she isn't worth more, though she's a nice girl and I've no fault to find with her. If you can spare me now I should like to be back. Miss Phipps is bound to go out to-night. She has to wear it."

"Oh yes, madame, I can manage now, don't let me keep you."

Elizabeth returned to her patient, who seemed to be sleeping. Then she ran downstairs.

"'Eney," she called, "'Eney, go and buy me a bottle of Bovril—a small one—and a hot water bottle. You know what I mean?"

"Stone or rubber, miss?" queried 'Eney.

"Oh, rubber, I think. Be quick, there's a good boy."

In the intervals of attending on customers, Elizabeth and Margot ministered to Jessie, who, warmed and fed, dozed for some hours. The day wore on. At length, her reserve melting under the kindly care of the two ladies, she confided her story.

"My mother and I live together in Furness Street, Chelsea. Poor mother, she's been ill months on

months. The doctor got her away to a home for six weeks, and she's a bit better. But often the pain's so bad she can't do anything for days together. Mother's a beautiful fine worker and she could get plenty if she could do it."

"Is your father dead?" asked Margot.

Jessie's face hardened. "No, Madermerselle," she said, and turned her head away.

Doris appeared. "Lady Jane Ellers would like to see you, please, Madame."

Lady Jane was a tall, thin woman, good looking in a strange wild fashion. Her clothes were exquisite, but they hung upon her as draperies upon a peg. She was wandering about the shop, looking at the hats and humming softly, and appeared quite oblivious of Madame's presence. Suddenly she turned and, with a smile, which lit up all her face, remarked:

"I think I want a few hats." Doris came forward to undo her hat and veil. "Oh, I won't bother to try them on. I always know what suits me. I'll have the black one with the feathers. Whose is it?"

"A copy of an Esther Meyer, madame."

"And the brown one?"

"A Caroline Reboux."

"Odd little hat, isn't it? It will go with my brown coat and skirt. I want some shooting hats. Yes—no, I think not—yes, quite pretty. Oh *no*, madame; what a monster! I'm sure *you* would never wear it."

"I wouldn't," laughed Elizabeth, "but it would never do to stock a hat shop solely with things one would wear oneself."

Lady Jane smiled. "I suppose not," she agreed, and then sat gazing vaguely at herself in the glass. Suddenly she began to whistle softly. The noise awoke her and she jumped up. "Hats—of course. Yes, hats. How many is that—five? I think I'll have that white one too. Six. Good-bye. I wonder if I really wanted six hats. My maid said I had eighty last year. But I like hats."

Lady Jane wandered through the door, held open by Doris, and stood for a few minutes gazing at her footman, who patiently looked at nothing in particular. Realising eventually that carriage and footman were both waiting for her, she entered the one, gave instructions to the other, and departed.

Madame Delaine smiled as she wrote the orders in the order book, but her smile quickly faded. The mental picture of Lady Jane and her eighty hats gave place to one of a sobbing, shivering work girl, starving with her mother on fourteen shillings a week.

It was a tired Elizabeth who at half-past five sat drinking tea with Margot in the office.

"By the by, did you notice that Roona was not here this morning?" queried the girl. "She has neither written nor telephoned. So tiresome just when we are so busy. She coughed a good deal yesterday, but she certainly wasn't really ill. Little

devil. Bizet says she has been as uppish as possible of late."

"I suppose we shall hear from her to-morrow," said Elizabeth, too weary to be very much interested.

But the morrow brought no news. Four or five days passed and no reply came to a letter written by Margot.

"I feel worried about the girl," she confessed. "I shall telephone to her. The lady she lives with is a Mrs. Benson."

Little information was to be gained. No, Mademoiselle could not speak to Roona. Roona was out. Her mother—no, her mother could not come just then. Was Roona returning to work—her place could not be kept open indefinitely, indeed it was only by special favour that Madame could have her back now. No, Roona was not coming to work at present. She needed a change. Her cough was so troublesome.

"Well," sighed Elizabeth, "I don't quite see what we can do."

"It's a bad business," agreed Margot, as she hung up the receiver of the telephone. "Briggs told Bizet a good deal when Roona didn't come back. Mrs. Benson is a *demi-mondaine* of a superior class and has this flat. She seems to be a kind soul according to her lights and was really sorry for Roona and her mother. Then when she hadn't anyone to go out with in the evening, she took Roona, and it was when with her that Roona met

this young man she says she is going to marry. Briggs says his name is Leonard and that his father is 'quite an important gentleman.' It doesn't sound a very likely tale."

"I think I will write to the child a little later," decided Madame.

But before the letter was written Roona made her appearance.

Madame Delaine, Margot and Miss Emmett were busy looking over the order books and writing to various firms for the necessary materials when Doris appeared.

"Roona has come and would like to see Madame."

"Send her up to the dressroom," said Elizabeth.

The girl was standing by the table turning the pages of a fashion paper when Elizabeth entered. She was dressed in a smart tailor-made and her toque and tie of white fur showed up her large dark eyes and red-brown hair. Under her arm nestled a tiny Yorkshire terrier and a gilt purse dangled from her wrist.

"How do you do, Roona," said Madame gravely.

Flushing, half defiant, half shy, the girl began her tale. "I'm sure I'm most sorry if I inconvenienced you, Madame. It's not that I wished to do anything like that, but well—my cough's been so bad and the—the gentleman I'm engaged to made a fuss." She gained confidence as she spoke. "He doesn't like me to have to work and that—we're to

be married almost at once and what with one thing and another——”

“Sit down and tell me all about it,” said Madame gently. “You know how it will please me to know that you are going to be happily settled.”

Roona's face softened and tears rushed into her pretty eyes. For a moment she hesitated, then her face hardened again and she threw up her head.

“I'm sorry, Madame, thank you, but my gentleman friend's waiting for me. But I thought I'd like you to know that I wouldn't have left you just for no reason. You'll tell Mademoiselle and the other young ladies perhaps. I should like them to know that I'm going to be married,” she emphasised the word.

The little dog under her arm yawned and barked shrilly and peevishly. His mistress administered an impatient shake.

“Well, Roona,” said Elizabeth. “I won't try to keep you—I see that you don't want to stay. But I hope you will not forget me. Perhaps one day when you are free you will come and have tea with me and tell me all about yourself. What is your *fiancé's* name?”

But Roona ignored the question—much engaged in reproving the small dog which still barked impatiently. As she passed the showroom she tossed the end of her white fur over her shoulder and bestowed a condescending smile on Doris, and so passed out into the darkness of the winter evening.

.

As the November days wore away customers became fewer: the autumn rush was over. The staff no longer bemoaned the difficulty of coping with their work, instead they thought glumly of three-quarter-time and of unwanted holidays, for when orders become fewer the workers are put upon three-quarter-time, thereby saving the employer wages, gas, light and tea. Then too, unsatisfactory girls, and those who have been engaged for "season" hands only, are dismissed and the regular workers take holidays in turn.

To Elizabeth this dismissal of employees was a misery.

"What are these girls to do," she asked of Margot. "If they have homes and well-to-do parents who can afford to keep them well and good, but for the others, those who are earning their daily bread? Once out of a place there is little chance that they will find work for at least six weeks, and not three out of five earn salaries out of which they can save."

"It is one of the many cruelties of life," agreed Margot. "But what can I do? My duty as your manager is to try and earn you a fair return for your capital. How can I do this if I pay a workroom-full of girls, when there is no work for them? It is true, Madame, that you do not depend for your living on this shop, so you might out of charity continue to pay wages which are not earned, but what of all the dressmakers and milliners who are making their living, and sometimes a very bare living,

out of trade? One is apt to forget sometimes that the employer is not always the bloated capitalist of fiction, but a man or woman working harder and under even more stress of anxiety than those he employs. Businesses are not charitable institutions you know, Madame."

It was the lunch hour, and Elizabeth who was stirring scrambled eggs in a frying-pan on the gas ring, attended by Miss Emmett, who added salt and pepper at intervals, paused in her stirring.

"Yes of course I know that. Oh dear! how puzzling it all is. The suffragists say that these matters will be set right when women have the vote. But the vote does not seem to have done any too much for men. Many of them are scandalously underpaid and overworked. Clerks, for example, and van men, their hours are often abominably long."

"I think, Madame Delaine," said the Emmett seriously, "that the eggs will catch if you do not stir them."

Elizabeth hastily returned to her stirring.

"Then season trades complicate matters so dreadfully," said Margot, buttering toast vigorously. "If all the women who want to help in the world would order their clothes in the slack months it might do some good. The average female, who does not want to look like the very latest fashion plate, might just as well choose evening gowns and summer clothes in February, March and April, as in May or June. Any decent dressmaker knows

sufficient of the coming fashions by then to advise her client. If we had only about two months' slack time in the summer and fairly even trade for the other ten months how happy life would be!"

"What do you think about it, Miss Emmett," asked Elizabeth.

Miss Emmett replaced the salt and pepper on the table with deliberation.

"Well, Madame Delaine," she replied, "I sometimes think if only ladies knew how much better they would be served they wouldn't just wait till the last, when every one's that rushed they don't know what they're doing. The work's got to be given to 'season' hands then, and there's no depending on them, and they're all tired from working overtime. Ladies who want the best attention should come when there's a chance to give it them. That is what I think, Madame Delaine."

Elizabeth had poured the scrambled eggs on to the hot buttered toast and the Emmett had begun to eat with her usual elegance, her fork held delicately and her little finger genteelly crooked, when masculine footsteps were heard in the passage, the sound of a stumble and a hasty "damn." The door opened to admit Sir James Hirst.

"Why the dickens do you put booby-traps in that dark passage of yours, Eliza?" he demanded.

"What the dickens are you doing in my dark passage?" queried Elizabeth.

"Come to take you out to lunch. How do you do, Mademoiselle—how are you, Miss Emmett? Forgive my lack of manners, but my nerves are shaken—and one of your bonnet boxes is worse shaken I fear."

"I can't come out to lunch," said Elizabeth. "I haven't got my tidy frock on and it's a horrid, wet day. But we'll give you eggs and anchovy toast and some tea if you will honour us with your company."

Miss Emmett looked pained.

"Can you eat one egg or two, Jimmy?" continued the heedless Elizabeth.

"Two," said Jimmy, "and I'll cook them myself; I'm no end of a cook—but I say!—tea you know. Bad as I am I don't breakfast at two. Can't I have a whiskey and soda?"

"No," said Elizabeth, "people in this shop drink tea—or cocoa. Miss Emmett loves cocoa—I'm sure she'd make some for you."

"Thanks awfully," said James, "but I think I won't trouble Miss Emmett. I'm not educated up to cocoa."

"'Enery will be back in a moment—he could fetch a syphon and some whiskey," suggested Margot.

"Bless him," quoth James, "so he shall."

Miss Emmett sat silent, compressed into a surprisingly small portion of her chair and blushed at intervals. She was one of those young women to whom a man is an excitement; in the presence of

one her primness increased, but through it glowed an almost fierce femininity.

"If I had to go out for a walk with a tiger of uncertain mood, I might feel as the Emmett feels when there's a man about," Elizabeth had once declared.

To the brotherless, fatherless Miss Emmett any male above the rank of a working man was a "gentleman:" mysterious, stimulating creatures with a code of morals and manners vastly different from that of any nice girl, but none the less desirable on that account as husbands for nice girls.

Any well brought-up young lady knew how gentlemen should be treated. Meals to them were serious matters. Yet here was Madame Delaine, and she a widow, gaily bidding Sir James (a titled gentleman, moreover) to cook eggs and drink tea in the office of a hat shop!

Miss Emmett glanced at the clock, collected her ledgers and glided modestly from the room.

Sir James ate his eggs with appetite, provided a cigarette for Margot, tipped 'Enery and sent him to purchase two large boxes of chocolate.

These he insisted upon presenting to the red-headed Bizet and to the severe Madame Green in their respective domains, and so set a fashion in "gentlemen friends" which did not fade for many a long day.

Golly, poor sentimental dear, felt the glories of her boot-shop betrothed fading fast.

But his charms re-asserted themselves, when, seated affectionately near in the dusky recesses of a picture palace, he pressed her to name the day.

CHAPTER XI

SIR JAMES was sitting over the fire with Elizabeth in the drawing-room of the flat. The chairs and tables were pushed aside and Nina was dancing. Her aspirations towards marriage and motherhood had disappeared under the influence of Art. A visit to the Russian dancers had decided Nina that the career of a Pavlova was the career for her, and she had demanded that her mother should send her to a school of dancing.

This evening Nina postured to an audience of Sir James, her mother and Monk, and the two former at intervals solemnly presented her with bouquets of rather faded chrysanthemums taken from the flower glasses. Finally the child sank breathless in a heap upon the floor.

Monk looked thinner and even more plaintive than of yore, and James commented upon the fact.

"Yes," agreed Nina, pinching his flabby form as she spoke. Then in an unctuous voice she announced: "We must all fade sometime, Monk's fading now," she ended briskly and callously.

"I've got to go to bed half an hour earlier because I was so rude to Mrs. Froggy."

"Oh, Nina. Why were you rude to Mrs. Frogmore?" queried her mother.

"I told her I wanted sardines for my supper," replied the child, "and she said 'Sardines for your supper, miss? And what sort of a complexion would you expect from a young lady who ate sardines for her supper?' So—I'd better not tell you what I said, mum. But I was rude."

"Horrid habit," said Sir James. "I shall write a book some day called 'The Rude Girl who had no Friends,' and it will be all about you, Nina."

"It needn't be all about me," argued the child, "because even if I hadn't any friends I should be sure to have plenty of enemies," and so saying she departed leaving the limp Monk strewn upon the floor.

Elizabeth picked him up and straightened his pink straw toque.

"We must all fade some time," she murmured, "and I feel as if I were fading very fast."

James looked at her critically.

"You do look a bit off colour, Eliza," he agreed. "You do too much. Take it easy, my dear."

"Yes, I have been doing too much," she admitted. "It's so difficult not to do things, especially when Meriel's in town. And how about you, Jimmy? Three dinners at the Carlton and two at the Ritz, not to speak of a sumptuous meal of buttered eggs at Delaine's."

"I plead guilty."

"Well I forgive you, for your sins were pleasant

sins. But talking of fading, I wonder why I dislike the idea of growing old? I was a pretty thing once, Jimmy."

"You're a pretty thing now, Elizabeth."

Elizabeth rose from her chair. Leaning upon the mantelpiece she studied her face in the gilt-framed glass.

"Remains," she criticised, "a few remains—but they won't last long. I don't know why I should mind. I don't want to do as I wanted to do at eighteen—to go to a ball and dance twenty-four dances with every kind of a jabberwock of a boy wouldn't amuse me now. I don't want to flirt and to have men running after me—that doesn't attract me any longer. I want real talk with real people, which I suppose one can enjoy at any age. I don't care for the things that my pink and white face used to bring me. I don't want the lusts of the flesh, and yet I like to feel I could have them if I did want them. It's hateful to know that it will all be out of reach soon whether one likes it or not."

"Not just yet awhile, Liza."

Sir James rose too and standing by Elizabeth put his arm round her. "You have known youth, romance, motherhood. All beautiful things. But life isn't over at thirty-five. One can never go back, but how about going forward?"

Elizabeth did not speak for a few minutes, then: "You're a dear, Jimmy—you're a dear. I don't know what I should do without you," she told him as she had told him many a time before.

An electric bell rang sharply and Elizabeth moved from the fire and began to rearrange the scattered furniture.

"You must go now," she said, "I'm dining with the Mersthams and playing bridge, and I expect that's the manicurist."

"I'm going to the Mersthams too," said Sir James, "but I'll be hanged if I'll play auction with you, Liza, much as I love you. You'll never make a bridge player, my girl."

"I don't suppose I shall—though I play quite as well as lots of people any way, my bright boy. You should encourage me, James, instead of snubbing my efforts. I played last week with one of the fading brigade and for something to say I asked her if she liked cards. 'No,' she said fiercely, 'no, I don't. But I'm beginning to make provision for my old age.' You should help me to do the same."

Mrs. Frogmore put her head in at the door. No persuasions on the part of her mistress could induce that good woman to open a door wide and show all of her person at one fell swoop.

"Miss Okeby's waiting for you, ma'am."

"Ask her to bring her things in here," said Elizabeth. "There's no fire in my room. Off you go, Jimmy."

Sir James departed, exchanging sweet speeches with the Frogmore who, like most other severe and elderly females, became young and coquettish under his influence.

"Just a minute, Miss Okeby, while I get into a dressing gown—I may as well rest while I can."

Elizabeth returned to find an easy chair pulled up to the fire, a footstool awaiting her wearied feet and the manicurist's stock in trade of pastes and polishes set out upon a little table.

Miss Okeby adored Elizabeth. She in her turn had a sincere liking for the girl who, in spite of her dyed, golden locks and powdered countenance, possessed a sweet and simple nature.

Elizabeth had seen something of the hard fight which Miss Okeby and her friend Miss Brown made for existence when they were living over her shop. She had done what she could to help them and had regretted the necessity of parting with them as tenants.

"And how is life treating you to-day?" she queried.

The girl's conversation always amused Elizabeth. She gave the impression that she regarded herself as a fisherman—her utterances as the fish. As usual she angled long and carefully in the recesses of her mind and landed her prey with an air of pleased astonishment at her unsuspected skill.

"Well really, madam, I think I may say we are doing nicely. I often think—" she paused, then up with a jerk came her fish—"that it's wonderful we do as we do do," she ended brightly.

"I don't think it's at all wonderful," said Elizabeth. "You do your work beautifully (by the by, my sister is in town and wants a course of face massage),

and as for energy—when you eat or sleep I really don't know."

Miss Okeby smiled.

"It doesn't seem such hard work when you're doing it for yourself. We can keep our own hours now, madam."

The fact seemed to fill her with astonished joy.

"When I was at Loveday's it was hard work," she went on. "Miss Brown was there with me—that's how I got to know her. She was book-keeper and behind the counter, and I did manicure and face massage and filled in time at the hair work or packing and so on. We'd to be there at a quarter to nine and we didn't shut in those days till seven and on Saturdays at five. It's different now," she discovered finally with a brilliant smile and wide opening of the darkened eyes.

"Why did you take up such work?" questioned Elizabeth.

"I had relations in the trade and I served my apprenticeship in my uncle's business in the country. Then I wanted to come to London and my people didn't like it. But I would come, so they wouldn't make it any easier for me. I earned 25/- a week and I had to keep myself, clothes, food, lodgings and all. And I was better off than many. My home was at Kingston, and I could always go back on a Saturday evening till the Sunday evening, and that meant four good meals, though there was the ticket to think of. I used to reckon that I more than ate my ticket."

"What a lovely way of putting it," laughed Elizabeth. "Now I shall always wonder if I'm going to eat my ticket. Go on, Miss Okeby, tell me some more."

Miss Okeby dipped deep into her mental pool.

"Girls on 25/- a week have to think about things," she discovered. "I'd a bed-sitting room in Hooper Street and breakfast included. Morning after morning my tray'd be so late I'd scarcely time to eat half there was. It seems horrid to say it, but sometimes I do believe the landlady did it on purpose. I had to start off about twenty-five to nine and I could have done with a good breakfast.

"Miss Brown and I used to have our dinner behind the counter in the shop. She used to pull out a drawer and sit on it and I used to get one of the footstools out of the ladies' saloon. I was so fat then Miss Brown was afraid I should break the drawer if I sat on it! We used to send the boy to the public house at the corner for a large helping of the joint and vegetables. That cost ten pence—five pence each and we could make it do for two. Then at five we had some tea and a slice of bread and butter each—the firm gave that. If you count it up, madam—seven shillings and six pence for bed and breakfast, three shillings and eleven pence for dinners, six days, it only left me fourteen shillings and seven pence for clothes and fares and stamps and washing and amusements and supper too. In a business house all day you wear out your clothes,

yet you have to look nice and smart and you don't have time to do much for yourself. Then by the time we closed almost everywhere else was closed, so you had to do your shopping where you could. On fine evenings I used to walk through some of the squares home just when all the dinners were being cooked, and you'll laugh, madam, but I do declare sometimes I used to cry, the things smelt so good. It wasn't," added the girl hastily, "that I hadn't enough to eat, but I did long for something nice. I used to walk along thinking of chicken and bread-sauce and jelly. I was a greedy girl."

"Greedy!" cried Elizabeth, "you poor, little soul!"

"And all the time I might have been living at home," discovered Miss Okeby surprisedly. "But I'm thankful I didn't, for when my father died there was scarcely enough for mother. There, Madam, they do look nice."

"Oh dear," sighed Elizabeth, glancing at the clock, "I wish I could sit and gossip with you. I'm tired to death and my head aches. Lady Roydon would like you to go at nine o'clock. Can you manage that? I've told a cousin of you too who wants a hair brushing treatment."

"Well, you are kind, Madame," beamed Miss Okeby. She cast a final fly. "I'm sure if all ladies were like you, life would be a pleasure."

The Merstham's dinner was admirable: "Short and sufficient, full of character," as Elizabeth's neighbour at the meal described it.

She fell to the lot of a most pleasant elderly man, possessed of a talent rare amongst Englishmen of expressing without words his delight in the society of his companion. Under his benign influence and that of good food and good wine, Elizabeth revived somewhat. She felt herself in an atmosphere of kindly thought, for Sir James smiled at her from across the table, while Meriel's duke, seated by his hostess, winked a wicked, amiable eye in her direction from time to time.

Annette Merstham was not a person with whom the duchess would condescend to dine, but the society to be met with at her house amused the duke. As for Annette it was a matter of complete indifference to her who dined at her house, provided that they did not bore her. She liked to eat good dinners in good company and to play a good game of bridge afterwards. To achieve her ends she arranged her guests with scant attention to precedence, and invariably annexed the best bridge players for her own table. Under the circumstances it was not surprising that a party at her house had all the uncertainty of the contents of a bran tub. Elizabeth's partner at dinner was one of the prizes—the man on the other side one of the blanks. This bald-headed person ate largely and grunted disagreeably when addressed.

"One of the finest bridge players at the Portland," explained the prize.

"So," said Elizabeth. "Mrs. Merstham told me that you and I are to play together. I won't, after

what you have told me, insult you by suggesting that you also are one of the finest bridge players at the Portland?"

The prize laughed. "I am not," he confessed. "I fear I don't play well, but I really do play pleasantly."

After dinner Elizabeth found that she was placed at a table in one of the small drawing-rooms. The four consisted of the nice man and herself, a silent youth who played brilliantly and who, like many other good players, made the best of the partner and the cards provided and kept his opinion of the doings of others to himself. Their fourth was a severe lady of uncertain age who, unlike the prize, played well and unpleasantly. The mere sight of her made Elizabeth feel nervous. She had a harsh, dry voice and claw-like hands glittering with diamond rings, and when she moved she creaked.

As the food and wine of which she had partaken lost its stimulating effect, Elizabeth began to feel extremely ill. Her game, usually intelligent, became more and more faulty. At each mistake the severe lady creaked aggressively.

Elizabeth's head ached—she felt hot then cold.

Loath to break up the table so early, she struggled on until clubs began to masquerade as spades and her adversary apparently produced seventeen diamonds in the course of a no-trump game.

"You lost three tricks," said the severe lady in her dry, harsh tones.

Elizabeth gazed at her hopelessly. She might have lost fifteen tricks for all she knew. She pressed her hand to her burning, throbbing head and cast a despairing glance at the nice man.

"I think——" she began.

"I am sure," said he.

He turned to the other players.

"Mrs. Earl is quite too ill to play. She must go home at once. Have you your carriage?"

Elizabeth shook her head and sat down again very suddenly.

The room was whirling round.

CHAPTER XII

A WEAK and fragile looking Elizabeth lay on her sofa three weeks later. The hospital nurse who had tended her through a sharp attack of influenza had departed, and Nina and Nana had not yet returned from Roydon where they had been sent out of reach of infection. It was Saturday afternoon. The fire was burning brightly, the rose-red curtains drawn. The room was full of flowers sent up from Roydon and Priorshirst; violets and Roman hyacinths scented the warm air. A tea-table stood in convenient proximity to a chair on the other side of the fireplace. The stage was set and awaited the entrance of Miss Ethel Horrocks.

A moment later that young lady was announced. Full of sympathy she commiserated with Elizabeth.

"However—it might have been worse," she finally opined; "fancy if it had been in the middle of the season. If you must be ill, Madame Delaine, you chose the best time. Your young lady can manage without you in the slack times, I suppose?"

"Oh yes," agreed Elizabeth. "I think Made-moiselle Margot manages better than I do—still there are always certain people who like to see me

personally, and I'm afraid we lost some of them. I wonder if you will be kind enough to pour out tea for me, Miss Horrocks?"

"That's where the personal touch comes in," replied Miss Horrocks, as she took off her spotless white gloves and laid them aside in company with her muff, purse and stole. The girl was charmingly dressed: her dark hair arranged in a style beloved of the French *demi-mondaine* and accepted by virtuous young English ladies as quite the correct Paris fashion.

"How do you take your tea, Madame—strong? No? Shall I put in three spoonfuls? It has its advantages and its drawbacks like other things in this world," she continued. "I've known a business go to nothing when the first saleswoman left. Set up just on the other side of the street and took most of the *clientèle* over with her."

"How horrid of her," said Elizabeth.

"Well, I suppose it was," allowed Miss Horrocks. "But you've got to look after yourself in business. Not that I should like to have set up in the very same street," she added virtuously.

"I hate to hear of women doing things like that," mourned Elizabeth. "If they don't stand up for each other and behave honourably how will they ever improve their position?"

Ethel opened her fine eyes.

"Most girls are a bit cattish as far as I see, and I don't know that the men are much better. They're all up against each other when the time comes.

People have got to live and it's not always so easy. It's different for those who don't have to think of money, perhaps. Sugar, Madame?" She handed Elizabeth her tea. "And yet I don't know," she went on, "I see plenty of rich ladies and, if you'll excuse me saying so, I don't find that they're much different. Why, a lady came the other day and ordered a blouse. She chose from the model. That was a blue *crêpe de chine* with little lace kiltings. Sweet it was. Well, when it was sent home back she brought it. Didn't like the lace. Well, of course, we showed her the model, but she just said she didn't care and wouldn't wear it like that. What could we do? Not even firms like Adolphe's can afford to offend customers, so we had to make her another and there we are at the end of the season with a special on our hands. Now I don't call that playing fair, do you, Madame?"

"No, certainly not," said Elizabeth, "but I am sure that people don't realise how unfair they are. I expect it never occurred to that woman that you wouldn't sell the blouse to somebody else."

"P'raps so," admitted Ethel, "but I don't call it acting like a lady all the same. Then the other day a customer came and ordered an evening dress. She kept a saleswoman and a model a good hour. Then she decided she'd have the dress in purple. She wrote four days later to say she'd changed her mind. Madame wrote and said she was sorry, but the material was cut out. Well, she came and made such a fuss—declared that she had said she must see

the satin in the piece and that if they'd cut it out it was their own fault. She hadn't said any such words. Miss Enriquez said so, and the model said so, and as it happened I was looking over some sketches close by and I heard it all going on. There we are with that purple satin cut, and you may be sure the next customer that asks for a purple satin will want a red purple just because we'd like to use up that blue purple!"

The door opened and Mrs. Frogmore's head appeared.

"Madermerselle Margot's brought you some flowers. I told her as the doctor said——"

"Ask her to come in," interrupted Elizabeth. "Margot," she called, "come in—come in."

Margot entered, carrying a bunch of lilies of the valley.

"You dear," said Elizabeth, "you are so good to me. Sit down and have some tea. I don't think you have ever met Miss Horrocks, but I've told you all about her. We were just discussing women and their sense of honour. I'm afraid Miss Horrocks doesn't think it exists."

"Oh, I don't say that," reproved Ethel. "I've met with ladies who were real ladies. And ladies like that I'd be ashamed not to treat like ladies. There was one last week. I serve her regularly—I always think it's a nice day when that customer comes. She wanted a velvet model copied in plush. I told her it would be heavy, but she would have it. Well, it was heavy! The plush seemed to take all the

shape out of it, if you know what I mean (Margot nodded a quick professional comprehension), and of course when she saw it she didn't like it. Well, there it was, and many ladies would have thrown it back on your hands. I've been in business ten years, and if there's a mistake you find it's never the customer who has made it—oh no. But my lady's not like that. 'You were quite right,' she said to me, 'I wish I'd had the sense to take your advice. Never mind, I shall know better another time. I must have it made in velvet. Don't let it be more expensive than you can help, now I have to buy the two.' Well, you see you'll do things for a customer like that. I had that plush re-made with a different crown and didn't charge her for the making. So there she was, with two hats as nice as you could want. I don't say that there aren't tricks in every trade, but if customers would play more fair with you you'd play more fair with them."

"But," Elizabeth objected, "I don't think you make sufficient allowance for the customer's point of view. Women who have never been behind the scenes in a shop do not realise that time is money, and, as I said before, they always believe that you can sell the thing they return to some one else. You must remember, too, that they look at the matter from one point of view; we look at it from the other."

"Before I went into trade I often used to think a thing so expensive. 'Three and a half guineas! Just for three yards of satin and some lace!' But

I did not take into account that the seller of that satin and lace had to pay rent and wages and heaven knows what other expenses, and must make a profit too. I wasn't sillier than most women, I suppose, but it didn't occur to me. If your time never has been worth anything and you have always spent money which you have not earned, how can you understand?"

"The truth is," said Margot, "that every one, man and woman, should be obliged to earn his living, and to earn it hardy, for at least six months of his existence. It should be as much a part of his education as learning to read and to write, for most of the trouble in life is due to the fact that one-half of the world does not know how the other half lives. You take a very different view of life even after experiences such as mine, and of course I have been unusually fortunate in many ways. I do agree with you that people are often inconsiderate, even dishonourable from ignorance. But, on the other hand, I think Miss Horrocks is quite right when she says that we should play fair with our customers if they would play fair with us. I did not tell you of this last week when you were ill, but you know Mrs. Lorri-son?" Margot's eyes shone and her usually pale face was suffused with colour. "I feel ill with suppressed temper when I think about it," she cried, springing to her feet.

"Oh dear," implored Elizabeth, "let me know the worst."

Margot laughed and sat down again.

"She came in and fell in love with that new muff and stole—you remember, the one in velvet and fur with the tiny flowers. I don't believe anyone else has it in London, and you know what we had to pay for the model. She said she must have it on approval to try with her dress, so I let her take it in the car. She kept it three days, and then—it came back by parcel post. Inside the box was a letter.

'TO MISS TIVERTON.

'Will you take the pattern of this stole and muff and copy it for me immediately. Return the pattern in its box to the address on the label. Of course I do not wish Madame Delaine to know you have seen it.

'L. F. LORRISON.'

"Oh!" cried Elizabeth.

"There, you see!" ejaculated Miss Horrocks.

"Yes," said Margot. "And that woman has thousands a year."

"What can we do?" queried Madame.

"That's just the maddening part of it," admitted Margot; "we can't do anything."

"What would you do, Miss Horrocks?"

"I don't see that you can do a thing," allowed that young lady. "You don't want to get that Miss Tiverton, whoever she is, into a row. Quite likely she sent you that letter on purpose, being in trade herself. You don't want to have a row with your customer either. You just charge her up well

for anything else she has from you and don't let her have any more approvals." Her manner changed. "I am so sorry, madam, you know I would send it for you if I could, but indeed we've been obliged to make this rule," she drawled in her softest accents.

"Cat!" she ended fiercely and suddenly.

Elizabeth lay back on her sofa. All the petty dishonesties and dishonours of the world seemed to gather in a dark mist, blotting out the life spiritual. Her tired brain dealt with her thoughts and distorted them.

She saw nothing but greed for money; desire for sumptuous raiment wherewith to allure the eyes of men, to excite envy in the hearts of women; callous indifference on the part of those who bought for those who sold; unwholesome admiration for the women who could buy extorted from those who could only work. An unending procession of women and girls, rich and poor, trailed past, striving to grasp the husks of the fruit of life while the fruit lay rotting by the way.

Dishonours, Dishonesties. The fog created by them grew more dense, more dark, smirching all it touched, leaving in its wake new centres of pollution.

With a start, Elizabeth opened her eyes and drew herself up on her cushions. The two girls were deep in discussion of the rival merits of two preparations used in blocking hat shapes.

"It's all very well," said Ethel, "but the whole-

sale have you there. You can block your own velvets and dark materials, but when it comes to light satins and silks, where are you? We make velvets and plushes that no customer would know from the best blocked Paris shapes. They think they come from Paris and they pay Paris prices for them!"

She laughed, stood up and began making her adieux.

"Well, I do hope you'll soon be yourself again, Madame Delaine. I have enjoyed seeing you to-day, and so pleased to meet your young lady too;" she beamed at Margot. "We shall be slack now till the sale comes on, so if I get the chance I'll call in at the business and ask how you are."

The door shut. Elizabeth and Margot sat silent for a few moments. They heard the noise of the descending lift.

"She's a good girl," Elizabeth cried, "kind too when it's not a matter of business; but, oh, Margot, she makes me miserable. It would be better to have an ideal and to sin against it than never to know that the ideal exists."

Margot gazed into the fire. "I wonder if it is possible to have two moral codes," she said at length. "I sometimes think that I have. One for my work, one for my private life. I don't believe I could ever lie for myself, but I can romance about a hat without any hurt to my conscience. It doesn't seem the same—I don't mean to say that I would do a really dishonest thing, but I agree with the Japanese, who

laugh at the idea of chivalry in trade. In business I get the better of you or you get the better of me Is not that so?"

"I suppose it is," said Elizabeth wearily. "But, oh, how I wish it was not. I want to be honest, to be just, to be generous——"

"But indeed, Madame, I do not think you could find a more honestly conducted shop than Delaine's," remonstrated Margot. "If you only knew the tricks that are practised in many businesses—if we err at all, we err on the side of generosity to workers and clients alike."

"It is a hateful world. If it were not for Nina I should like to be dead," sobbed Elizabeth. The facile tears of nervous exhaustion streamed down her cheeks.

Safely tucked up in bed, fed with chicken and champagne administered by Margot's kind, capable hands, Madame Delaine smiled on life again, if somewhat feebly.

"Margot," she said, "I want to have a Christmas party. I have been thinking about it while I have been ill. All the girls, and Bizet and Madame Green must come, and our beloved 'Enery. I shall ask Sir James and my brother-in-law too. He'll be horribly shy, poor dear, but they will all like him. We'll begin at eight—don't you think so? And have supper and games. You think they will care for it?"

"Oh, what fun!" cried Margot. "The girls will

love it. Will you send invitations—real invitations? I believe they would like that best.”

“Yes,” nodded Elizabeth, “and it must be in the beginning of Christmas week—I shan’t be up to it before, and later I am going to Roydon.”

Mrs. Frogmore’s head appeared. Her one eye gazed severely at Margot.

“Seeing that Nana’s not here, I take it upon myself, Madermerselle, to repeat the doctor’s words. His words to me was: “Plenty of nourishment—no fatigue . . . nor visitors.”

“Good night,” laughed Margot. “I fly.”

CHAPTER XIII

BY slow degrees Elizabeth recovered and resumed the usual tenor of her days. At the shop the slack season had set in with a more than ordinary dearth of orders.

Margot, who hated these dull periods, roamed about trying to find employment for the bored and weary staff. Sale notices were being addressed by Doris and Miss Fort; in the dress-rooms, models were renovated and would be offered at reduced prices during the sale. The work-girls on three-quarter time took unwanted holidays in turn, and Elizabeth, to provide as much work as possible, ordered dresses for herself and Nina, and prevailed upon Mary to buy some new garments in readiness for the Christmas festivities at Roydon.

"I buy more clothes than I need, so that I may supply my own shop with orders," complained Elizabeth to her sister.

"And you make me do the same," grumbled Mary.

Elizabeth laughed. "We are like the young couples who married on nothing and lived by taking in each other's washing. I expect Meriel wants

a dress ; I never knew her when she didn't. I must write and tell her to buy one now."

Mary said good-bye to her sister, who descended to the office. Miss Emmett had been granted an afternoon off for her Christmas shopping, and Margot was sitting by the gas stove making crochet lace. Madame drew up a chair, opened her work-bag, and began to sew at a boudoir cap destined to be a Christmas present for Meriel.

"Have you had any acceptances for the party?" queried Margot. "The invitation cards were a great success; but there now seems to be some doubt as to the correct procedure on the part of the guests."

Madame smiled. "I have heard from Doris and Miss Fort, also 'Enery. 'Enery's letter is a gem."

She took her bag from the table, produced the epistle and handed it to Margot.

The paper upon which it was written had evidently been provided by one of 'Enery's numerous elder sisters. It was mauve in tone with a gilt edge and smelled strongly of musk.

"DEAR MADAME DELAINE," wrote 'Enery in his best hand,

"I think it is very kind of you to ask me to a party. I hope you are quite recovered in your health.

"From yours truly,

"HENRY HERMIT.

"P.S.—I hope I shall enjoy myself very much."

"Dear little lamb," laughed Elizabeth, "I do indeed hope that he will enjoy himself very much. Madame Green and Miss Emmett have accepted verbally."

"The others will write later, I expect, when they have finally decided upon the proper method," Margot suggested.

And so it was: all the notes arrived by the same post, worded precisely alike. Jessie alone maintained silence.

"I wonder why Jessie does not want to come," Madame Delaine remarked to Margot a few days later. "I suppose she would have written or said something if she meant to accept. I own I feel a little hurt, because we really have done our best for that girl."

"How odd!" said Margot. "It is not like Jessie—she has such a nice affectionate nature."

Later in the day Margot came into the office. "I have unravelled the mystery," she remarked.

"What mystery?" queried Madame Delaine, who at that moment was trying to decide if the orders obtained from advertisements paid for the outlay.

"About Jessie. I asked Madame Green, and she asked Miss Hever, who is a great friend of Jessie's. Miss Hever says the real truth is that Jessie has not a party dress. The poor child doesn't know what to do; she thinks if she tells you the reason it will look like asking for a dress, and she doesn't know what excuse to make. Miss Hever says that she or one of the other girls would lend Jessie

something that would do, but she doesn't like them to know she only has her working things, and Miss Hever's so tall and fat, Jessie would just shake about in her clothes. But it will be all right now, Madame, I can manage it. I often talk to Jessie about her mother and her circumstances, and she won't mind if I give her a dress. I have one that I don't want. It can be smartened up easily."

"You kind girl—are you sure you don't really want it?"

"No," said Margot, "I really don't. I should have given it away to some one else if not to Jessie. By the by, what are you going to wear at the party?"

"I was wondering," admitted Madame. "I don't suppose any of the girls will wear real evening frocks?"

"Oh no," smiled Margot. "I know just what they are going to wear. I don't believe they have talked of anything else since the invitations arrived. But I think what will really please them is that you should put on your very best gown and all your diamonds."

"I will," said Elizabeth, "even unto my tiara and the necklace which Meriel always lends me for state occasions, if you think that is the right thing to do."

"I'm sure of it. This party is a great event, you know. I will clothe myself in my best frock too—it's a d'Oeillet—one of the few remains of my prosperity—and, like a true d'Oeillet, it will look

well until the day of its death. Our Emmett has bought herself a new 'costume'—pale blue ninon—modestly scooped out round the neck, with a bunch of moss rosebuds tucked into the belt. She's going to come home with me and dress at the studio so that I can bring her in my taxi."

"What about the others?" asked Madame.

"Oh, the girls who live near can go home, and those who have long journeys can bring their things and dress here."

"Capital! Margot, I really begin to be horribly nervous about the party. Suppose they should not enjoy it after all—it would be too tragic. I shall arrange to have supper as soon as they arrive, and then progressive games for a first, a second, a third, and a booby prize. Then we will dance and have other gambols, and end up with sandwiches and cakes and fruit before they go. Sir James says I am to buy a box of chocolates for each guest, and he's sending me a turkey and two brace of pheasants and lots of flowers from Priorshirst. He's quite the kindest soul I ever knew."

"He ought to be put in a glass case and preserved as an example to all men," Margot opined.

"Madame Green is quite excited at the idea of seeing him again, and Bizet too. As for the girls, somebody asks me something about the party every other moment. Minnie came down yesterday with a message. Then she grew very red. 'What is it, Minnie?' I demanded. 'Well, mademoiselle, if you don't mind my asking, we should like to know what

we shall do at the party. You see, we have not been to a party at a lady's house before and we don't quite know.' I suggested that probably they would be ushered into a room to take off their hats and jackets and then shown into the drawing-room, and that they would be asked their names by the servant who announced them. 'Should I say Miss Noble or Minnie? Madame always calls me Minnie.' 'Miss Noble.' And then Madame will say, 'How do you do?' 'Ought we to shake hands with her, Mademoiselle?' (Are you going to shake hands with them, Madame?) I thought you would, so I said 'Yes.' Then they would sit down and talk, and then I thought there would be supper and games. 'Shall we bring our music?' was the next question. (Are they to bring their music, Madame?) Jessie plays and so does Miss Fort, and Miss Hever sings. One of the little girls recites, and Nellie is a capital step-dancer. I don't know what 'Eney's parlour tricks may be, but Golly's young man gave her a piano-harp some time ago and she's practising madly to be in time for the fray!"

"Good heavens!" cried Madame Delaine. "This is to be a party indeed."

That evening Margot was writing a letter in the office when a familiar knock was heard and 'Eney's head appeared.

"Miss," he queried.

"Yes, 'Eney? Come in."

'Eney entered, and shut the door carefully.

"Can I ask you somethin', miss?"

"Certainly, 'Energ."

"I've asked me mother and me sisters, and I thought as I'd better ask you. I've two suits as I could wear at the party. One's a sort of brown, miss, and one's a grey. Which d'you think I'd better wear, miss?"

'Energ's green eyes were fixed anxiously upon mademoiselle, who gave to the matter the deep consideration it deserved.

"I suppose they are both made alike?"

"Yes, miss."

"Which is the newest?"

"I couldn't rightly say, miss. *I've* had the brown one the longest."

"Ah," pondered Margot. "Well, 'Energ, I almost think I should wear the grey. It seems more suitable for the evening."

'Energ sighed with relief. "An' me tie, miss?"

"Oh I should wear your blue tie," said Margot.

"Yes, miss. An' me mother says as she'll see as I've a clean 'an'kerchief and me sister Agnes is goin' to buy me a button-hole."

"I think you will look very well, 'Energ. I shall feel very proud of you."

'Energ beamed. "Is there any other gentlemen to be there, miss?"

"Yes," answered Mademoiselle gravely. "Sir James Hirst and Lord Roydon."

A few moments later Margot passed the kitchen.

'Enery was addressing an audience composed of Mrs. Morton and some of the younger girls, who in hats and jackets had paused on their way out.

"It strikes me," said 'Enery, "that me an' those two gents 'll have the time of *our* lives!"

It was the evening of the party. Nina, flounced and beribboned, sat in the drawing-room and on a chair opposite to her sat Monk. With her usual disregard for the conventions, Nina had attired him in a red flannel petticoat and a golfing jersey. A wreath of roses was pinned upon his brow. The double doors between drawing and dining-room had been thrown open, and Nina's nursery converted into a temporary dining-room. By using trestle tables and benches it was just possible to squeeze in the twenty-six guests.

After a final tour of inspection the hostess entered the drawing-room. She was clad in a blue satin gown and tiara'd and necklaced with diamonds. Nina looked at her critically but expressed no opinion. A bell rang.

Elizabeth felt a qualm of nervousness. The door opened and Lord Roydon and Mr. Fitzherne were announced.

"You weren't asked," objected Nina promptly and severely to the latter.

"No," said Master Bob, "but I came, and I'm going to stay, so you shut up, you young shaver."

"But he can't stay, can he, mum?" demanded Nina. "There won't be anywhere for him to sit at supper."

"Doesn't matter, does it, Bet?" queried Lord Roydon. "He came up from school unexpectedly—some bother about drains—and he wanted to come, so I brought him along."

"I'm delighted to have him," cried Elizabeth, who loved her nephew fondly. "We'll manage somehow."

The bell rang again. Mademoiselle Margot and Miss Emmett were announced; they were quickly followed by Sir James, Madame Green, and Mademoiselle Bizet. Polite conversation ensued. This was interrupted by the simultaneous arrival of Miss Briggs, Miss Hever, Jessie, Emmie and one or two of the older girls. Another pause and Doris and Miss Fort made a blushing appearance. The bell rang again and there was a sound of many footsteps and much whispering. Then silence.

The door opened and 'Enery in all the glory of the grey suit, blue tie, button-hole of stephanotis and the clean pocket-handkerchief burst upon the assembly.

His orange hair stood up stiffly, his freckled crimson countenance shone.

"'Evenin', miss," he observed. "I brought all the young girls from the shop along o' me. They'll be in in a minit, miss." "'Evenin', sir;" he caught sight of Sir James and smiled widely. "'Evenin', miss," and came to anchor beside Margot.

The "young girls" made their appearance in a

shy muslin and ribbon clad group. Elizabeth surveyed her guests. Her brother-in-law stood with his back to the fire endeavouring to hold converse with Miss Emmett, who in modest blue ninon sat primly holding a small swansdown fan. Sir James, perched on a small stool, devoted himself to Madame Green and the Bizet, the former dignified in black satin, lace and jet, the latter most *chic* in black and white, with an emerald green velvet tied through her flaming locks. Margot, with her warm ivory skin and soft dark eyes, looked lovely in white satin. Miss Briggs, her black Golliwog coiffure copiously adorned by glittering paste-bordered combs, sat, her hand with its engagement ring carefully displayed upon her velveteen lap.

In Margot's discarded frock of white washing silk, with a chiffon fichu, her delicate oval face flushed with excitement, and her brown curls set off by a pale blue ribbon, Jessie might have been a Lely portrait come to life.

Nina had now taken possession of 'Eney, and Bob had his eye upon the large and fresh coloured Miss Hever, who wore what she termed a "dressy" blouse and a black satin skirt. Supper was announced and after some difficulty the party was seated, much squeezed together but in strict precedence. Lord Roydon, at the foot of the table, did his duty nobly if somewhat heavily.

The guests at first ate sparingly and with elegance, and conversation dragged, but after some of the elder ladies had indulged in champagne cup more

gaiet
'Ene
Sir J
sque
and
pung
'E
gave
every
His
the s
waitr
To
'Ener
"Y
observ
this c
he add
By
party
his sh
Green
and h
subjec
Ciga
Miss I
compa
"I
Bob.
Eliza
one toc

gaiety prevailed. All the young girls, together with 'Enery, were "teetotal" and partook of lemonade. Sir James soon had his end of the table in delighted squeals and giggles, ably backed up by Bob Fitzherne and the blooming Miss Hever, who developed a pungent wit.

'Enery, happily seated between Margot and Nina, gave his mind to the business on hand and passed everything to everybody with the greatest assiduity. His efforts were greatly appreciated, as, owing to the small size of the room, it was impossible for the waitresses to do their work efficiently.

Towards the close of the feast Elizabeth found 'Enery's green eyes fixed upon her.

"You don't seem to be eatin' much, miss," he observed anxiously. "You might fancy a bit of this cream dish, miss. I don't suppose as it'll keep," he added encouragingly.

By the cracker and preserved fruit stage the party was hilarious: even Lord Roydon had forgotten his shyness and was deep in converse with Madame Green who, it appeared, was country born and bred and had much to say about cottage building, a subject dear to the heart of his lordship.

Cigarettes were produced, and after much giggling Miss Briggs was induced to take one, being kept in company by Margot and Mademoiselle Bizet.

"I say, father, can I have one?" demanded Bob.

Elizabeth watched 'Enery's face. "Give 'Enery one too," she whispered.

"Here 'Enery," called Bob, chucking a cigarette across the table.

'Enery's freckled countenance was a study. He looked at the cigarette, he put it in his mouth and took it out again.

"Father promised me five shillin' if I didn't smoke none till I was fifteen," he said meditatively.

"Jolly good idea," responded the other lad, promptly extinguishing his own cigarette in his finger bowl. "I say, father, what'll you give me if I don't smoke till I'm fifteen?"

Elizabeth could have kissed him. Supper being over, the guests were at length extracted and a move made to the drawing-room.

"Miss Hever, you sing, do you not?" asked Elizabeth.

But Miss Hever regretted deeply that she could not sing.

"That young gentleman has made me laugh until I ache," she explained. "I couldn't sing to save my life, Madame."

"I hear that you are a great performer on the piano harp, Miss Briggs, I do hope you will play for us."

But the piano harp had broken a string that very day and "Mr. Binden—my young gentleman—was not able to get off in time to have it mended."

Miss Fort had a sore throat, and the younger young ladies did not like to take it upon themselves to perform without encouragement from the older young ladies.

"Girls is like that," confided 'Enery to Madame. "Me sisters is just the same. Dyin' to all the time an' sorry when it's too late."

So progressive games were embarked upon and proved a most popular entertainment. At spillikins Lord Roydon showed genius, while at threading needles and sewing on buttons Sir James made an admirable second to the modest Emmett. Madame Green's skill in word-making was voted surprising, and Jessie could think of more girls' names beginning with "D" than any other player had ever heard of. The competitors moved from table to table, every one talked to every one else and the fun became fast and furious.

The party then danced the lancers to the strains of the pianola. Blind man's buff and the sheet and feather game excited it to almost hysterical gaiety.

"You won't forget that they all have to go home by train or omnibus, and some of them live so very far away," whispered Margot to Elizabeth, glancing at the clock.

So the prizes were presented and the boxes of chocolates distributed and Elizabeth led the way to the supper room.

Here cakes and sandwiches, cup and lemonade were set out. The girls regaled themselves and talked joyously, then less joyously, at last spasmodically and with veiled anxiety.

Elizabeth was in despair. She had forgotten 'Enery.

"Miss," he whispered, nudging Margot furtively,

"the young ladies is a waiting for you to make the move."

With lightning-like rapidity Margot made her adieux, followed by her flock. The situation was saved.

pe
co
ro
ot

ha

m
th

ar
N
bc

dc

fu
ag

to

CHAPTER XIV

THE porter blew shrilly upon the cab whistle and Nina fidgeted on the doorstep. She carried Monk who was still in his red petticoat and jersey but further protected from the cold by a woollen muff and tie. The wreath of roses was replaced by a velvet toque. In her other hand she held Monk's travelling trunk.

"We shall be late, I know we shall. Oh, do blow harder, Elkins," entreated the little girl.

Elizabeth was saying good-bye to Mrs. Frogmore, who cut short all her mistress's regrets for the lonely Christmas in store.

"No need to trouble about me, ma'am," she announced with her accustomed harshness. "Miss Nina, stop your dancing do, it's enough to maze a body."

"The green one's coming," shrieked Nina. "Oh do be quick, mum. Come on, Nana."

A journey always excited Nina to frenzy: she fussed until safely seated in the train and fussed again until safely out of it.

Fortunately for her mother's nerves, the journey to Roydon was not long, but Elizabeth wondered,

as she had often wondered before, how Nana packed and arranged and directed porters, patiently enduring Nina's mosquito-like buzzing meanwhile.

When the travellers reached the little station dusk had almost fallen. For once the weather was seasonable, as the station-master, welcoming Mrs. Earl, did not fail to observe. There was a coating of crisp, frozen snow on the platform, and long, broken lines of crimson and sulphur-yellow lay across the western sky. The old-fashioned oil lamps at the entrance of the little station yard twinkled faintly, outdone by the flare of light from the acetylene motor lamps.

The chauffeur, once coachman and an old family servant, welcomed Mrs. Earl and little Miss, and the hobbling old porter had a kindly word and Christmas greeting for the ladies.

Meriel and Mary were awaiting the arrivals in the large hall and made much of Elizabeth, while Nina and Nana were conducted to the children's quarters by Beth and Lancelot, who hungered for a belated tea. Lord Roydon, Bob, Sir James and Captain Hare would be in soon, they had been shooting over at Hinks's Corner and had a long drive home. Hoddy and Doddy were expected by a later train.

"And Mrs. Hare of course you know, Bet."

Greetings over, her fur coat thrown off, Elizabeth lay back in her luxurious chair, her feet stretched out to the huge, wood fire which crackled frostily.

She thought of tea in the shop drunk out of cheap cups and saucers, the tea-pot with a mended spout, the milk-jug lacking a handle : Mrs. Morton had anything but a fairy-like hand when washing up.

The beautiful, old oak-panelled hall with its lacquer cabinets and screens and great banks of foliage plants looked its loveliest, lit partly by the glowing logs, partly by shaded lamps held by painted and gilded carved wood figures. Heavy scented jonquils and the more delicate Roman hyacinths in great brass *jardinières* gleamed whitely against hangings of dull crimson and purple. Tea tables covered with lace edged linen were set before the fire with their wonted array of old silver and china and lavish choice of scones, sandwiches and cakes.

Meriel, plump and lovely in her white tea frock bordered with fur, her fair head thrown into relief by the deep faded crimson and purple brocade of her high-backed Italian chair, munched a sandwich appreciatively. Mrs. Hare, small and dark, picturesquely clad in green velvet, crouched upon a great foot-stool holding her delicate little hands to the blazing logs.

Familiar as was the scene, it struck Elizabeth afresh to-night. She looked at her sister, her beauty already a little marred and coarsened ; at Mrs. Hare, fragile, exquisite, but with a dreariness beneath her pretty tricks of manner. Were they the happier for the backgrounds against which they played their parts ?

Mary bent nearer to the table and the light fell

full on her kindly face made beautiful by the soul within. The squalors of the Mile End Road had done for her what the beauties of Roydon could never do for Meriel.

"A penny for your thoughts, Bet?" said she.

"I was thinking," admitted Elizabeth, "if beautiful surroundings should make beautiful natures. No, that is not quite what I mean——"

"What you were really thinking," interrupted Meriel, who occasionally woke up and showed an uncanny knowledge of the contents of other people's minds, "was, why is Mary of the Mile End Road a saint and Meriel just a happy human toad. 'Give over, Miss Bet' as Nana used to say and let that brain of yours have a rest. We're all very well as we are, my dear. The worst of it," she added, "is we don't stay as we are. I've put on four pounds this autumn."

She took another sandwich and ate it with regretful relish.

"And I," wailed Mrs. Hare, "can't get fat. How unfair life is!"

The conversation was ended by the simultaneous arrival of the shooters and of the two young men, of whom Meriel had spoken as Hoddy and Doddy. Horace and Denver Fitzherne, second cousins of Lord Roydon, and in appearance caricatures of that sallow, red-headed nobleman, were much at home at Roydon, and there, as elsewhere in their world, were seldom referred to otherwise than as Hoddy and Doddy.

Most people imagined them to be twins, but as a matter of fact Hoddy was thirty-four and Doddy thirty. They adored each other and lived together in a charming, little Elizabethan house, did many kindly deeds, played bridge well and tennis fairly, and were the mainstay and prop of every hostess within motoring distance.

That evening at dinner Meriel disclosed her programme.

"To-morrow," she observed with a sigh, "we are all to dine with the duchess."

The news was met with a chorus of reproach. On the part of Mrs. Hare the reproach was not sincere. She was a person who liked dining with duchesses—however dull.

"I think it's absolutely mean of you, Merry," complained Elizabeth. "I came here to enjoy myself. I don't so much mind Antonia—but I cannot do with her dinners."

"Who is staying there, Meriel?" asked Hoddy. "Any bits of brightness?"

"Can you imagine any bits of brightness staying at the castle?" queried his hostess. "The duke motored over a few days ago. He said Lord Heuington was coming and Lady Agatha Moore and a parson chap."

"I like Lady Janet," said Doddy, "and Lady Juliet too. Nice girls."

"They are," agreed Elizabeth, "very nice girls. But not enlivening."

"Oh well," said Doddy, and let it go at that.

"I wonder how the twins would have turned out if they had been rescued in their youth," suggested Sir James.

"Oh, nice little dears like all the rest," said Meriel. "The duke is so funny about his family. 'Shocking dull girls,' he always says, 'shocking dull girls. Can't see why they should be, my dear,' and then he winks a wicked old eye. 'Look at Heuington, all painted up very nice and fine. Mother's eyes, father's nose. Quite right and proper. But what's inside? Lord! if I'd had that boy's chances, my dear' . . ."

Every one laughed at Meriel's exact rendering of the old man's voice and manner.

"But it does seem odd that Heuington and the girls should be such ninnies, for Antonia's no fool or the duke either," said Lord Roydon.

"If I were a beauty like Antonia and had provided the twins with a fine figure of a man for a father, I should be annoyed when they insisted on looking like two little Sunday-school teachers," said Sir James. "Then Antonia's an oppressor, and like all oppressors hates the oppressed. If the twins would only marry and see mamma twice a year she'd be quite fond of them."

"The duchess will be far fonder of her grandchildren than she ever was of her own children," remarked Meriel sagely.

"And when we have recovered from this feast, what waits?" asked Doddy.

"Christmas Day—pudding and pie—dinner for

the
Da
the
far
sev
cor
the
(
pay
Aft
on
me
tea
'
cor
roa
cle
cop
A
stif
his
and
gri
Jar
I
ma
I
tho
citi
A
ing

the children and a tree. If you survive that, Boxing Day follows, with a school treat and another tree and the servants' ball, and the day after that there is the fancy dress dance as you know. It begins at seven and everything over twelve years of age is coming. To-night we shall do nothing—so make the most of your idleness," said Meriel.

On the morrow Elizabeth had several visits to pay, and little gifts to take old friends in the village. After lunch, therefore, she and Sir James started off on foot. It had been arranged that a car should meet them at Miss Tuckett's and convey them to tea with Mrs. Steppings.

They went out through the garden across a corner of the park and so into the wide tree-bordered road leading to the village. The trees stood out clearly against the grey sky, and the sun hung copper-red in the west.

All the little mud ridges in the road had frozen stiff under a thin layer of snow. A shepherd with his dog touched his hat and prophesied hard frost, and his golden-eyed collie showed its teeth in a little grin of welcome and snuggled its head into Sir James's outstretched hand.

In a field to the right a labourer was carting mangold-wurzels. The air was still and clear.

It seemed to Elizabeth a peaceful world, and she thought with distaste of the tumult and noise of cities.

After leaving her parcels at one or two houses, giving and receiving Christmas wishes, the companions

arrived at Miss Tuckett's. That brisk little personage was delighted to see Elizabeth and bid her and the gentleman take a seat in the parlour. She'd but just sent Johnny Hodkiss off with the dresses the Miss Tooneys were to wear at her ladyship's Fancy Dress, and was dying for a cup of tea if Miss Elizabeth—there now—Mrs. Earl I should say—and the gentleman would accept a cup.

She opened a cupboard and took out precious Crown Derby china.

"These belonged to my grandmother and I don't know when's the day that I can't remember them, Mrs. Earl."

An unseen Ethel was called up to make haste with the tea—"the kettle's on the boil," and Miss Tuckett prepared to enjoy polite conversation, meanwhile she covered a japanned tray with a white netted cloth and arranged the china upon it. Ethel, a small girl with rabbit-like front teeth and two pig-tails, appearing with tea, milk, bread and butter, and a plate of mixed biscuits, the feast began.

Miss Tuckett clicked somewhat less than on the occasion of Elizabeth's last visit. As no mention of the new plate was made, Elizabeth feared to refer to it as being possibly a subject improper in "mixed company."

The neighbourhood it seemed was thrilled with excitement at the idea of the fancy dress party. The Miss Tooneys would be present arrayed as Pierrettes.

It's cheap and it's "chick," if you know what I

mean
had
lady
suit
satin
died.
Si
hasti
"I
You
cher
busin
in, w
and a
surpr
"A
end?
"V
I did
your
'wha
a bla
husbe
part,
we w
'appy
and b
stars
young
"A
wear f

mean, Mrs. Earl. Then Mrs. Steppings—we have had a difficulty with her. Being so tall and a vicar's lady too, it didn't seem there was much as would suit her, especial as we had to bring in the black satin she had the year the Rev. Steppings' mother died."

Sir James spluttered over his tea and coughed hastily.

"I do hope as the gentleman hasn't caught cold. You should try a cure as Mr. Brown—he as is chemist in Boredon, not our Mr. Brown, his business being undertaker with insurances thrown in, which aren't much to depend on with a family and all. You take it every three hours, sir, and it's surprising how you shake it off."

"And what did Mrs. Steppings choose in the end?" prompted Elizabeth.

"Well, Mrs. Earl, though I say it as should not, I did have an 'appy idea. 'Seeing that there's your figure and the black satin to consider,' I says, 'what about "Night"?' And it appeared she had a black and silver scarf put away as her sister's husband had sent from India, or some such foreign part, so with a yard or two of black chiffong there we were. And at the last Master 'Arold had an 'appy idea too, and he cut out what he call a stencil and bought some silver paint and made a border of stars as natural as possible. There's nothing that young gentleman wouldn't do for his mar."

"And Mrs. Dawes—what is she going to wear?"

Miss Tuckett clicked with emotion and her expression became almost reverential.

"If I'd never had a success before, I do confidentially declare, Miss Elizabeth, as I've made a success of Mrs. Dawes. 'No expense shall be spared, Miss Tuckett' says she, and with her fair hair it seemed right as she should appear as 'Ondine.' I don't say as I quite know who the lady was, but Mrs. Dawes wrote to one of the ladies' papers and had a picture made all special for her. And a sweet, pretty picture it was. She sent to London for satin at seven shillings and eleven pence double width, and a water lily and dewdrops and all. The overskirt's of ninong, all edged with crystal beads—green stockings and shoes too—a water lily in the 'air."

Elizabeth enjoyed a mental vision of the magenta-complexioned Mrs. Dawes, her fine figure tightly imprisoned in the very latest "Slenderine Corset," her canary-coloured locks disposed over her ample middle-aged shoulders . . .

Miss Tuckett had started again.

"And Mrs. Mullins—you remember her as was Mrs. Knowles and married again, Miss Elizabeth—well, poor soul, she cried, the nurse told me. But with the twins but a fortnight old it wasn't to be thought of. And so Mr. Mullins wouldn't go neither, which in a gentleman as looks so young is more nice feeling than you might expect. Young Mr. Knowles of course 'e's going, and a time I had with 'im. An Albanian or some such Turk 'e is and some of the costume lent by another young gentleman.

But he come to me for the petticoats—gores and gores and gores, as you may imagine—him being proud of his figure and wanting twenty-four yards round the hem. We do live in times when there's young gentlemen wanting petticoats and them suffragettes that despises them."

The noise of the motor drawing up in front of the door checked Miss Tuckett's flow of eloquence, and good-byes were said.

"Not as it's more than *au revoir* so to speak, as I shall be obliging her ladyship in the cloak-room for the Fancy Dress and in charge of my Sunday class at the tree," said Miss Tuckett with dignity.

Sir James and Elizabeth leant back in the motor and laughed.

"It's a gay world, isn't it, Eliza?" said he, taking her hand and tucking it under his arm.

"I wonder what Miss Tuckett would say to that," asked Elizabeth.

If Mrs. Earl had been the rabbit-toothed Ethel she would have known.

"It's not for me to gossip and goodness' knows it's a thing I seldom do," remarked the dressmaker to her pig-tailed assistant as she washed and wiped the Crown Derby, "but you mark my words, Ethel, something'll come of that."

At Mrs. Steppings there was a new house-parlourmaid, so petrified with alarm at the sight of a motor and a strange gentleman and lady that, forgetful of all instruction, she fled to her mistress, leaving the guests upon the door-mat.

Returning, much chastened, she ushered them into the drawing-room where Mrs. Steppings, ignoring these slight unconventionalities, regaled them with more tea.

Mr. Steppings and dear Harold were out, she grieved to say, but perhaps Sir James would try and put up with feminine society.

In the vicarage drawing-room as in the dress-maker's parlour, the fancy dress dance was the topic of conversation.

"Of course my husband couldn't go in costume. In his position he fears it would not do, but he quite looks forward to being present and viewing the gay scene. Harold has been so fortunate, his friend Robert Bindloss—he came with us to your sister's garden party, Mrs. Earl—has lent him a most beautiful dress. He's to be a Knight Templar. His father thinks it so *nice*."

Sir James coughed again. He was obliged to admit to a slight cold in the throat—nothing of any consequence.

"Ah, you should not ignore these things," said Mrs. Steppings. "A stitch in time, you know. I really must get you a wonderful remedy I have in the medicine cupboard. It is surprising——"

She was interrupted by a knock at the door.

The new house-parlourmaid put her head in cautiously.

"Jenkins has come back, ma'am, and he's forgotten the liver and——"

"Hush!" said Mrs. Steppings with dignity.

"Hush, Mary. You will excuse me for a minute perhaps, Mrs. Earl."

Mrs. Steppings returned undaunted, and polite converse was resumed.

"How is Harold?" asked Elizabeth. "I hear he is doing so well at school."

Mrs. Steppings' kind, sheep-like countenance shone with pleasure.

"Dear lad," she said proudly. "Yes, he has won his scholarship and now our anxieties about Oxford are over. His father and I are so proud."

"I do not wonder," said Elizabeth, with true sympathy, "and I hear he is such a dear boy too, as well as so clever."

Mrs. Steppings' voice trembled.

"I thank God," she said, "I thank Him every day for my boy."

"And I thank God—for you, Elizabeth," said Sir James when they were once again in the motor.

"I think you'd much better thank God for women like Mrs. Steppings, Jimmy dear," said Elizabeth, "and not for a sickly, cross cat like me."

"I haven't made up my mind yet all the same, Jimmy, except about one thing," expostulated Elizabeth as they neared the Roydon gates.

"And that one thing?"

"That you ask Mrs. Steppings for at least three dances."

"I'll ask her for thirteen if it would please you—or her," said Jimmy.

It was a chastened party which set off in best bibs and tuckers to dine with Antonia and her duke. The funereal atmosphere of the black and white marble hall, partly covered with cocoanut matting, and the chill reserve of the ducal butler who might have made a great reputation as a mute, depressed them still further.

The party assembled was not large: the duke, the duchess, the twins, Lord Heuington—a young man of surpassing beauty—Lady Agatha Moore and the Reverend and Hon. Julius Burke. This with the Roydon contingent made up a party of sixteen.

Antonia greeted her guests with proper condescension and the meek twins twittered kindly. Lord Heuington opened his beautiful blue eyes a little wider, and Lady Agatha sat calm and lovely. The Rev. Julius, a grave, goat-like person, clearly destined to become a bishop and display his gentlemanly legs, said everything that was right and proper.

Dinner was long and a trifle old-fashioned. Antonia did not shine as a hostess. She had a heavy-handed way with her and crushed conversational efforts as a fat cook crushes black-beetles. As for the duke he endured his own dinners as he endured other disagreeables of his great position. "Dam' dull, my dear, dam' dull," he confided to Meriel, "but got to be got through."

In the drawing-room after dinner the duchess disposed of herself in a comfortable arm-chair and nursed two little dogs upon her velvet lap. Elizabeth was then conducted by Lady Juliet to her mother's

side and seated upon an uncomfortable hour-glass shaped ottoman covered with woolwork.

Meriel the duchess endured, but for Elizabeth she had quite an affection.

"You don't look at all well, my dear," she remarked benevolently, "what did I hear about being ill?"

Elizabeth confirmed the rumour.

"Well, never mind," said the duchess in forgiving tones. "But it all comes of young women not being content to stay in their proper place. But we won't say any more about that. Juliet, my dear, don't fuss about so—it would fidget me if I ever allowed myself to be fidgeted. Go and talk to Mrs. Hare. The announcement will appear in the *Morning Post* on Tuesday—Juliet has engaged herself to Julius Burke."

The duchess's tone gave no indication as to her feelings. Did or did she not approve of the match?

What Elizabeth thought was: "Thank heaven that poor girl will be able to call her soul her own at last," but what she said was:

"And you, duchess—I hope you are——"

"Yes?" asked Antonia.

"Er—pleased," ended Elizabeth lamely.

"Pleased? Yes, quite pleased," allowed the august lady frankly. "I have never deluded myself—I have no respect for persons who delude themselves, and I think Juliet is doing as well as I could expect. Julius is an excellent person, though dull and a little obstinate. His mother was a Forsythe—Sir Charles Forsythe's daughter, and cousin once removed of my

own dear mother. They will begin on a sufficiency—suitable to my daughter's position, but no more."

"You will miss Juliet dreadfully, will you not?" queried Elizabeth.

"Possibly, possibly," allowed Juliet's mother without emotion. "And now, my dear, you can run away. The silly thing is dying to babble to you about it. Tell that nice, good sister of yours to come and talk to me about all her poor people."

Lady Juliet was indeed dying to tell every one all about it. The middle-aged, goat-like Julius was to her as a god.

Was the wedding to be soon?

Oh yes—in London directly after Easter, and dear little Nina must be bridesmaid. But how she could part from dear Janet she did not know. She hoped mamma would allow Janet to be with her frequently. Julius was to have a living in Dorsetshire—he had been ill and away for his health, otherwise of course he could not have been with them at Christmas time. It was when staying with Aunt Laura that Juliet had met him and, "Oh, Mrs. Earl, I can't think how I could ever have thought I was happy before," ended the girl, her eyes shining.

And then Julius appeared and the solemn, kindly cleric and the little, commonplace, loving girl wandered along the Great Highway which leads to the phantom City of Heart's Delight.

Meanwhile the duke philandered with Meriel, and Hoddy and Doddy did conjuring tricks with cards for the edification of Captain and Mrs. Hare,

the dull young heir-apparent, the exquisite Lady Agatha, the unattached twin and Lord Roydon. Elizabeth and Sir James sat near by and applauded when occasion demanded.

At ten-thirty the duchess began to look bored. At ten-forty-five she bid her silent son ring for a footman to take the little dogs to bed. After which sufficiently broad hint her guests took their departure.

"I feel," said Meriel, as she settled herself comfortably in the corner of the motor, "as if"—she yawned—"I had been dining with the duchess for weeks and weeks and weeks."

CHAPTER XV

LIFE at Roydon was normal and Christmas festivities a thing of the past. Every one had eaten, drunk and danced if so minded. Hoddy and Doddy were once more under their own ornamental roof, the Hares had departed to their childless home, Mary again trod the pavement of the Mile End Road—of the party only Elizabeth and James remained and he but for one night more.

Meriel and her husband were dining out and their two guests had eaten and were now in Meriel's sitting-room.

Sir James lay back in an arm-chair smoking, while Elizabeth at the piano crooned in her soft, uneven, oddly attractive voice. She sang sad, tuneful, little songs such as her companion loved. Now and again he would whistle a few bars of some special favourite. The room was dimly lighted, warm and sweet with the smell of flowers, and Elizabeth in her picturesque dinner gown an attractive figure.

The song came to an end and after a short pause Elizabeth began to play the graceful, melancholy music of Madame Butterfly's vigil. Sir James sat very still. Suddenly he sprang to his feet.

“]
El
certa
“]
Th
her,
H
“]
mar
was
F
a cl
beth
man
T
“
last.
“
She
diffi
to d
J
her
“
darl
you
The
stir
“
“
“

"Elizabeth," he said.

Elizabeth ceased her playing, rose and stood uncertain.

"Elizabeth," he said again.

There was something in his voice which compelled her, and she moved towards him.

He threw his arms round her and kissed her.

"I can't wait for you any longer. You must marry me soon, Elizabeth," he said, and his voice was harsh with emotion.

For a few moments the man and woman stood in a close embrace, then freeing herself gently Elizabeth sat down. Her lover stood leaning against the mantelpiece.

There was silence for a space.

"Do you believe that I love you?" he asked at last.

"I don't quite know," said Elizabeth slowly. She went on: "Let us talk, Jimmy. It's very difficult, dear, for I own I don't know what I ought to do."

James came towards her and sat upon the arm of her chair. He took her hand and held it.

"There is only one thing you ought to do, my darling," he replied, "and that is to marry me. Do you believe that I love you?" he asked again. There was something in his voice and manner which stirred Elizabeth.

"Yes," she said in a low voice, "I do believe it."

"Then?"

"That isn't all, dear."

"Can't you love me, Bet? I don't believe it—You do love me," he went on, not waiting for an answer. "Perhaps not as I love you, but you do love me."

"Yes, I do love you," she admitted, "but do I love you enough? It breaks my heart to hurt you, and yet, Jimmy dear, I shall do you the worst hurt of all if I marry you without loving you enough. No, let me speak—I know myself only too well. I haven't a nice, peaceful nature, Jimmy, and I'm not easy to live with. Even with my own child I feel that. If I found that I didn't love you enough I might be hateful. I should try not to be, perhaps I might succeed outwardly, but you would know it all the time—one can't really hide oneself. You're too good for that, my dear, and it's that which troubles me. You are still young—hundreds of women would love you, and one might love you very well. I don't want to keep you from that."

"I love you," he said. "What is the possible love of some other woman to me?"

Elizabeth sighed.

"I must try and make you understand," she went on. "I do love you. I have tried to face the idea of losing you. Hush—for it would never be quite the same again, and besides you would marry some day. I have grown to depend on you. Everything that happens I think to myself I must tell Jimmy that—if I see anything lovely I want you to see it with me—if it is something funny I want you to laugh at it with me——"

"Then marry me," he interrupted.

"Hush," said Elizabeth again. "Life isn't simple like that. I'm no longer young, my health isn't very good and my nerves are all in pieces. I could cry for you one minute, Jimmy, but I should scratch you the next." She laughed tremulously. "No one knows what I suffer mentally. I have suffered all my life. I am two people tied together in one body—a wicked one and a good one—and they fight and fight and fight until the wretched outside shell is nearly dead. I flare into tempers, unjust cruel tempers, and then I loathe myself. You don't know how cruel I was to Hugh sometimes, and he loved me so. Often I wonder if it was a mercy for him that he died, for I might have worn out his love." She was trembling all over.

"Don't, Elizabeth—it's not true—you know, dear, you exaggerate."

"Do I? I wonder. My wretched brain gives me no peace. All the horrors I come across in life torment me. If only I were like Mary and knew that it would all come right in the end; or like Meriel who does not care!"

James slipped his arm round her and drew her close to him.

"I think I understand," he said. "But you know Elizabeth you aren't very fit yet and influenza plays the devil with one's nerves. You haven't had too easy a life either. You always took things hard you know, Bet, and you weren't happy at home, and then there was all the fuss over your engagement,

and after you were married you racketed about too much. Then there was nothing but sorrow and the last four years you've lived too hard again. You haven't given yourself a chance. You've done a deal of doing—perhaps it's time you rested and did a bit of thinking."

Elizabeth made no answer. For a long time the two sat silent. The clock struck eleven. Elizabeth roused herself.

"Jimmy," she said, "I want you to be very good to me. I want you to be patient and let me have a month or two more."

Elizabeth arrived in London the day before the winter sale. She found at her shop a small, wedge-shaped box, containing stale wedding-cake, and an elegant silver-rimmed card which bore the legend "With Mr. and Mrs. Sydney Binden's compliments." Below it pierced by a silver arrow were the words "Lucy Ethel Briggs." She also found an envelope containing a Christmas card. "From Roona" was written upon it. There was neither surname nor address and Elizabeth gazed at it sadly. What did such reticence portend?

The afternoon Madame spent in company with Margot engaged in "marking down."

"I don't know why that model has been such a failure," said Margot. "We thought it charming when we bought it, but no one has liked it. I don't believe we have copied it once—yes, once for Mrs. Roper."

"]
hate
week
"
anyt
noth
"
looki
sure
mod
color
mod
We
woul
happ
"
Mar
"
with
"Ev
wind
othe
"
only
will
sell,
said
"
cust
mod
"

"I hate the sight of it," said Elizabeth, "but I hate any hat when I've stared at it every day for weeks."

"I almost think it had better go for practically anything we can get, don't you, Madame? There's nothing on it of any value and it's bad stock."

"Hats are a sad gamble," moralised Elizabeth, looking round the rooms. "One never can be quite sure what will take. There must be gay-looking models to brighten up the showroom and the light colours get dirty, and no matter what shade your model is it never is the one the customer wants. We might have fifty brown hats, and Mrs. Jones would ask for the one shade of brown we did not happen to possess."

"A dog's life, as I always tell you," smiled Margot.

"That will have to go," said Madame, staring with unfriendly eyes at a rose-red, velvet tricorne. "Everyone knows it by heart. It was a good window hat though and we made it several times in other colours."

"People complain of the prices of hats, but it is only we, who realise that for every few we sell there will be one at the end of the season that we shan't sell, who understand why prices should be so high," said Margot.

"Yet we are obliged to keep a good stock or our customers would complain that we had so few models and go elsewhere," added Elizabeth.

"Englishwomen seem to have such an objection

to having a hat made for them," Margot went on. "Now in Paris that is not so. There *clientes* are more faithful to their *modistes*. They will go season after season to the same milliner who thus understands her customer. The result is far better—the hat so bought looks as if it were meant for its wearer and not for half a hundred other women. Englishwomen are dreadfully difficult to hat. To begin with they are in their hearts conservative. They cling to a certain style, and will seldom dress the hair to suit the hat as does the Frenchwoman." Margot took up a black velvet, feathered hat and set it on her head. "Look, this does not suit me. But why? Because the brim is too wide on the left and because I need a little more height on the right. You see that is so?"

"Without doubt," admitted Madame. "It is evident to anyone with an eye for line and proportion."

Margot put on a turned-up hat.

"That does not suit me either—the shape is good but it is too narrow for my face. Make me that hat an inch wider and all is well."

"I agree."

"Then this. Look at the contour of my face and carry your eye up. What is wrong?"

"The crown of the hat is too heavy—too wide."

"Precisely. Lessen it and the hat becomes me. Yet how many women would try on those hats and reject them as hopeless. I will not have a hat made for me, is the parrot cry."

"And to a certain extent I understand it," said Elizabeth. "You and I are very clever, you see——" she laughed.

"Yes, we are," agreed Margot.

"And we know these things. But the everyday milliner does not. She wants to sell a hat off the peg and there is an end of the matter. You and I aspire to provide a hat which suits the individual."

"We do. And then people we have never seen want hats sent into the country on approval! You might send forty hats and not hit on the right one. But really of all customers, those who will never try on hats in the shop are my despair. 'Oh, just send me three or four to try on at home.' And back they all come because I was not there to lift here and flatten there! But to return to our muttons. We are overstocked in country hats, Madame—we shall have to——"

The interview was interrupted by the violent opening of the shop door. A tall, stout person bounced through it. She waved a pair of long-handled eye-glasses, stared round her and remarked severely:

"I think your hats are hideous."

The devil entered into Elizabeth, who that afternoon was in no patient mood.

"I quite agree with you," she replied.

The stout person ceased to stare at the hats and transferred her attention to Elizabeth. After looking her up and down she stumped vigorously round

the showroom, and then sat down heavily before a looking-glass.

"Well, well," she remarked impatiently, "I suppose I'd better try some of them on."

Denuded of her hat and veil the customer displayed a fat, red face with two double chins and an elaborate front of fair hair, which by no means matched that which adorned the back of her bullet-shaped head.

Margot, with difficulty repressing her glee, produced a purple velvet toque out of which sprouted a green and purple shaded feather.

The stout lady placed the toque upon her head and gazed at herself. "Mangold-wurzel," she remarked in a resigned voice. "Still, quite clean wholesome things mangold-wurzels. What's the price?"

"Fifty-five and six, madame."

She removed the purple toque and replaced it by a brown velvet hat.

"Grotesque," was her criticism. She was right.

Madame Delaine supplied a black felt model.

The customer put it on wrong way round and before the mistake could be remedied she turned and looked fiercely at Elizabeth.

"Suffragette?" she demanded.

"Yes," said Elizabeth.

"Smash windows and slap policemen?"

"No," said Elizabeth.

"Use ospreys on your hats?"

"Never if I can help it."

"Feathers torn out of living birds—young left to starve—stick the feathers in your head—animals dying in agonies in traps—pull off their skins and tie 'em round your necks. Ministering angels! Pah!"

Elizabeth gazed morosely at the stout person's reflection and the reflection stared with protruding, frog-like eyes at Elizabeth. The black hat worn wrong way round resembled a cake tin in mourning.

"I hate it all," muttered Elizabeth half to herself, "the cruelty—the misery."

"Then make others hate it too," commanded the surprising customer, "and don't stop short at hating. I'll have those three hideosities. How much?"

"Fifty-five and six, forty-two and six, and fifty-two and six," said Margot.

"Tut, tut, I don't want to do arithmetic. What do they all come to?"

"£7 10s. 6d., madame," replied Margot after a little calculation.

The stout person counted out the money. When her head was bent her chins multiplied alarmingly.

"No, no, no. Put 'em in the car—bother the boxes."

She stumped to the door. "Good evenin', good evenin'. Seldom met so much sense in a hat shop," she remarked and banged the door violently.

"The treasure! the treasure!" gasped Margot. "Did you ever see anything so sweet as it looked with its hat put on wrong way round. It will be a joy to me for years. I shall pray that it will come again."

Elizabeth looked at Margot.

"Did you ever think about furs before?" she asked.

"No," said Margot, "and I don't mean to think about them now. Will you come downstairs and look through some boxes of rubbish we sorted out last week? If you have no use for the things I thought we might let the girls take what is of any value to them and throw the rest away. I want to get rid of all the bits and bats before stock-taking."

Later in the afternoon Elizabeth looked at the clock—it was half-past-five.

"Are you doing anything this evening, Margot?"

"No," said Margot.

"Will you come and dine with me? Mrs. Frogmore is going out so we won't have dinner at home—we can go to some little restaurant. I don't feel as if I could bear myself at home alone tonight."

Just as Madame and her assistant were putting on their gloves prior to leaving the office, 'Enery put his head round the door.

"Anything more for me, miss?"

"No 'Enery, you might get off now."

'Enery paused. His eyes were fixed on the waste-paper basket in which were stuffed odds and

ends of dirty ribbon, flowers and pieces of materials' the result of Margot's "turning out."

"I suppose as those isn't wanted, miss?"

"Those?" asked Margot.

"Them ribbins and things," explained 'Energ.

"No, they are not wanted."

"Then can I take 'em 'ome to my little sister?" 'Energ demanded.

"Your little sister! But I thought you were the youngest, 'Energ," objected Margot.

"So to speak—yes, miss," allowed 'Energ. "There's me and my six sisters all older. Nancy isn't but five and she's me cousin. Her father's dead and 'er mother's no good—gone off Lord knows where and left Nancy. Mother, she says in a family like ours one more don't make no difference. Nancy don't like to think she ain't got a mother so she's like one of us now. I allways counts 'er as my little sister. She'd like them pieces for 'er doll."

"Bless her heart and yours," said Margot.

"That makes me feel better," said Elizabeth. "I've had horrible blue devils all day and our mangold-wurzel dyed them still bluer. 'Energ has bleached them almost white."

"The world's very like streaky bacon," said Margot.

That evening Elizabeth, emerging from the lift, found Mrs. Frogmore opening the flat door with her latch-key. She was attired in the deepest and most correct of widow's mourning.

Elizabeth stared—recovered herself and expressed the fear that Mrs. Frogmore was suffering from—er—some recent loss.

Mrs. Frogmore shut the door and turned on the hall light.

“Well, ma’am, I have ’ad a bereavement,” she admitted. “I could scarcely call it a loss. Not having seen Mr. Frogmore these eight years past I can scarcely say I feel it as a loss. But I done my duty by him and it was a funeral ’e might have been proud of. I’ve always kep’ on good terms with my late ’usband’s brother (’is sister’s a woman as I never could nor should abide), and it wur but two days before Christmas that a young girl came along to my brother-in-law to acquaint ’im that ’is brother James wur lying very ill. He went off not an hour after and his brother, as was proper, acquainted me with the fact. I done my duty to Frogmore as a wife an’ I shall always say so. But bygones is best bygones, and now I’ve done my duty to ’im as ’is widow,” said Mrs. Frogmore. She produced a black-bordered pocket handkerchief as a final proof of her statement. “And now I’ll just get your hot-water bottle, ma’am,” she observed, resuming her normal severity of manner.

CHAPTER XVI

THE sale had come to an end, stocktaking was over and at Delaine's the staff was enduring as best it might the February dullness.

Damp, depressing weather made colds and chills prevalent. Miss Emmett had succumbed to "temporary indisposition,"—elegant term for a cold in her head—and Mademoiselle Margot sat in her vacant place.

The whistle of the speaking tube sounded once.

"Yes?" queried Mademoiselle.

"There's a little girl who says she wants to speak to Madame Delaine," explained Doris.

"But Madame isn't here. Can't she give a message?"

There was a pause.

Then Doris's voice again.

"She says she was told that she was to see Madame specially."

"Then she must wait a little. Madame said she would be back at half-past five. It's five-fifteen now."

Margot replaced the speaking tube.

The whistle sounded again.

"Yes?" she queried rather impatiently.

"Could I ask Miss Fort to come down while I speak to you, please, Mademoiselle?"

"Very well."

A few minutes later Doris appeared.

"She's rather a—well a dirty-looking little girl to be up in the showroom," suggested Doris, "and she says she must see Madame herself, and if she's away too long her mother will whop her."

"Bring her to me," ordered Mademoiselle.

Ushered in by Doris, the mysterious messenger proved to be a sharp-eyed little girl of about eleven, with neglected-looking hair, down-at-heel boots, and a cold in her head.

She stood first on one leg, then on the other, and put the corner of a very dirty pinafore in her mouth.

"Well, my child," queried Margot, "what is it that you want?"

"Are you the lidy?"

"I am not Madame Delaine, if that is what you mean," explained Margot.

"Then it's no use saying nothin' to you," replied the visitor.

She put a rather larger piece of her pinafore into her mouth and stared round her.

"Well, Madame will be in soon," said Margot. "Would you like some tea and a bun?" she added kindly.

The child ceased to stare at the speaking tube and looked at Margot.

"Yes," she said, and then added, "please, miss.

If the kettle's bilin'," she went on. "I couldn't wait for it. My mother said as she'd whop me 'ed off if I was late getting 'ome."

"Poor little soul," said Margot.

She took a cake from a tin box in one of the cupboards. "'Enery" she called, "bring a cup of tea, please."

"Who is your mother?" she asked turning once more to the child.

"Them as asks no questions won't be told no lies," was the reply, in a voice stifled by a large piece of bun.

'Enery bringing the tea gazed surprisedly at the visitor.

"'Aven't you ever seen a young lidy before?" she queried fiercely. "Can't see nothin' but your own red 'ed, I sh'd think. Lookin' at me as if I were a circus," she complained to Margot, stuffing another piece of bun into her mouth meanwhile.

The tension of the situation was relieved by the appearance of Madame Delaine.

Margot explained the little girl's presence and left the room.

The little girl finished her tea with a gulp.

"My mother as works for Mrs. Lancy sent me off to say as a young girl named Roona was mortal bad and wanted Madame Delaine. Mrs. Lancy didn't know what to be at with the girl, so she give in to 'er and sent me along."

"Roona?" cried Madame. "Roona sent you to me! But where is she?"

"Number fifty-four Tranter Street turning right 'and of Dean Street up past the theater," explained the child.

"Wait one minute," begged Madame.

She went to the speaking tube.

"Ask Mademoiselle Margot if she could come to me."

"Oh, Margot," she said, as the girl entered, "it's a message from Roona. She's very ill. She asks for me and they have sent the little girl to tell me."

"Where is Roona?"

"Number fifty-four Tranter Street turning right 'and of Dean Street up past the theater," repeated the child in parrot-like fashion.

Margot drew Elizabeth aside.

"A room off Dean Street! Do you think you are wise to go?"

"Oh, I must," cried Elizabeth—"that poor girl."

"Very well," said Margot, "but let me come with you. We can take a taxi and I can wait for you."

She ran to fetch her hat and coat.

"A taxi, 'Enery," she called.

Margot gave the address.

"Lor'!" said the little girl, settling herself on the seat, "I never been in one of these afore."

"Do you live at fifty-four too?" asked Elizabeth.

"No, I don't," said the child. "But me mother does a day's work there now and again for Mrs. Lancy."

"Who is Mrs. Lancy?"

"The lidy 'as keeps the 'ouse. She lets 'er rooms to other lidies."

The cab sped along. It was cold, and through the damp mist the dim light of the lamps was reflected in wavering lines on the wet pavement.

Before Elizabeth's eyes flashed a vision of Roona, lovely in her white furs—her little, yapping dog tucked under one arm, walking out into the chill dusk of just such another night.

At the corner of Shaftesbury Avenue the driver pulled up with a sudden grinding of his brakes to avoid an omnibus.

The little girl lurched on the seat.

"My eye! do 'e often do that?" she demanded.

The cab moved on again suddenly. Towards the northern end of Dean Street, it turned to the right into a dark, squalid-looking road and stopped before a dingy house.

The little girl without further ado took to her legs, speedily disappearing round the corner.

Elizabeth pulled at a jangling bell and waited.

After some time the door was opened by a stout, elderly woman in a dirty, cambric wrapper. Her black hair was elaborately crimped and streaks of rouge showed on the dirt of her wrinkled face.

"Mrs. Lancy?" queried Elizabeth.

"And who might you be?" answered the woman suspiciously.

"I am Madame Delaine. I understand that a girl called Roona is living here and that she wished to see me. A little girl was sent to fetch me."

The stout woman stood aside. Her manner became less aggressive.

"Will you step in?" she said.

Elizabeth entered.

The woman shut the street door.

"The girl's in a sad way, and taking on so I didn't know what to be at for the best, though it's not the place to ask a lady to," she added, looking doubtfully at her visitor.

"Never mind that, Mrs. Lancy," said Elizabeth, laying her hand on the other's arm. "Let us just help this poor girl as well as we can. It was very kind of you to send for me."

The woman's vicious, drink-hardened face softened: it looked kindly for all its wreck of womanhood.

"Well, I've done my best for the poor thing," she said. "As you can understand, we can't always pick and choose. That young girl owes me a matter of six weeks' rent, but I hadn't the heart to turn 'er out. She's not one as would do any good in 'er profession, and so I've said a many times. But when a girl's down what's she to do?"

"May I see her?" asked Elizabeth.

Mrs. Lancy led the way up three flights of narrow, stuffy, smelling stairs.

At the back room on the third floor she paused and opened the door softly.

Roona was lying on a cheap little iron bedstead, a dirty, white cotton quilt drawn over her.

A blind was pulled crookedly across the window.

The
chest
were
expe
over
A
bark
Ro
Fo
"
for n
Sh
near
upor
"
obse
Fo
shut
"
Sl
for l
E
was
pate
"
B
Eliz
Sl
was
a ju
D

The room contained a blue painted wash-stand and chest of drawers, a trunk and a chair. On the wall were pinned rows of picture postcards, and a large, expensively framed photograph of a young man hung over the bed.

A little dog curled round on the chair sat up and barked shrilly.

Roona opened her eyes.

For a moment she stared dully at her visitor.

"My dear," said Elizabeth, "I am so glad you sent for me."

She lifted the dog from the chair and sat down near the bed. The little animal settled down again upon her knee.

"I'll be about downstairs if you should want me," observed Mrs. Lancy.

For some moments Roona lay with her eyes shut.

"Oh!" she said at last. "Oh, Madame!"

She coughed and coughed again and again, fighting for breath.

Elizabeth held her up, and when the paroxysm was over laid her down upon the pillow. It was patent that the girl was terribly ill.

"Have you had a doctor?" asked Elizabeth.

But for the moment Roona was past speech, and Elizabeth feared she had fainted.

She looked round the miserable little room: there was no sign of food or medicine, only some water in a jug with a broken handle.

Dipping her handkerchief into this, Elizabeth

wiped the girl's mouth and forehead, and after a few moments she opened her eyes again.

"I'm coming back to you, Roona. I won't leave you, dear, but I must get you some food and medicine."

Running down the stairs Elizabeth opened the door and called to Margot.

"I don't know what to do," she said in distress "Roona is dreadfully ill. There is neither medicine nor food. The room is a hateful little attic without a fireplace. What shall we do?"

"Perhaps the woman of the house could let us have another room, so that we can light a fire," suggested Margot. "We could ask the chauffeur to get us some milk and things while we see what can be arranged."

The chauffeur was waiting by the cab door.

"Will you help me?" asked Elizabeth. "There's a girl here who is dreadfully ill. If I give you some money, will you bring me a little brandy, some milk and Brand's jelly from the nearest chemist's. When you have them, ring and ask for Madame Delaine. I may have to ask you to go for a doctor afterwards."

"Yes lady—I'll see to it. I'll be back almost directly."

"Will you go to Roona, Margot, while I see Mrs. Lancy?—third floor—the back room."

Elizabeth knocked at the parlour door but elicited no reply. She then rang the street bell once again.

Mrs. Lancy appeared from the basement.

"Poor girl" she said, "how do she seem?"

"I
"If y
for a
and
jelly
"
said
word
"
some
B
"
clair
the
"
shee
T
purc
took
"
fire,
give
poor
E
her
who
W
able
"
"Sh
he c

"I'm afraid she is seriously ill," said Elizabeth. "If you will help me, Mrs. Lancy, I will be responsible for any expense. Can you let me have a larger room and light a fire? I have sent for milk and Brand's jelly and some brandy."

"Well it happens I do have the first front vacant," said Mrs. Lancy. "The lady as had it and me had words only yesterday—you could have that."

"Oh, thank you," cried Elizabeth. "Can I have some clean linen?"

But at that Mrs. Lancy shook her head.

"The ladies supplies their own lining," she explained, "and what's extra belonging to myself is in the wash."

"Is there any shop near where I could buy some sheets and a pillow case?"

The chauffeur arriving at this moment with his purchases, Elizabeth appealed to him, and he undertook to purchase the necessary linen.

"I'll just give the room a dust up and light the fire," volunteered Mrs. Lancy. "I don't profess to give attendance, speaking generally, but with the poor girl so bad why we must do what we can."

Elizabeth climbed the stairs again, to find Margot, her face white with alarm, holding Roona, from whose lips blood was trickling.

When the hæmorrhage ceased, Elizabeth was able to administer a few drops of milk and brandy.

"We must have a doctor," she said desperately. "Shall I tell the chauffeur to fetch the nearest one he can find?"

Margot nodded. Roona had fallen into a state of half sleep, half stupor.

Elizabeth ran downstairs again to wait for the cab.

After what seemed an interminable time, the man returned with coarse cotton sheets and pillow case. Elizabeth despatched him again in search of a doctor.

With the help of Mrs. Lancy and a good-natured looking fair-haired girl in a satin petticoat and dressing jacket, who attracted by the unusual noise emerged from the first floor back, the first floor front was soon made habitable, the sheets well warmed and the bed made up.

The yellow-headed girl produced a hot water bottle and a dilapidated kettle.

Elizabeth ran upstairs again, and administered a few more drops of milk and brandy.

Roona's face began to lose its blue and deathly look.

"We can only wait now until the doctor comes, and then get him and the taxi man to help us to move her."

The fair girl came and looked in at the door—"Poor dear," she said, "poor dear!"

The street bell tinkled, and Mrs. Lancy was heard in whispered confabulation with the doctor, a tall, thin, middle-aged man, grubby looking and depressed.

He stared surprisedly at Elizabeth and Margot, and, without saying anything, made a cursory examination of the patient.

"Can we move her downstairs?" asked Elizabeth, "we have a room with a fire ready."

With the help of doctor and chauffeur, Roona was wrapped in her miserable bed coverings and carried downstairs.

She swallowed some more drops of milk and brandy, and fell into a restless sleep.

Elizabeth beckoned the doctor to follow her on to the landing.

The fair-haired girl and Mrs. Lancy hovered on the stairs, the party being reinforced by a fat young woman, with coarse, dark hair and a heavily powdered face.

"Bad case," said the doctor, "can't always say, but it doesn't look as if she'd last long."

"I do hope as there'll be no deaths in my house," Mrs. Lancy joined in. "Goodness knows I've done what I can for the girl, poor thing, an' would again. But I've my living to think of, and my ladies would say it brought bad luck."

"You'd better send the girl to the Infirmary," said the doctor. "I wouldn't say that she'd not die on the way," he added indifferently.

There was a chorus of "Poor thing!" from the two girls and Mrs. Lancy.

"Would it not be better if I got a nurse for her?" asked Elizabeth, trying to stifle her indignation at the callous attitude of the man.

"You can if you're prepared to pay her," said the doctor.

"Certainly," said Elizabeth stiffly.

"Would you mind if I sent for a nurse?" she asked, turning to Mrs. Lancy.

"Well, seeing that you'll be responsible for the expense, it's not for me to make objections," agreed the good-natured Mrs. Lancy.

"If I was you I'd send round to the Sister. She lives in Melbourne Mansions, Charing Cross Road. She's a kind soul as ever there was," suggested the yellow-haired girl.

"The one that looked after Lizzie last winter. I'll put on my things and go for her if it's any help," volunteered the fat girl.

"I've a taxi waiting outside," said Elizabeth. "It would be good of you. You'll bring her back with you if you can, won't you? I'll just run down and tell the driver. If you will kindly tell me what I owe you first?" she said turning to the doctor, determined that she would have no more to do with this extremely seedy-looking member of the medical profession.

These affairs settled, Elizabeth retired to Roona's room to await the coming of the sister.

The girl was still sleeping, and Margot had given the little dog a saucer of milk, which he drank eagerly, and was now moving gently about the room, making up the fire and removing some of the dust left by Mrs. Lancy in her perfunctory tidying.

Elizabeth sat down by the hearth and began to count the contents of her purse.

"I haven't enough to pay the taxi, Margot," she said, "and I shall want some money for food and

for Mrs. Lancy. I wonder if you would mind driving to the flat when the cab comes, and asking Nana for my cheque book and for some money. Ask her for some old linen too. Do you think that poor child has any clean nightgowns? "

"I think I had better see what there is in her box and bring her things down here," said Margot.

She returned with the photograph, a few odds and ends of under-linen and a brush and comb.

"Pawntickets," she said briefly, "and very little else. Oh, the poor child!"

"Nana could probably find you an old nightgown of mine and some handkerchiefs. Ask her for a jug and one or two cups and a spoon. Tell her too, Margot, that I may not be home to-night. It must depend upon what the sister says. What will you do, dear—it is long past eight and you have had no food."

"Neither have you," said Margot. "Let us wait until the Sister comes, and then I will fetch what is needed. It won't take long. While Sister is here we can go and get something to eat—there are plenty of restaurants quite close. If there is any need we can come back."

A cab drew up before the house. Elizabeth went down to the door.

The fat girl accompanied by a kind-faced woman in the dress of a deaconess was waiting.

"Oh," said Elizabeth, with a sigh of relief, "I am thankful to see you. And to you I am truly

grateful," she added turning to her messenger, "it was good of you."

The girl wished them good night, and walked off down the road.

"Will you still be kind enough to wait," Elizabeth asked of the chauffeur. "I shall get you to take the other lady back to my flat to bring some things we need."

In the narrow hall the Sister turned to Elizabeth.

"I am Sister Mary," she said. "I am employed in rescue work. Will you tell me how you came to know of me, and what it is you want me to do?"

Elizabeth explained the situation.

"A girl in this house told me of you, and that one who was here just now offered to try and find you. They said that you would advise me what to do," she ended.

"What did the doctor say?" asked Sister Mary.

"He said it was a bad case, and did not seem to care if the girl lived or died," said Elizabeth indignantly. "He was quite useless, so I paid him and dismissed him."

"Well, I think if you would send for the things you mentioned, I had better see the patient. Then if you will sit with her, I will go and telephone for a doctor I know. We shall not be able to keep the girl here. She will have to go to the Workhouse Infirmary. But at all events we can see how she gets through the night."

Sister Mary made her way upstairs accompanied by Elizabeth, and Margot was sent off on her errand.

The Sister felt Roona's pulse, and as the girl stirred administered a spoonful of jelly, then beckoned Elizabeth outside the room.

"Will you tell me what you know of her?" she asked.

Elizabeth narrated the circumstances.

"I do not think there is any cause for immediate alarm, but I will go and telephone for the doctor, and after that we can decide what it is best to do. Will you stay with her until I come back?"

Once more Elizabeth drew up a chair to the fire. The little dog tried to jump on to her knee. Elizabeth picked him up; he licked her hand and sat blinking at the flames.

The room was very still; much of the traffic had ceased. It was nine o'clock, an hour at which in Soho the late restaurant diner is still lingering over coffee and cigarettes, while the theatres have not disgorged their audiences.

Roona slept, and Elizabeth glanced at her anxiously from time to time.

Sister Mary returned. The little dog barked.

"The doctor will be here in a few minutes," she whispered.

Roona stirred restlessly at the noise. Elizabeth quieted the dog and the two women sat in silence.

When the doctor arrived Elizabeth left him with

his patient and the Sister, and not knowing where else to go sat upon the stairs.

A door opened and the fair girl's head appeared. She had a sweet-looking, delicate face.

"She cannot be more than twenty," thought Elizabeth.

"Won't you come in and sit down? It would be better than those dirty stairs."

The girl was now very smartly attired in coat and skirt and feathered hat.

"Thank you," said Elizabeth.

The room in which she found herself was furnished with some pretence at comfort. The walls were covered with Christmas number supplements and picture postcards, and a large framed text, bearing the words "I know that my Redeemer liveth" intertwined with lilies and forget-me-nots, hung over the bed.

From the text Elizabeth's eyes fell to the bed itself. With its thumb stuffed into its little, red mouth, there lay a child asleep—a little pink and white child.

"Oh!" said Elizabeth.

The girl looked up, and her face was hard to read.

"Dear mite," whispered Elizabeth, stooping over the little one.

"Isn't she a picture?" said the girl. "My lovely little lamb," she added softly.

A door opened. The doctor's voice was heard.

"I must go," said Elizabeth. "I shall see you again, shall I not?"

Bending over the child, very gently she kissed its fair little head.

The doctor was quite decided. The patient must be removed to the Infirmary. Her lungs were far gone, and there was practically no hope. She might live a week or two. She might possibly linger for some months, or a sudden hæmorrhage might end her life sooner. There was, he thought, no immediate danger. She was exhausted by neglect and lack of proper food.

"Will she be well looked after in the Infirmary?" asked Elizabeth.

The doctor looked at her kindly.

"You need have no fear of that," he said. "You shall go and see for yourself. I will make the necessary arrangements with the Relieving Officer. She will be moved in an ambulance to-morrow. If you could stay with her while Sister Mary goes home to make some arrangements, then Sister will take charge of her until she is moved."

"Thank you very much," said Elizabeth. "I am so grateful to you and to Sister. I will give you my name and address if you will kindly let me know——"

"Oh, thanks," said the doctor, "thanks—that will be all right."

Elizabeth turned to the Sister.

"I expect Miss des Vœux directly. If you could wait for a few minutes while we get something to eat, then we can take charge of Roona until you return."

Escorted by the doctor, Margot and Elizabeth supped at a restaurant near by.

"Oh, that poor little dog, I wonder when it was fed," suggested Margot. "I shall beg some scraps for it."

Armed with a plentiful supply of bits, wrapped up in newspaper, the two women returned to Tranter Street.

Roona still slept, and the small dog after eating hungrily slept also.

That hour in the dirty, tawdry room was one which Elizabeth never forgot. She had looked but a little way into a phase of life about which many good women prefer to know nothing.

How much is such ignorance to blame for the existence of these untold miseries?

CHAPTER XVII

“**H**ERE we are,” said Lady Juliet to her sister.

The maid who followed them came forward and opened the door, and all three entered the shop.

“Is Mrs. Earl in?—we particularly want to see her please.”

“I will inquire, madam.”

Doris went to the speaking tube.

Yes, Madame was in—would the ladies sit down.

Elizabeth made her appearance, to be greeted with much effusion by the twins.

“Oh, dear Mrs. Earl, this is nice, and you will be able to help us, won’t you—you yourself? It will take hours you know. Things for me, and the bridesmaids. Can you really spare the time?”

Assured that Elizabeth with the greatest of pleasure could and would give her whole attention to the matter, Juliet turned to her maid.

“I think, Parsons, if you would go on to Head’s, and get the wool for Her Grace, and tell them about my shoes at Gerrett’s, and then match that ribbon

at Harvey's, and come back for us, it will be best."

Parsons, a negative looking young person in a black toque, departed, and the twins, relieved of their somewhat depressing attendant, settled down to enjoy an hour of freedom.

It appeared that Juliet desired under-linen, hats and blouses for herself, and the bridesmaids' hats and dresses. It also appeared that the Rev. and Hon. Julius had ideas upon feminine attire. He liked nothing hard or manly, nothing noticeable.

"And of course," said Juliet, "as we shall not be at all well off, I must buy things that will last a long time and be suitable for a clergyman's wife."

Elizabeth sighed: this *trousseau* promised to be a somewhat dull affair.

"Still even though you are to be a clergyman's wife and not perhaps too rich, we must not forget that you are also a bride, and only twenty-one," she suggested.

"Oh, but I want to look as old as I can," said the bride-elect. "You see dear Julius is thirty-eight and does not wish me to set a frivolous example in the parish."

"Papa has given me £500," she went on. "He would have given me much more, but mamma said it was absurd."

"We thought," chirped Janet, "that Juliet need not have spent it all now, and it would have been nice to have it, but mamma perhaps didn't consider that. But, you know, we never hoped that mamma would

have
expe
ham
Je
her
at tl
coul
"
und
wan
Ju
"
imp
skirt
whi
with
the
mos
wat
alre
"
sma
wro
"
and
have
and
thin
plen
abo
£20

have let us buy a *trousseau* all by ourselves, we quite expected she would have ordered it all from Debenham and Freebody's where we always go."

Janet spoke of the *trousseau* as if it were as much her property as her sister's, and Elizabeth, looking at the twins, thought what a pity it was that Julius could not marry the pair of them.

"Well now, where shall we begin. With the under-clothes? Have you made a list of what you want?"

Juliet produced a little exercise book from her bag.

"Janet and I have planned it all out," she said importantly. "I thought if I had two coats and skirts, two evening dresses, and my wedding dress, which will make a third, and a going away frock, with a coat that would do to go away in or wear in the evening, that would be enough. I shall take most of the things I have now, and I shall want a water-proof. I've had five umbrellas given me already."

"Julius says Juliet won't want anything very smart," explained Janet, "and, besides, he thinks it's wrong to spend much money on clothes."

"Mamma wishes me to get my wedding dress and my other dresses from Debenham's, because we have always gone there. Then there are my boots and trunks and things. Julius likes walking; he thinks it so good for his health, so I must have plenty of thick boots. Janet and I thought if I spent about £300 on my clothes, then I could keep the £200 and buy things as I wanted them."

"But," cried Elizabeth, "you are not going to live on £500 a year."

"Oh no," agreed the bride, "I believe we shall have about £3,000 and Julius says we can manage very comfortably on that."

"Then I really think you might allow yourself a pretty *trousseau*. You are so young too; enjoy your youth while you can, Juliet—it lasts a very short time, my dear."

The girl shook her head. Behind the plain pink and white inexpressive face, in her narrow little brain a latent obstinacy was developing, a love of petty detail and of saving. Juliet, so Elizabeth observed, as the wife of a hearty middle-class person in an auctioneer's office, and the mother of a plain little boy in a velvet suit, living in a red brick villa on £300 a year, would have been in her right and proper place. But fate made her a duke's daughter and the betrothed of a prospective bishop.

Elizabeth said no more but led the way upstairs and demanded of Miss Fort: "*Lingerie* for these ladies, please."

Juliet and Janet sat at the table and gave serious attention to the garments spread before them.

"Things that will wash and wear well, please," they requested, and thumbed materials, and tested the strength of the stitchery. Margot came in and out, blouses were tried on, Madame Green took measurements. And so the morning wore away.

"I shall have to wait for my hats," said Juliet at length.

H
her :
"
brid
muc
one
have
"
quer
"
two
and
Nor
Nin
they
"
deliq
mai
whil
Ang
Mr.
"
you
ther
"
"
Nor
"
all t
to s
bet

Her maid had returned and was replacing her in her neat blouse and inoffensive coat and skirt.

"I have not chosen my dresses yet. But the bridesmaids' we must settle, and there is not very much time, because Julius is to meet me here at one o'clock and I must not keep him waiting. We have to lunch with his aunt in Charles Street."

"How many bridesmaids and who are they?" queried Madame Delaine.

"Janet, of course, and my cousin Angela. The two Soames girls and Julius' two nieces and Lilian and Nora Nordham. Then my other cousin, Lady Northearlham, you know—her little girl; and may Nina? Please do let me have Nina, Mrs. Earl, they'll make such a sweet little pair."

"Thank you very much, I'm sure Nina will be delighted—she has always aspired to be a bridesmaid," murmured Madame vaguely, casting meanwhile a mental eye over Juliet's troupe. "Lady Angela I have met and the two Soames girls; but Mr. Burke's nieces?"

"Oh, I've never seen them yet: but they are quite young with fair hair, and Julius says people consider them pretty."

"And the Nordhams?"

"Lilian has flaming red hair," said Janet, "and Nora's dumpy."

"Don't you think you had better arrange for them all to meet here?" asked Elizabeth. "I should like to see them together, and then I should know far better what they could wear."

"I should think we could do that, couldn't we, Janet? The Soameses are in town, and Julius' nieces come up for music lessons every Wednesday, I know. We could get mamma to have Angela to stay—Angela's one of her favourites—and I'm sure the Nordhams could come up for the day."

"Very well. Then if you will decide on a time and let me know, I will have sketches ready for you."

Doris appeared. "A gentleman is waiting for Lady Juliet."

The party descended the stairs to find Julius looking larger and more goat-like than ever when viewed against a flippant background of hats. He greeted Elizabeth kindly and made due inquiries after her health, then welcomed the twins, who twittered excitedly.

The negative Parsons stood aside, and seemed prepared to cease to exist until further orders.

"Well, my dear," said the goat benignly, casting somewhat apprehensive glances around the showroom, as if he did not quite know what garments might meet his eye, "and how does the *trousseau* progress?"

Juliet was packing the exercise book away in her bag.

"I think," she said seriously, "that I've chosen sensibly."

"Such pretty things, but all suitable, you know, Julius," twittered Janet.

Julius looked fondly at both the little creatures.

"The
dear
Ana
M
T
indis
accu
M
El
"
got.
adde
"
T
"
sudd
Julie
her
up in
a pir
she
and
for t
"
all b
jabbe
she'l
light
or ga
time
her l

"That's right," he said, "that's right; and now my dear, I think perhaps we should be moving. Aunt Anastasia is a woman of punctual habits."

Madame Delaine descended to the office.

The Emmett, recovered from her temporary indisposition, but looking a little pinched, sat in her accustomed place.

Margot was frying sausages.

Elizabeth sat down and watched the operation.

"Will you lunch here to-day?" asked Margot. "There's a whole pound of sausages," she added.

"Yes, please."

The sausages fizzled.

"There are some people," Elizabeth remarked suddenly, "who rouse my worst passions. Lady Juliet roused them to-day. I should like to take her and dye her hair and paint her face, and tie her up in lace and ribbons, and—and—and give her to a pirate, and when the pirate had finished with her, she could wash off the paint and marry her Julius, and work in the parish and help souls to heaven, for then she'd know something about hell."

"I forgot to prick the sausages, and now they're all bursting," said Margot, in an annoyed tone. She jabbed at one with a fork. "As for Lady Juliet, she'll adore her husband and act according to her lights. She'll never feel young or wicked or good or gay, but sometimes she will be pleased and sometimes vexed; and I suppose the good God who made her has some use for her."

"Possibly," admitted Elizabeth. "I cannot see," she continued after a pause, "why parsons' wives are always expected to become curates. Clergymen marry for much the same reason, or lack of reason, as the rest of humanity, I suppose. The Rev. Mr. Jones hands Miss Smith a cup of tea, and loves her because she has a turned-up nose and china-blue eyes, and because they are both young and, in spite of all their pretty bringing-up, just little lumps of nature. All very well and good if Miss Smith were marrying Mr. Jones, but when she has to espouse a parish along with him, it is quite another matter."

"Do all clergymen's wives do these things?" asked Margot. "You see, I know nothing of your English country life."

"All the Mrs. Clerics I have ever met do them," replied Elizabeth. "And really, when I come to think of it, the system appears to work fairly well. But it does not seem to be the right principle, because Miss Smith may make just the kind of wife Mr. Jones likes, but a shocking bad curate. Imagine Lady Juliet holding mothers' meetings, visiting the afflicted, and setting an example to the parish! Any little board-school chit of fourteen knows more of life than Juliet."

"She is *jeune fille tout à fait comme il faut*," said Margot, "a most mischievous invention, so it sometimes seems to me."

"A remnant of the old Eastern idea, and one which we are discarding by slow degrees," replied

Mad
the v
unco
"I
Emr
done
"I
"Y
for o
"I
"Y
refer
me d
"C
War
hopel
Mi
produ
"V
here,
time.
we've
went
she's
that t
a ma
the fu
ment
on th
Miss
Th

Madame. "At present woman's front leg is out in the wide world, her hind leg still in the harem. An uncomfortable attitude."

"I should like to know, Madame Delaine," said Emmett, looking up from her desk, "what you wish done about Mrs. Herseult."

"Mrs. Herseult?"

"Yes, Madame Delaine. She's owed £15 17s 6d. for over two years."

"I suppose she's had bills and the usual letters?"

"Yes, Madame Delaine. I have looked up her references, but the young lady who was here before me does not seem to have taken any."

"Oh, I remember, Mrs. Herseult. She lives in Warcliffe Square—or did live there. I'm afraid it's hopeless. Have you any mustard, Miss Emmett?"

Miss Emmett arose, went to the cupboard and produced some mustard.

"We sued Mrs. Herseult when Miss Furley was here, Madame," said Margot; "you were ill at the time. We were granted judgment against her, but we've never had a penny, and we never shall. I went to the T.P.C. solicitors about it; they admit she's one of the worst thieves in London, but say that there is nothing to be done. You can't imprison a married woman for debt: there are bills of sale on the furniture, and her husband's income is a government pension, and you can't get a garnishee order on that. She must be written off as a bad debt. Miss Furley ought to have done it."

The speaking-tube whistle sounded.

"Miss Ethel Horrocks for Madame Delaine."

"Ask her to come downstairs."

Ethel entered, bright and genteel. "Oh, Madame! Well, I declare—I wouldn't have interrupted you if I'd known you were at lunch."

"I'm lunching rather early because I have to go out this afternoon," said Elizabeth. "Now, sit down and eat sausages too. We've got a whole pound.—Don't forget to prick them this time, Margot.—We were talking of bad debts when you came in, Miss Horrocks. Let me introduce you to Miss Emmett, who is our book-keeper."

The girls bowed.

"I suppose every firm suffers from them more or less."

"Indeed they do," opined Miss Horrocks. "You should be careful over your references, Madame Delaine. It's very seldom that a lady who is a lady, and has nothing to be ashamed of, objects to being asked for a reference. Still, even with references you get taken in sometimes. We've got a customer, as nice a mannered lady as you'd meet. Well, you see, she had an account always going; nothing over £10 for a year or two, and paid regularly. Then she orders £50 worth of things. Now, what are you to do? Refuse credit to an old customer? It's awkward. Well, we let her have it, and off she's gone to India and never paid a penny. Seems she's left her husband, and no one knows where she is. Then there's people who'll come to any new shop hoping they're not up to the game, get credit and

nev
wh
rea
fir
"
exp
lool
at
owr
said
arr
wh
had
wor
shal
whi
on t
all
one,
and
to l
Wh
and
was
note
shill
five-
teley
safe.
and
her

never pay. You have to be very careful about that when you advertise. I believe there are women who read all the advertisements and lie in wait for new firms. You'd be surprised what tricks they're up to."

"When I was in Sloane Street we had an odd experience," said Margot. A girl came—nice-looking and quietly dressed. She ordered two hats at quite moderate prices, both to be made to her own colours. I asked her for a reference, but she said she would pay, as she never had bills. It was arranged that she should come in to try the hats when nearly finished. She came, and just as she had taken off her hat she said, 'Oh, by the by, I wonder if you could retrim this hat—it looks so shabby, and I am going on to a party; just a large white lace bow. You could do it while I am trying on the others, could you not, and I can pay for them all together.' She tried on the other hats, liked one, but needed a slight alteration in the other, and was rather fussy about it. Then she wanted to look at some blouses, and tried on one or two. While she was looking at these her hat came down and she put it on, and asked for her bill. The bill was brought. Oh dear! she had put a five-pound note in her purse and it was gone! She had only a shilling and some pennies. Perhaps she had left the five-pound note on her writing-table. Might she telephone?—Yes!—Oh, what a relief! The £5 was safe. She would send postal orders that evening—and adieu for ever. All that elaborate plan to get her hat retrimmed!"

"Well, I never," from Ethel. "But there's some private firms as careless as can be about references, and she hoped she'd get the new hats. She was a cute one to think of the retrimming dodge, and no mistake."

"I sympathise with people who are really hard up," Elizabeth admitted. "We had a client who bought rather largely, and paid so much on account regularly. Her husband failed, and they had to leave their house and go and live in a tiny flat. She came to us one day and told us all about it. —Don't you remember, Margot?"

Margot nodded.

"She promised to pay her account by degrees, and asked if we would let her have a hat now and again, just to keep her going. We did, and little by little she paid. We used to take all her own feathers and things and make her as smart as we could, and charge her just for the materials and work. Now that woman was honest. Even if she had not been able to pay all she owed, I would have done my best for her. But, when it comes to people like Mrs. Herseult, I feel absolutely vindictive."

"Herseult—Herseult," mused Ethel; "I don't fancy we've ever had her."

"Well, beware of her if she ever does come," warned Elizabeth. "She is very clever. First came a nice portly, comfortable Mrs. Herseult who paid her bill promptly. Then arrived Mrs. Pervey, recommended by her aunt Mrs. Herseult. She wished to pay quarterly, and did pay quarterly.

Now
aged,
young
and m
daugh
not ric
have a
guinea
who
necess
and so
I am
nice M
late I
that v
hands
only th
"M
with
I don'
adays.
"Do
Horro
First?
"Kr
Maden
"Sh
"W
She's
obliged
man th

Now appears Mrs. Hersult number two, middle-aged, pleasant, nicely-dressed, and with a pretty young daughter—recommended by her sister-in-law and married daughter. ‘Two hats and a blouse for daughter—nothing extravagant, please, for we are not rich; a toque for myself, and, yes, I think I must have a blouse—not too dear, something about two guineas and a half. Quiet people like ourselves who go out very little, so much dressing is unnecessary—indeed, the luxury of the present day,’ and so forth. I was not versed in business affairs as I am now. I thought it must be all right, so my nice Mrs. Hersult had £15 worth of goods. Too late I find she is a well-known swindler. Yet I saw that woman and her girl, both well dressed, with handsome furs, getting into a taxi outside Harrods’, only the other day!”

“My! it is too bad,” sympathised Ethel. “What with slack trade, and low prices and bad debts, I don’t know that there’s much in business now adays.”

“Do you happen to know a Mrs. First, Miss Horrocks,” asked Margot, “the Honourable Mrs. First?”

“Know her,” cried Ethel, “I should think so, Mademoiselle. Has she been to you?”

“She owes us nearly £20,” said Margot.

“Well, you’ll not get it without you writ her. She’s one of the kind who never pays till they’re obliged to, and then it’s not always the same gentleman that signs the cheque,” observed Ethel.

Elizabeth frowned.

"Don't let us talk about her any more. She is one of the legacies of my inexperience. Now that we have Miss Emmett, these things don't happen."

The Emmett looked primly gratified and ate a small piece of sausage delicately.

"Have you seen anything very pretty this morning?" asked Margot.

"Well I don't know that I have, it's a late season for all Easter's so early. But when I can be spared I take a look round. A lunch at the Ritz, tea at Rumpelmayer's or the Carlton, or a walk down Bond Street or Sloane Street, often gives you a model. Monsieur Adolphe agrees with me that it's worth the time and money. He'll be off to Monte Carlo himself in a day or two. Shall you be going to Paris, Madame?"

"Yes, I suppose so," said Elizabeth, and then she paused. Shall I be going to Paris, or shall I be marrying Jimmy? Oh dear, I only wish I knew. She collected her thoughts and turned again to Miss Horrocks. "We have rather an important wedding coming on, and I must wait until that is over, but I hope to get away directly after. There is never much doing for ten days or so after Easter."

"I daresay you'll be glad to have a bit of a change too—you're not looking so well as all that, Madame Delaine," opined Ethel.

"Oh, I'm really quite well, thank you, but rather tired to-day. What are the fashions going to be, Miss Horrocks?"

"V
lady,
very
"N
high
shape
"Y
"I
stood
with
you."
"I
disco
"O
to Re
numb
"N
Marg
Eli
as to
her f
kind,
lady
Squa
firm.
Mi
On
"I
Mrs.
does
eveni

"Well, now you're asking me," replied that young lady, "and asking me more than I know. There's very little to be found out yet awhile."

"Nothing really new is brought out before the high season, *demi-saison modes* are just last season's shapes and trimmings furbished up," said Margot.

"You're right there, Mademoiselle," agreed Ethel.

"I think I must say good-bye now." Elizabeth stood up. "I have to go and see a girl who used to be with us, and who is very ill—but don't let me hurry you."

"I must be getting back to business too," Ethel discovered.

"Our ways lie together. We can take an omnibus to Regent Street, and that will do for us both—what number, Margot?"

"Number nineteen, and change at Piccadilly," said Margot.

Elizabeth put on her veil and coat giving directions as to various matters meanwhile, and Ethel made her farewells—cordial to Margot, to Miss Emmett kind, but with a tinge of patronage, as befits a young lady buyer and head saleswoman in a Hanover Square House to the accountant of a lesser firm.

Miss Emmett responded primly.

On the stairs Madame Green was encountered.

"I was just coming down to speak to you about Mrs. Phipps, Madame. That lace across the bust doesn't work out at all and she's promised for this evening."

"Why not try the effect of the lace running lengthwise?"

"Well I thought I'd better see if you approved, Madame. Mrs. Phipps isn't easy and she said she'd have the lace across. It seems to me we shall have her back whichever way it is."

"Then let it go with the lace across. At any rate we shall have carried out our instructions."

"It's a tiresome trade dressmaking," sympathised Miss Horrocks, "worse than millinery. And for that you'd need sometimes to be a saint to keep your temper. My word, it's colder than ever, Madame Delaine. It's March weather a bit before the time."

The girl drew her furs round her more closely, and thrust her hands further into her muff.

A bitterly cold east wind was blowing, the streets looked grey and empty; the few passers-by hurried on their way.

A little ill-clad boy, his shoulders hunched forward, shuffled along, crying dully.

"What's the matter, laddie?" asked Elizabeth.

He sniffed and stared, smeared a dirty little paw across his face and sniffed again, but seemed disinclined for explanations.

"Here's a penny—cheer up and buy some goodies," suggested Elizabeth.

He took the penny, sniffed and shuffled off.

"There's our 'bus," observed Ethel.

She waved and ran.

Elizabeth followed.

Ethel settled herself comfortably.

"]
obse
Th
oblig
It
and
trave
bish
peop
Th
wom
a rec
"
Eth
It's
"
"Su
milli
quite
dece
very
E
"
she
all t
then
"
indig
"
Eth
way.

"It will be a twopenny ride, I suppose," she observed.

The conductor, blue with cold, yet still polite and obliging, took the fares.

It was one of those days when every one looks ugly and rather peevish. Elizabeth studied her fellow travellers and wondered, as often before, why worthy bishops consider it so advisable on the part of other people to add largely to the existing population.

The omnibus stopped and a thin, dismal looking woman, with a mangy rabbit skin toque and tie and a red tip to her nose, clambered stiffly out.

"Going to see one of your young ladies?" queried Ethel. "Well that is nice of you, Madame Delaine. It's not many employers who'd bother."

"It's a dreadfully sad case," said Elizabeth. "Such a pretty girl, only nineteen. She was in the millinery room and left us to be married. I don't quite know what happened, but I'm afraid the man deceived her. She sent for me and I found her very very ill in a horrid lodging."

Ethel tossed her head.

"I've not much patience with girls of that kind," she remarked dryly. "They aren't so innocent as all that comes to. They know how the men'll treat them if they've half a chance."

"But all men are not beasts," cried Elizabeth indignantly.

"Well, I don't know about beasts," admitted Ethel. "They don't think about things in the same way. Men's men and girls's girls and the girl knows

she'll do the paying when it comes to trouble. It's always been like that, and I suppose it always will be."

Elizabeth sighed. It was a dismal doctrine.

They had stopped in Piccadilly. Cross, cold people descended; others, more cold, more cross, entered. The women straightened their hats, blown here and there by the wind.

Elizabeth and Ethel bade each other good-bye, and the omnibus swirled upon its way.

F

crossed
Peter
down
Great
offices
and p
disple
girl c

At
Porlo
air of
where
of t
large

W
withi
mista
myste
shutt
Mash
the e

CHAPTER XVIII

FROM the stopping place of the second omnibus, Elizabeth had to walk but a short distance. She paused to look at Jay's window, then crossed the road and studied the hats displayed by Peter Robinson and Emilie, and eventually turned down Argyll Place, and so through wide, dignified Great Marlborough Street, with its music publishers' offices, piano warehouses, wholesale trade premises and police station. Outside this building bills were displayed, and the photograph of a little murdered girl caught Elizabeth's eye, as she hurried past.

At the end of the street she found herself in Porlock Street—narrow, dreary, with that strange air of being not itself, but merely the back of somewhere else which is so marked a feature of some of the little by-ways crowded behind London's large thoroughfares.

Walking north Elizabeth discovered herself within a few yards of Oxford Street. Realising her mistake she turned and hurried southward, past mysterious little houses, one of which, then fast shuttered, bore the legend "Stewed Eels and Mashed." Elizabeth's ready imagination pictured the eels—squirring.

The wind blew with a sudden, violent gust, bringing with it a shower of grit and dust from a half-demolished house, on which the housebreakers were at work.

She passed a *blanchisserie*. The door opened and the sound of gay French voices rolled out on a cloud of hot, steamy air.

Then opposite Elizabeth saw the infirmary: a tall, dreary building, with row upon row of windows. She crossed the road and looked for a bell.

A thin, black cat mewed round her, rubbing against her skirts, and an old, toothless man stopped to mumble advice.

"If ye knock on that door they'll coom, ma'am."

There was a trace of north country accent in his broken old voice.

Elizabeth thanked him, and knocked at the large door, in which was a small, square grating.

The door opened so suddenly that she nearly fell through it on to a tall, fat, severe man in uniform.

By him the visitor was instructed to make further inquiry of another uniformed official, this time of milder mien, who, after reference to a large volume—up and down the columns of which he hunted with a red, spatulate finger—directed the visitor to Block A., Ward F.

Elizabeth made her way into a wide, varnished corridor. A trolley bed was drawn up near a door, and two nurses waited by it. A large lift, of a size to take the bed, filled the well of the staircase.

At
Eliz
bran
side,
glass
scrui
El
of s
beati
Pu
enter
Th
struc
In
shut,
whic
has k
A
El
nurse
"M
she o
"I
wom
one o
Sh
A
Anot
with
a cen
flaunt

After climbing a flight of spotless, stone stairs, Elizabeth found herself in another wide corridor branching from right to left. From it, on either side, opened large doors, the upper portions of glass, through which opened vistas of clean, bare, scrubbed floors and neatly arranged beds.

Each ward was numbered. Up another flight of stairs and yet another she climbed, her heart beating fast from the exertion.

Pushing open a door marked F., Elizabeth entered the ward itself.

The large windows were all open, and the air struck chill after the greater warmth of the passages.

In a bed near the door lay a woman, her eyes shut, and on her thin, worn face the etherealised look which comes into the face of every mother who has but lately endured the pains of childbirth.

A nurse with an infant in her arms approached.

Elizabeth waited, and in a few moments the nurse came towards her.

"May I see a patient called Reona Lindhaw—she only came in yesterday?"

"Lindhaw," said the nurse—a young and pretty woman—"Oh yes, Lindhaw. The last bed but one on the left."

She hurried away towards the ward kitchen.

A woman propped up on her pillows was sewing. Another read a paper; a little girl, listlessly playing with a doll, turned and gazed after the visitor. On a centre table vases of daffodils and narcissus were flaunting gaily. And there, in the last bed but one,

lay Roona, her white, ravaged face seen clearly in the grey, afternoon light from the uncurtained windows.

Her eyes were shut, and she seemed to be sleeping. But presently, as she stood by the bed, Elizabeth saw the tears ooze slowly from under the thick lashes.

The girl's beautiful, waving hair was combed back and plaited, and some kind nurse had tied the soft, loose strands over her forehead with a pale-blue ribbon.

A ward maid brought a chair, and Elizabeth sat down by the bed.

The patient in the next bed turned away that she might give the visitor greater privacy.

"Roona," said Elizabeth very softly.

The great, brown eyes opened and closed again, but not before the misery of the soul they mirrored had cut into Elizabeth's heart.

She tried to speak, but speech seemed futile. On the face of the woman, as on the face of the girl, slow tears coursed down.

The nurse moved briskly about the ward. The traffic of the great thoroughfare near by sounded louder and less loud, as the gusts of wind blew louder or less loud.

In the spacious, clean, bare room, with its neat, white covered beds, the pulse of life seemed beating very faintly. And then came the weak, fierce, protesting cry of the babe, lifted from its mother's arms, and the laughing, consoling voice of the nurse.

"
able
tell
T
"
I ou
F
lay
eyes
"
Eliz
brou
Sh
"
Sv
"
you,
Th
"
Couk
"I
"M
till I
Th
able c
"I
Tory
safely
For
lay si
ceased

"Roona," said Elizabeth again, "are you comfortable here, dear child? Are they kind? Won't you tell me if there is anything I can do for you?"

The girl seemed scarcely to hear.

"And Roona—your mother. What about her? I ought to have thought of her before."

For some time longer Elizabeth sat, and the girl lay there silent, heavy lids veiling her miserable eyes.

"I am afraid, dear child, that I must go," said Elizabeth at last, and she laid the violets she had brought on the pillow.

She rose from her chair, and then Roona spoke.

"You did say 'don't forget me,'" she whispered.

Swiftly Elizabeth turned.

"I said it, and I meant it. I shall never forget you, dear. I shall come to you again very soon."

The girl once more opened her eyes.

"Tory—my little dog," she said, "and my picture. Could you take care of them, Madame?"

"Indeed I will."

"Mrs. Lancy said she'd keep him and my picture, till I could see about it——"

The girl's voice trailed away: she seemed incapable of any effort.

"I will go and see Mrs. Lancy. Be sure that Tory shall be well cared for, and your picture kept safely," promised Elizabeth.

For a moment or two more she stood, and Roona lay silent, again inanimate. Even the tears had ceased to flow.

It was with a saddened heart that Elizabeth walked away.

She stopped for a moment to speak to the little girl whose doll now lay neglected. The child brightened and smiled.

"Those is very pretty," she said, gazing at a bunch of violets pinned into Elizabeth's coat, and put out a thin, little finger to point at them.

Elizabeth unpinned them.

"Would you like them?" she asked.

"I would. I would, if you please," said the little girl.

She took them and smelled them, and smoothed the petals delicately.

"Shall I bring you something else when I come again? What would you like?"

The child looked at her earnestly.

"I'd like," she said slowly, "I'd like some silver paper—that what they wraps up choc'lates in."

"And don't you want the chocolates too?"

"Yes," said the child, "but I would like that shiny paper *very* much. Will it be long before you come again?"

"Yes," said Elizabeth, "I'm afraid it will. A whole week. But I can send the shiny paper in a letter, and then when I come again you shall show me what you have done with it."

"I makes it into balls," said the child, "it's lovely!"

Walking down the stairs—those hundreds of spotless, whitened stairs, Elizabeth's passionate soul glowed red and fierce within her.

"T
comes
every
make
At
Elizab
there f
severe
Eliz
short t
two w
talked
"It's
uncom
with g
will be
best fo
the hos
she add
"I c
that I
been to
looks b
the nur
"If y
you wo
suggest
"I v
take me
From
same c

"The girl knows she'll do the paying when it comes to trouble," Ethel Horrocks had said. "And every woman who accepts that doctrine, helps to make it possible," raged Elizabeth.

At the foot of the stairs a nurse passed, and Elizabeth asked the way to the matron's office, and there found a small, kindly looking woman in a neat, severe uniform.

Elizabeth made known her business, and in a short time some attraction in the natures of these two women had drawn them together, and they talked with interest and sympathy.

"It's a sad story," said the matron, "and no uncommon one. She may pick up for a time, and with good food and nursing it is likely—if so she will be drafted to Hesdon. It is difficult to do the best for such cases here. We are not smart like the hospitals, but we do our best for our patients," she added, smiling.

"I can't tell you how much happier I feel now that I have been here," said Elizabeth. "I have been to hospitals, but never to an infirmary. It all looks beautifully clean and comfortable. I watched the nurse upstairs and she seemed so kind."

"If you are interested in such matters, perhaps you would like to see some of the other wards," suggested the matron.

"I would indeed, if you can spare time to take me."

From ward to ward they went: everywhere the same cleanliness, the same order. It was the

quietest hour of the day, and in the neat, white-quilted beds the patients lay, some few reading, some working, some staring drearily.

Elizabeth paused to look at some beautiful drawn thread work, at which an elderly woman was sewing. She had a humorous, cheery face.

"Poor soul—she is nearly crippled," said the matron later, "every day she loses ground, but she is always cheerful."

A baby began to cry indignantly. It had been fed, and now discovered that its bottle would yield no more sustenance.

It was a quaint tadpole looking little object about seven months old. The nurse hurried to it, took it up and cuddled it fondly, then held it out for the matron's inspection.

"It doesn't look as if there were much the matter with it," said Elizabeth.

The matron laughed and kissed the fat little hand.

"Not much the matter with you, you scamp, but we can't say the same about your poor mother," she added in a low voice.

The nurse spread a blanket on the floor, and put the child down upon it before the stove.

It kicked and roared, but was soon pacified, and transferred its attentions to a fat, stuffed, grey rabbit with an expression of silly amiability.

"You keep special wards for consumptive cases?" asked Elizabeth.

"Oh yes," answered the matron. She opened a door.

"F
atmo
As
wind
"I
the n
with
She
kitten
crown
"Is
mothe
soul!"
In t
high p
from t
partiti
rose ar
Eliz
"Oh
"A
rare th
thing i
"Bu
and lis
"Th
Earl.
most o
custom
the trou
world

"Here is one. You notice the difference in the atmosphere.

As in the ward in which Roona lay, all the windows were open and the air was chill.

"Let us see your baby," she went on, addressing the nurse, who, disappearing for a moment, returned with a tiny bundle.

She moved the flannel wrapper aside, and two kitten-like blue eyes blinked in a wrinkled, red face, crowned by a thatch of dark hair.

"Isn't she a little beauty—five days old. Her mother has been in for the last three months, poor soul!"

In the next ward, divided down the centre by a high partition, the scene was much the same, but from the end of the room, on the other side of the partition, came a distressing moaning cry, which rose and fell with almost automatic regularity.

Elizabeth's nerves thrilled to it.

"Oh, what is that?" she asked anxiously.

"A delirious case," said the matron. "It's very rare that we have one in these wards. The poor thing isn't suffering," she added kindly.

"But how dreadful for the others who must lie and listen."

"They do not feel it as you would feel it, Mrs. Earl. Think of the wretched homes from which most of them come: they have never been accustomed to privacy and quiet. They do not face the troubles of life from your standpoint. In your world circumstance often may be bent to your

will: in theirs they are bent to the will of circumstance."

They had left the ward and the matron opened a door opposite.

There in a row set close together were three beds, and on each a child sat. The room was clean and bare, and a high guard protected the stove.

On the right was a little, brown-faced thing, with large, round eyes and a cockatoo crest of dark hair.

It stared seriously, and then its little face dimpled into smiles.

The babe on the left, commonplace and plain, hugged a torn picture book to its breast.

Elizabeth smiled in sympathy with the brown-faced infant; looked at the child with the book, and then at the centre figure of the trio.

With great, blue eyes glowering in a chalk-white face, under a mop of copper-red, waving hair, her delicate clear cut features convulsed with rage, sat a little girl of some two years.

She stared fiercely; and then, recognising in the matron a friend, she threw out one dramatic little arm towards the child with the book.

"Book!" she said, "book!"

"Has Robby taken your book, Rhoda?" asked the matron.

Rhoda threw a glance of malignant fury at Robby, who clasped the book still tighter, and gave a peevish cry. The cockatoo-crested baby gurgled cheerfully.

"'Ook," he remarked, "'ook!"

E
upor
attra
wave
came
fasci
wave
out
cont
"J
and l
Fr
form
Coyl
agair
delici
the b
white
"'
laugh
Th
turne
Rel
"T
Rhod
know
Rhod
illnes
ones i
"T
to tro

Elizabeth took up a teddy bear which was lying upon the floor. Fixing her eyes upon the unattractive Robby she approached, making the bear wave its arms and dance. Nearer and nearer she came; the book slipped from the clasp of the fascinated infant, his greedy, pig-like eyes never wavered from the advancing toy. His hands shot out to receive it, and snatching it away he grunted contentedly.

"There, Rhoda," said Elizabeth, as she leant over and laid the coveted book upon the bed.

From a malignant fury, Rhoda suddenly transformed herself into a thing of sheer bewitchment. Coily she turned her head, pressing her cheek against her shoulder, cuddling her fists under her delicious chin. Beneath the shadow of her lashes the blue eyes smiled: the red lips curved over tiny, white teeth.

"'Ook, 'ook!" said the cockatoo baby, and laughed as at an entrancing joke.

The matron waved her hand to the children and turned to the door.

Reluctantly Elizabeth followed.

"There's another case something like yours. Rhoda's mother was a shop girl: her father—who knows? The girl died when her baby was born. Rhoda is here because there has been infectious illness in the workhouse, and we took those little ones in out of harm's way."

"The girl knows she'll have to pay when it comes to trouble." And not only the girl, but the child.

What fate waited for Rhoda, with her delicate, white skin, her beguiling, blue eyes and the passions bequeathed to her to keep them company? No relations, no friends, no place in the world, but what a workhouse brat may scrape and scratch for herself!

When Elizabeth emerged again into Porlock Street, it was already dusk. Mrs. Lancy's uninviting dwelling was now her goal.

Past mysterious looking premises, the windows screened by wire blinds, past newspaper shops, tobacconists, and cheap restaurants, in the windows of which sausages and strange looking pieces of food sizzled in white enamelled pans, she made her way; and, somewhat uncertain of her direction in this unknown quarter, eventually emerged by Lexington Street and Windmill Street, past a flaringly illuminated picture theatre into Shaftesbury Avenue.

Turning to the left, she reached Dean Street, and pausing at a nice looking *pâtisserie* to buy some cakes and chocolate, she at length reached the dismal house in Tranter Street.

The bell seemed to have suffered since her last acquaintance with it. At first it made no sound; then, pulling with a firm hand, the handle remained dangling at the end of some inches of wire.

As she waited for the door to be opened, Elizabeth tried to coax it back into its normal position.

After some time, Mrs. Lancy made her appearance. She seemed a little unsteady on her

feet,
wrap
and p

"I
shoo
sh-ou

Sh

"I

beg

"I

Ther

that

can't

M

rema

forw

W

rema

the s

Ve

door

So

bark

M

the

first

"

T

The

Tor

rou

feet, but smiled benevolently at her visitor. Her wrapper looked dingier, her wonderfully crimped and puffed *coiffure* precisely the same.

"I'm glad to see you, de-ar," she remarked and shook Elizabeth warmly by the hand. "Lady's sh-out—ground floor—sh-it down."

She opened the door and sat down, still smiling.

"I've come to thank you for all your kindness," began Elizabeth.

"Don't trouble—no trouble, my dear—poor girl. There's many end like that. Roona wasn't one for that perfession. A girl who can't—can't—girl who can't——"

Mrs. Lancy seemed unable to deal with the remainder of her sentence. Her head lurched forward and she slumbered.

With a jerk she awoke, and staring earnestly remarked once more: "Girl who can't," gave up the attempt and again slept.

Very gently Elizabeth arose and, shutting the door softly, retired to the passage.

Sounds of laughter and gay voices and the shrill bark of Tory came to her ears.

Mounting the dark stairs, she felt her way across the little landing, and knocked at the door of the first floor back.

"Come in," cried a girl's voice.

The door opened to disclose a little tea party. The fair-haired girl, her child, the dark girl, and Tory, a pink bow tied to his collar, were collected round a little table.

Tory and the child were perched upon the bed, to the side of which the table was drawn close. There were crackers and a cake, with three candles alight.

The hostess sprang up. "Well, I never," she cried. "Why, it's Roona's lady!"

Tory danced excitedly, yapping shrilly meanwhile.

"Lady have some cake, mummie—lady have some cake!"

"Oh, don't let me disturb you," cried Elizabeth.

"Lady have some cake," insisted the child.

The mother looked at Elizabeth doubtfully.

"If you'd stay and have a cup of tea, Babs and I would be so pleased. It's my Babs' birthday," she explained.

"Oh, I should like a cup of tea. I've been out all this cold afternoon, and I am so tired!"

The fat girl stood up.

"I can sit on the bed," she said, "can't I, Babs? And the lady can have the chair."

"Thank you very much. Babs, will you come and see what I have here. I think a nice fairy must have told me that it was your birthday."

The child slipped off the bed and came to Elizabeth.

"In there?" she asked, pointing to the parcel.

"Yes—in there."

The little fingers fumbled importantly with the string and paper.

"Choc'lates, choc'lates!" was the glad cry.

"Say 'Thank you' nicely to the kind lady, Babs," instructed the mother.

"How old is the little one?" queried Elizabeth.

"Tell the lady, Babs."

"Three years old," said Babs, as well as she could, with her mouth full of chocolate.

The young lady having finished her tea was instructed to say her grace, and then clambered on to the bed again and began to undress a doll.

Tory, patted and petted by Elizabeth, whom he seemed to regard as a long lost friend, composed himself to sleep and the three women talked uninterrupted.

"I came to thank you all—you were so kind the other night," she explained.

Both the girls declared that they had done nothing, and then the black-haired one, whose name it appeared was Julie, said good-bye.

The hostess, whom Julie addressed as Louie, begged her visitor not to hurry away, and asked for news of Roona.

"I have just been to see her," said Elizabeth sadly. "I'm afraid she will never be better. The doctors think that it will be a month or two—perhaps less. It seems so sad."

Louie made no response, conversation on such a subject was a little difficult.

"Roona asked me to see Mrs. Lancy and take charge of her photograph, and arrange about her little dog."

"I'd like to keep the little dog," said Louie, "Babs loves him. I'd be very kind to him," she added. "I've been used to animals."

"Well, if you can keep him, Roona and I will be

very grateful. If anything happens that you don't want him, you will let me know, won't you? This is my name and address." She took a card from her purse and laid it on the table. "About the photograph?"

"Mrs. Lancy has it?"

"I don't quite know," and Elizabeth hesitated.

Louie looked at her amusedly.

"Did you see her this afternoon?" she asked.

"Yes," said Elizabeth.

Louie laughed. "You'd better let me tackle her—I'm used to her—if you don't mind waiting a minute."

She left the room.

Babs was playing contentedly with her doll, talking importantly to herself, and Elizabeth sat and watched.

"The girl knows she'll pay when it comes to trouble"—and the child? Rhoda in the workhouse ward. Little Babs in a back room in Tranter Street.

Louie returned with the photograph. Both women looked at the weak, handsome face.

"Good-bye," said Elizabeth. She kissed the child and patted the little dog. "Perhaps I may come and see you and the little Babs again?" she asked.

As the door shut Tory whined and gave a piteous howl. He was an affectionate small dog. The swift changes of his life made him feel uncertain and unhappy. Trotting up and down the parade at St. Leonards-on-Sea, the treasured pet of some old lady taking the air in a bath chair, he would have been a peaceful, happy beast. Poor little Tory!

CHAPTER XIX

NANA moved about the room, drawing up the blinds and putting out her mistress's attire, and Elizabeth lay, trying to wake herself and feeling deadened with sleep.

"I don't think I can get up," she said despairingly, "my head aches so"

"Why not take a rest, ma'am?" suggested Nana. "You've been looking as if you needed it, I'm sure."

"I really think I will. Oh no, Nana, I can't. Lady Juliet's bridesmaids are all coming at twelve. I must be there."

"Well, I suppose so, but it's a pity you ever took to that shop-keeping, Miss Elizabeth, and so I always have said."

"Then, my dear soul, for heaven's sake don't say it again," Elizabeth murmured fretfully.

Nana left the room, and Elizabeth, making a great effort, arose. She felt tired mentally and physically and thoroughly irritable. After her bath she revived somewhat and dressed in haste, for she was already late.

In the dining-room Nina was dancing on the tips of her toes to an audience consisting of Monk, who

for once appeared in all the simplicity of his biscuit-coloured plush skin.

"Don't, Nina; you know you are not to dance on your toes without your blocks; you might put your toes out of joint."

"I might," agreed Nina.

Elizabeth's atmosphere of irritation had already enveloped the child and she spoke pertly. Her mother repressed a desire to answer sharply.

"Come and begin breakfast—grape-nut morning, isn't it?"

A saucer full of this food awaited Nina, and by it stood a jug of cream. The child gave a final pirouette, caught up the monkey and set him down with a bang beside her place, so upsetting the cream jug.

"Oh, Nina—how tiresome you are!"

Elizabeth rose and began ladling up the cream. "How many times am I to tell you not to put Monk on the table?"

"He likes sitting on the table," said Nina.

Elizabeth longed to shake the child, instead she took up Monk, wiped some cream off him and threw him on to a chair.

Nina scowled. In spite of her dark lashed blue eyes and delicate pointed face she looked a little demon of ugliness.

"I can't eat my grape-nuts without any cream," she observed.

"Then eat something else. What shall I give you?"

Nina leaned back in her chair, surveyed the table,

and pondered deliberately: "I might have an egg—or I might have toast and butter—or I might——"

Elizabeth took an egg, cut off the top and put it with toast and butter in front of the child, poured out a cup of milk and set it by her, and began to eat her own breakfast.

Nina continued to lounge indolently in her chair. "I didn't say I really would have an egg," she drawled.

Elizabeth forced herself to take no notice and opened one of her letters. When she looked up again, Nina, the egg still untouched, was arranging fragments of grape-nuts in a pattern on the cream-stained patch of table-cloth.

"Nina," cried her mother again, "what are you doing?"

"It's a dirty table-cloth already. It doesn't matter if it's a little dirtier." The child spoke with a weary "well, what now" air, and deliberately added another crumb to the collection.

The blood rushed to Elizabeth's face, her temper flamed. Jumping up, she took the sticky little hand and slapped it sharply.

Nina's face whitened, the tears rushed into her eyes, but she would not let them fall. She scowled again, tossed her head, and walked out of the room.

Elizabeth sat down, her elbows on the table, her head resting on her hands. Remorse for the loss of temper, vexation with Nina, and a weary dislike of life in general possessed her. For some time

she sat, then with an effort forced herself to finish her breakfast and went to put on her hat. This done, she looked into the nursery to see if Nina was ready to make peace.

Nina, who was being dressed for walking by Nana in the intervals of eating bread and butter and drinking milk, gazed at her mother as one whose attention is suddenly attracted to a stranger of disagreeable appearance. Elizabeth shut the door; peace-making must wait until a later date. As she was looking for her umbrella in the hall, Mrs. Frogmore appeared.

"I should be obliged, ma'am, if you could spare——"

"I can't," said Elizabeth hastily. "Lunch as usual, and——"

Mrs. Frogmore, quite unmoved, continued: "I should be obliged, ma'am, if you'd make it convenient to spare a few moments." She opened the door of the drawing-room.

Her mistress almost stamped with impatience.

"What is it?" she demanded. "I'm in a great hurry this morning."

Mrs. Frogmore gazed at her severely with one eye, the other apparently probed through the open window into the grey vista of roofs and chimney pots.

"It's a matter, ma'am, that I'm obliged to mention," returned Mrs. Frogmore slowly and rebukingly. "I should be obliged, Mrs. Earl, if you will accept my notice for this day month."

"Well," cried Elizabeth, her temper flaring again,

"I
afte
mor
M
quit
eye
whic
"
she
repr
I can
I'd r
"
Eliza
Sc
Frog
wobl
"
she p
"
M
"I
El
deser
elect
thoug
her
marr
Mrs.
Sh
to con

"I do think that is horrid of you, Mrs. Frogmore, after four—nearly five—years to leave me at a month's notice. And for what reason, pray?"

Mrs. Frogmore continued to gaze at Elizabeth, quite unimpressed by her indignation. The blind eye was now fixed upon a photograph of Sir James which ornamented the writing-table.

"When I say a month it is in a manner of speaking," she observed, and her tone was that of a kind reproving parent to a foolish, passionate child. "If I can suit your convenience to a week or two, ma'am, I'd not bemean myself to do otherwise."

"But why do you want to leave?" queried Elizabeth.

Something resembling a blush spread over Mrs. Frogmore's bleak countenance. Her blind eye wobbled, the other gazed modestly at the floor.

"Well, ma'am, I've decided to settle myself—" she paused.

"Settle yourself?"

Mrs. Frogmore looked a little offended.

"I've accepted an offer of 'oly matrimony, ma'am."

Elizabeth's brain spun. Her presence of mind deserted her. She stood and gaped at the bride elect. Why or wherefore she did not know, but the thought, 'Then I must marry Jimmy,' flashed across her mind. It seemed inevitable that she should marry Jimmy if Mrs. Frogmore married. Who was Mrs. Frogmore to marry?

She gained possession of her senses and hastened to congratulate her serving woman.

Mrs. Frogmore bore her honours unmoved. " 'Is name's Mott," she stated, " Caleb Mott—a gardener—a gardener 'e's been since ever I remember 'im, and a most respectable man, which was before I married Mr. Frogmore, when I was head kitchenmaid at the Grange. 'Twould 'ave been better perhaps if I'd taken him then. But the Lord knows best, they do say." She made this statement as if in mere deference to public opinion.

" How romantic ! " cried her mistress. " And has he loved you all these years ? " Inwardly she was shaking with laughter. Mrs. Frogmore as a heroine of romance ! How Jimmy would revel in the joke.

But Mrs. Frogmore looked a little shocked. " It's to be hoped not, ma'am, seeing as I was a married woman," she reproved. " But Mott 'es come to the time of life when a man likes 'is comforts, and 'e knows the wife I was to Frogmore, though him being a weak wondering silly as never understood when 'e was well off 'ad no appreciation of it. But it's not for me to speak ill of the dead. So you see, Mrs. Earl, as I shouldn't 'ave inconvenienced you for no trifle."

" I do indeed," admitted Elizabeth, " and I congratulate you very much and hope you will be very happy."

The future Mrs. Mott sniffed. " I've never 'ad much use for so much 'appiness. I keep myself to myself, clean my 'ouse and do my duty in that state of life as it 'as pleased the Almighty to put me."

She
the ch
for. I
clean,
As I
and th
presen
slatter
that de
marry
notice
Nina's
Oh de
though
mad d
She wo
silly gi
with a
violets
" No,
want a
don't w
that. I
The v
tale of
morsel
'ungry l
Eliza
have fiv
The v
'em, lidy

She opened the drawing-room door. "Then it 'ill be the chicken for Miss Nina and a jelly as she wished for. It's time as the dining-room 'ad a thorough clean, so I'd best be getting to work at it."

As Elizabeth walked shopwards, her mirth faded and the tiresome side of the Frogmore-Mott alliance presented itself. She had visions of a procession of slatternly, incompetent general servants. Well, that decides it; I must marry Jimmy. But I can't marry Jimmy just because the Frogmore's given notice! It's absurd, she told herself angrily. Nina's white scowling face flashed before her. Oh dear, why was life so difficult? Then her thoughts flew to the shop, and she suddenly felt a mad desire to smack unoffending Miss Emmett. She would have to interview Juliet and a crowd of silly girls. For a moment she paused. A woman with a dirty baby and a basket half full of withered violets seized the opportunity to beg.

"No," said Elizabeth impatiently. "No, I don't want any.—Shall I telephone to Margot—No, I don't want them"—and say I'm ill? Oh, I can't do that. I must go through with it."

The woman still followed, droning out her stale tale of woe: "Five little children at 'ome, not a morsel of food, lidy. Take a bunch, do, lidy. Five 'ungry little children at 'ome."

Elizabeth turned on her fiercely: "How dare you have five little children?" she demanded brutally.

The woman gaped astonished. "The Lord sends 'em, lidy," she began.

"He doesn't," stamped Elizabeth, her blue eyes blazing.

The woman looked frightened, her silly mouth fell open, she hitched the basket further up her arm and hurried off, gazing over her shoulder now and again as if she feared that Elizabeth might pursue her.

She, poor soul, hurried on. "The devil is in me this morning," she thought. If she had not been in the street she would have cried. A fit of unreasonable remorse overcame her and she pressed a shilling into the hand of an astonished crossing sweeper, who backed a winner with it and went home that night handsomely drunk.

Before entering the shop Elizabeth stood on the doorstep trying to calm herself. "What is it all about, what is it all about?" she kept asking herself; and indeed she did not know. She looked at the window; it appeared dull and unattractive.

"Doris," she said sharply as she entered, "the window looks like a funeral. Do find something bright to put in it. Why not the pink satin model?"

"I thought, Madame, that——"

"Well, never mind. Just put it in," replied Madame, with scant patience.

Miss Emmett was sitting at her desk and gave the usual prim good morning. One of those tactless souls who pursue a corkscrew-like progress through life, regardless of all but their own goal, she at once began her recital:

"If you please, Madame Delaine, Mrs. Phipps has returned her pink dress and says—" she turned to the basket at her side for a letter—"she ordered the sleeves three quarters and a back panel. Madame Green and Miss Fort say she never said a word about the panel. Then Downe's haven't sent Mrs. Lucock's feather as promised, and the wedding is to-morrow, Madame Delaine."

"My God," said Elizabeth, "if you worry me any more I shall go mad—yes, mad!" she repeated fiercely.

The Emmett flushed. "I'm sure I'm sorry, Madame Delaine." She spoke stiffly.

Elizabeth left the room. On the stairs she met Margot.

"Margot, don't let anyone worry me any more," she implored. "I can't bear it to-day, I simply can't."

"Come into the dress-room," said Margot, and she took Elizabeth's hand. The touch of the cool, capable fingers seemed to calm Elizabeth's nerves at once.

"Go and ask Miss Emmett for the sal volatile, please, Miss Fort. Sit down, Madame; you'll feel better directly." Her beautiful low voice quieted and soothed.

Elizabeth drank the sal volatile and lay back in her chair. Margot sat near by, kindness and quiet control personified. Presently Elizabeth laughed.

"Oh, Margot," she said, "I've slapped Nina, Mrs. Frogmore's given me notice, and I stamped—yes,

stamped at a poor woman in the street because she had a dirty baby and 'five 'ungry little ones at 'ome.' ”

“I daresay Nina quite deserved to be slapped,” opined Margot placidly; “and of course no woman should have six children if they have to go hungry. I don't suppose she has any children really, or if she has she'll probably take them all to a picture palace to-night in plush pelisses, and they'll eat peppermints. But Mrs. Frogmore! why is she deserting you?”

Elizabeth recounted the tale.

“Oh dear, oh dear,” laughed Margot; “it's almost too good to be true. Do let us make her hat for the wedding! Now, if you feel able, will you look at the patterns I have for Lady Juliet? I have sketches, patterns, and estimates for dresses at eight, nine, and ten guineas.”

At ten minutes to twelve the bridesmaids began to arrive. First came Julius' nieces, the Misses Burke, accompanied by an elderly governess—tall, fresh-coloured girls, greatly resembling their goat-like uncle.

They did so hope the dresses would be pretty and not too expensive and not all floppety; they did hate floppety things.

Elizabeth handed them over to Miss Fort and bade her amuse them.

The red-haired Lilian and dumpy Nora Nordham next arrived with a maid. Nora was indeed dumpy. She talked and laughed continuously, and swept up

Elizabeth, Margot, and Doris into a cheerful, friendly heap, appealing to them all in turn. She too hoped that the dresses would be pretty and quite regardless of the Burke party—whom she did not know—confided at the top of her ringing voice that Juliet hadn't an atom of taste, and would probably dress them like Sunday-school teachers! The red-haired Lilian was shy and said nothing.

Nora picked out two sketches which she greatly admired, but doubted if Juliet would let them have what they wanted—hadn't Madame Delaine noticed what an obstinate little thing Juliet was?

The words were scarcely out of her mouth when Juliet, Janet, and the unobtrusive Parsons appeared. There was a babel of talk and of introduction. The Misses Burke bleated, and Nora welcomed the tasteless, obstinate Juliet with fervour. Janet twittered and the red-haired one still remained dumb.

The duchess' favourite, Lady Agatha Moore, now appeared. She was a tall, graceful, and very pretty girl, with a sweet, quiet manner. A hush fell upon the other girls as she came into the room, and they greeted her with some deference. The Burkes bleated nervously when introduced.

Madame Delaine watched the little scene.

"Margot," she whispered, drawing her assistant aside, "show Lady Agatha the sketches and tell her the prices. Find out what she intends to have and let me know."

At this moment the Soames girls made their appearance in charge of their mother. All three were

meek and quiet looking ; near neighbours of the ducal family, and well accustomed to obey the mandates of Antonia the oppressor.

More talk, bleats from the Misses Burke, loud cheerful laughter on the part of Nora Nordham, and twitterings from Janet.

Meanwhile Margot returned to Madame. "Lady Agatha wishes to have Romney frocks of white silk muslin with soft rose-pink sashes. Rose-coloured shoes. Lamballe hats of lace and bouquets of white lilies tied with the pink ribbons. She has brought a sketch, but we are not to show it until the matter is decided. She says she will give eight guineas for the dress and two guineas and a half for the hat, and if ever a young woman knew her own mind it is Lady Agatha !"

"So," said Elizabeth, "I thought as much. The only two people who matter are Lady Juliet and Lady Agatha. A little flattery, a little firmness will meet the case with the others. Juliet will make a fight for it, but I put my money on Lady Agatha."

"And so do I," agreed Margot.

The bride elect approached Madame Delaine. "Oh, Mrs. Earl, do come into the other room with me," she begged. "You see," she continued, "I know just what I want. Janet and I have thought it all out. We want white satin and ninon dresses trimmed with silver lace, and bouquets of pink carnations tied with blue, and we thought black hats with blue feathers."

Elizabeth looked at her. "Exactly what you

would want, my dear," she thought. "And does every one agree?" she inquired.

A harassed look took possession of the bride's little face. "No, I don't think they do," she admitted. "Janet likes the idea, so does Julius, and I don't think Lilian or the Soameses will mind, but Nora's sure to want something odd. She's one of those girls who *is* so odd. She will wear quite low necks in the day time and ear-rings. Mamma told her about it one day when she came to tea."

Elizabeth pictured the scene: Antonia, stately, kind, ponderous, her little dogs upon her lap.

"But she didn't mind a bit. She told mamma it didn't pay to look like a lady in these days, and now she puts red stuff on her lips! But we must ask them," finished Juliet, "because their father's one of papa's oldest friends."

"And how about Lady Agatha—does she approve the white and silver idea?"

Juliet's plain little face now looked fretful. "No; she says she thinks it's rather commonplace. But I don't see why we should have to do just what Agatha says because she's a favourite of mamma's. It's my wedding."

"It is," agreed Elizabeth.

"And Julius doesn't like her. He thinks her opinions are advanced. The truth is," said Juliet cattishly, "Agatha means to marry Heuington, but he doesn't want to marry her."

Perhaps, thought Elizabeth, but he'll do it, poor good-looking lamb.

"Do you know what dresses Lady Agatha would like?"

"No—not exactly—something out of a picture."

"And what about prices? I don't think we can make anything nice under about nine guineas," suggested the wily Madame Delaine.

"Oh—nine guineas! I—we—thought about seven."

"Well, perhaps eight and a half," conceded Madame, "but I doubt if we could manage silk and ninon with silver lace for that. I'm afraid it would have to be something a little less elaborate."

"Do let me get Janet." She went to the folding doors. "Janet," she called.

Janet hurried to her sister's side. She was flushed and agitated. "Oh dear, they are so tiresome," she sighed. "No one wants anything like anyone else, and Agatha just sits and reads a fashion paper and won't help at all. She says when we've decided we can tell her."

"Mrs. Earl thinks that the white and silver dresses would be elaborate—do you think so, Janet? You know Julius doesn't like anything elaborate, and they'd be nine guineas, and we thought about seven, didn't we, Janet?"

"Oh yes," agreed Janet, who would have thought five or fifteen had her sister told her to do so.

"But Julius doesn't like fanciful things either," prosed Juliet, "he likes girls to look nice and like ladies."

"Exactly. Do you not think he would admire simple, white frocks with pretty sashes—blue, or perhaps a soft, dead pink would throw up your white gown better; and I think pink would be more becoming to Janet. These gowns I could make for eight and a half, or possibly eight guineas. Will you consider it while I consult Mademoiselle Margot for a minute. We are getting on," she whispered, "the seed is sown. Get hold of Miss Nora Nordham and see what you can do with her, let her imagine it's her own idea and then take the eldest goat—I mean Burke—in hand."

She returned to the twins.

"Don't you think if you were to talk over your last idea—white chiffon frocks with fichus and soft pink sashes—with the others?" she suggested.

The twins swallowed the bait. They talked.

By this time every one was becoming bored, tired and anxious to settle the matter. The bleating laugh of the Burke girls was heard less often, even Nora's vivacity was somewhat quenched.

Madame Delaine telephoned for Madame Green.

"Take the measurements as quickly as you can," she whispered.

Madame Green proceeded, helped by Miss Fort.

"Fix fittings for next week, then the dresses can be finished off immediately," Madame instructed.

"Now take Lady Juliet and Lady Janet to the large fitting room and show blouses to them there."

The twins bid their friends good-bye, the meek

Soames family departed, followed by the Burke party. The silent Lilian and the talkative Nora made their adieux.

Lady Agatha rose from her chair. She smiled at Elizabeth. "Here is the sketch. I am so glad every one likes the idea," she said sweetly.

"It is charming to find such uniformity of taste," agreed Madame blandly.

When Elizabeth arrived at her flat that evening she found a telegram from Sir James awaiting her.

"Arriving this evening dining Tommy before leaves for India telephone club when and where meet.—JAMES."

She sat before the fire with the flimsy pink paper on her knee, thinking. A decision must be made. Her thoughts were interrupted by the return of Nina from a tea-party. The child sauntered into the drawing-room, sat herself upon her mother's knee, rubbed her nose up and down Elizabeth's cheek and remarked :

"Well, we did have a row this morning, didn't we?"

"We did," agreed her parent.

"Silly," criticised Nina. "Sorry," she added after a brief pause.

"I am sorry too," said Elizabeth. She felt that she ought to utter words of wise admonition but Nina evidently opined otherwise.

"I should like to know why, when all dogs are

dogs, some are pugs and some are greyhounds," she observed. This and other interesting subjects of conversation made the half-hour before bed-time pass quickly.

"Nina can have her supper here, and tell Mrs. Frogmore to give me something to eat at the same time. I am going out again, Nana."

"Well indeed," replied Nana, "it would be more sensible I should say if you went to your bed. Now, Miss Elizabeth, do be said for once."

"I can't be said, Nana. I've so much to think of and I don't feel as if I could sit still."

She was walking restlessly about the room. Pausing for a moment she put her arm through that of the old woman.

"Well, my dear, you must do as you think best, for it's plain to see that you're fair moidered," said Nana. "We can learn wisdom for ourselves but it's seldom as we can set it before others. You must find out your own way. Not but what it's a pity you should go streiving out when you're that wearied."

Elizabeth smiled.

"Yes, Nana, I am fair moidered and nothing but streiving out will suit me. Give me my thick coat and don't expect me until you see me."

"You'll not be late, ma'am? It's not fit for you to be out and about by yourself, Miss Elizabeth."

"No, I won't be late, Nana."

Walking to South Kensington, Elizabeth mounted to the top of the first eastward bound omnibus. It

was a dark night for the time of year, cold and clear. The omnibus forged its way through the comparative dimness of South Kensington into the Brompton Road. The long stretch of Harrods' brilliantly-lighted windows caught Elizabeth's eye, and the vehicle stopping at that moment she gazed at a group of wax figures draped in sumptuous garments. The faces of these dummies leered wickedly at the passers-by. A group of girls looked and envied. In other windows quantities of unnecessary articles, unnecessarily adorned, met the eye. At Hyde Park Corner Elizabeth vaguely noted the heavy mass of St. George's Hospital, and the clear-cut shadow of the trees thrown on the smooth roadway, lit to a glittering brilliancy by the electric lamps.

Past the dark spaces of the Green Park, more slowly along the crowded part of Piccadilly almost solid with taxis hustling eastwards, across the thronged Circus, past theatre and music-hall Elizabeth journeyed. As the omnibus stopped before crossing Oxford Street, a smell of pickles permeated the atmosphere, becoming fainter as yard after yard of Tottenham Court Road was traversed.

It was here that the words of a woman speaking to a man penetrated Elizabeth's consciousness.

"I would go anywhere to hear him," she said, "he woke my soul."

The listener's mind took hold of the words.

"He woke my soul—he woke my soul," she found herself repeating.

Later the omnibus stopped, the man and the

woman began to descend. Obeying a vague impulse Elizabeth followed them. For a few minutes they walked along a dark road, then crossed a wide thoroughfare and paused outside a church. A band was playing the last bars of a clanging, trashy tune. Boys and men holding flaring lights stood round and people thronged the doors. Elizabeth followed and stood for a moment, then made her way to an empty bench in a side aisle.

The church was dimly lit. The band ceased and the organ took up the hymn tune, accompanied first uncertainly and then with fervour by the congregation.

Elizabeth looked round. There was scarcely a touch of colour in the crowded building; shabby, frowsy, black skirts; shabby, frowsy, black jackets, shawls or capes; a man's cloth cap, battered bonnet or sailor hat formed the dress of the women. Here and there a young girl or a child displayed some attempt at ornament.

In a line with Elizabeth stood a little imbecile girl with red, lashless eyes and a pink tongue lolling from her gaping mouth. She held a hymn book upside down and swayed her body in time to the music. Everywhere white, brutalised faces—the undeveloped noses and blotched skins, gruesome signs of disease and dirt—met the eye.

In her corner Elizabeth knelt, her head pillowed on her muff.

The hymn came to an end and the voices rose in prayer. Our Father . . . Thy will be done on earth

as it is in heaven . . . forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us . . .

The tears fell down Elizabeth's face—she made no effort to check them, no effort to think. All the sadness of this ugly, toiling world enveloped her. In spite of her disbelief of the Christian faith, here in this Church of Christ she prayed to that great Spirit of good, the God of every Faith.

The missionary's passionate exhortation mingled with her wordless prayer. "Be good—be good—be good," he cried. "It is all that matters. In this world, in any world, it is all that matters. No one can take goodness from you. No matter what your miseries, your sorrows, to you may belong that peace which passes all understanding. Though you were a king, a millionaire, your power, your riches cannot buy it. Oh, my people be good."

Elizabeth opened her eyes. The faces of the women enthralled her—still, silent, they craned forward, their souls aglow.

Elizabeth shut her eyes again. She felt that she could not bear to look.

Her own life seemed to unfold before her. There seemed in it no peace, no time for thought, no right balance of cause and effect. She had battled through the years clutching impatiently at joy, at excitement, suffering, raging, always fighting, fighting for what?

The missionary's voice ceased, then rose again in intercession. The voice of the congregation was uplifted. An old woman with a lined, patient face sat with bowed head.

"Oh, my Gawd, oh, my Gawd," she whispered, and then again, "Oh my Gawd."

And Elizabeth prayed with her "Oh, my God, oh, my God," and with that vague prayer for she knew not what there came to her tired soul some understanding of that peace of which the missionary had spoken. That peace which passes all understanding and which is the crown of no one faith, but of all those who have in their hearts the love of God.

"Ten o'clock," said Elizabeth to herself as she entered the flat. "I suppose Jimmy will still be at the club."

She went into the dining-room to the table on which stood the telephone.

"Hullo—Hullo—57700 Gerrard please. No! 57700. Yes.

"Are you 57700? So sorry—wrong number. Hullo—Hullo—I say, exchange. Yes—you gave me the wrong number. I want 57700 Gerrard. Yes, 57700.

"Are you 57700? Really—that is the second time. What fiends these people are, aren't they? Yes, ring off, please, thank you.

"Hullo—Hullo—Hullo. What is the matter with you. Yes I have twice—57700 Gerrard. Can you hear! Yes 57700 Gerrard—no.

"Hullo—Hullo. I'm still waiting. Nonsense. It's a club—there must be someone there. No I tell you. For heaven's sake send the clerk in charge.

"Hullo. Hullo. Hullo. Hullo. Yes I did.

Are you the clerk in charge? Do you think you could find an operator who could ring up 57700 Gerrard?

"Thank you so much. Yes—only about ten minutes, oh pray don't trouble, it's not an atom of use, just let me have 57700 Gerrard now. Thank you. Are you 57700 Gerrard? Is Sir James Hirst in the club? Take my number in case we are cut off, please, 3273 Kensington. Mrs. Earl would like to speak to Sir James. Thanks. Yes. Is that you, Jimmy? Yes. I am in a passion—I've been ringing away at this horrible telephone for nearly twenty minutes. Yes, of course it's too late now. Certainly not. Yes, to-morrow I could lunch with you. Yes. Come to the flat about twelve. I shan't be going to-morrow morning. Yes. And—Jimmy—I've finished thinking. Yes . . . Yes . . . Yes, I did say yes . . . Good night, Jimmy."

CHAPTER XX

“WELL, that’s that,” said Sir James cheerfully, “Nina, with £600 a year, is well provided for. The settlements I am making provide for you. I can see no reason why you should not make a present of the shop to Miss Margot. She’s been well worth £800 to you, Elizabeth.”

“She has indeed.”

“I want you to let me settle all the trade accounts up to the day on which she takes over the business, and pay £100 over and above,” went on Sir James. “Delaine’s must do a little advertising to make up for customers who will drift away now that you are not there. I calculate that this will bring up the capital to some £1,200. What are the book debts?”

“About £600 at the moment, I think,” replied Elizabeth. “Miss Emmett gets in the accounts wonderfully well. The average credit is six months, but of course there are a good many people who only pay yearly and others who take even longer credit.”

“Do you think that the concern can run on £1,200?”

"Yes—at present. But if the turnover increases fast Margot may need more capital."

"Well, there would be no difficulty in getting it then," said Sir James. "Your staff will all stay with her?"

"Oh yes," agreed Elizabeth. "She is very popular with them. Then of course Meriel and I shall go to her. I shall be quite a good customer, Jimmy. You don't know what an extravagant baggage you're marrying."

"Considering that we are middle-aged people," said Elizabeth a little later, "I think your behaviour is forward, James."

"Middle-aged be hanged," returned James. "Then you'd like that? We'll stay at Dover, cross and motor to Paris, put in a few days there and go on to the Riviera fast or slow, just as we feel inclined. Think of the sun and the blue sea, Bet."

"Delicious," breathed Elizabeth.

"We can do the buying while we are in Paris—it will save Margot something, and it would be difficult for her to get away just now. Oh, Jimmy, you know I shall hate it when I haven't a finger in the pie."

"There will be plenty of other pies, my dear."

Elizabeth sighed. She still hankered after that particular pie.

Mrs. Earl and her *fiancé* were sitting in the drawing-room of the flat clad in their best for Lady Juliet's wedding; meanwhile Nana dealt with Nina's toilette.

Nina had taken the news of her mother's engagement placidly. "He *was* engaged to me," she had remarked with a tinge of reproach. "Still, I daresay it's all for the best. You'll love me just the same, won't you, Jimmy, and then I can marry some one else if I want to?"

The engagement had been announced to the family some time since, and, as Sir James expressed it, appeared to give satisfaction. The public notification of the fact was to be found in the columns of the *Morning Post* that very day.

James was engaged in reading it aloud to Elizabeth when Nina made her appearance, in her bridesmaid's attire, followed by Nana.

"My eye," said Sir James, "we are a swell."

The child glanced at him with affectionate contempt. She was rather bored by her lengthy toilette.

The four packed into a taxi. Nina began jerking up and down on the front seat.

"If the springs were stronger and I weren't so strong it would shut me up like a pancake," she observed.

"Try and keep still or you will look as if you had been badly packed and sent through the post," implored her mother.

Nina gave a despairing wriggle. "I'll try," she promised. "Why do people fuss so about weddings?" she went on. "If I were Juliet I shouldn't be so pleased because I'd got to marry Mr. Burke. I don't think so much of him as all that. But perhaps

she wants to have a baby, so she's got to marry some one and he's the only one who asked her," she continued, unconsciously summing up the tragedy of many a woman's life.

Elizabeth looked at James, and James looked at Elizabeth. Neither felt able to contend with the situation. But Nana's nursery lore proved sufficient.

"Little girls should be seen and not heard," she admonished. "There's times for talking and times for silence, and for the rest of this day, Miss Nina, you'd do well to speak but when you're spoken to."

Nina gazed at her instructor meditatively. "I daresay you're right, Nana," she slipped her hand into that of the old woman, who pressed it fondly. "I've never been to a wedding since I was quite a little girl, so I don't know much about them," she continued. "I wasn't born, or I suppose I should have gone to your wedding, mum."

Having disposed of the subject she fell into one of her silent moods and gazed fixedly out of the window. A long string of carriages and motors was progressing spasmodically past the portals of St. Peter's, and out of the vehicles emerged many gaily-dressed ladies and a few sombre-coated males.

A strip of red cloth was laid across the pavement and marked the path to the altar. Crowds of women and children and not a few men craned forward to see the guests arrive. A murmur of approval greeted the appearance of Nina in her bridesmaid's finery, her sheaf of lilies held against her serious little face.

But before Nana could take her hand all seriousness had departed.

"There's 'Enery," she cried, and darted into the throng.

'Enery's crimson face widened into its habitual grin of welcome. "Mornin', miss," he observed, "you do look fine, miss."

Nana recaptured her charge and Elizabeth and Sir James joined the group. 'Enery greeted his friends with much pleasure; the crowd evinced an almost breathless excitement in the scene.

"Would you like to come into the church and see the wedding, 'Enery?" asked Elizabeth.

"I would, miss," replied 'Enery earnestly.

"Then come along, and keep close to me."

A murmur of approval went up from the onlookers. The incident appealed to the love of the sentimental which fills the heart of the lower middle-class Briton, and makes possible the vast circulation of a halfpenny press which wallows in mawkish sentimentality.

"Well, I call that sweet I do, no pride about 'er," criticised a young woman clad in an intolerable travesty of the latest fashion.

Several of the bridesmaids had already arrived, amongst them Lady Northearlham's Imogen, a ponderous child some two years younger than Nina. Lady Northearlham, tall, thin, elegant, excitable, sweetly and sillily fussing, writhed serpent-like about her offspring who looked forth, bored but resigned, out of large, blue doll-like eyes. Nina

and this young person stared each other up and down.

"I like you," said Imogen, after due consideration.

"'Sh," hissed the attendant Nanas gently.

"Do you?" queried Nina nonchalantly, but secretly much gratified.

"Yes," replied the young lady firmly and loudly.

"'Sh," hissed the Nanas again.

The bleating Burkes welcomed Mrs. Earl, the meek Soameses smiled meekly and the voluble Nora Nordham began voluble congratulations. To escape these Elizabeth hurried 'Enery into a pew and leaving Nina in charge of Nana made her way up the aisle. She paused to speak to Madame Green and Mademoiselle Bizet who with Margot had come to admire the result of their labours.

The congregation whispered and stared. Elegant youths ushered guests into their places and the organist played extremely well.

Antonia, impressive in grey velvet, with a bouquet of orchids, arrived on the arm of her handsome Heuington. Hoddy and Doddy made their way up the aisle, and Elizabeth became aware that Mrs. Steppings was smiling with piously restrained affection from the next pew.

There was a pause, and every one fidgeted.

Julius and a clerical best man appeared.

Every one fidgeted again.

The organ thundered forth, and up the long aisle came little Juliet shrouded and almost lost to view in the voluminous folds of a heavily patterned lace veil.

The duke, leading his child to the altar, wore his "damn dull dinner party" expression, leavened by an unwonted touch of sentiment.

Holding the gleaming satin train walked the two children, subdued and wondering, and following them came the procession of young girls led by a pink and pulpy Janet sniffing piteously.

The organ ceased and one of the many clergymen gathered together to marry the small Juliet to her large Julius, uplifted his voice.

"Dearly beloved . . . here in the sight of God . . . to join together this man and this woman . . . for the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other . . ."

Elizabeth's thoughts were back in the past—at the marriage of a young, ignorant, heedless girl—

"Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honour, and keep her in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all other, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?"

Beautiful words—a beautiful ideal. But to bind by such vows two young unknowing adventurers on life's way—

The patient, anguished voice of the old woman at the mission service sounded in Elizabeth's ears—"Oh, my Gawd—" and she herself prayed again, "Oh, my God."

To anyone no longer young a wedding brings many a sad thought of promises so happily made, sometimes so miserably broken; of lives saddened for want of the toleration which youth must always

lack, and unhelped too often by a knowledge denied by foolish convention to the young.

Elizabeth thought of the joys, the passions, the quarrels and disenchantments of her brief married life. She had come far since then, had she come far enough to bring to her second husband the help and comfort the one should have of the other?

And again she prayed, "Oh, my God."

The service had come to an end. Near relations and old friends had followed the wedded pair to the vestry. The organ played on as the congregation sat waiting the reappearance of the bridal procession.

The first phrase of the Wedding March sounded, and down the aisle came the bride—her commonplace little face softened and idealised by happiness—leaning on the arm of her good, kindly, prosy spouse. The little train-bearers, seriously attentive to their duty, preceded Janet, still sniffing, the Burkes followed, well drilled, stalwart young females, Nora Nordham all smiles, bobbing along like a cork in a choppy sea, the unnoticeable Soameses, the silent red-headed Lillian, and bringing up the rear, calm, beautiful, gentle Lady Agatha in her picturesque Romney draperies. Antonia, escorted by the chief Burke male relation (their great grandpapa most surely *was* a goat, thought Elizabeth, tracing the familiar features as members of the family moved past her), the duke, his "damn dull" expression melting fast under the glances of a remarkably pretty woman, handsome Lord Heuington. Elizabeth watched them all. The kindly face of Mary—her

hat slightly on one side, came into view. Meriel and her husband followed, with Hoddy and Doddy orange-haired and eye-glassed, in their wake. Elizabeth and Sir James joined the party and, pausing on the steps of the church, Elizabeth became aware of a meagre, excited figure, one twinkling mass of sequins, crowned by a jaunty toque of magenta roses.

"Oh, Miss Tuckett—how nice to see you."

Miss Tuckett clicked, her beautiful false teeth were widely exposed in a welcoming smile.

"Well, Miss Elizabeth—tut, tut, which I should say Mrs. Earl—and indeed it's mine the pleasure, and Miss Nina looking that sweet, quite the little angel I declare."

"Are you staying in London, Miss Tuckett?" queried Mary.

"With my cousin Matilda, as perhaps you remember, Miss Mary—now married and doing well in the Portobello Road. 'Twas a disappointment that she couldn't be with me, but she didn't feel justified in leaving the shop, considering as her husband was away on business. I'm making the most of my time, Miss Mary, seeing what's to be seen."

Miss Tuckett's head was jerking from side to side in her efforts to take in the cut and style of every female garment in sight.

"Not but what I can say I admire 'em altogether, what with the skirts that skimped and no fit about the body. But fancy me going on so and not one

word about the news I had from her ladyship's maid about you, Mrs. Earl. I couldn't have been more pleased, for from the very day as you and the gentleman took tea with me, I knew how it would be. I says to Ethel, and she can bear me out as I said it—I says to Ethel—You mind that young girl of mine, Miss Elizabeth—I says to Ethel, you mark my words, something'll come of that."

"Dear me! did you really, Miss Tuckett," asked Elizabeth, suitably impressed.

Miss Tuckett smiled so largely that something went wrong with the new plate. She veiled her small countenance in a pocket handkerchief with a pink border and clicked energetically.

"Well, Miss Tuckett," said Sir James. "I only wish you'd told me what would come of it; it would have saved me many a wakeful night."

Miss Tuckett looked up with coy delight, but her reply was interrupted by the appearance of Lord Roydon.

"Meriel's waiting in the car—she'll take you and Mary. Jimmy and I'll stroll round."

Adieux were said and shortly the three sisters entered the sombre portals of the ducal town mansion. Here again, as at Heuington, the floor was of chequered black and white marble, and gloomy pieces of furniture, on which stood what might well have been funeral urns, gave a crematorial-like air to the apartment.

The three ladies mounted the stairs, moved on by a succession of automaton-like footmen, the last

of whom confided them to the mute-like butler, who announced their names in tones of loud, clear gloom.

The duchess bestowed a few fingers of greeting, and as Elizabeth passed by patted her on the arm.

"I will speak to you later, my dear," she commanded, and Elizabeth felt a schoolgirl-like qualm. Of what sin had she been guilty? She remembered her engagement and hoped that her sentence might be light.

Within the large, royal blue drawing-room Mrs. Hare, picturesque and playfully fretful, fell upon her.

"And so you are going to marry that nice Sir James—such a dear. I really envy you."

Hoddy and Doddy followed. They shook Elizabeth warmly by the hand and gazed at her with kindly, light grey, eye-glassed eyes.

"Capital, capital," they said. "Jolly good fellow. Suit you awfully well, Elizabeth. Lucky chap."

A few steps further on Mrs. Steppings took up the tale. She was now in charge of grave, bearded Mr. Steppings, one of the several clergymen who had assisted in the marrying of Juliet. Mrs. Steppings in a Tuckett confection of dust-coloured *voile*, with a hat of the same mild shade surmounting her dust-coloured face and hair, looked rather like a sand heap. She smiled affectionately.

"Oh, my dear, I felt so pleased. I heard about it from Lady Roydon." She laid her hand on

Elizabeth's arm. "Every woman needs the care of a good man," she added impressively. Her eyes rested on the respectable form of Mr. Steppings.

"Dear Mrs. Steppings," said Elizabeth, and gave a little squeeze to the dust-coloured hand, and meanwhile she thought of Mr. Steppings, who preached two ready-made sermons a week—the doctrines in which were so varied that Meriel always declared that he bought them in mixed packets like cheap sweet peas—and collected stamps, while Mrs. Steppings battled with inadequate means and gawping country servants, taught in the Sunday school, held mothers' meetings, visited assiduously in the parish and adored Mr. Steppings. It really seemed, rather, that some men require the care of a good woman!

"Come and see the presents," suggested Elizabeth.

The magenta saloon resembled a silversmith's shop with a touch of jumble sale introduced. Mrs. Steppings inspected the gifts with the deepest interest, especially those presented by persons from her own neighbourhood.

"See, my dear, the Ellits sent a butter dish—so sensible, for every one must have a butter dish, and that lovely cushion with the view of the Castle of Chillon is from Ethel Tooney—she painted it from a photograph her mother had. Mrs. Mullins sent a silver photograph frame. Poor thing, she's never been herself since the birth of the twins. She almost broke down last Tuesday when I went to tea with her, for, as she says, never has there been

a year with so much going on and she obliged to miss it all. I promised to go and see her directly I return to tell her all about it."

"Please give her my love," said Elizabeth. "I do hope she will soon be stronger. Oh, what a hid—" fortunately a large card caught the speaker's eyes and she paused in time—"handsome cake basket," she went on hastily.

The handsome cake basket was the gift of Mrs. Dawes of "Ondine" fame.

"Such generous people," said kind Mrs. Steppings, gazing at the monumental object. "So useful in a clergyman's family for choir treats and suppers to the school teachers. But I never can help thinking of all the cleaning," went on the lady with a sigh. "Still, I suppose in Lady Juliet's position that need not be a difficulty."

A jewel table by the side of which a detective watched now attracted Mrs. Steppings' attention. The duke had presented his daughter with a neat restrained hair ornament of diamonds, sufficiently handsome to grace the head of a future bishop's lady and no more. The duchess had followed suit with a necklace of the same calibre. Lord Heuington contributed a diamond brooch and Lady Janet, giving way to the affectionate sentimentality of her nature, a pendant in the shape of intertwined hearts of diamonds framing two pearls. There were brooches, bracelets, a ring or two: all suitable if rather ugly. Mrs. Steppings was thrilled by the sight of these gems.

"A tiara," she murmured, "you'll scarcely believe that I could be so silly, my dear, but it was one of the dreams of my youth to go to a ball in white satin with a long train and a tiara like that on my head. But of course I never did," concluded Mrs. Steppings, to whom not to do what she wanted seemed the natural order of affairs. "Still," she added, looking rather apologetically at Elizabeth, "when the ladies in the parish speak strongly about the foolish way in which the village girls dress—lace collars and bead necklaces, you know, and even feathers—I always remember how I used to feel about that tiara."

Mr. Steppings who had been chatting weightily with a brother cleric now reminded his wife that they must take some refreshment before catching the four-thirty train.

Sir James joined his betrothed. Making their way towards the dining-room they were intercepted by Miss Nora.

"I think our frocks are lovely," she cried. "Every one thinks so. I am so glad you persuaded them to have my idea."

"So am I," agreed Elizabeth.

On the stairs they met Janet.

"Oh, dear Mrs. Earl, every one says our dresses are lovely. I am so glad dear Juliet had her own way about them," she dabbed her swollen nose with a damp handkerchief. "I'm just going to get the pendant I gave her—she wants to wear it," and she hurried on.

In the dining-room there was a stuffy smell of wedding-cake and heavily scented flowers. Before the fireplace, filled with ferns and palms, a beautiful background to her white-clad figure, stood Lady Angela. She smiled at Elizabeth.

"Our dresses are so charming," she said prettily, "it was so delightful of you to find a style to suit every one so well."

Lord Heuington, bearing a large plate of wedding-cake, approached. Across Elizabeth's brain flashed a vision of a boa constrictor and a poor, meek, beautiful, brown-eyed rabbit. But Miss Soames now timidly attracted Lady Angela's attention.

"The duchess asked me to say that she would like to speak to you."

Lord Heuington handed cake to Elizabeth with a gloomy air.

"Beastly things weddings, ain't they, Mrs. Earl?" he remarked. After an interval he added with a further excess of gloom: "My turn soon, I suppose."

"Oh no," said Elizabeth in her most consoling voice.

Lord Heuington's exquisite eyes looked quite pathetic. His inarticulate soul struggled for expression.

"Seems rough on a chap," he confided at length. "But I suppose it's got to be done."

"Don't you do it," said Elizabeth naughtily, "strike, my dear boy—strike. They can't make you marry, you know."

Lord Heuington was still looking at her; in his face dawned the expression of the dog who thinks that he may possibly escape the punishment of his misdeeds.

"Don't you do it," urged Elizabeth again.

At that moment the duchess and her favourite approached. Gloom again enwrapped the rich and beautiful young man.

"Have some cake, mother?" he asked, and in his voice was a hopeless note.

"Take Angela and give her some champagne," commanded the duchess, callously abandoning her rabbit to the boa constrictor.

"Sit down, my dear. Now what is this I hear about you?"

Elizabeth sat down and glanced guiltily at the questioner.

"I am en——" she began.

"Yes, yes," said the duchess. "Quite a nice arrangement—suitable in every way. A nice position which you must do your best to fill, my dear."

Elizabeth felt as if she ought to say: "Yes, if you please, your grace," and make a curtsy. What she did say was: "Thank you very much."

Nina put an end to the situation by burrowing through the crowd. She kissed the duchess affectionately and leant against her undulating lap.

"I'm enjoying this wedding," she observed. "I didn't think I should, but I am. Would you like to marry Mr. Burke?" she demanded in much the same

tone of kindly severity that Antonia had used to Elizabeth.

"No, my dear," replied the duchess quite obediently. "But fortunately it is not necessary that I should marry him." Her manner implied: "Had duty required even that of me, it should have been done."

The duke made his appearance.

"Ha ha!" he observed genially, "so I have to congratulate you, my dear. Lucky chap Hirst, good chap too, deserves a nice little wife." He winked confidentially, then turned to his duchess. "Juliet must be getting off in a few minutes," he said. "Come along, my dear."

The admiring Imogen, who had followed Nina and had been standing stolidly awaiting her opportunity, now demanded:

"What shall we do next?"

"Let's get some of the sugar part of the cake and go and sit on the stairs," suggested Nina.

"Bless me," said Meriel, who was grazing on sandwiches, "how I do hate weddings. Let's have a jollification this evening, Bet. We'll dine at the Ritz and go to a play. We three, Jock and Jimmy and Hoddy and Doddy. Now we'll see Juliet start, and then thank heaven we can go."

CHAPTER XXI

ROONA was lying propped up on her pillows when Elizabeth arrived to pay a last visit before her marriage and departure abroad.

The ward was unusually empty. The little girl to whom Elizabeth had sent the paper "what chocolates are wrapped in" was now at Hesdon and the beds on either side of Roona unoccupied.

The invalid looked flushed and seemed restless. She had been very bad again, she informed her visitor.

Elizabeth had brought her a few carnations and the girl tucked them into her bed jacket. With her red-brown hair tied with blue ribbon, the feverish pink of her cheeks, and the pink flowers on her breast Roona looked her loveliest.

To-day she seemed inclined to talk, inquiring after Tory, Louie and little Babs.

"I have arranged that if Louie cannot do with Tory for any reason, he is to be sent to my nurse who will be at Roydon, my sister's house, and there he will be quite safe and happy. I have packed up your picture and addressed it to you, and Mademoiselle Margot has the parcel in her charge. I am doing this, Roona, because I am going away for some time."

"Oh! Madame," cried the girl in a distressed tone.

"Not for very long—a month or six weeks."

"I do wish you weren't going. And the busy season coming on," commented Roona. "However will Mademoiselle manage without you?"

"Well," replied Elizabeth. "I really have quite a budget of news for you. To begin with I am leaving the shop—and very sad I am to leave it for many reasons."

"Leaving the shop? Oh, Madame."

"Mademoiselle Margot is going to continue the business. Everyone is staying on with her, and I hope she will do very well."

"They'll miss you," said Roona. She moved restlessly. "I wonder if I'll ever be back in the millinery. It seems sad you giving it up, Madame, after you've worked so hard."

"Well you see, I am giving it up because I am going to be married."

"Married," ejaculated Roona—"is it to that nice gentleman that used to come——"

"Yes. Sir James Hirst."

Roona held out her hand impulsively.

"Oh, I do hope you'll be very happy."

Elizabeth took her hand, but suddenly the girl wrenched it away.

"Everybody's happy but me," she cried. "It's cruel—it's cruel. And I'll never be happy again. What have I done, but there's plenty of girls that do it too and it doesn't happen like it to them?" She turned away from her visitor. "All this

time I lie here and I think, and I think and I think," she went on. "I don't seem to have had a chance. Look at father," she turned again to face her listener. "As early as ever I can remember, going on at mother, mother going on at him, never a moment's peace. He'd come home, if the family where he was butler was away, and he'd drink. And then he flings things up at mother. Then mother was always afraid that he'd lose his places and sometimes they had rows because of the money he spent. He'd spend it on taking the ladies' maids out, and when mother grumbled at him he'd ask her who she was to give herself airs.

"I don't believe he was my father really. Beast, I hated him. Mother as much as said so one day after they'd been quarrelling. Mother would dress me up and take me out sometimes, because she liked to hear people say how pretty I was and had her hair and eyes. But she didn't trouble much about me other times. And father all the while going from bad to worse, till he had to take job places and then waiting when he could get it. Mother put me into the millinery. I believe for a long time she had some money paid to her every week but I don't know for certain. She used to go to the dressmaking. There was nothing mother couldn't make." She paused and lay breathless.

"Do you think you ought to talk, Roona—doesn't it tire you too much, dear?"

The girl began fidgeting with her flowers.

"At last it came to father being so bad he couldn't

get any work at all and mother and I had to keep him. He'd drink all the money he could get and go on at us because he couldn't have more. I used to stay out all the evenings rather than go back to it. I went out with other girls and the boys would treat us. Often I've been ashamed to be seen in the shabby clothes I had. Why should I have had a home like that? It wasn't fair." She paused again.

"I am sure you ought not to talk so much," again objected Elizabeth anxiously.

"But I want to," said the girl fretfully. "There were weeks when I didn't feel as if I'd ever speak to anyone again. To-day it seems as if I must. Things are cruel for some girls. They are," she repeated passionately. "Look at me. All the time since I was old enough to know, I wanted a nice home with a nice sitting-room and a piano and things all pretty. And a father and mother who weren't always nagging and fighting. All my life I wanted everything that I didn't have. One night father nearly murdered mother; some one had treated him and he was mad drunk. That was the end of it. Mother said she'd not stay. She'd hardly any clothes then and no references, and that was why she went to Mrs. Benson who wasn't particular. Mother didn't mind much either if the money was good. I used to go and see her sometimes of evenings, and Mrs. Benson would come and talk and I'd trim up hats for her.

"Then father came back drunk again and he frightened me so I wouldn't stay. The beast! The

beast! Mother saw I couldn't after that, and then it was Mrs. Benson said I could come and share mother's room. It wouldn't cost her anything and I could trim her hats to make up. Sometimes of an evening if Mr. Benson—that's what the gentleman called himself who kept the flat for her—wasn't coming and she hadn't any one to go out with, she's have me into her room, and sit and talk and I'd brush her hair and we'd look at her clothes and things.

“ Mr. Benson was on the Stock Exchange. Mrs. Benson didn't care about him one bit; he was a tall, thin, solemn sort of elderly gentleman, and inclined to be mean, but she wasn't very young—thirty-six, though you wouldn't guess it—and it used to worry her thinking what was going to happen. One evening he came in and left early. He wasn't doing well and he'd told her he didn't see how they were to go on. He'd a wife and family to provide for. She began crying and had a brandy and soda and then another. She didn't never really drink, but that night she had enough and she sat and cried and told me things about her life. Her father was a solicitor in the country. Her mother died and her father married again and she'd several little brothers and sisters. There wasn't much money and her father was a stern man. Moira—that was her name—said she never had any fun; except at school. When she was sixteen she came home and had to help in the house and teach and mind the children. Her stepmother didn't like her much and she hated

being at home. She wanted to go out and earn her living, but her father wouldn't let her.

"Then she was found out carrying on with a young gentleman in her father's office, and he was worse than ever after that. He'd never let her go anywhere. It used to drive her mad. She'd ramp round and round her bedroom at nights she said. She was eighteen then and felt as if she'd never get out. She'd just stay there getting old and ugly till no one would want to look at her. She told me there were two old ladies that kept a little fancy shop and she'd look at them—one called Emily, who wore spectacles and had a wart on her chin, especially—and think that was what she'd come to. One day when she was out with the children she met a gentleman riding and he stared a good bit and she looked at him. Then she met him again one evening when she'd been sent out to the post. She managed to see him several times. She didn't know very much about him, but after a bit he offered to give her the money to go to London and said he'd be able to get her a place in a shop. He said he was sorry for her and for all girls kept strict like her.

"She cried and cried when she told me. But she didn't see that you could expect a girl to put up with the life she had, she said. She never wanted to be a bad girl, but she did want some fun and the chance of marrying some day. So presently she said yes. He never made love to her and she thought it was all right. She didn't care for him, only talked to him just for

the fun of it. He gave her the money and told her where to go to in London, and said he'd be coming up in a few days and she'd better go and see if she could get a place in a shop. It was in July and of course no girls were wanted then—he knew that, if she didn't. When all her money was nearly gone he came as he'd said. She didn't dare go back home, and what was there for her to do? He told her he was a married man separated from his wife, but he'd be good to her and take care of her. He was a bad lot if ever there was, she said. And then she began crying again. She'd no money and if Mr. Benson turned her down she didn't know what she'd do."

Roona was silent. She lay, her eyes shut. A sudden bright gleam of sunlight lit up her beautiful fragile face. Still with her eyes closed, she spoke again :

"Mrs. Benson's not to blame for what's happened to me."

She was silent again. Through the open window the noise of the distant traffic penetrated.

The nasal cry of a cats' meat man "mee-eet, mee-eet," was drowned by the loud metallic clanging of a piano organ. It began suddenly in the last few bars of some tawdry music hall tune. This finished, it moved further down the street and the distant cry of "mee-eet, mee-eet" was again heard and again obliterated by the clamour of the organ—plunging gallantly into the sentimental tunefulness of "In the Shadows." The vision of anxious, ageing Mrs. Benson crying in her common

little drawing-room faded, and Elizabeth saw again the opalescent heavy sky, the dim ochre stretches of the Southwold sands up which crept a grey and silent sea. She heard the rattle of stones against an old tin pot and Sir James's voice : " I sometimes think you had better marry me."

Roona shifted restlessly again. She fingered her flowers, and then the hem of the neatly arranged sheet.

" It all began that evening," she said, and now her hands were still and her eyes looked out across the wide bare room and back into the past. " Mrs. Benson said she couldn't sit there all the evening miserable like that. It was only nine o'clock, we'd go to a music hall and then to supper somewhere. ' I'll take you too—you can wear my lace dress,' she said. It fitted me near enough, with a few pins. By the time we were ready it was rather late : it took her a time bathing her eyes, after all the crying. We went to the Great Britain. There were performing dogs, and one like Tory that came in dressed in pink satin. It did make us laugh. It was just as we were leaving and going on to the Bertha for some supper that Mrs. Benson met an old friend of hers—though he must have been a bit younger. There was another gentleman with him—a good bit younger still.

" Mrs. Benson called her friend Frank, and presently he suggested we should all have supper with him for the sake of old times. Mrs. Benson and he had lots to talk about, people they'd known, places

they'd been to, so the other one . . . he talked to me . . . I'd never met a real gentleman to make friends with before. He talked to me just as if I were a lady. He asked Mrs. Benson if we'd come and dine with him and go to a music hall another night. Mr. Benson was away for a bit, so we went, and the other gentleman—he was a Captain Bernuth—came too. Then Lennie—he told me to call him Leonard, but Lennie seemed more like him—took me out one Sunday in a motor. We went on the river . . . I'd never been anywhere like that before.

“Mrs. Benson came sometimes, and then Lennie would ask another gentleman; but she didn't dare to come too often because of Mr. Benson. He'd been lucky and things were all right again.

“Lennie gave me a satin dress—a real evening dress—and a feather boa and lots of things. I did love to be all nicely dressed. I felt like a lady when I went out with him. Then Mr. Benson took the Bungalow at Bourne End for Mrs. Benson, and she asked if she could have me for company—he couldn't get down there often.

“Oh, it was lovely—like heaven. And Lennie used to come . . . He taught me to punt. We'd go out in the moonlight evenings . . . the river all in little silver waves and the dark trees. We never did any harm—Lennie knew I wasn't a bad girl. I wanted to be good. It made me feel I'd like to be the best I could . . . And then Lennie asked me to marry him. . . .”

Again her voice ceased. When she spoke again it was in level colourless tones.

"No one's a good word for girls like me. 'Bad women' they call us. And we'll go to hell. P'raps we shall. But I've had a piece of heaven."

Once more she was silent and the magnetism of her thoughts spread and captured the mind of the other woman, and she too felt the almost breathless glamour of those summer nights, and for a moment grieved that she would never know again the exquisite passion of youth.

Roona was speaking again.

"Then we went back to London. Mother hadn't come with us to Bourne End. Mrs. Benson just had a woman in. I'd told her I was going to be married. I told mother too. She said she'd believe it when I'd my marriage lines. The idea that I was going to marry a gentleman seemed to turn her against me. She'd nag at me and sneer about Lennie. Mrs. Benson was different. She was kind to me. But she'd her own troubles, for things began to be bad again with Mr. Benson.

"Lennie said he'd marry me in November, and then one day he came and I could see there was something wrong. He'd had an awful row with his father; there was some trouble about money and his father was mad with him. Captain Bernuth let out to Mrs. Benson that Lennie had got himself into a bother about a cheque, and it was then that we had words. She said things against him. I couldn't believe Lennie would do anything like that.

And if he did, his father was rich. Why should he have grudged him the money? He said he'd give him no more—except for his outfit, and then he'd buy a ticket for him to Canada, where he'd a friend who'd give Lennie a chance to make a start in business.

"I'd gone to meet him and have dinner, and we walked up and down Wardour Street, and he told me he couldn't marry me . . . not then . . . He daren't because of his father . . . But he'd never forget me; he'd send for me to marry him in Canada. . . . He was to go in a fortnight . . . There was only just two weeks . . . He promised he'd send for me and marry me. . . ."

The tears were in Elizabeth's eyes.

"Poor little soul, poor little soul," she murmured. Her heart beat fast. In imagination she fought the battle between love, the woman's inborn desire to give, to comfort, and the stern morality which bids her crucify herself and deny her lover.

Roona was speaking again. "And then he had to go."

Her voice was empty of all feeling; she might have been reciting the multiplication table.

"He'd kept back £10 out of the money his father gave him and he left me that. He'd pawned his watch and links and a tie-pin before. I thought I'd be able to manage, if I could go back to work until he sent for me. But after he went I was ill. I had the influenza and my cough was awful. I'd gone into a furnished room, and the landlady was kind to

me. But it cost a lot of money. I felt I couldn't write to mother . . . after the cruel things she'd said, and I'd had words with Mrs. Benson. I'd been so proud that I was going to marry a gentleman. When I was well enough I went out trying to get into the millinery again.

"I didn't feel sometimes as if I could drag myself about, still I went on. But in December they don't want girls . . . I got a place just for ten days before Christmas in the toy department at Burleigh's. It was only seven and sixpence a week, and of course after Christmas they didn't want us extra ones. And all the time I was waiting for a letter. . . . My cough used to wake me early, and I'd lie and cough and wait for the post to come. I used to feel so sick when I heard the knock that sometimes it would be ever such a time before I could go to see. At night when I came home I'd stand waiting and waiting on the doorstep. I couldn't open the door for fear there'd be no letter.

"Girls like me go to hell. I've been to hell already. . . ."

The expressionless voice went on again.

"I had to pawn my things and I owed the landlady.

"Then I thought I'd go and see Mrs. Benson. The flat was shut up. The porter said he'd heard that Mr. Benson had lost a lot of money. Mrs. Benson had gone and he didn't know where. Then I went to find my mother. Father had died—he had delirium awful, they said, and mother had moved.

I felt as if it didn't matter. Nothing did matter. I'd written five times and there never came a letter. I didn't care if I died, and yet I'd got to live somehow. I'd got to pay the landlady, and there was Tory too. Lennie gave him to me when we were at Bourne End . . . I made a pink coat for him like the little dog at the Great Britain. We used to laugh. . . .

"Being about with Mrs. Benson and then with Lennie I'd got to know girls at the restaurants we went to. Lennie would talk to some of them. It didn't seem to matter, and a girl who is pretty can earn a living that way when she can't any other. . . ."

"Oh, Roona," cried Elizabeth, "why didn't you come to me?"

"I didn't feel I could," answered the girl in her tired, indifferent voice. "I'd told them all I was going to be married. And I didn't care, really. I didn't feel as if it mattered, and that was the easiest way. But I wasn't much use for that life: the hot rooms and the cold streets, and sometimes getting wet, and the drinking. You have to take the drinks that are offered to you. And I was so miserable. I couldn't laugh and be larky. My cough was so bad too.

"One evening a man told me to go to the devil. I thought he looked as if he'd be nicer than some. He said: 'There's no getting away from you women.' I'd just a shilling left that night and owed my landlady. I walked home to Shepherd's Bush. It was raining and it was too late for a bus. I had to

leave that room. It was Louie who told me about Mrs. Lancy. Louie paid my rent for me that week. If it hadn't been that she couldn't bear to give up Babs, Louie could have married a man she knew. Louie helped me, but it wasn't any good. And then I was ill again. I used to lie scarcely thinking about anything. And then one night it seemed as if someone kept saying; 'Don't forget me; don't forget me.'

She closed her eyes and lay still.

"I wanted to tell you," she said a few minutes later.

Picture after picture in the tragic life of this child flashed before Elizabeth as if displayed on a cinematograph film.

When her eyes looked again at the material objects around her she saw that Roona was sleeping quietly.

A journey of some eight minutes in a taxi sufficed to transport Elizabeth from one world to another. She left the world of the poor and entered the world of the rich.

At Gemini's, the famous jeweller's, Sir James awaited her. The family diamonds in their ugly early Victorian settings were to be rearranged to suit the bride's fastidious taste.

One of the heads of the firm came to offer advice and proved to be a clever, interesting man, an authority on gems and their histories.

An hour passed quickly.

"We'll turn into Rumpelmayer's for tea," suggested Sir James.

Near by sat a party of Americans. One woman

wore a toque almost covered with costly ospreys, some ten pounds' worth of feathers was arranged upon the hat of the friend with whom she chatted.

A few tables further away an exquisite woman, over whose shoulders lay a stole of priceless silver fox, talked to a hideous podgy man.

Elizabeth poured out the delicate China tea into the elegant cups.

"A penny for your thoughts, Eliza."

Elizabeth started.

"I would sell them with pleasure," she answered.

"They are no comfort to me."

She repeated to Sir James the tale which Roona had told.

"It is the injustice of it all that maddens me," she ended.

"Poor child," said Sir James, and by his voice Elizabeth knew at once that he thought not only of Roona but of another girl long ago laid away in her grave in the formal cemetery of a neat little German town.

There was silence. Sir James took his tea-spoon and jingled it absent-mindedly against his tea-cup.

Elizabeth moved quickly in her chair.

"Oh," she thought irritably, "if Jimmy's going to fidget with spoons when we're married——"

And then James spoke. "It does seem bitter, rough luck," he said. "But, after all, my dear, when you come to think of it, we don't know—we who can never know the beginning or the end of any story."

THE END.