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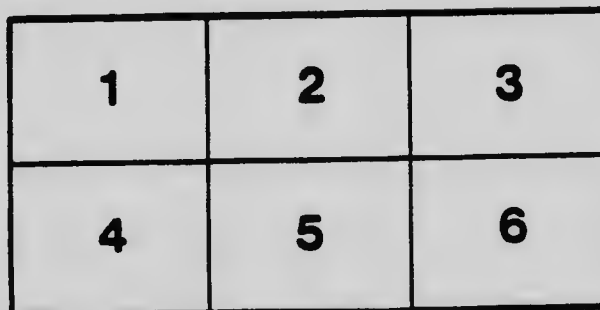
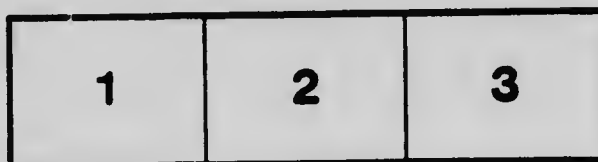
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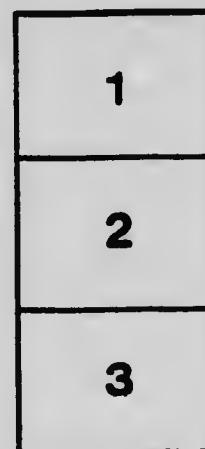
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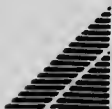
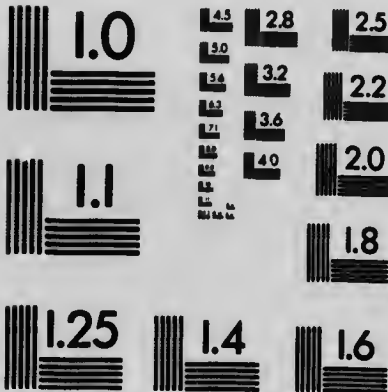
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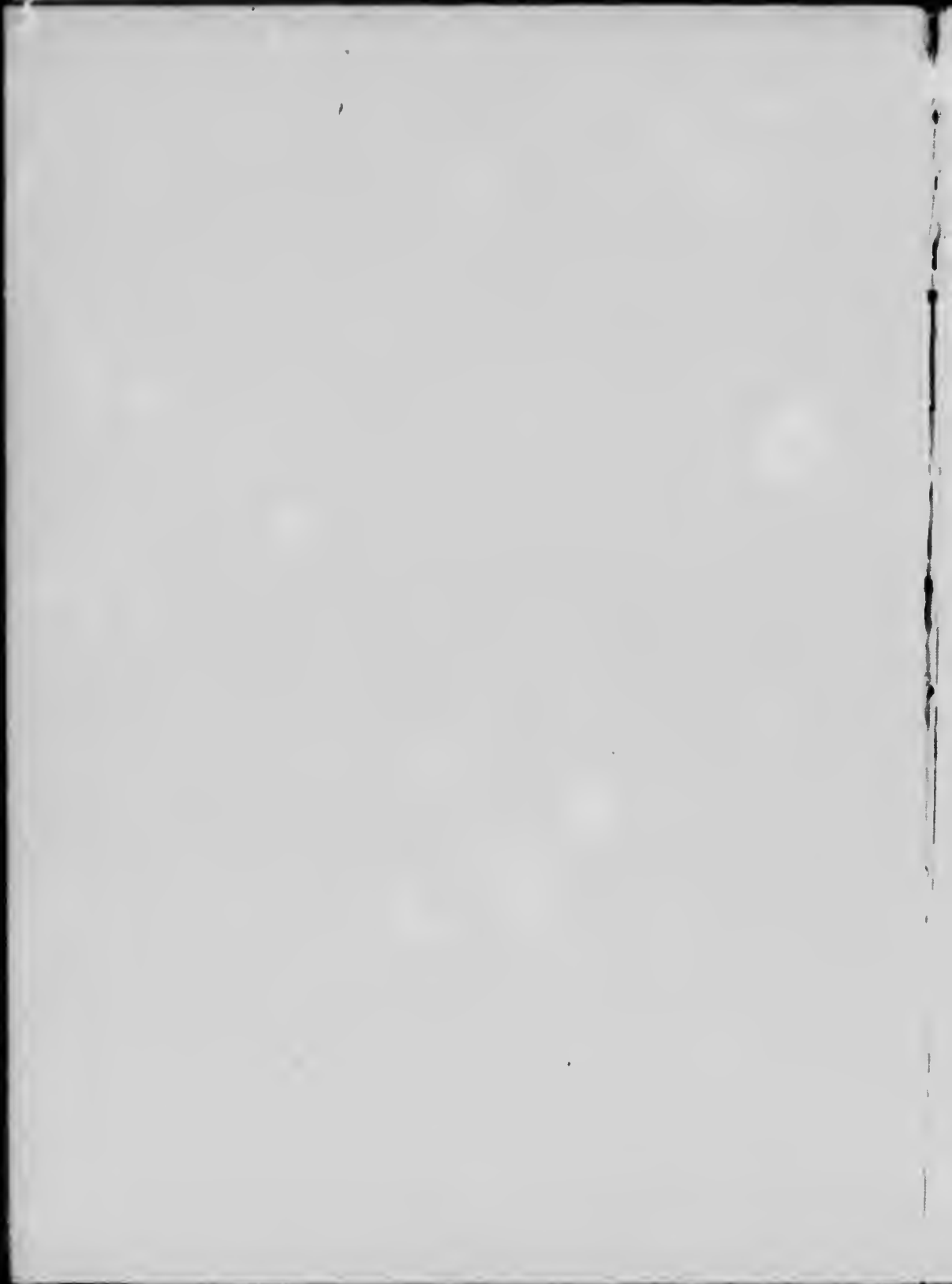


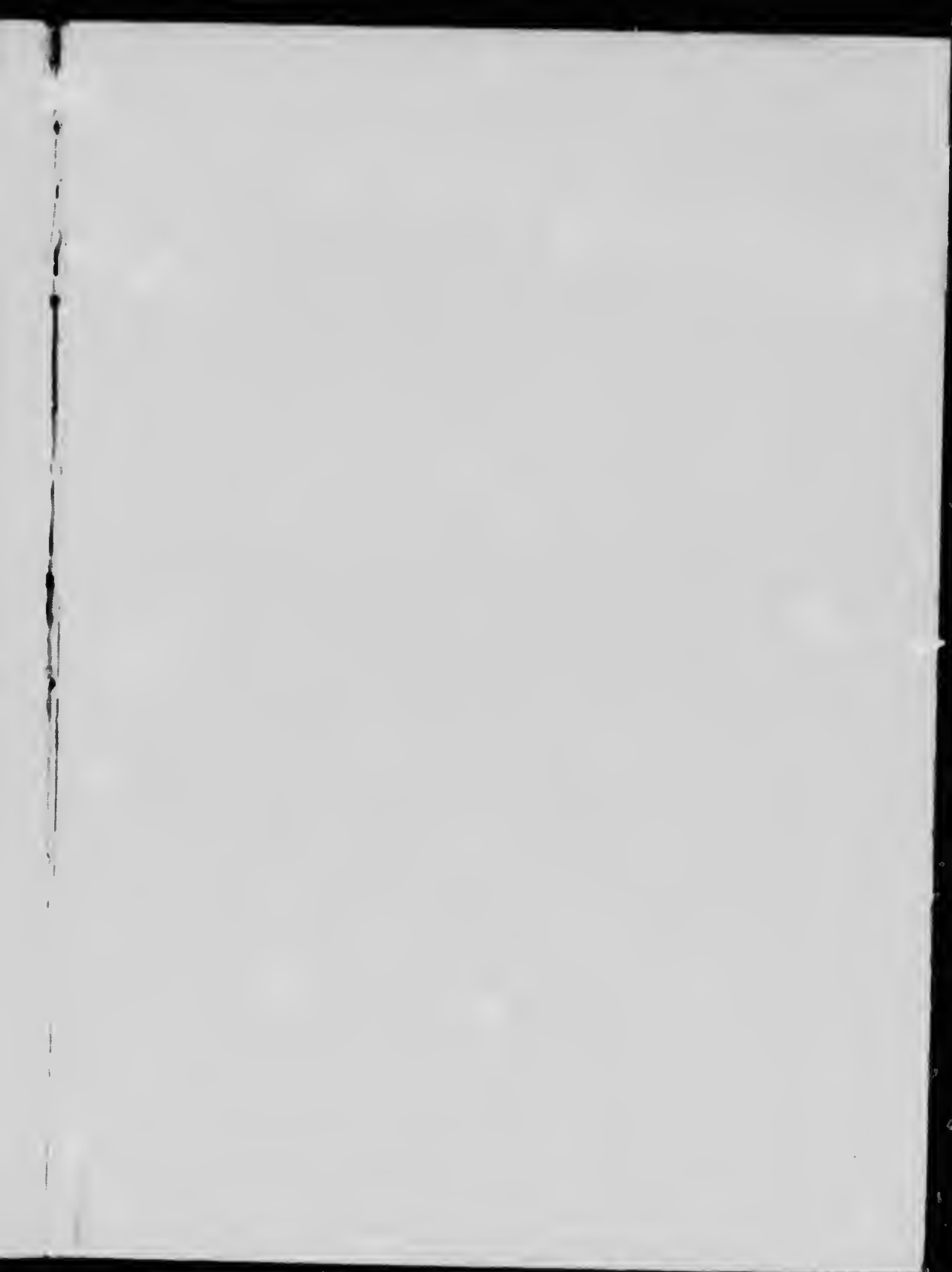
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THE BONDAGE OF RICHES







"They paused just a moment at the bottom of the road."

[p. 21.

A decorative border of roses and leaves frames the text. The roses are in various stages of bloom, and the leaves are detailed with veins. The border is symmetrical and ornate.

THE Bondage of Riches

BY
ANNIE S. SWAN

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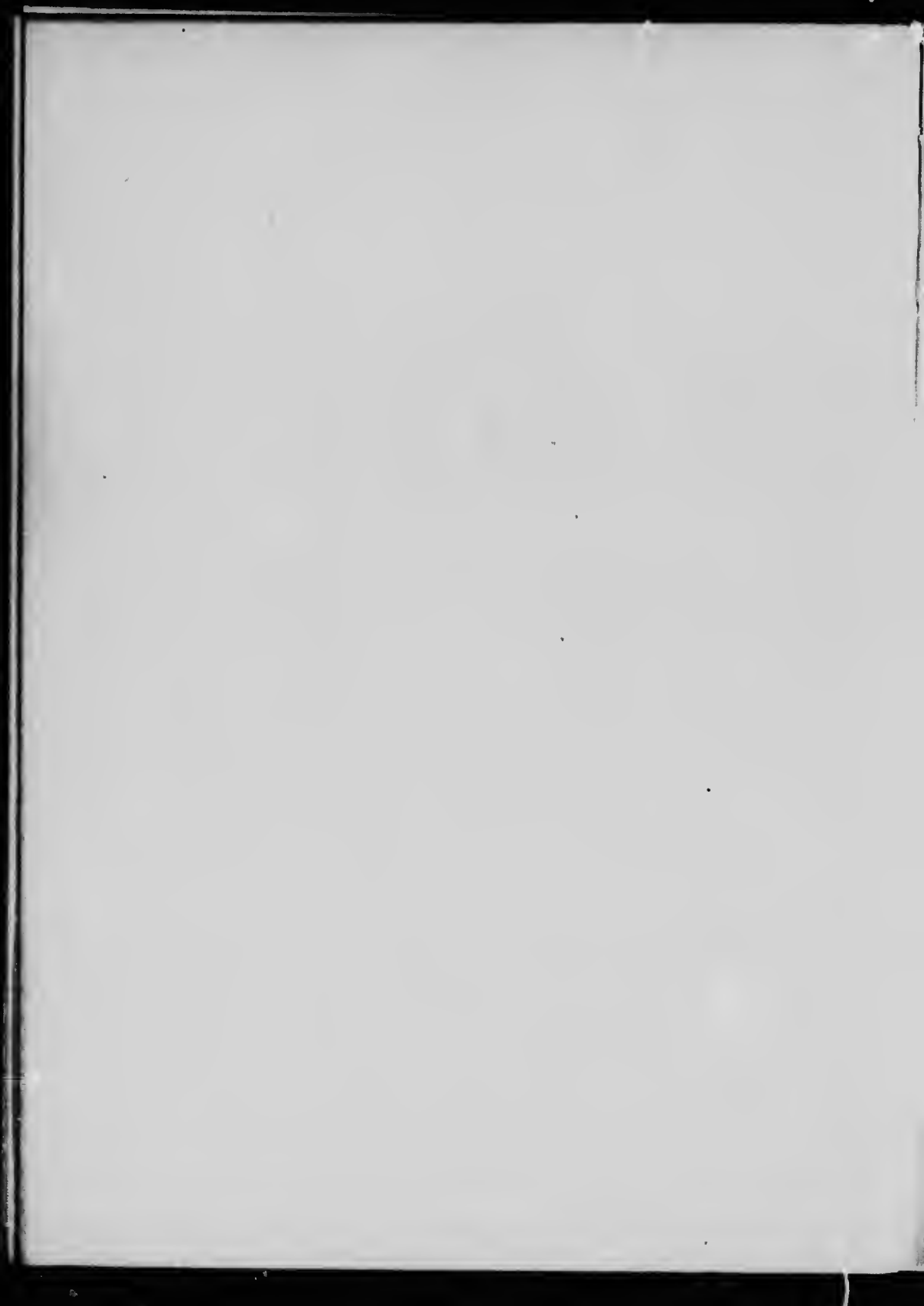
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THE BONDAGE OF RICHES.

CHAPTER I.

AS John Wycherley walked up the hill from the station to his suburban home his step was the step of a careworn man. He was then in his forty-eighth year, but looked at least ten years older. He was the ordinary type of the City man, tall yet firmly built, with a good square business head and a shrewd, yet not unkindly, eye. Wycherley had risen from the ranks of the very poor. His father had driven a market cart on the country roads of Evesham, selling therefrom the produce he had grown on the acre of garden ground surrounding his little cottage. He had been a hard-working, industrious, God-fearing man, who had brought up three children to love purity and truth and to respect work.

The eldest son had occasioned him a great

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deal of anxiety, and had finally, in his seventeenth year, run away to sea. Nothing further was ever heard of him, and it was generally supposed that he had been drowned at sea. His mother never recovered from the blow. The next child, Phœbe, married a young greengrocer in a comfortable way of doing in Evesham, but had died at the birth of her first child. John was left to close his father's eyes in death. He had been a great comfort to the old man, and was supposed by old Wycherley and all the narrow circle in which they moved to have done extraordinarily well. A plodder at school, without vices or any temptation in that direction, he had consistently walked in the way he should go from his youth up.

He had married young the daughter of a small farmer—also in the Evesham district—a brilliant, rather showy girl with ambitions. She was, perhaps, not the happiest choice John could have made for his own happiness ; but she had been a faithful, hard-working wife, and a good mother to their five children. None knew better than Wycherley himself that his success in the City—where he was head of a department in a great industrial store—was neither lucrative nor conspicuously honourable. He was merely part of a great

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machine, only acceptable to his employers so long as he did his work efficiently and made his department pay. The increasing competition, the introduction of new and sometimes doubtful methods into business life, had made Wycherley's position for a few years back one of extreme difficulty, even of peril. He knew that he held his post by the slenderest of threads, and that any day he might receive, if not his dismissal, at least intimation that his services were unsatisfactory. That day he had heard for the first time, though not directly, that changes were about to be made in the business and the whole staff reorganised. He had also been told, on authority he could not doubt, that he would be superseded at his post by a younger man.

His expression was slightly bitter as he toiled up the uninteresting slope of the hill, dotted with suburban homes and cut into innumerable suburban streets. The district was close to the Crystal Palace, and from the top of the hill a magnificent view was obtainable. Wycherley loved his home and took a great deal of pride in his garden, which he had brought to a complete state of perfection.

Wycherley thought of the household in No. 13, Goldhawk Road—the little double-fronted

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villa with the stucco pillars, named quite inappropriately "The Cedars." There was not a cedar in the whole district ; but the jerry-builder, at a loss for designations for his handiwork, had called in the aid of Nature, and had named every house in Goldhawk Road after a tree. Wycherley did not like to think of his wife or her comments when he should tell her what he had heard. He would not tell her, he decided, until it was absolutely necessary. But he should ask Ethel—the gentle, kind-eyed eldest daughter—to walk out with him that evening after supper, and they would discuss it together. Ethel was the very apple of his eye. She reminded him of his own mother, who had been one of those rare and lovely women who can make a home out of the poorest place.

Tom, who had been fortunate in obtaining an opening in a bank at Balham, would in a year or so be self-supporting. Clement, the third and the brightest boy, might have to leave Dulwich College, where his mother had insisted on sending him, hoping he would win a scholarship. But so far he had not been fortunate ; his gifts did not lie in that direction. Then little Phyllis, still at her day school in the neighbourhood, and Robin, the baby, made up the home circle, each unit of which would

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be affected in more or less degree by any change which might occur in the family fortunes. Ethel would be certain to wish to go out and earn; she was a very capable housewife, and entirely devoid of the kind of pride which is ashamed of work. Wycherley could depend on Ethel; indeed, he thought of her much as a man might think of a strong, capable friend on whom the utmost reliance should be placed. Yes, Ethel and he must have a talk. He hoped it would be possible for them to slip out for an hour after supper.

With this resolve he came to the bottom of Goldhawk Road, with its neat rows of houses and its even line of young trees on the edge of the pavement, which had flourished exceedingly, and in a few more years would make quite a respectable avenue. He found his wife in the front garden. She was fond of flowers, and took a great personal interest in the front plots, aiming at growing better roses than any of her neighbours. Wycherley thought how young and slim her figure looked yet, and how neat she was in every particular. She turned at the sound of her husband's step, which her sharp ear detected at some distance; but she did not smile upon him. She merely opened the gate with an indefinite air of recognition.

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"Good evening," said Wycherley. "You get a lot of pleasure out of the roses, dear Emma, and I must say they are uncommonly fine."

"They look well," she said, with an air of conscious pride. "I hope you aren't very hungry, John, because Tom and Ethel are at tennis at the club, and they can't get here much before eight. You know I don't like messing with two suppers."

"Oh, I can wait right enough," answered Wycherley quite meekly. "And where are the children?"

"Clement is playing cricket and Robin has gone to bed. He seemed a little tired and fretful. I suppose it is the heat. Was it very hot in the City?"

"Fairly so. It is fresh out here. We should be sorry to leave this house, shouldn't we, dear? We've had a good many happy years in it."

"I shouldn't be very sorry if we were going to a better one. I hope that will come soon. Ethel ought to have her chance, John. She really looked very pretty this afternoon in her new pink frock."

"But Ethel's quite contented, I'm sure, dear," said Wycherley, as he stood a moment on the step before turning into the house.

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"She likes her friends, and has a lot of them. Everybody likes Ethel."

"Yes, that's all right, but I don't care for the people she meets at the club, especially the men. What are they, anyway?—mostly bank clerks or clerks of some other kind; and I want to say John, that I don't think we should encourage Harold Crosfield to come here so much. Why, he has been here five Sundays running tea-time, and of course, though he pretends he's Tom's chum, it's Ethel he comes to see."

"But Harold is a very nice young fellow, and his people surely would be good enough."

"They are quite poor, and he has really no prospects. It would be quite disastrous for Ethel to take up with him. You know what it would mean: a little £20 house on the other side of the hill, and probably a baby every year. I don't want Ethel to have as hard a life as I have had, and she'll never be a manager like me, though I say it who shouldn't."

Wycherley walked slightly and passed into the house, his wife following a little slowly. She closed the door, and they passed together through the narrow hall, which ran the whole length of the house, and gave entrance to the back garden at the end. It was only

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a square yard, but the most had been made of it, and the arches covered with crimson ramblers redeemed it from the commonplace. The little lawn was beautifully kept; it was the exercise Wycherley took of an evening or early in the morning. They walked round it discussing the flowers, and finally sat down together on the bench just outside the garden door.

"I've been thinking about the holidays lately, John, and I think we've had enough of Seaford. Really, I was wondering whether we could arrange to have separate holidays this year; I could take Ethel to a hydro for a little change. It would be quite good for her, and she would see somebody other than our few neighbours here. Do you think you could spare ten or fifteen pounds for that? I'm quite sure it would be worth it."

Wycherley did not say anything for a moment.

"You and the boys could take a cycling tour somewhere, and I could send the children down to mother's. You know she is always pleased to see them, and they couldn't do better than Evesham from a health point of view. What do you think?"

"Does Ethel want to go to a hydro?" he asked doubtfully. "I always thought she liked

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a holiday at grandma's better than anywhere?"

"She would like it when she gets there, and it does give a girl a chance. We should go to a good one, of course—to Harrogate or Matlock, I thought. Don't you remember Lena Bakewell, who was at school with me? Her daughter, who isn't half as pretty as Ethel, married from a hydro; at least, she met her husband there, and he was of quite good family. Lena told me not long ago that it was likely she would be presented at Court."

Wycherley's face flushed uncomfortably. He was a sensitive man, holding somewhat old-fashioned ideas, and such planning for the future revolted him.

"I shouldn't like to do that, Emma. Ethel is not for sale."

She pursed her mouth up, indicating that she was displeased, and there was a moment's uncomfortable silence.

"It is I who have the full responsibility for the children, John; you don't take much thought for to-morrow, and you aren't very willing to help me. You may be sure I'm right—time will prove it."

Wycherley was silent a moment, then something made him blurt out the truth.

"I don't think we need discuss it at all at

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present. We should not agree, anyhow, but as things are at present in the City we should not be justified in laying out anything extra. The best thing we can do is for us all to take our holidays at granny's, provided she is willing to have us."

"I shan't go there. I was sick to death of it last year," she replied decidedly. "But what has happened in the City? I thought you were getting on all right, and I've been expecting any day to hear about that partnership we've so often joked about."

"We shall never get beyond joking about it, Emma, and there isn't the faintest chance of a partnership in Selby's. In fact, I'm a good deal depressed to-day. I went out to lunch with James Markham, and he told me that young Selby is coming in immediately, and that there is to be a complete reorganisation of the staff. It is even on the carpet that I may get my marching orders." He rose as he spoke, and his voice shook a little. Mrs Wycherley's face reddened.

"John, I hope James Markham was lying. He's always croaking, anyhow. You can't really think they'd ever do that! It would be too mean after the way you've toiled and slaved there for over twenty years."

"It's done every day though, Emma.

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Things are getting keener and keener, and I couldn't tell you how many men are actually out—men quite as good as I am, many of them better. But I hope the blow won't fall for a few more years, till we get the children launched."

"Don't you see," she said with a sudden flash of her bright, hard eye, "how necessary it is that Ethel should have her chance? If she were married to a rich man, he would be willing to help the family—at least, to do something for the boys. I really think that money ought to be expended next month. We must talk it over."

She was bitterly disappointed, and not at all inclined to be sympathetic.

Wycherley had never come up to her ideal of what a keen business man should be, and it is certain that had she been able to change places with him she might have made more of his business opportunities. She found it hard to forgive him, that she had still sordid anxieties in her middle life, when other women were able to take their ease in rich and luxurious homes. She did not take into account the fact that he had been a perfect husband and father, and that her personal happiness had really been a very exquisite thing.

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"Did you say they are at the Dennet Club grounds?" asked Wycherley.

"Yes; it's a match, but they expected to finish at a quarter to eight."

"I'll walk up and meet them, then," he said, and left the garden by the side entrance.

All his life long Wycherley had missed that warm, personal sympathy and community of thought that makes the chief joy of married life, though lately Ethel had made up for it. When he saw her flushed and happy, with a lovely light on her sweet face, come through the club-house gate with Harold Crosfield at her side, his heart warmed to her, and he thought what a goodly pair they made.

Harold was the son of a poor doctor who lived about two miles distant, and had not been able, through lack of means, to follow in his father's footsteps. He was engaged as a clerk in a solicitor's office, but just lately—indeed, since he had learned to love Ethel—he had become very discontented. He was a very good-looking young fellow, straight-limbed and strong, with a fine, open face, and that look of clean young manhood which is one of the most beautiful young things in the world. Ethel was his mate—a sweet English girl with a face like a rose, and a clear, laughing, yet earnest eye.

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"There's your dad come to rescue you from temptation," said Harold, as he waved his cap.

"Now I'm cheated out of my walk home with you; but I'm coming back later—Ethel, may I?"

"If you like," she answered demurely. "I wonder what brings dad. Don't you think he looks worried?"

"A trifle grave. Oh, good evening, Mr Wycherley; we were just coming. Tom has gone on round by Lavender Walk with the Tremletts. Have we been too long?"

"No, but I thought I'd like to walk home with Ethel; and you must be getting back to your own supper, Harold. This is your way, isn't it?"

They paused just a moment at the bottom of the road where the tram stopped and talked about the game of the afternoon; then, when the tram drew up, Harold raised his cap and darted off.

"I like that boy, Ethel, best of all the boys that come about," said Wycherley sincerely enough.

Ethel slipped her hand through his arm and squeezed it.

"Thank you, dad, I'm glad; because, you see, I like him very much."

"What does mother say about it, dear?"

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"I think mother would approve of Harold all right if—if he were rich," said Ethel with difficulty.

"Perhaps he will get rich some day. Has it become serious between you and Harold, then?"

"I know he cares, dad," whispered Ethel, turning her pink cheek away. "And I think he knows that I do too."

Wycherley patted the little hand which lay so confidently on his arm, and then Ethel's fingers closed over his.

"You haven't got anything fresh to worry you to-day, have you, daddy?"

"There is something, dear. I've just been talking to your mother about it," he answered, and then told her what he had heard that day.

She listened with a very earnest face.

"Darling daddy, don't worry. Everything will come right, and remember that we are all young and strong, and that we shall work for you if necessary. I'll speak to mother to-morrow. You know I've been wanting to go out for quite a long time, and Harold's mother told me about a rich patient of the Doctor's who wants a sort of lady-help. She said she would recommend me if I cared to apply. I could do all the lady requires perfectly well. I'll go and see her to-morrow."

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Wycherley's heart was full, and for a moment he could scarcely command his voice.

"Your mother will take it very hardly, dear; I spoke of it to her to-night."

Ethel very gently sighed.

"I quite understand, daddy, but don't worry about that either. Poor mother does so want a big house and heaps of money and servants and horses and carriages. I sometimes wish she had them just for a little, she would enjoy them all so much. But I'm quite sure that if real trouble came she would be quite all right and do wonders. Couldn't we go into a smaller house then, daddy? Don't you see, if I go out that would be a room less needed."

Then they passed into the house, and soon afterwards sat down to a well-spread and well-ordered meal, which did the utmost credit to the hands that had prepared it. Mrs Wycherley indeed was a splendid housewife, and was openly proud of her accomplishments in this direction.

As for John Wycherley, he was glad when the meal was over and the snow-white cloth was removed from the table.

Sinking into the worn but well-polished chair, he gave himself up to the miserable thoughts that crowded his brain. Here he was in the prime of his life an outcast—or

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nearly so—one of life's failures. He felt it a disgrace that he would not be able to provide for the wife and family. The fact that he had done his best was no consolation. He had proved his inability to keep pace with the world.

At that moment he stretched out his hand as if to ward off the tormenting vision, and he touched a long envelope on the little table at his side. Listlessly picking it up, he surveyed it in an aimless fashion. Presently he became aware that he was gazing at his name—"John Wycherley Esq." Oh, the irony of it all—"John Wycherley Esq!" Soon he would be again plain Mr Wycherley, and later on he would be scornfully recognised as one of the world's failures—an outcast, a nobody.

But what was in the envelope? It looked important, but then stockbrokers and others were in the habit of sending their touting circulars in such envelopes nowadays. Though he never expected to find anything to interest him, yet he carelessly tore the flap and withdrew a folded letter.

Mechanically his eyes read the typewritten words, and by degrees the purport of the letter began to dawn on his bedimmed brain. As he tried to realise the meaning of the words

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he read, his hand shook and his breath came in short gasps. Surely it could not be true? It must be the freak of a disordered mind. He was dreaming and presently he would awake to the grim reality and the knowledge that he was still an outcast.

The rustling paper in his hand brought him to his senses. Yes, the news must be true—for here was the letter. With difficulty his shaking hands grasped the arms of his chair and he pulled himself up straight. Only a minute before he had wished the very thing that was written down here in the letter. He read and re-read the words that were before him, but still he could not believe them.

His wife, who came bustling into the room at that moment, happened to glance at him, and noticing the pallor of his face and his staring eyes, stopped short before him.

"What's the matter, John?" she asked in alarm. "Who is the letter from?—I forgot to give it you. It came by the three o'clock post."

Without a word Wycherley allowed the letter to fall from his grasp. He seemed stunned, and leant back in his chair in a listless manner.

Silently his wife picked up the letter and

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read it closely. When she had mastered its contents a new light came into her face. The hard lines of her mouth became even harder, and she gripped the missive tightly. She accepted the facts in a more matter-of-fact way than her husband, but there was a curious gleam in her eye.

CHAPTER II.

"**J**OHN WYCHERLEY, John Wycherley!" exclaimed his wife. "Have you read this letter? Do you know what it is all about?"

"Yes, Emma, I think I do," Wycherley answered quietly, and without any sign of excitement or elation—a complete contrast to his wife, who was plainly burning with excitement.

"But you don't seem to realise it, that is quite evident. Why, it's a fortune, dear, coming to you, John Wycherley! Let me read it to you; I'm sure by the expression on your face that you can't have grasped the contents of the letter."

"Read it to me, by all means, Emma," he answered with a faint smile that might have been derision.

She began to read in her high, shrill, excited treble—

THE BONDAGE OF RICHES

"NEW COURT, LINCOLN'S INN,

"July 9th.

"DEAR SIR,—We have the pleasure to inform you that under the will of our late client, Halliwell Drage Esq., deceased, you have become his residuary legatee. The estate is considerable, comprising the Manor House and lands of Mitchelham, in Hertfordshire, and some town property. We shall be pleased if you will call upon us as early as possible to-morrow, when we can lay the whole important matter before you in all its details. We trust that we may still have the privilege of administering this estate, which has been in the hands of our firm for a great many years.

"We are, dear sir,

"Yours faithfully,

"YARDLEY, RANSOM AND CHARD."

"Who is Halliwell Drage, John? That is the first thing I want to know," said Mrs Wycherley in her most judicial and peremptory voice.

Wycherley's face flushed a little.

"Oh, he was an old chap whom I used to meet in a corner of the chop-house where I take my lunch. He was a queer old fellow; I never knew who he was or where he came

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from, actually. It was only lately I learned his name and he mine. I lent him half-a-sovereign once, when he had forgotten his purse, and he did not pay it back for nearly a year."

"So that was where that half-sovereign went, and you thought you had lost it, dear."

"No, my dear; I think it was you who assumed that I had lost it," he remarked mildly.

"And all the time you knew exactly what you had done with it. Oh, fie, fie, to deceive me like that!" she said with quite a coquettish air. "How long did you say you had been in the habit of lunching with the old gentleman at your chop-house?"

"A matter of three or four years, I should say."

"So long as that, and never found out a thing about him? That would have been impossible to me or to any woman."

"I daresay, but then, you see, I'm not curious, Emma. And we only met for about twenty minutes each day. The old chap merely had a sandwich and a cup of coffee every day, and he always left the waiter a penny on the edge of the tablecloth. On Saturday he left twopence, so that he might have one on Sunday."

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"Many rich people are eccentric like that," said Mrs Wycherley, with the superior air of one who knows all about the habits of the rich and great. "Tell me, what did he look like?"

"A very odd figure, a very odd figure indeed! Very short and his shoulders quite rounded. His hair was red, I believe, and he wore goggles."

"And did he carry a big umbrella very loosely tied at the top—a real gamp for everybody to laugh at?"

"I believe that he did."

"Well, he was here one day—yes, positively he was! I caught him peering over the railings, and as I thought he had an eye on my 'Mrs Richardsons'—they were just in bud then—I went out and suggested that he should move on."

Wycherley smiled, and she continued:

"Robin was coming home from school at the moment, and he told me that just a few steps further back the old man spoke to him, asked his name, and gave him a penny. When Robin offered him a kiss—you know how ridiculous that child is through Ethel's spoiling—he ran away."

"Mr Drage beyond a doubt, Emma! Well, it was very good of him to remember me in

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his will; it is pretty good interest on that half-sovereign."

"Do you mean to say you never asked for it back?"

"No, I never did. I thought he was very poor, you see."

"Oh, John, John, will you ever learn common prudence? You know you couldn't afford to throw away a half-sovereign on a poor, though interesting old man. But I forgive you this time, as it happened to be bread upon the waters. Why, wherever are you going now? Aren't you going to call the children in and tell them?"

"Hadn't we better wait till we hear some definite facts about the legacy? Perhaps it may not amount to much after all."

"Nonsense! It's sure to be thousands, dear. Mitchelham Manor and land and town property—why, we shall be rich, John, positively rich, and very, very happy. Your working days and all my anxieties will be over."

She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him more affectionately than she had done for years.

"I want to finish the lawn before it is dark, Emma; I shall only just have time," said Wycherley a little awkwardly.

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"Oh, don't trouble about it! We can get a man to the lawn to-morrow. Do you think I am going to let you work as hard as you have been doing? Why, it has often made me miserable. I must find the children! How exciting for them all, and what things we shall be able to do for them!"

Wycherley, still smiling a little ruefully, escaped by the French window of the little drawing-room, and once more took the handles of the lawn-mower. It was a task not demanding full concentration, and as he made his straight lines on the smooth turf he was able to think a little of the curious acquaintance he had made in the City, and which had brought about such an extraordinary change in his affairs. He felt profoundly thankful that this legacy had happened so opportunely. His heart had been very heavy that night, and fear of the days to come insistent, but Wycherley was not an ambitious man. Modest comfort was all he had ever aimed at or hoped for; he had no desire to exchange the peace of a quiet, well-ordered life, bringing each day its small and quite compassable round of duties, for the bondage of riches. He was one of those who could quite sincerely have voiced the prayer, "Give me neither poverty nor riches."

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And he was a little afraid of his wife. Her ambition had no bounds, and in her pursuit of the things which she accounted of the highest importance she would not have too many scruples about the feelings of others. A sensitive man, it cost Wycherley sundry genuine qualms to admit so much evil of his wife, as he went to and fro on the lawn in his shirt sleeves ; and he hoped with all his heart that when he should pay his promised visit to the lawyers it would be to discover that the legacy in total would only be sufficient to remove their immediate sordid anxieties. The Manor of Mitchelham might be a sort of glorified farmhouse, where the children could make delightful holiday, and to which they might all retire ultimately. He knew of many such in Hertfordshire, which was his native county, but he did not recall Mitchelham by name. As for the town property, if it would only provide a modest income to supplement what he could earn and leave something to give the boys a good start in life, why, then he would be very, very thankful indeed.

No such modest aims were in the mind of his wife, however.

Presently Ethel came flying out through the open window, and threw herself into his arms.

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"Oh, daddy, darling daddy! I am so glad! It just shows that God doesn't forget the real good people after all, though sometimes we think He does. Aren't you glad, daddy?"

"I am, if you are."

"Now you shall never work any more. You will be a gentleman at large. John Wycherley Esq., of Mitchelham—doesn't it sound grand? And you will look the part perfectly and be a sort of prince in disguise in the neighbourhood. Why, it's like a fairy story! But isn't mother excited? Her voice is getting louder and louder! She was describing our triumphant *entrée*, hers and mine, into Buckingham Palace, but she hasn't settled the question of who is to present us yet. Somebody will have to be found."

The trill of her laughter rang out spontaneous and sweet upon the still evening air, and Wycherley, in spite of himself, joined in. After all it would mean a great deal—it would give Ethel her chance. Those sweet looks, that loving heart, were surely destined to adorn a wider sphere than the little home circle, however affectionate and appreciative it might be.

"We shall have to restrain mother, darling," he said with a quiet touch of humour which Ethel fully appreciated, and which cast no

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disrespect on her of whom they spoke. "You see, that letter is really very vague—I suppose mother has shown it to you? It may be a very small thing after all. Personally, I shall be more than thankful if it gives just a little addition to our income, so that we needn't have so many anxious hours about you and Tom and the rest of the kiddies."

"All I care about, dad, is that you won't have to work so hard, and that all those sad, hard lines will be smoothed away out of your dear face. Why, you used to be such a good-looking dad, but just lately you have got far too old-looking. What you have got to do now, John Wycherley Esq., of Mitchelham, is to look after Number One. When we have a little quiet moment I want you to tell me all about that funny old man. I'm so sorry I shall never see him just to thank him, and to let him see how appreciative we are all going to be of our fairy godfather."

She voiced Wycherley's own feeling, but before they could talk any further Clement appeared at the window, calling to Ethel that Harold Crosfield had come. Ethel persuaded her father to put down the lawn-mower and come into the house. They found Harold sitting a trifle uncomfortably on the edge of a chair, striving to feel at home in an

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atmosphere which Mrs Wycherley managed to make decidedly chilly. If it had been necessary to discourage Harold before, it had become doubly necessary now, and the sooner the process of freezing out the ineligible was begun the better.

Wycherley's pleasant "Good evening," however, and the glance from Ethel's kind eyes helped to reassure him. When he heard what had happened he just managed to murmur a few words of congratulation, and rose abruptly to take his leave.

"Don't go yet, Harold," said Wycherley pleasantly. "You are quite one of the family, and there isn't anything in this affair we are not willing to discuss with our friends. Sit down for half-an-hour."

Mrs Wycherley did not second the invitation, however; she did not even smile, and murmuring another excuse, Harold said he must be off.

"You mustn't go to the door, Ethel," called out her mother sharply. "You can easily get a chill going from this hot room; besides, it isn't quite the thing, and I'm sure Harold does not expect it."

Ethel looked blankly surprised, reddened, and ran out of the room.

Wycherley looked reproachfully at his wife.

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"There is no use hurting their feelings, Emma," he suggested mildly. "And surely the possession of a little more money is not going to change everything. We can still keep the friends we had, I hope?"

"Oh, John, will you ever learn the whys and wherefores of things?" she asked ruefully, feeling that as yet she could scarcely dare to openly contradict a person of such importance as Mr Drage's residuary legatee. The respectful tone of the lawyer's letter had made a great impression on Mrs Wycherley's rather unformed mind. But at the same time she was quite determined that Harold Crosfield should less than ever be encouraged as a possible suitor for Ethel's hand.

Disobedient very rarely, Ethel in a perfect tumult of indignation went out to the door with her lover, even to the garden gate, where they stood quite hidden by the overhanging branches of the two laburnum-trees which overshadowed the front of the house.

"It's all up, Ethel," said the young man gloomily, "so I may, in the language of the vulgar, 'cut my stick.' I hadn't much chance before, but even that is gone for ever. Don't think I'm grudging you the money. I'm glad for your father's sake, of course, dear old chap—it's about time he had a rest. But I

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can see quite well that this is going to take you out of my reach altogether."

"It won't, Harold, unless you wish it," said Ethel in a low voice, speaking out frankly for the first time.

There had been no open declaration between them as yet, though, as she had explained to her father earlier in the evening, they understood one another fully. We need not linger to witness their betrothal, or to listen to the vows they made to one another, their passionate young hearts beating with that pure and true affection which is the only true basis for the happiness of married life. Ethel was in tears when she re-entered the house, and instead of rejoining the family circle, she went up straight to her own room, and came down no more that night. Her mother heard her moving about upstairs, but when a little later she went in to say good-night to her she made no allusion to the subject of Harold Crosfield. There would be plenty of time later to deal with Ethel. Mrs Wycherley's mind was far too actively engaged with all the seething possibilities arising out of the unlooked-for upheaval that had taken place in their quiet suburban lives.

"You will go to the office as usual to-morrow morning, I suppose, John, and give

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notice at once," she said busily. "Or can you leave without notice—just send them a few lines explaining what has happened? I should just love to see James Markham's face when he hears the news! It would do me no end of good. And Mrs Markham too, with her airs—I shall be upsides with her at last, thank goodness, and I shan't forget the snubs I've had to take from her when she called in her carriage to patronise me."

This sort of talk was inexpressibly distasteful to Wycherley, who was himself quite incapable of it.

"Don't, Emma!" he said quickly. "I shall not give notice until after I have seen the lawyers, and for that purpose I will simply make use of my dinner hour. I don't want to say anything at all at the office until it is absolutely necessary. And certainly I should never leave at a moment's notice or put them to any inconvenience."

"Well, I never; no, I never did! You are the queerest man that ever lived, John Wycherley—quite Quixotic; but as that is why your queer old friend took to you, I mustn't scold you for it to-night. Probably if you had been what Clement calls a common or garden City clerk, this stroke of good luck would never have come in our way. What time do

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you usually go out for lunch? Don't you think it would be nice if I were to meet you? Then we could go to Lincoln's Inn together. I am sure they will expect to see your wife, John; it's only natural that she should take an interest in what has happened and what is going to happen."

"I don't mind; just as you like, Emma. Do try and get to sleep, there's a good girl, or we shall both be useless in the morning. There's hardly anything worth losing one's rest for."

Mrs Wycherley laughed a little hysterically. Sleep with such an amazing and alluring vista spreading in front! Why, it was quite out of the question! The flush of the dawn and the first sleepy twitter of the birds found her wide awake, her busy brain exercising itself to the uttermost in plans for the future—glorious, wonderful plans which would very considerably have astonished and undoubtedly have dismayed the quiet-hearted man sleeping soundly by her side.

She was a little pale and haggard at breakfast, but in the same high spirits, and insisted on reading the lawyers' letter aloud at the table so that the children might have another chance of taking it in. Ethel did not say a word. Her only concern was lest the fortune

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should part her from her lover. Tom, busy laying marmalade on his toast and watching the clock at the same time, made only one remark, accompanied by a rather wistful look at his father.

"All I want to know, pater, is whether it would run to the university for me if I'm not too old."

Wycherley turned an affectionate and glowing look on the boy's face. For the first time it dawned upon him what this might actually mean, and what he could do for all he loved.

"Surely, my boy. We will make every inquiry. I didn't know you had it so much at heart."

Tom reddened and rather abruptly rose.

"Well, you see, there wasn't any use grizzling about it, was there? Thanks awfully, dad, and good-bye, everybody. This will be the worst rush I've had this week."

Wycherley departed about ten minutes later, the family adhering to the usual routine of the morning.

Shortly before noon Mrs Wycherley, dressed in her very best, and looking, it must be admitted, very well indeed, departed for the City.

When Wycherley came out of his office at Bishopsgate at the luncheon hour he found his

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wife waiting for him, and on her suggestion took a hansom to Lincoln's Inn. They were fortunate in finding the senior partner of the firm in, and were at once shown to his room.

He was a stout, amiable-looking gentleman of middle age, with a benevolent cast of countenance, but an uncommonly shrewd eye, which fixed itself alternately on the faces of Wycherley and his wife. He arrived at an estimate of them almost in the very moment of meeting, which he had not at any future time reason to alter.

After the usual preliminary remarks and congratulations natural to such an occasion, he proceeded to go into some of the details of the bequest, which far exceeded John Wycherley's expectation or desire.

About four o'clock in the afternoon, as Ethel was spreading the tea-cloth on the end of the dining-room table, in expectation of her mother's return, she arrived in a hansom, greatly to the girl's astonishment. She shut the gate with a little bang, and followed Ethel, who had run to the door, into the house.

"A cup of tea? Yes, and thankful to get it. I don't think I've had any lunch. I didn't seem to need it. Let me tell you what has happened, as well as I know how. I met your father as arranged, and we went to Lincoln's

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Inn, to be received with great consideration by Mr Yardley, the senior partner. There is no doubt he was determined not to go out to lunch before your father had called. Ethel, it's a big thing! Mitchelham is an estate worth about two thousand pounds a year, and then there are town properties and City rents to bring the income up to seven or eight thousand. I don't seem rightly to take it in, do you? Just think of the tremendous change it is going to be for us all! Don't you feel happy about it?"

"Just wait till I bring tea in, mother. If you haven't had any lunch you must be quite exhausted. Shall I undo your boots first?"

"Oh, no, I'm not tired at all! How could anybody be tired in the midst of such good news as that?"

She drew off her gloves and leaned back in the chair and put the tips of her fingers together in delighted contemplation. When Ethel re-entered the room she regarded her lithe, young, straight figure with critical approval.

"With your looks, and—and your opportunities now, Ethel," she said severely, "there isn't anything really to prevent you marrying into the peerage."

Ethel burst out laughing.

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"I've no ambition for the peerage, mother, I assure you. A little house, the same as I have always been accustomed to, and—and Harold will make me quite a happy woman."

"Harold!" repeated Mrs Wycherley blankly. "Do you think it will be possible for you to marry Harold *now*?"

Ethel made no immediate response. The shadow of a coming struggle rested on her heart.

CHAPTER III.

HAROLD CROSFIELD left the gate of the house in Goldhawk Road in a very mixed frame of mind. Mrs Wycherley had certainly shewn him quite plainly that there was now positively no welcome for him there. Being a lad of spirit, his natural impulse had been to put unmeasureable distance between himself and the Wycherleys, but the words spoken by Ethel under shadow of the little porch had made a difference. The clinging touch of a woman's arm, the tender light in her eyes, have been known before now to spur a man to great endeavour, to unexpected achievement. For Ethel's dear sake he would get rich and that quickly—but how? He remembered reading somewhere that genius is merely another name for opportunity created.

His busy brain positively seethed with schemes, many of them chimerical and impossible, as he rapidly covered the two miles of distance between Goldhawk Road and the

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upper part of the Brixton Road where his father's house was situated.

To get rich quick was his one idea, and he was in the mood to which the method did not greatly matter.

Dr Crosfield occupied a tall, narrow house on the Brixton High Road, and there he carried on a considerable but not at all lucrative practice. The neighbourhood had gone sadly down, and there were a great many bad debts on his books. Naturally a kind-hearted, easy-going sort of man, he had never been able to extract his due from his poorer patients.

"It's no use, Kitty," he had often said to his wife. "You can't squeeze anything out of a dry pouch. The poor wretches haven't got it. They'd pay if they could." Kitty did not doubt it, but it did not help her in her struggle to make ends meet. Once a pretty country girl, she had grown old and grey in the struggle for existence, and sometimes her thoughts of the future were rather gloomy. Her husband was not strong. He had never been able to afford a conveyance other than the tramcar or omnibus to carry him over his work, and, as much of it lay in back streets, he was compelled to be out in all weathers both by day and night. During the winter he had frequent heavy colds, which he found

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it increasingly difficult to shake off. She saw his health steadily, if slowly declining, and his energy with it. Once devoted to his profession, the languor of ill-health and the constant struggle had robbed him of his zest in it; he only now did a certain amount of work because he must. She was often glad that she had only three children, Julia and Maud, both teachers, and Harold, the solicitor's clerk. Harold naturally was the apple of her eye. Her motherly fondness invested him with many qualities and gifts he did not possess, and she was confident that if he had had a proper chance he would have had a distinguished career. All these anxieties and disappointments had soured a naturally kind and sweet disposition, and Mrs Crosfield looked what she was, a harassed and not always sweet-tempered woman.

She was alone in the family sitting-room when Harold returned that evening so much earlier than usual that she could not help expressing her surprise. Her husband was in his surgery, where he received his club and poorer patients till nine o'clock, and the girls were at a concert.

"You're home early surely, Harold," she observed as he entered the room. "Didn't

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they ask you to supper as usual at Goldhawk Road?"

She put the question rather tartly, feeling the natural maternal resentment against the people who, she thought, were anxious to rob her of her son. She disapproved of the love affair between him and Ethel, agreeing with Mrs Wycherley that the prospects were not hopeful. Not that they had ever discussed it. Oh no! There was a sort of armed neutrality between the two ladies, who paid conventional calls on one another on their respective "days," and were careful to avoid touching upon any theme which interested them in the smallest degree. Mrs Wycherley secretly despised Mrs Crosfield because she was not a good housewife, and had no idea about dressing herself. Mrs Wycherley was a lover and frequenter of sales at the shops, and being very clever with her fingers managed to make a very good appearance on little money. Mrs Crosfield, however, having been brought up in a better-class home, where struggles were unknown, had no resources. Within herself, if she had money, she could buy things with taste and discernment, but make-shifts she hated, and would not pretend to descend to.

"No, they didn't ask me to-night, mater,"

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answered Harold, as he threw himself on the old morocco-covered couch that had lost all its springs.

Something in the tone of his voice arrested his mother's attention, and she looked up from her mending, and eyed him narrowly.

"What's up, Harold?"

"The Wycherleys have got a windfall."

"A what, dear?"

"Mr Wycherley has had a fortune left to him by some queer old buffer in the City he used to hob-nob with sometimes."

Mrs Crosfield nodded slowly, and a shrewd look of comprehension came into her small, weary-looking face.

"And they shewed you—at least, Mrs Wycherley did—that your room was better than your company? It's just the sort of thing she would do. She's underbred."

Harold did not deny it.

"She's so excited, mater, she doesn't appear to know what she is saying, but the rest of them are all right, don't you know. The old man is one of the best, and Ethel——"

"Well, Ethel?" asked his mother, and her tone became more acute.

"Ethel's all right too. It won't make any

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difference to her. She'll wait, mater. I must do something. I can't stop on at Gilbertson's. I've been mighty sick of it for a long time. Young Gilbertson and his cousin will get anything that's going, and I may be chucked any minute."

"Oh no, dear. Mr Gilbertson expressly told your fater it would be a permanency."

"A permanency of what kind?" he asked with lofty scorn. "I've two quid a week now. In about half a century it might be raised to three quid. It isn't good enough. A man can't get a home together on that, unless he's a working-man. I'm tired of it—going to chuck it, and go out to Uncle Bob in British Columbia."

Mrs Crosfield gave a little cry of genuine distress.

Her only brother had been a successful fruit farmer and lumber merchant in the Far West, and had certainly given her boy an invitation to come out one day. But they had never taken it seriously, or as a thing that was likely to happen. The Crosfields were not an enterprising people, the work of the pioneer did not appeal to any of them. It did not actually appeal to Harold, who would infinitely rather have remained in England had he seen any prospect of even reasonable advancement in

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life. It was simply the only channel open to him.

"I shall never forgive these horrible Wycherleys! They've undermined you, Harold!" his mother cried angrily. "Until you met that girl at the tennis club, you were quite contented, and such a comfort to me. No, I'll never forgive them. As for Mrs Wycherley I positively hate her, and next time I see her I shall tell her so quite plainly."

Poor Mrs Crosfield was rather given to such extravagant speech, so Harold did not take it very seriously.

"It won't do a bit of good, mater," he said judicially. "The matter in a nutshell is this: Ethel's now a rich woman. I believe there's even an estate in Hertfordshire going with the money, and unless I can make a bit and have something decent to offer her, I'm no match for her. That's common sense that anybody can see. . . . I don't blame Mrs Wycherley altogether, but she might have given me my *congé* a little more gracefully and kindly. She was so keen on making me understand that she didn't trouble much about the method."

"Do you mean to say that she actually told you not to come back?" enquired Mrs Crosfield, bristling with motherly indignation.

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"Not in words, mater, though she made it plain enough. But Ethel's a brick. She's—she's promised to wait for me until I'm in a position to marry her."

Mrs Crosfield's eyes dropped on her work once more, and her mouth visibly trembled. The strong, jubilant note in the boy's voice, the joy on his face were bitter to her. He was her only son, and she had to give him up to another woman. She could not see beyond that sad fact at the moment. All unconscious of the blow he had inflicted, Harold continued earnestly, for he had always been encouraged to open his heart at home.

"I'll write to Uncle Bob to-night, I think, after I've spoken to father, and ask him if his offer is open yet. The money for the journey is what bothers me. I'd need fifty pounds, mater, even if I travel steerage."

"The money could be got, and you won't travel steerage—you don't know what you're talking about, boy," she answered rather sharply. "It'll be a much rougher life than anything you've been used to here, remember. Your uncle suffered no end of hardships when he first went out, and that summer he was home he often told us that every penny

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had been wrung from his heart's blood. And the competition is greater now. Perhaps even it might be a long time before you could make a position to enable you to marry Ethel, and would they let her go out to you, even if you did?"

"They couldn't prevent her, mater, if I were in a position to ask her to come," said Harold with quiet determination. "I wonder whether father will be done in the surgery yet. Do you think I might go through and see?"

"Ten minutes past nine; he ought to be nearly done," said his mother, glancing at the clock. Harold picked himself up and left the room. He had to go out into the garden to reach the surgery, which was detached from the house, having an entrance in the side lane. Looking over the obscured half of the glass door, he could see that his father was alone, stooping over his day book, in which he was making the entries of his visits.

Harold walked in without knocking.

"I can come in, I suppose, dad?" said he casually. He and his father were very good friends, though they had not much in common, and saw very little actually of one another.

"It isn't often that you spend an evening

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at home, Harold," the Doctor said as he looked up, his eyes smiling slightly over his spectacles.

He was a tall, lean man, with a somewhat cadaverous face and sunken eyes, looking as if he needed rest and building up instead of having to work twelve or fourteen hours out of every twenty-four.

"No, that's true," said Harold with a little nod. "But something's happened I thought I'd like to tell you. I want to go out to B.C. to Uncle Bob."

"When?"

"Now."

"Why this sudden desire? Last time your uncle wrote about it, you were clean off the idea."

"Well, but something has happened. I asked Ethel Wycherley to marry me, but as her father's just come into a fortune, I'm no longer considered eligible in my present position."

"When did you ask her to marry you?" enquired the Doctor, leaning back in his revolving chair and thinking how swiftly the years rolled by. It seemed no time since Harold was a little chubby chap waving to him in the street from the window as he passed by.

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"Well, as a matter of fact, I really only asked her to-night," admitted Harold with a little awkward laugh.

"Did I hear you say Wycherley had come into a fortune?" enquired the Doctor curiously.

Harold nodded.

"Some fellow in the City he knew, and had been a little kind to, not dreaming he was worth a red cent. It's quite like a Dickens story."

"I wish a bit of such luck would come in my way," said the Doctor with a sigh. "But nobody will grudge it to John Wycherley. So you want to be off to seek your fortune. I don't blame you. Life in London to the half of the people who have to endure it is intolerable. Have you said anything to your mother? She won't like the idea of parting with you."

"I've just been telling her. She said very little. I don't think she really minds much," said Harold with all the fine inconsequence and assurance of youth. "You don't mind if I write Uncle Bob to-night, then? I suppose the thing wouldn't run to a cable?"

"A shilling a word, and then you can say so little," observed the Doctor drily. "No, I think you'll have to make a letter do;

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you can ask your uncle to cable his reply if you like. If he's as keen on you as when he wrote last he won't grudge the expense."

Harold wrote the important letter before he slept, setting forth the whole circumstances with admirable frankness, certain that his uncle, a kind-hearted man, if a little rough in the exterior, would appreciate his confidence. There was a good deal of talk about Harold's future in the Crosfield home that night. When the girls came home soon after ten, they had to be told, as they discussed their bit of cold supper, and on the whole they were agreed that it was the best thing he could do. Maud the elder openly wished she could accompany him. The one who felt it most and said least was undoubtedly his mother. She slept little or none that night, and quite early the following afternoon, without saying a word to anybody, she dressed herself carefully and took the car up to Streatham to call on Mrs Wycherley. Mrs Crosfield always looked like a lady, and there was a good deal of dignity in her appearance, as she stood on the doorstep at the Wycherleys' house, waiting to be admitted. Mrs Wycherley vainly endeavoured, by peeping over the blind, to discover the identity of the caller before she opened the door, but unable to distinguish her,

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she decided to let her in. But her disappointment was quite keen when she saw Mrs Crosfield, who was certainly the last person she wished to see.

"Good afternoon, Mrs Crosfield. Come in," said Mrs Wycherley, but her voice was cold and her manner ungracious. "I'm very busy this afternoon, but can spare a few minutes, I daresay. I'm all alone in the house."

Mrs Crosfield accepted the half-hearted invitation, and stepped into the immaculately kept little hall. She had come for a purpose, and was not to be deterred by a little stiffness of manner from Mrs Wycherley, whom she despised and thought a common person, and whom in the ordinary course of things she would not have cared even to know.

"I shan't keep you long, Mrs Wycherley," she said, in her cool, dignified voice. "I've only come to talk over a little family matter. It concerns my son Harold. I suppose you understand?"

Mrs Wycherley pulled up the blind at the French window of the drawing-room with a little jerk.

"No, I'm afraid I don't understand," she said with a dense look on her face, and sitting

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down she crossed her hands on her lap and prepared to listen. All the time she thanked her stars that Ethel was happily out of the house. She did not wish her to meet Mrs Crosfield. If the Crosfields from the parents down were going to be troublesome, then they would need drastic treatment, and she was quite prepared to administer it.

"Perhaps your daughter has not yet told you," said Mrs Crosfield in her quiet, well-modulated voice, which was seldom raised beyond a low level. "Harold came home last night, and told me that he had asked Ethel to marry him, to my very great regret."

The colour sprang swift and angry to Mrs Wycherley's face, but whether her anger was directed most hotly against Harold or his mother she could not have told.

"He may have asked her," she said icily. "Unfortunately we parents are powerless to prevent such occurrences, and so are their girls. But that is the end of it. I hope Harold made that clear to you likewise?"

"He did not," replied Mrs Crosfield. "It seems that they are pledged to each other, and that Ethel has promised to wait for him. He says he is going out to British Columbia to his Uncle Bob."

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"An excellent suggestion, a really excellent idea; such fine openings for young men in our Colonies," murmured Mrs Wycherley persuasively. "I hope he is being encouraged in this idea?"

"I have neither encouraged nor discouraged him," said Mrs Crosfield quietly. "I have only one son. He has been a very good boy to me, and to his father. He was all right until he began coming here. I warned him at the beginning that he must be very careful, because he had nothing to offer any girl, and it is so easy to drift into a love-affair."

"Precisely what I said to Ethel all along, and they are so ridiculously young," said Mrs Wycherley eagerly. "Dear Mrs Crosfield, let us lay our heads together, and try to nip this foolish attachment in the bud. They can't know their own minds. Neither of them has seen anything. Why, Ethel hasn't even come out yet, in the proper sense, as she will have to come out now. Of course this will make a very great difference to us all, and we shall, I expect, be leaving London immediately."

"To live in the country?" asked Mrs Crosfield.

"At Mitchelham Manor, in Hertfordshire,"

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answered Mrs Wycherley graciously. "I believe it is a large and most important estate, with a beautiful house dating back to the time of the Conqueror," she added on the spur of the moment. "Of course all this means an extraordinary amount of work and anxiety for me. But I am very glad to have this little opportunity of seeing you before we go."

The touch of kind patronage in her manner was in its way a masterpiece. It was the word Mrs Crosfield used afterwards when trying to describe it to her husband. Mrs Wycherley did not quite understand the small, quiet smile that crept to her visitor's lips, and certainly she seemed very little impressed by the whole situation. "Very kind, I'm sure," she murmured. "In these circumstances it may not be necessary for Harold to emigrate."

"It would undoubtedly be a good thing for him," said Mrs Wycherley emphatically. "What is there for young men in this country now, unless they are the sons of rich men who can buy or arrange appointments for them. I am quite sure that if things had been as they were with us, I should not stand in the way of my sons going out."

"You can't tell until you are face to face with it, Mrs Wycherley. I don't think

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honestly that Harold is fitted for the Colonial life. It is very rough, and takes a special kind of man to succeed."

"Oh, if he is willing to work, he'll do well enough. Why, quite good people go out there. I have often read and heard that the sons of the aristocracy are to be found on the ranches and in the logging camps. It is the very thing for him. Don't worry too much. The time will come when you will be glad that you have made this little sacrifice for your dear boy."

"I'm not making any sacrifice. I'm against it right through. I don't wish him to go. I don't see the smallest necessity for it. It is Harold himself who thinks that you consider him an unsuitable lover for your daughter now."

"I have not changed my mind in that respect. I have never approved of him as a possible husband for Ethel. With her looks she ought to do better. And I should never in any circumstances have consented to let her begin a life such as mine has been, so full of toil and anxiety, ageing one before one's time. But don't let us quarrel about it——"

"Quarrel!" repeated Mrs Crosfield in a frigid voice which made even Mrs Wycherley wince. "I do not quarrel with any

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one. I will bid you good afternoon, Mrs Wycherley."

"Won't you have a cup of tea? I can put on the kettle in a moment. No? Well, then, good-bye. Perhaps a little later on, when everything is settled, you will come out and spend a long day with us at Mitchelham."

"That is unlikely," said Mrs Crosfield. "Perhaps we shall not meet again, and there is no doubt my son will persist in going abroad, hoping thereby to win the girl he loves, and who has spoiled his life. One day, perhaps, something will happen to recall to your mind what I am suffering now."

She passed out, and quietly closed the door, leaving Mrs Wycherley with the miserable consciousness that she had not come very well out of the interview. But she was able to dismiss the disagreeable episode from her mind without any undue delay, and even to congratulate herself upon having at least been very firm and straightforward in a very difficult situation. "She can't say I misled her, anyway, and I only hope he *will* get out of the country as quickly as possible."

Mrs Crosfield returned to her own home more miserable than when she left it, only too

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conscious that she had done nothing whatever to improve the situation, and had only added to the sum of her own vexation.

Her heart burned with indignation against the woman, once her friend, who had that day not scrupled to treat her so cruelly.

The greed and pride of gold had undoubtedly laid hold on Emma Wycherley, and taken away from her, for the time being, all sense of just proportion.

CHAPTER IV.

MITCHELHAM was a typical country village in which most of the types of village life were to be found, exhibiting all their individual idiosyncrasies.

Miss Tabitha Snell, who kept the post-office, was looking over the gauze screen before the window, and observed Aaron Chappell, the landlord of the "Rose and Crown," putting his best horse into the somewhat dilapidated fly which was the only vehicle of importance to be hired in Mitchelham. Soon after he retired into the house, struggled into his somewhat rusty-looking bottle-green livery coat, and, reappearing, mounted the box seat. Almost immediately Ann, his wife, came out of the house and crossed the road to the post-office, which she entered with an important air.

"Good morning, Ann," said Miss Snell interestedly. "Aaron is off to the station, I suppose? Who is he going for?"

There was no dubiety about Tabitha's

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curiosity. She was as frank in her questioning as she was in her scrutiny of every postcard, letter, and newspaper that passed through the Mitchelham post-office. She read the postcards often before she handed them to those who called to receive them. Mrs. Chappell, a comfortable-looking middle-aged woman with a cast in her eye, which gave a somewhat comical appearance to her otherwise comely face, nodded excitedly.

"Yes, he's going for the new Squire, Tabitha. Aaron had the letter this morning, ordering a carriage and pair, but, like the rest of us, he'll have to take what he can get. Mr Drage never ordered the fly, did he, Tabitha? Many a good walk he took, rain and shine, between Mitchelham and Arnham Green Station."

"You're right, Ann. Do tell me about the letter. What was it like? I saw it this morning, of course. It looked like a woman's writing. I thought it might be one o' them ladies that boarded with you last summer wanting to come back. They was very pleased with Mitchelham, I remember, and said they was comin' back."

"It was the missus herself that wrote, Tabitha, kind o' high and mighty-like."

"But they ain't anybody, if what the papers

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says is true. And Miss Ludlow, she was in here yesterday, and says it's quite true that the new Squire has only been a clerk in a London office up to now. That'll be a change for Mitchelham, Ann."

"Maybe, but what I looks at is this: If there be a family—an' the *Mercury* said as how there was several children—it'll bring a bit of life about the place. Nobody can't say there was any life in Squire Drage's time, can they now, Tabitha?"

"No; but there was summat about Mr Drage out o' the common, and you can't say but that he was very civil-spoken."

"He didn't do much for Mitchelham, Tabitha; an' they do say as 'ow he left some folks of his own down to Deal. My cousin, Martha Warner, bein' married at Sandgate, 'as told me about them often. If that's true, Tabitha, it don't seem right that Mitchelham should go to a London clerk."

Tabitha's eyes grew round with excitement.

"Seems like as if we'd have livelier times than we've bin' 'avin' in Mitchelham, Ann, don't it? Aaron'll bring 'em through 'ere, of course? Let me see, the train gits in about half-past eleven; a quarter past twelve, shall we say, allowin' for it bein' a little late, or any delay at the station."

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"Better be on the look-out about twelve, Tabitha, on account o' Billy 'aving 'ad an extry feed o' corn, an' Aaron'll want to make a good show for the new Squire to begin wi'. Ef 'e 'ad 'ad time 'e would 'a' overhauled the fly, but I dusted it over as well as I could."

"If there be a lot of custom from the Manor it'll maybe run to a new fly, Ann," said Tabitha facetiously, but the matron departed shaking her head.

Meanwhile Aaron Chappell, a thin, stolid man with no expression on his face, was waiting with anxiety which did not betray itself for the arrival of the eleven-thirty down train from King's Cross, which was to bring the new arrivals to Mitchelham. They were the only passengers who alighted—a grey-haired, pleasant-faced man, of quite undistinguished appearance, and his somewhat stylishly dressed wife. They were alone, for this was merely a preliminary visit to take an inventory of the place. In spite of all his wife's remonstrances and reproaches, Wycherley had very decidedly refused to leave his employers until they had found a suitable man to take his place. They had offered to relieve him, but at the same time had been very willing to accept his offer to remain until the end of

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the month when business would slacken off for the holidays sufficiently to permit them to dispense with his services and leave his place unfilled until the autumn. Mrs Wycherley could not understand the over-scrupulousness which made her husband act in such a manner. She would have had no hesitation whatever in throwing over all former responsibilities in view of the new ones demanding her interest and attention. When they stepped from the train she looked about her interestedly and with a slightly supercilious air.

"It is quite the country! I hope there will be a few more houses at Mitchelham," she said. "Ah, there is the fly; not much to look at, John, is it? Soon we shall have our own carriage; but perhaps it may be a motor-car."

Wycherley hardly answered, but took a deep breath of the sweet, pure air. He loved the country; the one thing that reconciled him to the new condition of things was the fact that he could spend the whole or the most of his time in the fresh air. They walked out together through the booking-office, where the clerk regarded them with a sort of respectful curiosity, having been duly informed by the landlord of the "Rose and Crown" what fare he was waiting for. Mrs Wycherley's heart

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swelled with pride at the signs of deference paid to them, and she climbed with the greatest dignity into the shabby fly, and immediately drew down both the windows. They passed through Mitchelham about noon, as Ann had prophesied, and there were a great many pairs of eyes on the look-out for them. It was a picturesque little village, built like a triangle round a village green, with the Church and the Rectory at the one corner. Wycherley looked out interestedly. He had been born in the country, and he well knew the important part Church and Rectory play in the life of the country village, and how much they can add to or take away from the happiness of the people.

"I hope the Rector will be a pleasant man, Emma," he said, voicing his unspoken thought, "and inclined to be friendly. And if he has some young people it would be very nice for our children, wouldn't it?"

"Oh, I suppose it would be to begin with," she said with a slight touch of condescension. "But of course we shall get to know everybody. Still, we shall be quite willing to be friendly with the Rector if, as you say, he is a pleasant man and has a nice wife."

Wycherley smiled ever so slightly. His wife had no idea of the life looming ahead

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of them, and he did not know how to tell her. She must find out for herself. As he looked at her alert, trim figure, and noted the keenness of her eye, like some one on the hunt for the best to be got out of everything, he was once more haunted by a vague sense of discomfort and apprehension. He feared that Emma would be difficult, that she would not permit any of them, but especially him, to live the peaceful, unaggressive life he loved and longed for. What had been sometimes bondage in London could very easily become intolerable here. He could only wait and hope for the best.

"We are at the gates, dear. Don't you think we might get down and walk through the grounds? It would be much pleasanter than being shut up in a close fly; and see, there is a pleasant shade under the trees."

"Well, if the man wouldn't think it strange. Don't you think it might be more dignified to drive right up to the door on account of the caretaker."

"I shall walk, anyhow, caretaker or no caretaker," said Wycherley, and at the moment a young woman of about twenty-four came out from the little creeper-covered lodge and threw open the gates. By this time Wycherley had alighted, and Mrs Wycherley,

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looking through the fly window, felt her heart swell once more as she observed the respectful curtsy bestowed.

"I think I will get down, John," she said graciously. "And what about going back to the station? Have we decided what train we are going by?"

"No; but the village is very near, and I daresay there will not be a very great demand for the fly in Mitchelham."

"No, sir, that there ain't," said Chappell with a slow grin. "It'll be ready for you whenever you wish, sir. I won't let it out to anybody else, and, as you say, sir, it ain't but a step to the 'Rose and Crown,' an' I'll be about all the afternoon."

So it was arranged, and Chappell drove away slowly to make up his mind regarding the new arrivals. Mrs Wycherley, after a moment's hesitation, addressed herself to the young woman at the gate.

"So you are the lodge-keeper. Have you been here long?"

"Yes'm, I've always lived here with my gran'fer, ma'am. He worked as woodman to Squire Drage for over forty year. He's bed-ridden now, but I keep the lodge and do a little washing for the Manor, ma'am, an' what needlework I can get." Suddenly her eyes

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overflowed. "An' we do 'opes as 'ow you'll keep us on, ma'am. Gran'fer, he ain't bin able to sleep nights for thinking of it."

"Of course you will stop on, my good woman," said Wycherley hastily. "Pray tell your grandfather not to worry any more about it. I'll come in and see him soon, perhaps on my way down from the house. But be sure you tell him not to worry. Everything will go on just as it did before."

The girl thanked him profusely, and once more curtseyed as they passed on.

"Oh, John, John, how am I ever to put common sense and prudence into you!" his wife said, half-playfully, half-sternly. "You must not go about the place making promises *ad lib.* like that. Probably, in fact almost certainly, we shall have to make all sorts of changes. Can't you learn to wait, dear, and to be prudent?"

"I will never start by paying off old and helpless people, Emma, dear. whatever you may say. Isn't this a lovely place? I can't believe that we have anything to do with it—that it can possibly be mine. It is heavenly."

He spoke the word quite reverently, because it was what he actually felt at the moment. And indeed in the sweet sunshine of a summer

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day there were few more delectable spots than the park surrounding Mitchelham Manor. It was very, very old, and the soft turf had had no vandal hand upon it, nor had the timber ever been despoiled to fill depleted coffers. The Mitchelham oaks were famed in a county rich in woodland, and the vistas seen through them now were most alluring. Even the somewhat commercial soul of Mrs Wycherley was slightly uplifted by the sylvan beauty of the place, and she stood still a moment to share her husband's admiration. But presently she would go on again, being eager and anxious to get to the house to see whether it corresponded with the beauty and the dignity of the park. It was not a large house, but presented a picture of singular dignity and beauty as they came upon it suddenly, turning a sharp bend in the avenue. It was low and broad, flat-fronted, with many small windows about, to which the ivy clung. The doorway was wide and had a pillared portico and a glass panelled door which gave entrance to a wide hall-place, furnished and panelled in old oak. Mrs Wycherley drew a little sharp breath as she drew near.

"Oh, John, what a lovely home, isn't it? How splendid to think that it is really ours. Shall we walk right in, or knock or ring?

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Look at this quaint bell-pull. I am sure that it must have belonged to the Middle Ages."

She took hold of it and gave it a slight jerk, which immediately caused a very deep but melodious peal to sound through the house. It was answered by the housekeeper in person—a tall, angular woman wearing a very stiff black dress, a silk apron, and an old-fashioned cap. She did not curtsey, but stood bolt upright and gave her head a queer little bob.

"Mrs Mallory?" said Mrs Wycherley, a little awed by this imposing vision, but quickly recovering herself on reflecting that she was only a servant after all.

"Yes'm—Mrs Mallory. Do I speak to Mrs Wycherley?"

"You do," answered Mrs Wycherley, and she stepped across the threshold into the hall-place, which smelt of lavender and old furniture, that mysterious combination of odours only found in old houses.

"Pleased to see you, sir," said Mrs Mallory, who, having taken an inventory of the pair, decided that the Squire was the more attractive of the two. "I got your letter, sir. Luncheon is ready in the dining-room, and I will send it up at once, unless, perhaps,



"IT WAS ANSWERED BY THE HOUSEKEEPER IN PERSON."

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you would like to see through the house first?"

"We shall just wander through it, thank you, Mallory," said Mrs Wycherley blandly, remembering that in the great houses she had read about in books they generally called the servants by their surnames instead of their Christian names. Mrs Mallory, however, resented the omission or innovation, and ominously sniffed.

"A very beautiful old house, Mrs Mallory," said Wycherley, trying to repair the error. "I am afraid you miss your master very much."

"Yes, sir, that I do. I served him here in Mitchelham for nearly forty years."

"Well, I hope you will go on serving the house," he said, out of the natural kindly impulse of his heart, but immediately his wife called to him to come up the stairs.

"John," she said, in a loud whisper, perfectly well overheard by Mrs Mallory as she moved off towards the dining-room, "do be careful, or we shall have all the old crocks in Christendom on our hands. I don't want that woman to stop on. I shan't have her, I tell you, at any price. The house would never be mine. She looks as patronising as if she were the mistress. But isn't it a nice old house?"

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It smells fusty; wants all these old, faded carpets taken up and thoroughly beaten, or, better still, done away with, and nice new Axminsters put in their place."

"I'm not sure that that would be an improvement. This house was never meant to be furnished out of Tottenham Court Road, Emma, and I do believe that these faded things are real old Persian prayer-rugs which are worth a small fortune."

Mrs Wycherley looked a little startled.

"Oh, never, John! But I'll tell you what: we must have somebody down to take an inventory, and to appraise everything, then we shall know where we are and be able to make up our minds what to keep. Oh, isn't this a lovely landing? And what a lot of doors! I wonder, now, how many servants we shall need to keep to be comfortable. Do you think three and a boy would be enough, or shall we need a butler? I think I should be afraid of a butler just at first—though, of course, it would be more 'toney' and stylish. Now, promise before we go down to lunch that you won't invite any more old fossils to make their permanent home here. I shall interview Mrs Mallory after I am fortified with my lunch, and, I hope, reduce her to her proper place."

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To her undisguised relief, they were not waited on at lunch by Mrs Mallory, but by a rosy-cheeked country girl, with whom Mrs Wycherley was much more at home. It was an excellent luncheon, though quite simple, and Mrs Wycherley's sharp eyes missed no detail, though the real charm and value of the old earthenware dishes and the heavy cut glass were lost upon her. She was inclined to think everything shabby, being accustomed to such bright colours and shining effects in her little suburban home. Subdued colourings and faded harmonies had no charm for her. But undoubtedly it was a beautiful old house, a cosy family house, made to be lived in and to be peopled by happy family groups.

Luncheon over, Wycherley buried himself in the library, and Mrs Wycherley, summoning all her dignity and resolution, requested the red-cheeked damsel to ask Mrs Mallory to wait upon her.

Mrs Mallory came slowly, almost reluctantly, into the room.

"I thought we had better have a little talk, Mallory," said Mrs Wycherley graciously, "so that we could understand one another. Perhaps you will tell me, first, exactly in what capacity you have been here with Mr Drage all these years."

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"As housekeeper, ma'am ; nothing more, and nothing less," answered Mrs Mallory primly. "Mr Drage left everything to me. He did not come here very much, and most of the rooms were shut up ; only the small dining-room, the library, and the Squire's bedroom were kept aired constantly. I managed myself with one maid. You see, the old Squire was a gentleman who did not give much trouble."

"He was rather eccentric, was he not ?"

"A kind master to me, ma'am, and I've nothing to say against him," replied Mrs Mallory, in the same prim, rebuking tone.

"Ah, well, it is nice to see you grateful," replied Mrs Wycherley, still graciously. "Of course everything will be very different now. Where there is a considerable family the ways of the house must be altered. I shall probably bring my own staff !"

"Yes'm," answered Mallory, and put up her hand to her lips while she gave a little betraying cough. There were few items about the new owners of Mitchelham which Mallory was not now acquainted with, and the idea of the suburban clerk's wife bringing her own staff tickled her immensely. "And when would you wish me to go ?"

"There is no hurry, Mallory. You can wait,

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if you like, for a few weeks," said Mrs Wycherley, more graciously still, feeling much relieved that it was taken for granted by Mallory that she should go. "As Mr Wycherley says, there is no necessity for drastic changes. They must come gradually. I shall be pleased if you will stay a few weeks, at least, and assist me to get things put in working order, at the same wages paid by Mr Drage, unless the figure was very exorbitant," she said, with a slightly coquettish smile.

"I should not dream of staying, ma'am, and I shall be very much obliged if you will make arrangements so that I can get away by the middle of the week. I'm going down to Deal to live with my sister, who is married there. She has a boarding-house and I can help her in the management. It is a very good going concern, and I think I'll put my bit of money in it."

"You have saved a bit, then? I'm so glad to hear it. So many in your class are thriftless. It is quite a pleasure to hear of one who has taken some thought for the morrow."

"Mr Drage left me a nice nest-egg, ma'am, and I needn't work another stroke unless I like," said Mallory, with an air of conscious

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pride. "May I go, then, ma'am, and is it settled that I can leave Mitchelham by the middle of next week?"

"Oh, yes, certainly," said Mrs Wycherley; and Mallory withdrew, leaving the new lady of Mitchelham feeling rather subdued. She made another pilgrimage through the house but could not find her husband, who had escaped through the French windows of the library to the woods beyond.

"Now, that's just like John; he'll go mooning about outside while I want him to go over things with me. Well, it doesn't matter; I'll just get out my notebook and have a look through drawers and wardrobes on my own account."

In this entrancing occupation an hour quickly slipped away. She did not find any treasures, the linen cupboard especially disappointed her sadly, and she mentally decided that in all probability Mrs Mallory had helped herself liberally to anything she could lay her hands on. She would very much have liked to bring her up again, and put her through some further catechism, but there was something about the prim, dignified old family servant which somewhat disconcerted Mrs Wycherley, and made her feel small and insignificant. It was not an enjoyable feeling,

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and she would be relieved when she could take over the keys of store-room and cupboards for good and see the last of the old house-keeper.

She was standing at one of the front windows looking out upon the sweet picture spread before her vision, and reflecting how the children would enjoy it all, when she saw a man walking rapidly up the avenue. He was a tall, well set-up young man, wearing a light tweed suit and a bowler hat. A few moments later she heard the bell ring, and, with all the curiosity of which her nature was full, she ran out to the landing in the hope of being able to overhear what passed at the door. It was a gallery staircase, and she could therefore from above see that it was Mallory who crossed the hall and opened the door, but she could not hear what passed until she had gone half-way downstairs to the first landing, when she heard Mallory say—

"Yes, they've come. If you'll step in, sir, I'll tell them. What name shall I say?"

"My name is Drage," replied the man in quick, decided accents. "Nephew of the late Mr Halliwell Drage."

"Oh!" said Mallory, with a little catch in her voice. "But the place has passed out

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of the family, sir, to—to some very queer folks."

Mrs Wycherley could not longer stand this, being in doubt as to what Mallory would say next. She hastened down the stairs, feeling herself capable of coping with anything in the shape of opposition. Now that she had seen Mitchelham, and in a sense sampled the sweets of power, nothing should take it from her.

"You can go, Mallory," she said, with an imperative wave of the hand. "Will you step this way?" she said, addressing herself to the stranger with all the dignity of which she was capable. She led the way to the library, beckoned him to pass in, and, following him, closed the door. Looking back upon her behaviour afterwards Mrs Wycherley congratulated herself upon having borne herself with great dignity and resource in a situation which would have filled most women with dismay.

"Good afternoon, sir. I am Mrs Wycherley. My husband is here also, but is not in the house for the moment. Perhaps you will be good enough to state your business to me."

"I can do that," said the young man frankly, as he put his hat down on the table and faced her. "My name is Drage—Geoffrey Drage

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at your service, and I am the nephew of the late Squire of Mitchelham. I am fortunate in finding you here to-day. It will save me a little time. How long do you think it will be before your husband returns to the house?"

Mrs Wycherley reflected a moment, and in that moment a thousand thoughts chased one another through her active, seething brain. One thing was certain, if it were true that this man was what he pretended to be—Halliwell Drage's nephew. She knew her husband well enough to be aware that he would hesitate to take possession of the place, even in the face of the valid will in the possession of the London lawyers. She had already been a witness to the Quixotic character of his mind that very day. She hesitated a moment, realising how important it was that the two men should not meet at least that day, nor until she had had time to face the situation.

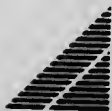
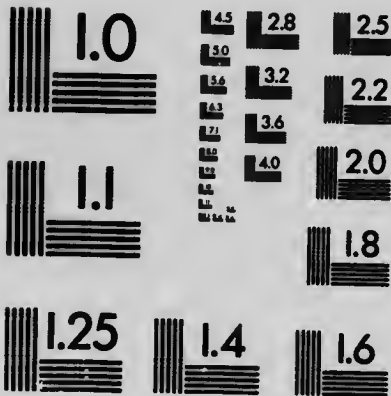
"What is your business with Mr Wycherley, Mr Drage?" she said sweetly. "It may be quite an hour before he returns. You can state your business to me, can you not? My husband and I are one."

Geoffrey Drage did not smile at these unusual words. In a moment of time his quick eye had taken the measure of the woman. A gentleman himself, he was quick enough to



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note the absence of gentleness in others. He decided that the new mistress of Mitchelham did not require, as certainly she would not receive, any consideration at his hands. He noted the hard look on her face, and he decided that she could be cruel. The quiet air of proprietorship, too, made him feel uncomfortable. Her keen desire to inspect everything, the inquisitive air irritated him, and he made up his mind to show her no consideration.

"I should prefer to deal with a man, madam, but my business can be stated quickly enough. I am my uncle's heir. I know for a fact that he made a will in my favour a few months ago."

"The will which left my husband sole heir to the late Mr Drage is in the hands of the London lawyers, Mr Drage, and can be seen there. I'm afraid I must refer you to them," she said, with the same steady sweetness which intimated that she considered her position impregnable.

"I'll see the lawyers, of course, but I tell you the will exists. I have just arrived from Canada, the day before yesterday. I came by the earliest possible boat. I have been out far West for the last two years, and I only heard of my uncle's death by an accident. I have his

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letter here, which tells me that he will leave Mitchelham to me. You can look at it, if you like."

He took out his pocket-book and drew from its inner flap a thin letter, which he spread out and handed to Mrs Wycherley. She took it with a faint, incredulous smile on her lips, and began to read.

CHAPTER V.

THESE were the momentous words which met the eye of Mrs Wycherley :—

“MITCHELHAM MANOR,
HERTS,
“*April 13th.*

“MY DEAR GEOFFREY,—I sit down to write this letter to you, not at all certain whether it ever will reach you. I have been over at Royston this afternoon to inquire whether anything has been heard of you lately. I saw Susan Wickham at the Stone-Cross Bakery, who gave me your last address. But she likewise said you were working at a lumber camp, she thought, and liable to change at any moment. And further that nothing had been heard of you for two years. Two years is a long time, boy, and much water can flow under the bridges in that time. But anyway this is a bow at a venture, and I am not with-

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out hope that it may reach you in the long run.

"In the last year your old Uncle Halliwell has begun to fail—perhaps that is the reason why his heart turns so persistently towards his own kith and kin, of which you are the sole representative. Your father and I quarrelled sorely in our stormy youth, and there never was a chance of making up that quarrel, for we were both what the Scotch call 'dour.' When I heard from Susan Wickham of his death, I wished that we had made it up. No man knows whether any opportunity will be granted for such things on the other side.

"You ought to have Mitchelham, and I wish you to come home with all the haste you can muster, for something tells me that my own race is nearly run. If I do not hear from you in three months' time, I shall conclude that you have no wish to be reconciled to me, and that you prefer your own way of life out there in the wild country. Well, I am not saying but that it may have something to recommend it, but Mitchelham in the hands of a young, energetic man, not afraid of work, might become a property of some value. It has never been anything but a white elephant to me.

"I have made my last will and testament, but I live in the hope that you will come home

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in time to see me, and to let me see you established in the old place. Susan Wickham has told me that her sister Mary Jane reports nothing but good of you, and that you have often been at her house in Vancouver Island. If you don't come I shall make other arrangements for the disposal of the property; in fact, I have already made them. But of course the last will in your favour will be the valid one. I need not write any more now, because as I say I am living in hopes of beholding you in the flesh, and leaving you Squire of Mitchelham.

"Your affect. uncle,

"HALLIWELL DRAGE."

Mrs Wycherley read slowly and carefully, because the handwriting was crabbed and difficult. Her expression grew harder, and when she had finished reading she quietly laid the letter on the table.

"Well," she said tartly, "what are you going to do?"

"The will must be found."

"From your point of view it is desirable, of course," she admitted. "But pray how are we even to be certain that you are Mr Drage's nephew? Any chance adventurer might arrive here presenting such a letter."

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The young man's face flushed slightly at the implied insult.

"I have come over from Royston this afternoon, madam, from Susar Wickham, of whom my uncle speaks. Her nephew Harold, the son of her sister Mary whom my uncle also mentions, is working at the Bakery, and he knew me quite well in the Island—I was often in his mother's house. Knowing who I was, and that I belonged to Herts as they did, they showed me a great deal of kindness; in fact, Mrs Crundall, Harold's mother, nursed mine through the long illness of which she died."

Mrs Wycherley listened politely, but her expression indicated lack of conviction. In fact, she slightly shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't think really that there is much use in our discussing the subject. After all, it is the lawyers' affair, isn't it?"

"I shall go to them to-morrow morning. Will you be so kind as to give me the address?"

Mrs Wycherley hesitated a moment. She was quite unversed in business matters, and even wondered whether it would be politic in her own interests to give the address. On the other hand, it would be futile to withhold it, because there were other means of obtaining the information. She therefore repeated slowly

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the name of the firm in Lincoln's Inn with whom they had been having so many recent communications.

"Thank you very much, Mrs Wycherley. May I ask whether you would have any objections to my walking through the house? My father used to talk a great deal about it. He was born here, and loved the place. This is my first visit to it."

Mrs Wycherley shook her head.

"I think I can hardly permit that yet, Mr Drage, unless you choose to walk in my company. You see, everything is lying about loosely, and we don't enter into possession until next week. Perhaps in the circumstances, however, it might be advisable for us to come earlier. I will speak to my husband about it."

Drage's face flushed once more. He had a quick temper, and it was exceedingly difficult to deal with the conscious, underbred woman, who treated him exactly as if he were an adventurer. Indeed he appeared in her eyes.

"Are you afraid I will pick up anything? I am not altogether on my beam ends," he said, with a slight curl on his lips which gave him a startling resemblance for the moment to old Halliwell Drage. "But, as you say, I have

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my claim to substantiate ; and it will be useless to continue this discussion. Everything must come through the lawyers."

"Of course, everything," she assented, with a snap of her lips. "But I assure you you will waste both your time and your means. You know what lawyers are. They are wise people who keep out of their clutches as much as possible. These lawyers are very clever men, and do you suppose for a moment that a firm of such repute would have had anything to do with a will which was not quite genuine and unassailable? I assure you, you don't know them, but when you see them you will understand it will be impossible for you to take them in."

Under his slight moustache Geoffrey Drage tried to hide his smile. The woman with her ignorance and pretence amused him, even in the midst of his sore disappointment and anxiety.

"Madam, I don't for a moment suggest that the will my uncle made bequeathing the property to you was not valid at the time it was made. I understand that it must have satisfied the lawyers, or you would not be where you are to-day. What I do say is that there is a later one which will set it aside."

"Then, where is it?"

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There was ill-concealed triumph in her words and tone, and Drage merely shrugged his shoulders.

"I have come to England to find it, and after to-morrow I trust I may be empowered to make search of the house. It is a very old house and must have many secret hiding-places. Indeed, I have heard my father speak of them."

Mrs Wycherley could scarcely hide the uneasiness these words caused her, but she endeavoured to retain her dignity.

"Well, the whole management of this unfortunate business must be left with the lawyers," she replied warily. "But you will at least promise me that you will not bribe the servants to allow you to search the house when we are not here—before you are authorised, I mean?"

"Madam!" said Drage quickly; and Mrs Wycherley, for the first time a little ashamed, coloured and drew back.

"I don't wish to be rude or to imply anything," she hastened to explain; "but you must realise that this is a very serious matter for us. My husband has given up the important and remunerative position he occupied in the City, such a position as is not picked up every day. Surely you cannot be

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so infantile as to expect that we shall simply walk out and let you take possession! And I would remind you, that we did not seek to become possessors of your uncle's property or wealth. It was in a manner thrust upon us, simply because he took a fancy to my husband on account of some kindness he was able to show him occasionally. It is a long story. I don't wish to go into it here, nor is it necessary. We shall give you every opportunity, of course, of investigating your claim, and trying to substantiate it—every opportunity in reason," she added impressively, "and sanctioned by the lawyers."

She glanced towards the door, hoping he would take the hint and go, her one desire being to prevent a meeting at that stage of the proceedings between her husband and the new claimant to the Mitchelham property. But she was doomed to disappointment. At that very moment, when Drage grasped his gloves and his hat in his hand to depart the library door opened and Wycherley himself entered, looking benign and pleasant as usual. "I think, my dear, if we are to finish the four o'clock it is time we got ready," suggested mildly.

"Yes, yes, I am coming," replied his wife hurriedly. "Good afternoon, sir."

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But Geoffrey Drage did not respond to her good-bye.

"Do I speak to Mr Wycherley?" he inquired, and Wycherley bowed.

"My name is Drage, Mr Wycherley—Geoffrey Drage, the only son of the late Mr Halliwell Drage's only brother. I have just arrived from Vancouver."

"Dear me, dear me; very pleased to see you, I am sure," said Wycherley, offering a cordial hand. "Mr Drage's nephew, did you say? Why, how is it that we have not heard of you before now?"

"I have just been explaining to your—your good lady," said Drage, with a cold politeness. "The story of my family would take a long while in the telling. My father was the wanderer in the Mitchelham family, and was abroad many years. He is dead now, and my mother also. I am here by reason of a letter I received from my uncle some weeks ago. It was very much delayed in transit, because I had moved from my last address and gone prospecting to a more remote and inaccessible place. Have you time to look at that letter?"

"Why, we must make time," said Wycherley affably, not yet realising the full significance of the event.

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Drage drew the letter from his pocket and would have passed it to Wycherley, but his wife intervened.

"No, no, John," said, almost feverishly. "We absolutely must get this train. I will explain all about it to you in the train, and I have given Mr Drage the address of the lawyers in New Court. He must lay his whole case before them—we positively can't deal with it—and I won't have you worried. Don't you see we are in a hurry, Mr Drage? Pray bid us good afternoon."

Mrs Wycherley had a masterful way, and Drage quickly perceived that she had her spouse well under control. He refolded the letter and put it back in his pocket-book.

"As Mrs Wycherley says, it is a matter for the lawyers," he repeated. "Good afternoon. Probably we shall meet later on."

He withdrew, apparently as relieved as Mrs Wycherley herself. She had grown quite pale and her mouth was quivering nervously. Wycherley had no idea of the strain she had gone through nor of the awful fear possessing her lest the full cup should be dashed from her hand just at the moment of tasting.

"John," she said, clutching his arm almost convulsively, "of course he is an impostor. If

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Mr Drage had had a nephew the lawyers would have known all about him, and advised him properly about his will. Don't you think so?"

"But his story is plausible, Emma, and he certainly bears a resemblance to the old man. If his claim could be proved, it would simplify everything. Of course the place ought to belong to a man of the name of Drage rather than to strangers like us."

Wycherley spoke in a quiet, matter-of-fact voice, as if the matter gave him no concern whatsoever. His wife looked at him in a secret amazement, mingled with an overpowering resentment. Why was he so unlike other men? Why was it that she would have to do the fighting for their family and for the position she so much coveted, and which was only just within her reach? The flood of her conflicting feelings kept her quite silent. She simply passed him by, and went upstairs to get her bonnet and the feather boa which she had purchased on the strength of the fortune she believed to be theirs. Mrs Mallory, hovering about the hall, looked at her with a curious expression, of which Mrs Wycherley was acutely conscious. It gave an exceeding bitter edge to her speech.

"Look here, Mallory, you saw the gentleman

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who has just gone out—you heard his name, I suppose, as well?"

"Yes'm, Mr Geoffrey Drage, nephew to the old Squire," replied Mallory steadily, as she crossed her demure hands in front of her. "And as like him as two peas."

"You say that because of course you are prejudiced in his favour. Mr Drage was an excellent and indulgent master to you, and you naturally resent those who come after him. But this claim will have to be thoroughly investigated; we may leave it to the lawyers, who are men of the world and of affairs and who will not be deceived. Of course, if Mr Geoffrey Drage can prove his identity to their satisfaction and produce the will, we shall retire quite gracefully. We should be the very last to stand in the way of justice and right."

Mrs Wycherley forced herself to speak in these moderate terms because she had some inkling of the old servant's attitude towards interlopers coming into the house she had served so long. If possible it might be wise to stand well with her, because Mallory, too, might have something in her power.

"Just arrange my boa for me, Mallory," she said graciously, though it needed no arranging. "And remember that until things are proved

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to the satisfaction of the lawyers, I am the mistress here. I would be a just and kind mistress. If you befriend me, if you are true to our interests, you will lose nothing by it. I may even be able to help you in many ways I can't specify here. When you go to Broadstairs, for instance, I could send you people, good people, who would pay well, and recommend others. We might even come ourselves, when we felt the children needed a little change."

"Yes'm, very kind, I'm sure, ma'am," said Mallory, in a non-committal voice.

"And in the meantime may I have your promise that you will not permit the gentleman who has just left to roam through the house seeking for a will which we are almost certain does not exist? It would be most imprudent; don't you think so?"

"Yes'm, perhaps it would."

"We shall come ourselves on Monday, at least I shall, and leave my daughter to superintend the removal."

"Won't Hampton's, or Whiteley's, or some of the big people remove you, ma'am?" suggested Mallory primly. "They save you every trouble. It is always done in the best families."

"Of course we are to be removed by a large

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firm, but you know that some responsible person must be on the spot to prevent them making mistakes."

"Yes'm," assented Mallory, in that acid voice which somehow raised her listener's ire.

She bit her lips as she began to draw on her gloves.

"You have been here a long time, Mallory, and probably know every nook and cranny of the house. It is very old, Mr Wycherley tells me. He has been reading about it in a book of old Hertfordshire records. Have you ever heard of secret passages, or ghosts, or hiding-places behind panelled walls—the sort of thing, you know, one associates with old houses?"

"I've heard of such things, ma'am, but never seen anything," answered Mallory cautiously.

"They say there is a secret passage going by way of the river, under the bed of it even, to Mitchelham Priory, and that the monks used it in the old days, but if it was true nobody has ever found the entrance. It was never spoken of in the old Squire's time. I'm sure he never believed in it."

"And the panels, Mallory? I've heard of things being hidden behind walls. Are there any walls in this house which might have secret places behind them?"

"I've been in the house for a long time,

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ma'am, an' I never saw anything of that kind. I've regularly spring-cleaned every year, and if there had been any holes in the walls, or things of that sort, I'd know about them. I'm sure they don't exist."

The answer was a distinct relief to Mrs Wycherley, and she fastened her last glove button with a little sigh.

"Ah, well, right is right, and if Mitchelham Manor really belongs to Geoffrey Drage we shan't be able to keep it from him, nor would we wish to. There, Mallory, and remember I trust you not to let him or any other stranger into the house between now and Monday."

"I won't do that, ma'am; I hope I know my duty and my place better; but I can't take the money, thank you," answered Mallory, stepping back from the offered half-sovereign as if she were greatly offended.

Slightly confused, Mrs Wycherley restored it to her purse and bade the woman good-day. She found her husband waiting patiently just outside the wide, low door, enjoying the rich flood of the afternoon sunshine and drinking in the whole beauty of the scene. He was not greatly troubled in his mind regarding the reappearance of Geoffrey Drage, though the spell of the beautiful old place was upon him even at that very moment.

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"Come, John," his wife's slightly impatient voice said at his elbow. "We shall never be able to catch the train, as we have got to walk to the inn, I suppose, and wait till they put the horse into that horrible dusty old fly."

"We have three-quarters of an hour yet. I think we shall manage it. Ten minutes will take us to the inn, and probably the man will have the horse ready, because I mentioned, if you will remember, that we might get that train," said Wycherley in his precise, quiet way.

"Come, then, and let us walk quickly. I don't want to miss it," she said, with a sudden energy as she put up her parasol and stepped out on the smoothly rolled gravel. She knew that Mallory, with sinister, unfriendly eyes, was watching them from some obscure window of the house, therefore she would not look back. She did not speak a word until the shadow of the trees in the avenue hid the house from sight.

"John," she said then, in a choking voice, "won't you care a pin if we are disappointed at the last moment, if it should be true about that nephew of old Halliwell Drage?"

"Disappointed of course I should be, Emma, but more especially on your account

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and for the children's sakes. It is a sweet spot."

"But we'll fight for it, John; I promise you I shall, at least. I simply can't give it all up. I won't, either."

Tears of vexation stood in her eyes at the mere thought of it.

"We shall be in London at 5.10 and we'll go direct to New Court before we go home. I simply can't rest until I hear what Mr Yardley has to say about it."

"Hadn't we better wait until the young man has seen him?"

"Why, no, John, of course not! You are always for waiting. You've been waiting all your life, and what have you made of it? And now, when a little bit of good fortune comes to us, you would let it slip without making any effort to keep it. Oh, you do make me tired, John Wycherley!"

"But, dear, it is such a simple matter. If the later will exists, then undoubtedly the place belongs to Geoffrey Drage, and if we sought to keep him out of it even for a single day we should be doing wrong."

"Baby! If he finds the will we can't keep him out of it, even for a single hour!" she snapped back, her nerves now strung to the highest pitch. "Don't talk to me any more, I

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haven't patience with you, I haven't indeed. I've just had about as much as I can bear for one day."

When they reached the "Rose and Crown" they found Aaron Chappell ready for them, and Ann his wife very obsequious, though but thinly disguising her curiosity. Over the way Tabitha Snell was looking over the rim of the gauze screen at the post-office window, taking an inventory of the new Squire and his lady. These village worthies were as yet unaware that another claimant for Mitchelham was in the field.

Mrs Wycherley comported herself with all the dignity she could muster.

Wycherley smiled quietly to himself as he handed her in, not cynical towards the pride which was so natural in her, but rather compassionate.

"I can't think how you can take it all so easily and calmly, John. Just think how pleased all the children are about it, and what it will mean if we have all to go back to the grey, wretched life of the suburbs again."

"We've had some very good days in the suburbs, Emma," replied Wycherley soberly. "I heartily wish for all our sakes this will-o'-the-wisp had never begun to pursue us. If Geoffrey Drage should be able to prove his

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claim—and as Christian people we should wish the rightful heir to have the place—we shall all be a little more difficult to please in future, but that is all. Try not to build too much on it, Emma. Something else will turn up.”

“I shan’t wait for it; I shall hold on to what we have, John,” she answered, and harped on the same string until they reached King’s Cross, where she insisted on hailing a hansom to take them to New Court.

They were fortunate in finding the senior member of the firm still at the office, where he had had a busy day. He was not too busy, however, to receive clients so important as Mr and Mrs Wycherley, and he did not seem so much astonished as Mrs Wycherley expected when she explained their business.

“Of course, we were aware of the existence of this young man,” he said cautiously, “and I may say advised the late Mr Drage to weigh his action well. It is not good, except in extreme cases of justification, to cut off one’s own flesh and blood.”

Mrs Wycherley sat forward with an eagerness that was almost pitiful.

“Did Mr Drage confide to you his intention at any time to make his nephew his heir?” inquired Wycherley, coming directly to the point.

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"No, we have no knowledge of the will you speak of, and should, frankly speaking, doubt its existence," replied the lawyer. "Obviously there was no reason whatever for Mr Drage to conceal either his intention or his action in the matter. There were then no opposing parties. Mr Drage informed us that you were, comparatively speaking, strangers to him, and while we of course considered his action Quixotic, and pleaded delay so that his brother's son might at least be communicated with, or some information obtained concerning him, we had no reason for refusing to execute Mr Drage's commission to draw up a will in your favour."

"Then you think that there can't be another will?"

"'Can't' is a very positive word, dear lady; but I should certainly say that the chances are against this youth being able to establish his claim."

"And there is no reason why we should not go down and take up our abode at Mitchelham as we intended doing at the beginning of the week?"

"Certainly, none at all. You are the legal possessors of Mitchelham Manor and all it contains, and will remain so until this young man can prove that he has a better right."

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"Then we need not take up more of your time, Mr Yardley. This person calling himself Geoffrey Drage will probably call upon you to-morrow. May we expect to hear the result of that interview?"

"If there is anything of importance to communicate you may depend on hearing from me," replied the lawyer, with his customary caution.

It had been on the whole a satisfactory interview, and Mrs Wycherley's spirits rose perceptibly as they made the return journey to Dulwich.

"You can see perfectly well, John, that Mr Yardley doesn't take the thing seriously at all, and I don't think we should say a word to the children. Just think how frightfully disappointed they would be. They are all so built up on the idea of going to live in the country."

"It is all a question of right or wrong, Emma," replied Wycherley. "If the man we saw to-day is really Halliwell Drage's nephew, then it can never be right for us to have the place."

"Not even if the old man willed it to us at the last, John?"

"No, because obviously his heart yearned over his own kind, and he regretted the

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impulse, an unusual and a foolish one, which tempted him to make a will in my favour."

Mrs Wycherley shook her head with a defiant air. The words she spoke in reply expressed her whole attitude towards the momentous question.

"We shall be there on Monday, and after all possession is nine points of the law."

CHAPTER VI.

GEOFFREY DRAGE retired down the avenue between the Mitchelham oaks with very mingled feelings in his breast. With what joy and hope had he set sail for the shores of England, assured that a home, if not a welcome, awaited him in the land which his parents had never ceased to speak of as home! Geoffrey Drage had not been unhappy in the Far West; he was the good stuff of which new countries are built, but all his instincts and his tastes were in favour of an older civilisation. His uncle's letter had arrived at a moment the most opportune, when Geoffrey Drage had realised that a new enterprise which he had undertaken in conjunction with another man was doomed to failure. He had invested his all in this venture, and had just faced the prospect of having to return to the kind of servitude experienced in lumber camps when the alluring letter from his uncle reached him. He had

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even had to borrow the money for his passage—a very easy matter with such prospects in front of him, and now, unless he could find indisputable proof of his claim, he was in worse plight than he had ever been in his life.

In the Far West the eager heart and the willing hands are always certain of employment, but in England there are so many degrees that the Colonial is bound to be mystified at first. Geoffrey Drage, actually a pensioner on the bounty of his humble friends at Royston, was at his wits' end what to do next. Everything must depend on his visit to the lawyers on the morrow. He passed through the gates with a singular feeling of bitterness in his soul, and turned towards the village to inquire concerning returning trains from Arnham Green. The little lodge-keeper peered over the blind as he passed by, wondering who the very sad-looking gentleman could be. In spite of the assurance she had received from Mr Wycherley about the future of herself and her grandfather, Polly Ember was by no means happy in her mind, and she was, therefore, quite ready to sympathise with sad looks in man or woman.

She did not go out, however, because the wicket was only on the latch, and such service

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would savour of fussy curiosity. So Geoffrey Drage passed out into the open road, unaware that a girl was feeling sympathetically towards him a few yards away.

A short distance down the road there was a bridge over the Mitchelham Water, making just there a very exquisite bit of rural scenery, which Geoffrey Drage stopped to admire, leaning with his arms on the mossy parapet and glancing first one way and then the other into the green and alluring vistas of Mitchelham Park—the Park which ought to be his, and of which by some irony of fate he was deprived in the very moment of realisation.

He had already proved that Mrs Wycherley at least would fight to a finish, but everything must depend on to-morrow's verdict at Lincoln's Inn. As he turned to proceed on his way, he encountered the pleasant face of the Rector of the parish, the Rev. Septimus Ludlow, who was of course deeply interested in the new rule about to be established at the Manor House. He would have passed on with his usual friendly word of greeting, but something in the young man's appearance and expression arrested him.

"You are a stranger in our district," he said kindly. "Many stop to admire this picture,

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which has been very often painted. You have not seen it before, perhaps?"

"No; I am a stranger only just arrived in England. I have only been here two days."

The Rector nodded.

"Are you living in the neighbourhood?"

"At Royston, about nine miles distant, I believe. I was just wondering whether I could walk the distance. I think the road leads through the village?"

"Yes; and at the Moor Edge you can turn off and save a mile and three-quarters, besides giving yourself a much wilder and more beautiful walk. Have you been paying a visit in this parish, then?"

The Rector was not usually of a prying or curious nature, but something pressed him to question the stranger.

"I have just come from Mitchelham Manor."

"Ah," said the Rector, drawing a little sharp breath, but whether of anxiety or relief it would have been difficult to tell. "You are perhaps a friend of the new Squire?"

"No, sir; I happen to be only the nephew of the old one."

Then Mr Ludlow started indeed, and eyed the young man with the greatest keenness.

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"The nephew of the late Mr Halliwell Drage! Then am I speaking to Mr Drage?"

"To Geoffrey Drage, at your service," replied the young man in the quiet, unobtrusive way which left Mr Ludlow in no doubt that he spoke the truth.

"Mr Drage, you surprise me very much! How is it we see and hear of you for the first time?"

"Simply because my father had little or no communication with my uncle in my lifetime. They quarrelled in their youth, and I believe the only letters which ever passed between them in later life were of a business nature. You knew my uncle perhaps?"

"I knew him well—I am the Rector of this parish, Mr Drage. He did not live here as much as we should have liked, but he was beloved by all those who knew him. His little eccentricities grew upon him as he grew older and his secret benefactions were many. None of us knew until after his death that he was a rich man."

"Did he leave much money, then?" inquired Drage eagerly.

"His will was proved at forty-seven thousand pounds."

Drage made an impetuous motion with his hand.

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"And all to these people! It is extraordinary. Since you knew my uncle and do not look with suspicion on me, may I ask you to read this letter?"

"Yes, surely," said the Rector, deeply interested.

Once more Geoffrey Drage undid his pocket-book and presented the precious missive which was the only proof he at present possessed of his identity and his claim.

Mr Ludlow read it through with breathless interest, and his benevolent face betrayed the liveliness of his sensations.

"How extraordinary! How very extraordinary! I understand that you hastened home on receipt of this letter."

"Immediately on its receipt, but it was delayed over two months, because I was up at Prince Rupert's Sound on a new venture, and they did not know where to find me. I took the first boat after I got it, but I am, it seems, altogether too late."

"You have been to the lawyers, of course?"

"Not yet. I only arrived in England the day before yesterday, and I was too ill yesterday to leave the house. And besides, I did not know who the lawyers were. I had to find that out. You see, my uncle makes no

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mention of lawyers at all in his letter, but leaves me totally at sea. Of course, I expected to arrive in England and find him in life."

"Of course, of course," said the Rector, still eyeing the young man steadily, as if trying to weigh him up. "Suppose you walk back with me to the Rectory and have a cup of tea."

"Thank you, you are most kind; but supposing I am only an adventurer?"

"Ah well, *we* shall not be any the worse," replied the Rector with a faint smile. "And where, may I inquire, are you living at the present moment?"

"I am living at the Stone Cross Bakery at Royston."

At this extraordinary address the Rector half hesitated on the road.

"How was it that you did not go straight to Mitchelham Manor, if, as you say, you expected to find your uncle still alive?"

Geoffrey Drage replied quite simply and directly.

"I knew Mrs Wickham's sister in British Columbia. She was very, very kind to my mother when she was cut off from any women friends at a very remote homestead. It seems Harold Crundall, Mrs Wickham's nephew, cabled to his people that I had sailed, and

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when I reached Liverpool Wickham himself was at the landing-stage to acquaint me with the news of my uncle's death and the succession of the new people to his estate. He very kindly asked me to stop at his house while I was making inquiries, and, as I say, I have been staying there since Thursday afternoon, but yesterday I was too ill to come over to Mitchelham."

"I know the Wickhams well—most respectable people," said the Rector, but still with the puzzled air of a man who found it difficult to piece things together. "Then this is absolutely your first visit to Mitchelham?"

"Yes; I have been to the house, and had an interview with Mrs Wycherley."

"Why not Mr Wycherley?" asked the Rector quickly. "I heard from our good Ann Chapman that Aaron had driven them both up."

"Well, as a matter of fact, I saw them both, but the momentous part of the interview was with Mrs Wycherley. I showed her the letter, and she promptly treated me as an impostor."

"There may be difficulty in substantiating your claim, Mr Drage, I can very well see that, but I earnestly trust the lawyers will be able to get justice done. I may confess to you that I should like uncommonly to see one

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of the old name at the Manor House, and that both my daughter and myself have had a good many qualms about the strange dispensation of your uncle's wealth. It seemed to us not quite normal action on his part—the sort of thing one reads about in books, but does not expect ever to meet in real life—quite Dickensian, in fact.'

Geoffrey Drage nodded. He was immensely comforted by the evident sympathy and reasonableness of his new friend; to be treated in such kindly human fashion restored his belief in humanity.

Indeed, Geoffrey Drage had encountered many hard experiences in his eight-and-twenty years of life, and had he been made of less stern stuff might have gone under. The Rector stole a side glance at his face, and noted with satisfaction the clear outline of his profile, its decided curve, and the manly yet modest way in which he held himself. He decided to champion his cause with all his power and ability. They came, talking in the same friendly way, to the village, the Rector drawing him out skilfully, and Drage responding with frank courtesy which more and more commended him. At the moment of turning in at the Rectory gate, the fly from Aaron Chapman's came lumbering by. Mr and Mrs

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Welchley were within, and she was quick to recognise Geoffrey Drage, and the sight of him in company with the Rector disturbed her equanimity a good deal.

The Rector of Mitchelham was a widower, and his house was kept for him by his widowed daughter, the Hon. Mrs Vellacott, who with her three little children had found a home there after her soldier husband's death in one of the frontier skirmishes in India. Joan Vellacott had been a very lovely girl: she was a beautiful woman still, who had not suffered the sorrows of her life to embitter her. She had returned to Mitchelham Rectory at an opportune moment, and her decision to remain with her father had been a great relief to her aunt, Miss Honoria Ludlow, who preferred her own London flat, though she spent many odd weeks at Mitchelham. They were both waiting for the Rector to come in to tea, and when he introduced the stranger as Mr Geoffrey Drage, Miss Ludlow's eyes waxed round with excited interest. She was a small bird-like person with an extraordinary keen eye and much quickness of wit, and she jumped to the right conclusion of the whole matter, without so much as a word of explanation.

"You are the very image of your uncle, Mr

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Drage. I knew him very well even before my brother came to Mitchelham. I've seen him at a pet charity of mine down in the East End. He was a sort of fairy godfather, always popping about where nobody expected him, but where everybody wanted him. I must say I'm glad you've come home, though of course one must be sorry for those poor dear people who will have to turn out. Almost, so to speak, before they have turned in."

Miss Ludlow spoke in a tone of cheerful assurance, as if there could not be the smallest doubt or difficulty about Geoffrey Drage taking up his position at Mitchelham. It was an infectious assurance. Drage felt his spirits rise under its influence.

Although he had never, strictly speaking, been in such society before he made no mistake, but felt himself quite at home. There was a simplicity about his manner, a quiet, manly sincerity which spoke volumes in his favour; even Mrs Vellacott, who measured all men by the hero she had lost, was very favourably impressed. That impression was deepened by the way in which the children took to the stranger, when they appeared, little Elaine, more than usually fastidious, actually climbing on his knee without so much as an invitation.



"THE CHILDREN TOOK TO THE STRANGER."

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"There, Septimus and Joan, if Mr Drage wanted any credentials surely we have them now!" said Miss Ludlow with a little note of triumph in her voice. "I forsee splendid times for these imps at the Manor of Mitchelham, where they will be even more spoiled than they are here."

"I only wish I had the chance to offer them such delights as Mitchelham contains," he said, and the somewhat painful note in his voice roused Joan's sympathy so that she spoke out for the first time.

"But surely," she said, raising her velvet eyes to his face, "you don't expect that there will be much, if any, difficulty? Why, the mere fact of your name and the letter from your uncle would convince any just-minded person that you are the only real and proper heir to the place."

"My dear Joan, lawyers deal with facts," her father reminded her gently. "And I am afraid Mr Drage will have considerable difficulty. If you care, I will accompany you to London to-morrow to make your call on the lawyers. It might give you a little moral support, so to speak, and London is apt to be confusing to a man fresh from the wilds like you."

Geoffrey accepted the offer gratefully, and

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soon after took his leave, much fortified in spirit and comforted in heart by the genuine friendly kindness of these simple gentlefolks. He had never in his life seen a more gracious and alluring vision than Joan Vellacott in her trailing black gown, with the prim muslin bands at throat and wrists, and the pathos of an unhealed sorrow in her beautiful eyes. His afternoon at Mitchelham had not been altogether barren, and he was buoyed up with hopes of the morrow.

Mr Yardley received the new claimant for the Mitchelham estate and the Rector of Mitchelham in his own private room soon after ten the next morning, without keeping them waiting a moment.

The Wycherleys' call of the previous evening had of course prepared him for their coming. The Rector took the initiative.

"You don't know me, Mr Yardley, but I happen to know Lord Babbacome, one of your clients, very well ; I have heard of you from him. This is a very extraordinary complication in the affairs of the late Mr Drage. I observe that you are not surprised to see us. Have you had notice of my young friend's claim?"

"Mr and Mrs Wycherley called last night on their return from Mitchelham, where, I

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understand, they had had an interview with Mr Drage."

While he spoke Mr Yardley had not failed with his keen eyes to make a comprehensive survey of the claimant; and he was obliged to admit that he bore a considerable likeness to the late Halliwell Drage.

"I understand that your claim is based upon a letter you received from your uncle, in which he signified his intention of making you his heir."

"That is so," answered Drage coolly, the lawyer's keen edge putting him on his mettle in a moment; "I have the letter in my possession."

He passed it over to Mr Yardley, who ran his eye over it.

"It is perfectly plausible. I recognise my late client's handwriting and style of expression. It is just such a letter as he would have written," he remarked as he folded it up and passed it back. "Everything, of course, depends on the existence of the will mentioned therein. I may just say now that my firm have no knowledge of it, and that so far as I am aware not a member of it has ever heard the late Mr Drage mention your name. It was I who saw Mr Drage invariably, and when he proposed to make the will in favour

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of Mr John Wycherley I very naturally, knowing there were other Drages in some part of the world, protested."

"And what did my uncle say?" inquired Geoffrey eagerly.

"He would not listen, nor did he mention that he had written to you. Probably he was smarting under the sense of neglect, because you had not replied to it by return of post. In some directions Mr Drage was apt to be unreasonable, even childish. I suggested advertising in some of the Colonial papers, but he would not listen to this; I may say that had I had any reason to expect such a speedy decease, I might have been more insistent. But Mr Drage seemed in his usual excellent health up to the very day of his death, and there appeared to be no reason why he should not live for another twenty years. It was our hope that he would repent him of this will cutting off all those of his own blood, but unfortunately he had not the opportunity to repent. His death took place five days after the will was signed and sealed."

"Then what would you advise, Mr Yardley?" inquired Geoffrey Drage.

"What you must do is to put yourself unreservedly in the hands of the most reputable firm of solicitors you can find, and then leave

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them to advise and act for you. Prove your claim, Mr Drage, and nobody will rejoice more sincerely than we shall."

"The will has to be found. It is probably, nay, almost certainly, in the house," said Drage, a sterner note of determination creeping into his voice. "Mrs Wycherley forbade me the house yesterday."

"Ah, yes, I am not surprised; but you will find Mr Wycherley more amenable. I can assure you on my client's behalf that he will not only be willing but anxious to accord you every opportunity of making good your claim. In fact, I may go so far as to say that if you are going to search for a will in the Manor House, Mr Wycherley will be the first to offer to help you and to rejoice with you when it is found. That is the kind of man he is, and why, of course, he commended himself to Mr Drage."

"Then it is useless for us to stay here, Mr Ludlow," said Geoffrey Drage.

"I can give you the address of another firm if it will be any use to you," said Mr Yardley.

"I will take him to my own. They are not far off, merely in Gray's Inn. Come, Mr Drage."

The Rector did not often do a quixotic act, but his heart had unaccountably warmed

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to Geoffrey Drage. When they stepped into the narrow forecourt of New Square, Drage turned to him with a sudden touch of passion.

"Mr Ludlow, I have no money to pay lawyers. I could see that Mr Yardley did not think much of my claim. I mean that he is almost certain that no such will exists, or will ever be found. I may as well give up the fight without further ado."

"Not at all, not at all," said the Rector cheerily. "It's a big thing you're fighting for. I mean to see it through. It interests me, and I can't stand by and see a great injustice done. So you leave this to me, my boy. I'm not a poor man, and if you ever come to your own, why, then you can pay it back, if you like."

CHAPTER VII.

IN spite of her avowed resolution to say nothing to the children about what had happened that day at Mitchelham, Mrs Wycherley confided the disturbing secret to Ethel.

When they returned home they found that she and Robin were the sole inmates of the house, the boys being all at a cricket match in the neighbourhood. So far, the lads of the Wycherley household were not troubling themselves unduly about the Mitchelham fortune; they had not realised it yet, though the disorganised state of the house pending the removal early in the following week was a most unusual experience for them. Since the great upheaval Mrs Wycherley had relaxed her stern hold of domestic affairs, and had actually begun to belittle and despise what had once been the very incense of her life.

In former times, if anything happened to prevent a certain room being turned out on

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its appointed day, the family grew weary hearing her continuous laments. Lately the boys had ventured to chaff good-naturedly about their mother's propensity for perpetual spring-cleaning, for which they saw no need whatever.

Wycherley himself felt very weary when one of the station flies set them down at their own gate in Goldhawk Road. His wife had talked incessantly for the last two hours, at times a little wildly, but at least continuously, and he longed for a little quiet breathing space. He thought of the bench under the roses in the back garden and his evening pipe with an irresistible longing. He would be sorry to leave that little patch of garden ground in which he had been wont to cool his heart and refresh his spirit after the burden and heat of the day.

"Not a word to the children now, John, remember!" his wife said tartly as she took out her purse to pay the cabman. Never had so many cabs stopped at the Wycherleys' house in the whole course of their tenancy, but already part of the story of the fortune had got wind, and had brought the inevitable crowd of callers and inquisitive acquaintances.

Mrs Wycherley had received them with a nice mixture of dignity and condescension,

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denying or admitting nothing, but preserving a discreet and slightly mysterious air, which nearly drove them wild.

John escaped into the house, which seemed very quiet. He stepped at once along the narrow hall passage to the garden door, which was open, and there beheld Robin playing quietly by himself.

Wycherley hung up his hat and went bare-headed into the sunshine, where he lifted the child and pressed him to his heart. The thought of the little Robin, with his pale, almost *spirituel* face and lovely ways, roaming in the green glades of Mitchelham suddenly warmed his heart. The child always drooped a little in the summer heat of London, and the time had come for him to go to the sea or to granny's at Evesham. But instead he would go and live in the country always, and so grow a big, strong man. It did something to reconcile Wycherley to the thought that had already become a burden to him. Mrs Wycherley merely glanced at them through the open door, then sharply called for Ethel.

"Yes, mother ; I'm here, I'm coming. We did not expect you home quite so soon," answered the girl from the upper landing, and presently appeared on the stairs.

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"Don't come down, I'm coming up. Where are they all?"

"The boys are at the Mid-Surrey match; baby's in the garden. I've had heaps of people to tea—Dora Vance and Mrs Babcock and Susan Walkley and her mother. I'm quite tired."

"Is that why you've been crying?" asked Mrs Wycherley sharply, as she stepped on to the landing and took in Ethel at one comprehensive glance.

Ethel reddened, and sought to turn away a rather rebellious face. But her mother, on whom the strain and excitement of the afternoon had left its mark, was inexorable. She drew her relentlessly into her room.

"Now sit down and tell me what you have been crying about. I have enough troubles without your adding to them."

Ethel could not think of any troubles her mother could possibly have, but she dared not say so.

"Harold has been here," she remarked helplessly at last.

Mrs Wycherley set her lips grimly.

"I thought as much. I shall have to speak very plainly to Harold Crosfield, Ethel. It is neither fair nor manly of him to go on as he is doing."

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"He is not going on at all," said Ethel with just a touch of sullenness. "He simply came to say good-bye."

"To say good-bye! Then where is he going?"

"Away out of England to—to the Far West of Canada," said Ethel brokenly, and hid her face.

This astounding and unexpected bit of news was so welcome to Mrs Wycherley that she permitted Ethel to weep for several moments undisturbed.

"Well, I think it is very sensible of him," she observed at last in a very gracious tone. "Of course, Harold realises the hopelessness of it all. Ethel Wycherley of Goldhawk Road, Norwood, and Miss Wycherley of Mitchelham Manor are two different persons. I am glad he has had so much common sense."

Ethel sat up very straight and looked rather defiant.

"But I have promised to wait for him. You can't toss about people's hearts like that, mother; I shall never change. He has only gone out to try and make a fortune for me, and whether he makes it or not, I shall never, never marry any one else."

Mrs Wycherley listened to this frank avowal

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with unusual complacence. She had no great faith in the lovers' vows that had passed between Harold and Ethel, whom she regarded as mere boy and girl, who had to be prevented taking any foolish steps. And seeing that the immediate danger was about to be so far removed, she could afford to be very lenient and gracious.

"When did Harold take this sudden resolve?"

"It isn't so very sudden; his Uncle Walter in Liverpool asked him to go out last year, and he refused because of me. And he was very glad to take him when he offered again. Of course, no man who respected himself could keep on coming here when you were so horrid to him."

Ethel's poor heart was still smarting under the pain of parting, and she would not pause to weigh her words.

"And has he actually gone away?"

"Yes; he left for Liverpool this afternoon at three o'clock. He is to stop at his uncle's till Tuesday, when the boat sails for New York. He has to go that way to transact some business for his uncle in New York before he goes West, so you see he is not of such very small importance."

"I am glad he has had a chance, and I'm

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sure I sincerely hope he will get on," said Mrs Wycherley cheerfully. "I'm sorry for you, my dear; I understand that you feel as if the end of the world had come, but when you have had as many sweethearts as I had at your age, you will find that one more or less doesn't matter much."

Mrs Wycherley glanced at her very comely face in the mirror with an air of complacency which, for the first time, filled Ethel with a cold disgust. The strength of her own feeling towards her mother almost caused her to recoil in horror. It was terrible to feel so about one's mother, but Mrs Wycherley was quite unconscious of the averted contempt in her daughter's eyes. She had far too many weighty matters on her mind.

"It will be quite good for you and Harold to be parted for a while. Probation is an excellent thing for lovers who are so young as you. And if he succeeds out there and makes his fortune, why, nobody will be more pleased than we all shall be to see him back. But I hope he was man enough to leave you quite free?"

"He would have left me so, but I declined," said Ethel hotly. "I consider myself engaged to him."

"Ah, well, I daresay you will tire of an

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irksome tie before long. Why, you have everything before you, child! Haven't you a single question to ask about Mitchelham? My dear, it is a lordly, a heavenly place, far exceeding my expectations."

Ethel looked interested, in spite of her misery. She was young, and though she regretted the upheaval that had seemed to destroy all the symmetry of her life, she was woman enough to feel interested in the new home to which they expected to go early in the following week.

"Did father like it?" she asked doubtfully.

"Your father, my dear, was like a child let loose in a daisied field. I can't describe him otherwise. He was like a man enchanted, or in a dream. If you had seen his face you would have been glad for his sake, if for nothing else. Poor father, who has worked so hard and so long, and who has had so little enjoyment in his life, will be able to have every hobby he cares about in abundance!"

She struck that chord of a set purpose. There is no doubt that Mrs Wycherley was a far-seeing and astute woman, a regular diplomatist. Ethel would be happy in her father's happiness till her own was assured in some new and quite permissible direction.

"But there's always a fly in the ointment,"

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she observed, after carefully noting in the girl's softened expression that her suggestion had gone home. At the same time she took a light brush from the toilet table to coax the dust from her flower-trimmed toque.

"They say every Eden has its serpent. Ours did not fail to arrive in the very moment of our best enjoyment this afternoon. It seems that old Halliwell had a brother in America, who left a son, or at any rate we are told that he left one. A young man claiming to be such turned up at Mitchelham this afternoon, with all the assurance in the world. Thought, because he had assumed the name of Drage, he had no more ado than to walk in, and that we should walk out. But I was a match for him."

Ethel's interest was now most thoroughly aroused.

"But, mother, suppose that it should be true, what would happen?"

"Well, he has got to prove his claim to the satisfaction of the lawyers and the courts. We drove to New Court this afternoon from King's Cross, and I could see that Mr Yardley did not take the matter at all seriously."

"Has he no proofs, then?"

"Well, he has a letter purporting to be written by Halliwell Drage some time before

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his death. It refers to a will in his nephew's favour. What I said, and what the lawyers say, and what everybody will say, is, ' Find the will ! ' "

" And supposing it was found, would father have to give it all up ? "

" It would depend on dates and other corroborative evidence such as would satisfy the courts," replied Mrs Wycherley with her most judicial air. " But I rather think that this young adventurer will have a pretty tough job cut out for him, now when everything has been proved in your father's favour."

" Do tell me what he was like. How I wish I had seen him ! " cried Ethel excitedly.

" He was nothing much to look at, I assure you ; quite a commonplace young man dressed in atrocious clothes, and living with some quite common people at Royston, at a bakery, and he speaks about the people who keep it as his friends."

" But supposing that he really was Mr Drage's nephew, wouldn't it be a dreadful thing for strangers like us to keep him out of his uncle's place ? "

Mrs Wycherley assumed a wise air, as she carefully placed her toque in its box and swathed it with tissue paper.

" There is no doubt that Mr Drage had

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very good reasons for leaving Mitchelham to your father, and also for cutting out his own relations. All families have a black sheep, and they have to be punished for their sins. Unfortunately sometimes the innocent have to suffer because of them. Just look at your Uncle Joe and his impossible family. If I had not been very firm with your father about them at the very beginning, we should simply have had them sponging on him all his life. Depend upon it that was poor Mr Drage's experience with this brother of his, who no doubt left his country for his country's good. Anyhow, it has nothing to do with us. I mean we can't alter it, but must leave the law to decide. I am almost certain it will be in our favour; indeed, I gathered as much from Mr Yardley this afternoon. Now, is there anything to eat in the house? I haven't had a bite since the queer little luncheon that starched-up old dame of a housekeeper prepared for us at Mitchelham. Thank goodness she's going!"

Ethel rose and sped downstairs to see about the evening meal. As her mother did not hasten down, she ran out to give her father a kiss and to ask him how he had enjoyed his day.

He smiled a trifle doubtfully.

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"Your mother has told you, I suppose, what happened this afternoon?"

Ethel nodded.

"And what do you think, darling?"

"I think, daddy, that if this young man is really Mr Drage's nephew it can't be right for us to have everything."

A gleam of satisfaction shone in Wycherley's eye. Of all his family Ethel understood him best. She was indeed cast in the same, unworldly, unselfish mould, and the bond between them was one of special strength and tenderness. He passed his hand somewhat wearily across his brow. The day had tired him, and the incessant chatter of his wife, with her insistence on the rights of possession, seemed to have left his brain in a whirl.

"That is precisely my point of view, but your mother thinks otherwise."

"But, daddy, don't you think it would be better for us to remain here until something is settled about Mr Drage? Think how dreadfully humiliating and how expensive, too, it would be for us to move in and then move out again, supposing things are decided against us!"

"I hope there will not be a law case in the courts; I mean I could not stand that; in fact, I should simply renounce the whole thing."

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"But, daddy, that would be very hard on you, too! It is for your sake chiefly we have all been glad. Did you not like Mitchelham to-day, then, that you speak so easily about renouncing it?"

His eyes filled with a sudden rush of painful longing which answered Ethel before he spoke.

"It is like Paradise. I have dreamed of such places where one could be alone with God and with Nature and be the better for it. To-day I have pictured you and the boys and baby in these lovely glades, in the fine old house, and I have scarcely been able to realise my own gratitude to God for His goodness. But at the same time no blessing could follow or remain with us there, Ethel, if we were keeping another man out of his lawful rights. I wish your mother would look at it from this point of view. She says she will fight to a finish."

She looked both able and willing to do that as she appeared presently at the French window of the dining-room to call them to supper.

Though next day was Sunday, Mrs Wycherley did a good deal of surreptitious packing, and on Monday morning early she went out to telephone to the firm that was to

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move them by road, asking them to come on Tuesday instead of Wednesday, which meant a very busy and long day for all concerned.

By three o'clock on Tuesday afternoon all the household goods of No. 15, Goldhawk Road had been transferred to the pantechicon vans, and Wycherley turned the key in the lock. He had been left alone with Clement, who had got a half-holiday for the purpose; his wife and the others having gone by the midday train to be in readiness to receive the goods at the other end. Clement was struck by his father's sad look as they turned away from the little gate for the last time.

"Surely you have no regrets in leaving this old shanty, dad," he said banteringly, "when we're going to something so jolly much better."

"We've had some happy days here, my son," replied Wycherley, and said no more.

Meanwhile Ethel and the rest of the family had arrived at Arnham Green station, where they were met by Aaron Chapman's fly. There was now a good deal of excitement in the village and neighbourhood, for it had leaked out that a new claimant for Mitchelham had appeared on the scene. Ethel could not repress a little cry of delight at the beauty of the park when they drove through, and she

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quite entered into her father's mood and felt her heart ache for him. It would indeed be hard if he had to renounce this beautiful home.

When the fly drew up at the door the decorous Mrs Mallory was waiting to receive them. A good deal had been said in the intervening days; she had been separately interviewed by the Rector, and Mrs Vellacott, and by Miss Honoria, and others, concerning her views on the subject of the disputed succession, and her importance was thereby greatly increased. But she knew her place. Meanwhile in the eyes of the law the Wycherleys were the owners of Mitchelham, and to them her deference should be paid. She despised Mrs Wycherley, but recognised the fact that it would be better to have her for a friend than an enemy. When she saw the tall, graceful figure of Ethel alight and the two slim, bright-eyed boys and the dear, cherubic-faced Robin, looking more like a cherub than ever in his beautiful white tunic, her hard eyes softened somewhat. The one soft spot in Mallory's heart was for children, and there never had been any in Mitchelham. Also she was astonished at the well-bred looks of the youngsters and charmed by the simplicity and grace of Ethel's manner. It quite took the

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edge off Mrs Wycherley's condescending recognition.

Ethel was perfectly natural; and the prim Mrs Mallory did not disconcert her in the least.

"Aren't you sorry to go away from this lovely place?" she asked, when she had opportunity a little later on of talking to her.

"Yes, miss, I am. I've been very happy here, though often a bit lonely. I'm sure I hope you will all be as happy at Mitchelham as I have been."

She spoke quite sincerely, because Ethel's sweet looks had drawn her and disarmed her resentment wholly.

"When you have time, will you show me through the house, and explain all its nooks and crannies?"

"Come, now, miss, if you please, because I am leaving in the morning."

"Are you? I am sorry you go so soon. You look as if you belonged, don't you know? Thank you, I should like to come now."

They climbed to the top of the house first. The attics were not furnished as living rooms, though they contained much old furniture, some of it of extreme value, and many boxes, which were full.

Ethel looked round interestedly.

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"Anything might be hidden in these old boxes, Mrs Mallory, even the will they are talking about. Tell me, have you seen the man who says he is Mr Drage's nephew?"

Mallory looked desperately uncomfortable.

"Oh, yes, miss; I have seen him twice—on Saturday when he came, and again yesterday when he walked through the grounds with Miss Honoria from the Rectory."

"And what do *you* think, Mrs Mallory?"

Mallory shook her head, and began to move towards the stairs.

"I don't think at all, miss, if you will have it," replied Mallory in a low voice. "I know he is what he says he is—the late Squire's brother's son."

Ethel looked back into the low-raftered room with its piles of heaped-up boxes, and wondered whether the secret was hidden there, and whether, if it was, her fingers would be the first to discover it. And if so, what would she do?

CHAPTER VIII.

HITHERTO the only experience the young Wycherleys had had of country life was the family fortnight when they were small children in confined seaside lodgings at Ramsgate or Westgate, or the holidays in turn at granny's cottage in the market garden at Evesham. At first the younger members were obviously a little awed by the spaciousness of their surroundings.

"Ethie, is this Dulwich Park?" inquired Robin wonderingly the next afternoon when his sister, who had found him wandering aimlessly and disconsolately about the big hall, carried him off for a walk to explore the grounds.

"No, darling, this is Mitchelham Park," replied Ethel.

"And why are we here? Is it a holiday, Ethie? Have we come like we go to granny's? Has somebody asked us?"

His sweet face was uplifted in very childish

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and natural wonder, and Ethel suddenly realised that in all the hubbub of the last few weeks Robin had been sadly neglected. Nobody had ever taken the trouble to explain anything, nor did anybody know that he had cried himself to sleep on Sunday night because his old woolly lamb, prime favourite of his few priceless possessions, had been packed away or lost, nobody knew which.

Robin was convinced that Bobs would be cold all night outside of the crib blankets, and his little heart was aching yet with anxiety about his pet.

"No, darling, nobody has asked us. A very kind old gentleman gave it all to daddy," she answered as simply as possible.

"And do we live here now?" pursued the child.

"Yes, darling, we live here now," she answered with a scarcely perceptible sigh.

"Isn't it big and pretty?" he said, dragging at her hand as he peered through the vista of the oaks. "But where are the trams and the 'bus horses and Mr Goad, the dustman, and the muffin man; shan't we ever see them here?"

"No, darling, we've left them behind at Dulwich."

"I've nothing to play with," said the child,

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and his heart suddenly filled with an unutterable sense of desolation, which he was puzzled to understand. He wanted to cry, but thought he had better not, because he was four, and he had said on his fourth birthday that, being now a man, he must never cry any more, whatever happened.

"Your things will come out all right, darling. They're stowed away in some of the boxes. I told Lily to look for them. To-morrow she will be able to take you out and play with you most of the day, and perhaps daddy is going to get you a little pony."

The desolate look vanished, and an eager anticipation took its place.

"A real live pony, same as Mr Cobb, the milkman has? His name's Danny, and he runs ever so fast."

"He will have to be a slow, quiet pony at the beginning, darling, till you get used to him."

After a moment he looked up again with a small quiver of the lip.

"I do want a bit of chocolate, Ethie; haven't you got any in your pocket?"

"Not a scrap; but if you think you can walk a little way, we might go to the village shop. It isn't far, and I've some money in my pocket."

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"Oh, I should like that," cried the child, aglow with pleasure. He had been awed and a little frightened by the large quiet and solitude of the place, and missed the cheerful sights and sounds of the little suburban street, and all the familiar landmarks of the only existence he had known.

At the prospect of seeing a shop where real chocolate could be bought, he cheered up wonderfully, and chattered on, clinging to his sister's hand with that affectionate trust which was very precious to Ethel.

"Will daddy bring the pony back from London with him this evening?" he asked, as they passed through the lodge gates and turned their faces down the cool, pleasant, shady country road.

"In his pocket, Robin Hood? I hardly think the pony will be quite as small as that, but I daresay daddy will tell you all about it when he comes."

"Do you think daddy likes this place?"

"Yes, I think he does—don't you?"

"I dunno. Do *you* like it?" he went on in the persistent way of childhood which will have a direct answer, and will not be put off with any make-believe.

"I think I do. I don't quite know yet, Robin. It is so new," she said. "Now, let

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us stop just here on the bridge and watch the little fishes below."

"Goldfishes?"

"No; trout fishes, and little dace and carp—there are hundreds of them. Some day, when you are a big boy, you shall have a rod and try to catch them."

"But then they would be deaded, and I shouldn't like that," said the child, pulling her away. "Come and let us get the chocolate. Is it far to the chocolate shop?"

Ethel had never been in the village; the road from Arnham Green merely skirted its upper end, and she was not even certain whether there was a sweetstuff shop. She had no gloves on, and her shady hat was old and shabby. Robin himself was bareheaded, but that did not matter. Ethel was rather unconventional. It did not occur to her that Miss Wycherley, of Mitchelham Manor, might have made her *début* into the village in a more dignified fashion. She was only anxious to please the child, and a little curious to see for herself what their nearest neighbours were like.

Presently they came to a stile on the roadside pointing to a field path leading straight to the village, because she could see the square Norman tower of the church acting as a sign-post.

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Robin was much pleased with this new form of gateway; there were no stiles in Dulwich Park, and he crossed and re-crossed it a great many times, quite proud that his short legs were just able to reach to the low bar. Then he ran joyously along the little path, stopping now and again to pick a daisy or a big sweet pink clover, perfectly happy and joyous. Ethel found that the stile emerged suddenly upon the village green right opposite the post-office.

Miss Tabitha Snell kept a limited selection of sweets and small wares in addition to the postcards, stamps and telegraph forms, and she was always on the look-out for customers, especially new ones, regarding whom she was insatiably curious. She had taken a very good inventory of the passengers in Aaron's fly the previous evening, and had therefore no difficulty whatever in recognising Miss Wycherley. Her face positively flushed when she saw her cross the road and enter the post-office.

Ethel bade her good afternoon pleasantly, and asked her for some chocolate.

She lifted Robin on the solitary chair, and he was very busy taking an inventory of the various kinds of sweets spread out on the boxes on the little counter, when some one

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else came in and asked for a telegraph form.

Then Miss Snell's face flushed furiously. As she said to Ann Chappell afterwards, "My dear, there they were, two that should have been natural enemies a-smilin' at one another, and him chattin' like anythink to the little boy, what do look as near an angel as I ever see'd —Mrs Vellacott's children don't have a chance for looks besides 'im."

Tabitha provided the telegraph form, and then devoted her attention to the small customer with the sweets. His choice was made, the money changed hands, and they were about to leave the shop when the man with the telegraph form stepped forward. He seemed in a hurry, and as he passed to the counter his stick inadvertently knocked the head of the little boy.

"I am very, very sorry," he said, bending anxiously towards the child, who had slipped off his chair, looking a little frightened. At the same time he raised his hat to Ethel, who had never looked sweeter than at that moment with her home-made cotton frock, her old garden hat, and the posy of daisies and clover which Robin had pushed into her hand.

"Oh, Robin is not hurt, I assure you," she

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said pleasantly. "Tell the gentleman so, darling."

"Robin isn't hurt at all," said the child, with his charming smile, which was sufficient to steal Geoffrey Drage's heart away.

"May I be permitted to offer some chocolates as a peace-offering?" he asked, and though Robin did not in the least know what a peace-offering was, he was delighted to accept, and they parted the best of friends.

While Tabitha Snell counted and spelled out the words of his telegram, Geoffrey Drage watched the pair crossing the road and wondered how he could find out who they were. Presently, however, Tabitha enlightened him with a little curious toss of her coral-screw curls, which indicated her inward excitement.

"The young lady from the Manor, sir, only just come. Looks very nice, don't she?" At the same time she eyed the young man's face intently, trying to detect any sign of perturbation, but none was visible. He was certainly taken by surprise, but managed to hide it from the sharp eyes of the village post-mistress, of whose propensities he had already heard at the Rectory.

He simply answered, "Oh, indeed!" paid his due and walked away. His telegram had

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been addressed to Mrs Wickham, at Royston, informing her that he would not be home till late, as he was staying at the Rectory for dinner. He did not mention there that he had seen Miss Wycherley even when the conversation turned upon the subject of the Wycherleys.

Across the open meadow beyond the stile he could see the little spot of colour made by Ethel's pink frock, and the thought uppermost in his mind was the contrast between her and her mother, whom he recalled with a kind of cold aversion. As he approached the Rectory gate some one was leaving it, a man, whom he recognised as Mr Wycherley. Drage stepped back, not certain how to comport himself, but Wycherley solved the difficulty immediately by his ready smile and his outstretched hand.

"Mr Drage, I have just been inquiring for you at the Rectory; I heard accidentally that you were to be found there. I have just come down from London."

"Yes," said Drage, standing rather awkwardly in the middle of the road, in no way hostilely inclined towards this gentle, mild-mannered man, but glad to leave him to take the initiative.

"I have had an interview with my lawyers

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to-day, after their interview yesterday with yours."

Drage inclined his head.

Wycherley, a trifle disconcerted by his silence, looked towards the Rectory gate and then suggestively up the road.

"I think, if you have no objections, a little talk together would not be amiss. I called at the Rectory for that purpose, but the maid said I should probably meet you on the road. Will you walk a little way with me?"

"I have no objection, Mr Wycherley," said Drage, but his manner was a trifle stiff, arising out of the undoubted awkwardness of the moment.

Wycherley regarded his somewhat impassive face a little wistfully.

"We have no quarrel, Mr Drage," he said, in his kind, quiet, well-modulated voice; "I regretted what passed the last time we met. You must make allowances for my dear wife, the circumstances being so very unusual."

"Oh, yes, certainly; why not?" said Drage, a trifle stupidly, as, impelled by some quiet force emanating from John Wycherley, he turned to accompany him along the sheltered road.

"First of all, I should like to explain to you how I got to know your uncle," said Wycherley,

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and proceeded to go back on the odd details of his acquaintance with old Halliwell Drage, of their regular meetings at the City chop-house, of their quaint talks, quiet friendliness, but always abrupt partings, the young man listening with the most intense interest. It gave him an insight into the character and peculiarities of his uncle as nothing else could have done, and in a few moments of time completely altered his mental attitude towards the whole affair.

"He must have been a very queer old chap," he said bluntly. "Not quite right here, perhaps?" he said, tapping his forehead significantly.

Wycherley shook his head.

"He was quite right mentally, only a little eccentric and abnormally sensitive. He dreaded, above all, being taken for a rich man, and always wore very shabby old clothes. You may know what an odd figure he cut when I tell you that one day when he had gone out to Dulwich, to see for himself, I suppose, whether what I had told him about myself and my circumstances was true, my wife almost chased him away from the gate, thinking he had a long eye after her roses."

"Did he visit at your house, then? Was he intimate with the whole family?"

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"No ; he never saw any of them, except my wife, accidentally that day, and the little chap who was returning from his kindergarten class at the moment, when he was passing up the street. He gave the child a penny, and when he offered a kiss in exchange Mr Drage ran away."

Drage walked along a few steps in silence. Wycherley had in these few moments completely disarmed him, but he found himself in such an awkward corner that his natural reserve simply overwhelmed him and sealed his lips. Wycherley stole a nervous, slightly apprehensive glance at him as he prepared to utter the words he had determined on during his return journey from town. Also he had resolved that these words should be spoken, if possible, before he had returned home and been cross-examined by his wife. All his life long Wycherley had been led by his wife, in all the minor and most of the major details of life. But in this great question, involving moral as well as legal rights, and which in his estimation was simply one of right or wrong, he was about to show an adamant strength. She had been so much engrossed with the fascinating task of placing her furniture to the best advantage in the Manor House, that she had suffered her

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husband to go to town alone, although had she known what he was going to do there, what he was doing now, she would have made any sacrifice to prevent it.

"I wish to explain to you, Mr Drage, two things. In the first place, although I did not think your uncle was as poor a man as his appearance and behaviour suggested, I did not learn until after his death that he was a man of substance. Secondly, I had not the remotest idea that he had the smallest intention of leaving me anything. As I say, I was unaware that he had anything to leave. He was mostly a taciturn man, but at times he was very talkative, and then he would ask me a great many questions about my home life and my family. He knew my income down to the last fraction, and the names of all my children, and what I intended to do with them. But he never once told me a single thing about himself. I had missed him from the City a good few weeks, but my first intimation of his death was the letter from Messrs Yardley, Ransom, and Chard, informing me of what had happened, and that he had left a will in my favour."

"It is an extraordinary story. You never saw him, then, during his illness?"

"Never. I tell you my first intimation of

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his illness and death was from the lawyers. Naturally I found it difficult to realise or to believe."

"But you were a happy man over it, of course," said Drage quickly.

"I was happy for many reasons, chiefly because, being on the shady side of fifty, I realised that my market value was daily diminishing, and my anxiety for my family on the increase. After the first astounding sensation passed I thanked God for His goodness to me and mine. I saw the possibility of realising all my ambitions for my children, and of giving their mother a rest."

"And yourself?" put in Drage, oddly touched in spite of himself.

"My happiness would very naturally be in these things, Mr Drage," he answered with quiet dignity. "But one thing is certain, as I said to the lawyers to-day—I may have a legal but I have no moral right to Mitchelham, or to your uncle's money. In spite of them, some compromise must be made. I will not be a party to usurpation. If that will exist, Mr Drage, it must be found, and my object in calling on you this afternoon is to invite you up to the house so that we may search for it together."

Drage stood still in the path, with one hand

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in his pocket, and looked in undisguised astonishment at Wycherley.

"You are an extraordinary man, Mr Wycherley," he repeated. "I begin to understand things a little better, even to fathom my uncle's motive. You must have appealed to him immensely. You couldn't help it."

Wycherley smiled, delighted at the way in which his suggestion had been received. But almost immediately an undefinable shadow crossed his fine face.

"Then we begin to understand one another—good! I must pass on to more difficult and delicate ground. My wife takes an entirely different view. You don't need me to tell you, as you have already had experience of it. But again that is natural. She has been the wife, the uncomplaining wife, of a poor man for six-and-twenty years. Never had man a better helpmeet. She welcomed the news of the fortune with the peculiar joy of a woman who loves the good things of life and who has been denied most of them. It has slightly affected her sense of proportion. It is difficult for me to say it, but in the interests of justice it must be said here and now. The dealings in this matter must be between ourselves. They concern you and me alone."

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For a moment Drage felt himself still further at a loss. He was in a sense overwhelmed by the extraordinary just-mindedness of the man by his side and by the bristling difficulties of the situation. He suggested that, not as foes or rivals, but as friends, they should collaborate to discover the document which must enrich the one and impoverish the other—in a word, which would reverse the situations. And he who made the suggestion had a thousand interests at stake. He was an elderly man, on his own confession somewhat of a beaten man, he had a family dependent on him, whereas Drage had only himself. The Rector had referred to the situation as Dickensian. To Geoffrey Drage, looking at it from Wycherley's point of view, it seemed wholly tragic.

"Mr Wycherley, you are a good man!" was his involuntary comment as he paused very naturally at the Mitchelham gates.

"Not at all. It is only what any honest man would do. I am not a scoundrel nor a usurper, and I may add here to you what I have already said to the lawyers. Even if every proof fails and they hold me as absolutely your uncle's legatee, some arrangement must be made whereby you have the place at least and the half of the income."

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"But, Mr Wycherley," said Drage stupidly, "this is not the action of an ordinary man, but of a Quixote."

"You use the wrong word, my friend," said Wycherley with a quiet light shining in his eye. "It is merely the action of a Christian."

"I shall say good afternoon here, Mr Wycherley, and go back to ponder on what you have just said."

"Why not come up now? There is no time to lose. I understand from the lawyers that you have no money, and that it is a vital matter for you that all doubt should be set at rest as soon as possible. Come up now and have a ramble through the house. It is a wonderful old building, and I am promising myself much interest from studying it."

"Mrs Wycherley may resent my coming."

Wycherley held open the wicket gate and motioned him to pass through.

"I have said all that is necessary on that head, and I will speak to her when we get to the house, if she is about. She needs to realise the situation from your point of view, that is all that is necessary. Once that is accomplished, she will be found the most reasonable of women."

Mentally recalling his last experience of Mrs Wycherley, Drage doubted it very much.

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He doubted it still more a few moments later when, as they neared the house, they saw her standing at the door. From one of the upper windows she had espied the two figures coming slowly up between the branching oaks, and when she recognised Geoffrey Drage, and saw with what earnestness and apparent friendliness they were conversing, she had thrown herself into a kind of panic, and stood there a little white and desperate-looking, as if fully expecting to hear her own death-warrant.

But she would not give up without a struggle. Had the moment been less serious Geoffrey Drage might have been amused at the expression on her face.

CHAPTER IX.

MRS WYCHERLEY acknowledged Geoffrey Drage's courteous salutation by a frigid bow. She now realised that her brief return to her own domain, her devotion to the arrangement of her household gods, might have cost her dear. She loved her husband, but she placed no reliance on his judgment, and regarded him as an irresponsible child who could not be trusted in the smallest matter.

"John," she said sharply, "did you bring Mr Drage back with you from London?"

"No, my dear, I met him in the village; in fact, I called on him purposely. Mr Drage and I have some business to discuss in the library. Perhaps you will kindly excuse us for a little."

At the moment Ethel and Robin, flushed with their scamper through the park, appeared on the scene, and Wycherley was obliged to pause a moment to make an introduction.

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"Mr Geoffrey Drage—my daughter Ethel," he said, and smiled at the girl's sweet face with fondness and perfect trust. Ethel would never vex or harass his soul; she secretly sympathised with all the notions her mother had no hesitation in describing as mad.

It is sad when a man turns for the need of his soul from his wife to his child, and it is by no means an uncommon case. It is invariably the wife's blame; in the case of the Wycherleys she had simply by her lack of sympathy and understanding, her exasperating fault-finding, driven the heart of one of the best of men back upon itself. But she was wholly unaware of the magnitude of her loss.

Ethel, like her father, extended a frank hand to the interloper, while her eyes filled with astonishment.

"We have already met Mr Drage in the post-office, father. That rogue Robin is eating some of his chocolate now. See, his hands are all smeared with it."

Any awkwardness peculiar to the moment was bridged by Ethel's frankness, and by the charm of Drage's quiet, manly deportment. He had nothing to be ashamed of, and there was no reason whatever why he should not meet any advances from the other side with a corresponding cordiality. The situation was

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certainly unique, and all the more piquant on that account.

"Come, then, Mr Drage. Perhaps a little later Mrs Wycherley will give us some tea," said Wycherley with bland unconsciousness as he beckoned to Drage to pass through the open door. As the two men disappeared beyond the square hall to the narrower corridor leading to the library door, Mrs Wycherley leaned against the inner door and gave a little gasp.

"Ethel, I do believe your father is a little touched in his head. How dare he bring that man here, and what is he saying to him now? He is perfectly capable of offering him back the whole thing, and you can see for yourself that Drage is a man who will take all he can get, and stop short at nothing."

To her mother's dire wrath and surprise Ethel suddenly burst out laughing. A curious lightness of heart had come to her since the moment of meeting Geoffrey Drage in the post-office; and the whole situation amused her beyond all telling.

"Oh, mummy, don't be so unjust! He looks such an inoffensive young man, and so gentlemanly, not at all like the villain you depict. Dear dad looks as if he had found another fortune."

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Mrs Wycherley wrung her hands.

"You are all against me, Ethel! I am the only one left to fight for you, and you don't seem to realise the fact. I can't even rouse the boys to any serious sense of the danger threatening us. Tell me, Ethel, would it cost you nothing to leave this sweet place now you have seen it, and got a taste of what life can be like for people in—in this station of life?"

Ethel shook her head.

"It is indeed a sweet place, but I'm like father, dear. I couldn't be happy if I thought I was keeping out somebody who had a better right. It seems to me quite foolish for the lawyers to go on making business for themselves about it. Now they have proved beyond all doubt that Geoffrey Drage is really the old man's nephew, it seems to me that there is no more to be said. The place is his by every right, moral and legal."

"Ethel, you are even worse than your father; of course, it is the thought of Harold that is at the bottom of all this high-falutin nonsense," said Mrs Wycherley with the air of a woman exasperated beyond measure. At the same time she worked her hands nervously together, and kept on looking in the direction of the library door.

"I ought to go in! It is my place and my

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duty to do so, to prevent your father from making absolute disaster for us. He is quite capable of coming out in half an hour or so and telling me with the most cheerful air in the world that we must pack up again to-morrow and go back to Goldhawk Road. Oh, was there ever such a situation, or was ever poor woman treated as I have been? It makes one feel in full sympathy with any movement or agitation that can take the power out of incapable hands and give it to women who have brains."

She took a few steps along the passage, then came back again, and Ethel felt great compassion for her.

"I shouldn't go in, mummy, if I were you. We must trust father; he loves us, and he will think of us when he is dealing with Mr Drage. Come, and let me get you some tea, and if you would lie down for a bit, it would do you great good. You simply look worn out."

"I *am* worn out. Any woman would be after going through such a strain. I don't know where I am and whether to-morrow I shall have a roof to cover me. Yet your father calls himself a Christian man."

Something in the last words seemed to exasperate her afresh, and before Ethel could prevent her she had darted once more along

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the corridor and opened the library door. Wycherley and Geoffrey Drage were standing together by the long French window conversing earnestly. At the sight of his wife Wycherley raised a deprecating hand, and hastened towards the door.

"Excuse me, my dear, and leave Mr Drage and me alone for a little longer. No, I am sorry you can't come in. We shall be able, I think, to settle this vexed matter amicably between ourselves, and come to some arrangement which will please everybody."

"I must come in, John; I don't feel that I can trust you," she said in a low, hurried voice. "Remember me, remember the children, and don't come out of this room and tell me we are homeless."

Wycherley smiled and laid a very kind, tender hand on her shoulder.

"My dear, you may trust me. Do I not love you and the children better than myself? Now go away, and if you want to be kind send somebody with a cup of tea for us here. I can't remember having had any lunch."

There was a strange new firmness and dignity about her husband which she had never before seen, and in spite of a protesting will Emma Wycherley found herself compelled to obey for the first time in her married life. She

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laughed bitterly to herself as she did so, nevertheless she was sufficiently mistress of herself to go and tell Lily to prepare a tea-tray for the library.

Then she retired upstairs to roam once more through the spacious, beautiful old rooms, to take an inventory of their special charms, and to nurse her fear lest she had only tasted the sweets of possession and power to have them wrested from her in the very moment of realisation.

Ethel would not leave her alone, however. With her own hand she brought her a cup of tea and tried to cheer her as best she could. She had never seen her mother so nearly hysterical before, and it was rather a disturbing sight. Poor Emma Wycherley could not rest. Even while drinking her tea she wandered about, popping out to the landing, to listen for some sound from below-stairs, and between whiles continuing to lament the total lack of common sense and worldly wisdom on the part of her husband. Presently Lily appeared on the stairs, after having taken the tray to the library.

"Are master and the strange gentleman still talking, Lily?" her mistress inquired sharply. She was never above questioning a servant to obtain any information she specially

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desired ; it was a habit of hers which always secretly vexed Ethel, who had the instincts of a gentlewoman.

"No, 'm," replied Lily, with a giggle. "They was walkin' round the walls a-tappin' of 'em between the boards like. It did look so funny. But they was 'a-talkin' too all the time."

"They'll find something there sure, Ethel ! and I know we are going to be homeless. And as for your father, he knows what chance he has of being taken on again in the City, or of finding a new situation at his age. I hope he will be sorry for it when he sees us all going to the workhouse. There certainly isn't anything else in front of us."

Again Ethel laughed.

"How I should love to go down and help them ! I mean to have a hunt for that will all on my own."

"If I found it I should make very short work of it, I do assure you," replied Mrs Wycherley with an exceedingly vicious snap. She was no longer careful to hide her real feelings under the garb of civility. She felt like a rat in a trap fighting for the best way out.

"Mummy !" cried Ethel in a horrified voice. "You never would ! Why, that would be an

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awful thing to do ; besides, you might have to go to gaol for it."

"Not more awful than what your father is doing now. I would try to put bread in my children's mouths, he does his best to take it out. He is by way of being a very religious man, but he has forgotten what the Bible says about the man who neglects to provide for his own household."

She continued to talk in this strain until her patience was exhausted, and in despair of obtaining satisfaction anywhere she addressed herself with redoubled energy to her household cares once more. The mere mechanical exercise of unpacking layers of things out of drawers had a soothing effect, and slowly the unusual fit of hysterical agitation passed.

Contrary to Ethel's expectation, when the men came out of the library they went towards the hall door, and did not turn to come upstairs. She saw them both leave the house together, but her father accompanied Drage only a few steps, and then bade him what appeared to be a very cordial good-bye. Then he returned to the house, whistling softly to himself.

The contrast between her father's serenity of spirit and her mother's agitation was very marked. Ethel was so constituted that she

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could sympathise with both. She ran out to meet her father at the door.

"Well, what has happened: has anything been found?" she asked excitedly.

"Nothing; we merely did a little preliminary tapping on the oak panels of the library, but a more thorough search will be made by competent persons. Where is your mother?"

"Upstairs. She is frightfully upset, dad; I have not seen her more so. It really is a terrible business altogether for us, isn't it? How much better if we had never heard of Mr Halliwell Drage or his money!" said Ethel with a sigh. "This sort of thing is bondage of the very worst kind, and it is so bad for everybody. It is having an effect on us all; you are the only one that seems to escape corrosion."

"There is no need to be unduly troubled, my dear. No great harm has been done as yet, and we have not wronged anybody. Is not that the chief thing?"

Ethel acquiesced, and watched him ascending the stairs with a half-wondering, half-wistful look on her face. Wycherley wandered from room to room looking for his wife, and at last discovered her sitting on the floor among a pile of muslin and lace curtains of the cheaper

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sort, which she had unearthed from one of the drawers she had packed so carefully at Goldhawk Road. Mrs Wycherley was a clever and in some respects a very versatile woman. Realising that she had come painfully near making a fool of herself, and that it was absolutely necessary that she should keep all her wits about her for any emergency that might arise, she had by a supreme effort of the will compelled herself to concentrate on the question of curtains, and to decide whether she could make any use of the clean, beautifully laundered pile by which she was surrounded.

"They'll do for small bedrooms and back rooms," she said half aloud at the very moment of her husband's entrance.

"You are there, Emma!" he said with an air of relief at finding her so rationally employed.

"Yes, I'm here, of course," she answered a trifle shortly as she rose from her lowly position, in which it was difficult to maintain the dignity she desired.

"Has Mr Drage gone, John? I hope Lily took in your tea nicely. I looked after it myself."

"It was very nice, thank you. What do you think of him, Emma? He struck me as

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being a very fine fellow indeed. We have had quite a long and friendly talk."

"And what is the decision you have come to?" she asked, with an air of indifference she was very far from feeling, and at the same time fingering the goffered frill of one of the curtains as if her real attention were engrossed thereby.

"No decision exactly, but we are both agreed that it is necessary to make a very thorough search in the house for the will."

"And when is it to start, so that I may keep out of the way?"

"It may start at any time; I shall be occupying all my odd moments in it. The lawyers are agreed that Mr Drage must have every facility given him, because the document, of course, is of the last importance to him."

"And of the least to us, I suppose, John; that is how you would put it if you were allowed," she said, with a slight indulgent smile such as she might have bestowed upon a child.

"No, I understand that it is of equal importance to us, Emma."

"I don't want to hear any more about it," she said good-humouredly. "I'm sorry if I've been rude to Mr Drage; you can tell him so next time you see him, and so far as I

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am concerned he can have the run of the house. It will save a great deal of bother if he finds what he is seeking quickly. There is only one question I wish to ask. Supposing he is granted every facility, as you express it, and nothing is found; supposing everybody is satisfied that there is not another will, what will you do then?"

"Mr Yardley said this morning that there could be no possible objection to my sharing with Mr Drage, if I wished. He said it would be very handsome and generous and unusual—you know the sort of thing he would say—but I have another name for it, common honesty."

"Then how would you propose to divide it? Shall we have to leave this dear house where I feel more and more at home every moment?"

There was quite genuine feeling in her voice, and Wycherley's by no means hard heart was instantly touched by it.

"I'm very sorry, dear wife, but I think it would be our duty to give him the chance of it. There have always been Drages in Mitchelham. I have read the family history in that old volume of Hertfordshire records I unearthed in the library. But with the half of the money—twenty thousand pounds, my

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dear—we could buy ourselves another home, and do well by the children—that is, if I can reconcile myself to taking even such a share.”

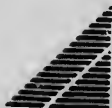
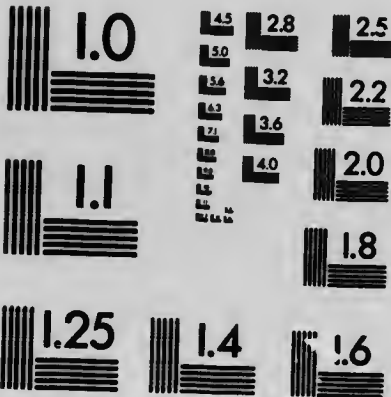
“It must be as you decide, of course, John,” she said in a quiet, resigned voice. “But perhaps Mr Drage, being a Colonial, would prefer to have the money to go abroad with again, and let us stop here. I have heard that Colonials don’t like English life after the freedom of new countries. But there! don’t look so worried and scared, and for goodness’ sake don’t let us talk any more about it. I’m so dead tired and sick of it all. I wish when I go to bed at night that I could not awake again till some good fairy had arranged all the disagreeable part of the business for us, and left me nothing to do but rest.”

The unusual quietness and reasonableness of his wife’s words surprised and relieved Wycherley very much. He had no qualms about the future now. He was content to leave it in the hands of the good God who had so wonderfully led him hitherto, and who would not desert him in his hour of need. Wycherley believed in following the straight path of duty and of conscience at any cost; he had never in the whole course of his life



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swerved from it, and it made him very happy that his wife seemed to be coming round to his point of view. He did not recognise the fact that her silence and apparent reasonableness were forced upon her, because for the moment she saw no other way out. He slept the sleep of the just man that night, and rested in the sweet country air, as a child might have done worn out with his play. No problems vexed or harassed his soul. Lying wide-awake by his side his wife marvelled at his long, deep, gentle breathing, at the quietude of soul that in the midst of what to her was simply harassing care could find such repose. She was dry-eyed and very wide-awake, her brain beating like a sledgehammer, her busy mind full of endless plans and numerous schemes for the future. With a different husband how easy had been her path in life! She loved Wycherley for his estimable qualities, yet in her secret soul despised him for lack of certain qualities she thought necessary to success.

Then she fell to pondering on the will, and wondering where it could possibly be concealed. Finally, when she had heard the old clock on the stairs ring one, she rose softly, took her dressing-gown from the back of the door, thrust her feet into soft slippers, and



"SHE HEARD AN UNEXPECTED SOUND WHICH ALMOST
MADE HER HEART STAND STILL."

[p. 184.]

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taking a candle and a box of matches from the dressing-table softly left the room.

She was a brave woman, afraid of nothing, and the idea had suddenly occurred to her that she would herself go down to the library and have a look round. The old oak stairs creaked as she stepped upon them, and the moonlight creeping in through the mullioned window had a ghostly effect. She stole softly across the faded rugs scattered about the hall, shading the candle with her hand, to prevent any stray draught from blowing it out. The library door was locked. It had been her custom at Goldhawk Road to lock all the room doors on the ground floor before she went upstairs, and she had pursued the same plan in the new home. The key, which was a little rusty from disuse, creaked in the lock as she touched it ; and the sound gave her a little start. But next moment her courage came again, and she threw it open and entering closed it carefully behind her.

It was not a very large room, being long and narrow, and having bookshelves running all round the walls, about six feet from the floor. The walls were oak-panelled from ceiling to floor. Mrs Wycherley did not know the actual value of these walls, or of the rare carvings occurring at certain intervals.

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A pair of folding steps stood just behind the door. In pursuance of the regular campaign she had mapped out for herself, Mrs Wycherley put them in position, and climbed to the topmost step, from which she found she could reach all the panels except the very top one next the ceiling.

She began very deliberately to tap softly on the wood. It was a fascinating occupation and successful, in so far that she got round a considerable portion of the room without meeting a single hollow sound in the course of her operations.

She had just descended from her perch for the purpose of readjusting the ladder, when she heard an unexpected sound which almost made her heart stand still. The door opened swiftly, and a figure in white appeared on the threshold.

CHAPTER X.

FOR the space of half a second Mrs Wycherley experienced the sensation of fear, and a mist swam before her eyes. But presently a familiar voice broke the silence—Ethel's voice, liquid with amusement.

"So it is only you after all, mummy. I made sure when I heard the noise that it was the Mitchelham ghost."

Mrs Wycherley felt momentarily faint, and even irritated, but presently she had the good sense to laugh.

"I can't imagine how you heard in your room, Ethel. I made sure nobody could hear me tapping the walls."

"I didn't hear it in my room, mummy; to be quite honest, I was coming to try my own luck! It was only when I got to the corridor that I heard the knocks. Well, have you found anything?"

"Nothing; it's my firm belief that there has never been a will, and even if it were ever

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drawn up that Mr Drage destroyed it before his death."

Mrs Wycherley looked very tired just then, and so much harassed that Ethel felt very sorry for her.

"Dear mummy, what is the use of worrying like this? I'm sure that things will turn out all right for us. Why don't you treat it as a sort of comedy, and get all the fun you can out of it? I believe myself it is the only way."

Mrs Wycherley raised a rather unsteady hand, and dashed furtively something from her eyes.

"I can't help worrying, dear, it's my nature. I don't want to speak against your father, that would be wicked and ungrateful; but it is I who have had to plan and think of everything for you all since ever you were born. Of course, it has told on me; it has both hardened and soured me. We have had such a struggle to make ends meet, and maintain the small position we had in Dulwich. If you only realised a tithe of what it has been you wouldn't wonder that I feel so keenly about this. I do want a rest, and to see you have your chance."

"Poor mother!" said Ethel, and put a very tender arm round her shoulders. "But you

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shouldn't bear the burden for everybody like that. We are all young and strong and able to fight for ourselves, and willing too, just as you have been."

"But you're such a pretty girl, Ethel," she said, moved afresh by the sweetness and purity of the girl's looks, accentuated by the flowing lines of her simple white lace-trimmed dressing-gown, the work of her own clever fingers. "Why, with your looks, you could marry anybody. It's not for myself I want things, goodness knows, but for you."

It was debatable ground, from which Ethel gently sought to withdraw her.

"Come on up to my room, mummy, and we'll light the gas fire, and I'll get you a cup of tea in no time; then you must go to bed. Robin is fast asleep, and we shall be ever so cosy up there by ourselves at two o'clock in the morning. I do believe I hear the birds, and that the dawn is beginning to break."

Mrs Wycherley suffered herself to be persuaded, and in that weird little vigil together another and daughter arrived at a better understanding of one another than had been possible to them for a long time—not, indeed, since Ethel had grown up and had begun to claim a voice in the ordering of her own life. Mrs Wycherley lay down in the grey dawning, com-

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forted and almost tempted to accept Ethel's hopeful view of things and determined not to worry about the issue, but to leave it in higher hands.

Next afternoon the first caller, in the person of Miss Honoria Ludlow, arrived at the Manor House. Ethel was out, consequently she was received by Mrs Wycherley herself. Miss Ludlow's frank, if rather brusque, manner put Mrs Wycherley at her ease, and she was able to be herself without putting on any of the airs which Miss Honoria, after Ann Chappell's report, had expected.

"I have to apologise for not bringing my brother. He intended to come, but had to go to town this afternoon with his daughter on some matters connected with her family. You know, she is a widow, and has to consult her husband's people on every point. I don't live in Mitchelham, I may tell you, though I come on a good many visits. I stopped over this week purposely to see you."

"Very kind of you, I'm sure," murmured Mrs Wycherley, and wondered whether all the county people dressed as badly as Miss Ludlow. Ann Chappell had already assured her that the Rectory folks were real quality, but she privately thought Miss Honoria a "guy," and felt very well dressed indeed in her plain grey

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skirt and white blouse, which had both been the work of Ethel's clever fingers.

"I came to-day because I must go back to London to-morrow," continued Miss Honoria, favourably impressed, on the whole, with the new lady of the Manor, and struck by her good looks and her youthfulness. "Of course, we are frightfully interested in all this. It's as good as a play. We knew Mr Halliwell Drage well—an old dear, but no more fit to manage his affairs than a village donkey!"

"You have seen Mr Geoffrey Drage, of course?" said Mrs Wycherley, welcoming the opportunity of hearing some outside comments on the situation.

"Why, yes, of course we have. My brother has made him welcome of the Rectory, and even, I believe, become a sort of guarantee if he needs money. Is it true that he has been here, and that you have let him search through the house?"

"He was here yesterday, and had tea," replied Mrs Wycherley with the air of one acknowledging the performance of a virtuous act. "And I believe my husband and he were searching in the library for the will which is making such a mystery."

"Dear me, what good, unworldly creatures you must be!" quoth Miss Honoria, adjusting

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her pince-nez to get a better look at Mrs Wycherley's placid face. "Do you mean to say you wouldn't mind if such a document were found?"

"I should mind a good deal, of course, but still the young man must have his chance. It is my husband's wish that justice should be done. He is keener on that than anything else."

"Dear me, is he, indeed? It isn't at all like a story-book plot; there doesn't seem to be a villain in the piece," said Miss Honoria with a small laugh at her own joke. "Well, of course, we are a little prejudiced—we can't help ourselves. We should like to see another Drage in Mitchelham, but at the same time one must feel that it is all rather hard on you."

"It is, indeed," answered Mrs Wycherley, betrayed into a confidence she had not thought it would be possible to give to the austere-looking spinster in the short leather-bound skirt and unbecoming hat. "I don't mind telling you that it keeps me awake at night. We have been quite poor up till now, and trying to do our best for the children. It will be hard if all this is snatched away after it has been ours a short time."

"Horribly hard; the sort of thing to make one use unparliamentary language," assented

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Miss Honoria quite cordially. "You would get compensation, of course; you would be entitled to it. I feel quite sorry for you. Was that your daughter I met in the village this morning—a very pretty girl in a brown holland frock?"

"Yes, my eldest daughter Ethel; at least, she *was* in the village this morning about twelve o'clock."

"She's a sweet-looking creature, so modest and simple. I congratulate you on her possession, and I hope she will get a fair chance, anyway," said Miss Honoria with great kindness and sincerity.

"Thank you for speaking so kindly. You can't think how I have felt these few days—almost as if every man's hand were against us."

"Oh, but that's nonsense! You didn't steal the property; it was given to you fair and square to the full satisfaction of the lawyers, and though I like Geoffrey Drage very much, I don't think it would be so hard for him to forgo this as for you. You can tell them I said so. I didn't think it this morning, which shows that people should never judge until they have heard both sides. Yes, I shall be very glad of a cup of tea, thank you, and I shall see that my brother and my niece come

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to see you soon, and that other people call too."

Never had Miss Honoria of the sharp tongue appeared more gracious, and as she retired down the avenue, after a very substantial and fortifying tea, she said half-aloud to herself:—

"Quite a decent woman; a little gauche, perhaps, but quite presentable, and no airs at all. It would be hard on her. I'll stick up for her to them all."

She suddenly bethought herself when half-way down the avenue that she would take a short cut across to a hamlet at the other side of the Mitchelham woods, and say good-bye to a *protégée* of hers who lived in a roadside cottage. Just then she was attracted by two figures walking slowly in the distance, talking earnestly. She stood still, quite unabashed, put up her lorgnette and took a comprehensive survey.

"Geoffrey Drage and the holland girl—no, I won't go that way; it would be a shame to interrupt their *tête-à-tête*. It might lead to something—what, eh?—that would be the best solution of all."

Miss Honoria, who had never received an offer of marriage in her life, was yet in favour of matrimony, and an inveterate matchmaker. The idea of fostering and arranging a match

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between the claimant to the Mitchelham estates and the daughter of the present possessor appealed to her imagination mightily, and she occupied the whole of her walk home with planning how it was to be brought about.

Drage had met Ethel accidentally at the edge of the wood. He had walked all the way from Royston, being unable to keep away from Mitchelham, and not now apprehensive regarding his reception. He had hesitated at the moment of meeting, not certain of how Ethel might regard him, but she had not left him in doubt. She extended a frank hand immediately, and bade him a pleasant good afternoon. "I suppose you are going to the house," she added. "Have you walked a long way?"

"From Royston. It is difficult to get here in any other way," he answered. "The cross-country journey by train to Arnham Green takes two hours, because trains don't generally suit."

"One can always drive," suggested Ethel.

"Yes, when one has money to pay," he answered, and immediately regretted his words as he saw her colour rise. "I beg your pardon, I ought not to have said that. It is a ghastly situation for us all, and upon my word I

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could almost wish I had never left Rupert Sound."

"Oh, but if it should turn out—as it may very easily do—that you have the best right to Mitchelham, you will never regret it," she said quickly.

Geoffrey Drage was silent a moment, regarding intently the sweet face by his side. He had been attracted by it the first time he saw her, and now something more than the sweet face attracted him—the pure, gentle heart which had made Ethel beloved in Dulwich, just as she would be beloved in Mitchelham. Drage had not met many women like her. In the Far West they had been of a different type, rendered hard and unattractive by the privations of their lives; this girl was like a flower. All unconscious of the feelings with which she had inspired him, Ethel wondered at his silence.

"How could you regret it?" she asked. "Just look across this lovely park! I would ask nothing better than to call it mine."

Drage gave a little half-conscious laugh.

"Yet you would be so single-minded as to wish me success," he said. "Surely there has never been so strange a situation since the world began."

"Ah, but there are wheels within wheels!

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I don't know why I should wish to tell you, but somehow I think you would understand. We were quite happy till all this happened. We had only a simple home, but we had enough. Latterly my father had some anxiety about his situation. You see, he is getting old, and he was afraid of being superseded. But even if he had been some other way would have opened up. He knew that, and did not trouble very much. Poor mother could not believe it, though. She has been bearing other people's burdens all her life."

"And you?" he said anxiously, even tenderly; "what sort of prospect did the old life offer you?"

Ethel hesitated a moment, the colour rising exquisitely in her sweet face. "Yes, I *will* tell you. Somehow I think if you understood everything it would be easier for us all. I was engaged to be married, and when this happened my mother did not think it would be a good enough marriage. She showed it so plainly to Harold Crosfield that he left England. He sailed for Canada a very short time ago to try to make the fortune without which my mother would never give her consent to our marriage."

"To Canada! What part?"

"He did not give any address, but said he

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would write when he got there. He has a relative in a good business out there, who has promised to help him. He will have a good chance, won't he? You know all about the life and the country. Do you think he will realise the ambition with which he set out?"

Her wistful eyes dwelt almost entreatingly on his face, and Geoffrey Drage felt himself strangely stirred. It was the very irony of fate that, drawn as he was to this girl, she should seek his counsel and advice regarding the affairs of the lover who had won her. But he rose to the occasion. Geoffrey Drage was an honest, good-hearted fellow, whom the untrammelled life of the Far West had kept singularly free from guile.

"No man able and willing to work need ever be on his beam ends out there," he hastened to assure her. "As to the fortune, that is a matter of good luck. I've been seeking one a good while, and my father sought it all his life without success. Some men fail to grasp the psychological moment, that is all. When do you expect to hear from Mr Crosfield?"

"Oh, I don't know; he may not write until he has something good to tell."

Drage suddenly turned his head away. These words recalled to his mind scores of

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young men he had met on the ranches, in the log camps, hanging about the saloon bars of the little townships—all waiting until they had something good to tell. Would Harold Crosfield, who had won the heart of this sweet English flower, add one more to that melancholy host?

"Then you don't know where he is?" he asked.

"He has not long left England, but I could find out. He has an uncle in Liverpool who arranged for his going, and his mother and sister would know, of course. She was a school friend of mine, and lives at Norwood, near the Crystal Palace."

"I shall be glad to have the address when you get it."

"Would you?—but why, if you will remain in England?"

"That is unlikely. I may tell you I have no hope of finding the will, and since my talk with your father yesterday, I don't seem to care. Did he tell you that it is probable we may come to some arrangement? If I had some money I could turn it over very profitably in a short time in Prince Rupert's Land. They are opening up the country round there, and are talking of making a great port of call for the world's steamers. You can easily

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understand if that should come to pass, that the man who owns even a small bit of land there can turn it over at an immense profit."

"I've read of such things. And you would go back then?" she asked wistfully, "and leave us here!"

"Of course. The place is your father's until I can prove my claim. But how can I prove it? I may tell you I'm a kind of fatalist; I believe that if the will exists it will be brought to light. Meanwhile, why should I loaf about here? The life doesn't appeal to me. It's too slow. I'm simply longing to get back to my native wilds."

He drew a long bow to reassure the doubtful heart of the girl by his side. Love coming to Geoffrey Drage, as it does to some men, in a moment of inspiration, had altered the whole current of his life. He could read between the lines. He knew what was in store for the Wycherleys should they be thrown back through his efforts into their former obscurity.

Ethel's eyes grew round with a soft look of wonder.

"And will you really go back without doing anything more to find the will? I must tell you mamma and I were both in the library about two o'clock this morning making search for it. It obsesses us all more or

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less. Even Baby Robin has caught the fever, and digs for it with his little spade without in the least knowing why, or what it would mean."

"But you could be happy here, if there were no outside influences to deter you?"

"Happy! oh yes; and for my father I should love it! This is his right environment. He would simply live an ideal life here, and be happy. He has had a hard life, and it is very sweet to me to think he might have a rest. You say you are a fatalist, but I am more—I am a believer in an over-ruling Providence, and I am not going to worry myself any more about it."

"It is the better way," assented Drage. "I may tell you now what decision we arrived at yesterday. After every possible search has been made, I shall go back to Canada, accepting from your father five thousand pounds for my present use and investment. That makes fortune possible to me, and it is a foregone conclusion that I shall be able to refund that money with interest before many years are over."

"You and papa have settled that already, and he has never said a word about it!" she exclaimed, astonishment growing deeper with every moment of their talk.

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"It is a little arrangement between ourselves. I am not aggrieved. I would rather have that money than the whole of these lands and estates. Can't you understand? I have not been brought up to this sort of life. I should not know how to conduct myself in it."

"How wonderful it all is!" she said in a low voice. "I wish I could believe it all. I am a little afraid you are making light of everything because somehow since you have got to know us you don't want to turn us out."

"There is one thing before we get to the house," he said, pausing as they came to the edge of the gravelled sweep before the door. "If you will get me the address of Mr Crosfield I will make it my business to find him, and to learn what he is about. I shall be able to put him in the right way, and I would like to do it for your sake, so that the future you and he have dreamed of might be realised."

Within a month it was known in Mitchelham that Geoffrey Drage had relinquished all claim to the land and estates of Mitchelham, and had returned to the Far West. Many rumours were afloat, but the actual arrangement between him and John Wycherley was



"I AM AFRAID YOU ARE MAKING LIGHT OF EVERYTHING BECAUSE
YOU DON'T WANT TO TURN US OUT."

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known only to Ethel and to the lawyers at New Court.

The strangest thing of all was that when the moment of good-bye came, Ethel was conscious of a distinct heartache at parting from Geoffrey Drage.

She scarcely dared to admit it to her own heart, but the memory of Harold Crosfield seemed to have faded away into nothingness.

CHAPTER XI.

TO cross the Atlantic in a cattle boat in charge of a section of the cargo is a somewhat lurid experience not easily forgotten, and seldom repeated by men who have gone through it. There are scarcely words in the English language suitable to describe its misery in detail. Having been once through that experience, Geoffrey Drage much appreciated the comfort of his second-class passage on one of the big liners bound for Quebec. His strange introduction to English country life had made a profound impression on him, and entirely altered his point of view. He had left Canada in rage and bitterness, he returned to it in a different frame of mind.

The born Colonial is of necessity in some directions an ignorant person, and a voyage to the home-land is bound to open his eyes. It had done more than open the eyes of Geoffrey Drage, it had filled him at once with happiness and an overpowering discontent. He had

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learned that a well-ordered life in the old country has a beauty of its own, a solid comfort and satisfaction which is most certainly absent from the more feverish existence of the pioneer. What filled him with the greatest astonishment and remained a baffling problem in his mind, was how men who had been born and nurtured in such homes as he had seen, could endure the life to which circumstances condemned them out West.

He had met many, both among the remittance men and among the well-to-do, who had come straight from the environment to which his strange fortune had introduced him, and he sympathised as he had never done before with their failure. He could imagine despair and immeasurable hate of existence seizing upon a man who found himself cut off from all that made life worth living on in the old country, and who realised, perhaps too late, that he had sold his birthright for a mess of pottage.

Undoubtedly the great West has been the grave, as well as the crown, of many human hopes. Drage was pondering these big problems in his mind on the second evening out, smoking an after-dinner pipe on deck, when a man whom he had observed already as rather an interesting-looking person, sauntered

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up and bade him good evening. He was an immensely tall person, with a big, hard face and a keen penetrating eye, which gave the impression of seeking to read the soul of any one whom he addressed.

"Evening, boss. We're going to have a pretty trim passage, I guess, if it goes on like this."

"We're hardly in the Atlantic swell yet," answered Geoffrey with a smile. "Care to take a turn?"

"It's what I come up for. I've been looking at you quite a while, then you see, quite sudden, I thought it time to pow-wow. My name's Bolitho, Ambrose Bolitho at your service. Yours?"

"Geoffrey Drage."

"Going out fust time, I suppose?" said the stranger, pausing to light his pipe at that of his companion.

"No. My first visit to the old country, if you like. I was born out West."

"So! You don't look it. It's them English togs. I don't git the hang of 'em somehow. Fellers looks as if they was poured into their clothes 'ere."

Geoffrey laughed silently.

"They think about them a tidy lot, I do suppose," he assented. "And the tailor trade

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is big in England, and good. Some of 'em are rich enough to own estates and ride in carriages, and yet they don't charge half New York or Toronto prices. Something wrong, boss, eh?"

"Tariff Reform," said Bolitho curtly. "And are you goin' West now?"

"Yes, right through to Vancouver."

"Me too, and further. Ever heard of Prince Rupert's Land, boss?"

Drage acknowledged that he had.

"That's going to be the place; that's my next claim."

Geoffrey felt immediately interested.

"Curiously, I've been thinking I'd go out and have a look round myself. I suppose you heard a good deal of talk about the All-Red Route in the old country?"

Bolitho laughed his big silent laugh, which seemed to suggest a variety of emotions.

"Talk's cheap," he commented briefly. "Not that it don't make things hum in moderation, but you an' me, boss, knowin' what we do of geography in the land that bred us, the All-Red Route! No! We *don't* think, leastways not in our time, to do us any good, see?"

"Then you think it's a chimera?"

"A what?"

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"A thing that can't come off."

"Oh, well, I wouldn't ezzactly go so fur as thet. No man who knows anything about life is positive about anything. He's a fool if he pertends to be. But look at the difficulties, the climate, the work in front afore Prince Rupert could ever be a port. They ain't believable by anybody who ain't been there, an' thank goodness, it's too fur fer the common or garden person to take a cheap trip of investigation. If he's goin' to swallow it, he must swallow it whole."

"They've begun building and 'clearing, I believe. A man on the Government Survey told me that eighteen months ago."

"Yus, that's true enough, and land's boomin'. If you're goin' along to Prince Rupert, we kin go together, if you like? I've took a fancy to you, an' I know a thing or two about the Sound that's worth knowin'. Anyway, two 'eads is better than one any day."

Drage thanked him, but did not commit himself in any direction. He had knocked about the world enough to be a little careful about such sudden friendships, and he did not feel very sure yet about Ambrose Bolitho.

"It'll be some weeks before I could go right through. I've been away a goodish bit, and must look up several folks. I'll have to

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stop a bit in Vancouver, anyway. Is there a boat running regular now?"

"Only once in two weeks, and then sometimes there ain't anybody on 'er," said Bolitho with a grim smile. "There's a special kind of togs wanted for the Sound, boss, things to keep out the rain. When it ain't pelting the mists hide up everything. I've bin there a solid month once, and never saw the sky."

"As bad as a London fog," laughed Drage.

"No it ain't, 'cos it leaves you clean. Bin over to England to see your folks, I suppose?"

"No, I haven't any folks there. I thought I'd come into a bit of money and a place, an' I came over to see. It was a mistake, that was all," he answered quietly, knowing no reason why he should withhold that item of information.

"An' you had your trip for nothing; hard lines, wasn't it?"

"No, I don't think I had it for nothing," said Geoffrey musingly. "England itself's worth seeing. Know what I was thinking just before you came up?—that I'm not at all surprised so many of them go to the dogs out West. The contrast would drive them. How the half of them stick it even as long as they do, I don't know."

"I couldn't stick the old country, you bet.

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It ain't got any room anywhere, and a man's afraid of the sound of his own voice, it sounds so loud like. My sister Lallie, I went over to see her, she's married a chap from Kootenay who came into a business on this side. She's very tidily fixed up, I must say, but she ain't the same girl. Half the time she was at me about the noise I made, the cut of my togs, my outlandish ways. Last I got fed up, and quit, an' I shan't come back in a hurry, you can take my word for that."

In much of this sort of talk they passed their idle hours, and by the end of the voyage Geoffrey had arrived at a tolerably correct estimate of his new friend, and had decided that he was a straight chap, and that he would not refuse his company West. He was, in most respects, an elemental creature, but he had a firm grip of the principles of success, which might be summed up in these words—"get there first." When he heard from Geoffrey that he had five thousand pounds to invest, he took great pains to point out to him a few channels in which it might be most profitably employed. Geoffrey had no reason to doubt his sincerity, or his desire to help him. They decided to go to Prince Rupert's Land together, Bolitho agreeing to wait in Vancouver as long as Geoffrey found it necessary. His only object in linger-

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ing there was to interview Harold Crosfield's uncle, and if possible see Harold himself. So much he had promised to Ethel Wycherley, and though the promise might drive the last nail into his own hopes, he would carry it through. He refrained from giving his full confidence to Ambrose Bolitho, partly because the part Ethel Wycherley had played in the curious events of the last months made him reticent, and partly because Bolitho's views of life were rather different from his. Bolitho had no sentiment, and very little regard for the feelings of others, and he prided himself on calling a spade a spade. Sometimes Geoffrey amused himself by wondering what verdict he would have passed on the unworldly and child-like John Wycherley.

Their voyage and subsequent journey from the Atlantic to the Pacific coast was without important event, and they arrived at Vancouver within a fortnight of leaving England. They did not put up at the best hotel, though they could have afforded it, but at a more commercial house off the Main Street. After a good night's rest, and breakfast together, they parted, and went their separate ways, agreeing to meet for supper in the evening.

Both were familiar with Vancouver, and

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needed no guiding. Geoffrey went direct to the Canadian Bank of Commerce to settle his own monetary affairs, and while there made some enquiry regarding the firm of Rogerson & Snell, of which Harold Crosfield's uncle was the head.

"Mr Rogerson lives at Victoria now," said the manager. "He moved there about three years ago. Snell lives in this city, but I believe he's down East just now connected with their branch at Ottawa."

Geoffrey Drage looked disappointed. He had no particular desire to go over to Victoria, though it might be necessary.

"Stop a minute," said the manager with his finger on the telephone call. "Somebody told me yesterday that Rogerson was over here, that he dined last night at the C.P.R. Hotel; probably he's stopping there. Shall I just ask?"

Geoffrey thanked him, and waited the result of the enquiry, which was satisfactory. Mr Rogerson was staying in the hotel, and had only just left it to go to his place of business. Geoffrey was easily directed to it, and walked straight from the bank to the substantial-looking offices of the well-established firm. His spirits sensibly fell as he approached, now in no manner of doubt that he would

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see Harold Crosfield, and have to say farewell finally to the hopes that still lingered in his own heart.

But he was not one to shirk duty because it happened to clash with inclination, so manfully swallowing his disappointment, he presented himself at the counter of the enquiry office and asked for Mr Harold Crosfield.

"Ain't here, sir."

"Mr Rogerson, then," pursued Geoffrey, concluding that it would be more discreet and respectful to put his enquiries straight to headquarters.

"He's in, but busy ; I'll ask," said the clerk, and left him standing at the enquiry desk. In a second or two he returned to say that Mr Rogerson had just five minutes to spare, if that was any use. Geoffrey indicated that it would suffice, and followed the lad to the room where the busy Westerner was engrossed in the plans of a new township, in which he was personally interested.

He was a short, squat man, with a clean-shaven face and a keen grey eye, a hard man, Geoffrey mentally decided, and one who would stand no nonsense.

"Good-day! You can see I'm busy," he said, with a curt nod in the direction of the

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door through which the stranger entered.
"What can I do for you?"

"I only want to ask a question, Mr Rogerson; it need not take you a moment to answer it. I am seeking the address of a young man called Crosfield—Harold Crosfield—who came out from England about a year ago."

"Well, I don't know it, so we needn't waste each other's time," was the laconic reply.

Geoffrey looked the surprise he felt.

"Isn't he here, then? I thought he was with you."

"He was, but he ain't now," answered Rogerson, as if the question nettled him. "And if you're a friend of his, I ain't got anything to tell you you'd like to hear. See?"

"I'm scarcely a friend, I've never seen him, but I've just come back from a trip to the old country, where I met those who were interested in him."

"And they put you on his track," said Rogerson, allowing his eyes to fall more searchingly on Drage's face. "Was it his mother you saw then, my sister, Mrs Crosfield?"

"No," answered Drage, and after a hesi-

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tating second added, "It was the girl who expects to marry him."

"Oh, then, if you're a friend of hers, you can write to her and say she'd better pull up stakes here, now, at once, and let 'im drop."

"I'm sorry," said Geoffrey quite simply. "Thank you, Mr Rogerson. If you don't know where he is, I needn't waste your time, but I've got to find him, for her sake."

Perhaps it was the words or the manner of their utterance, or Geoffrey's whole personality, which was certainly winning, but as he would have left the room, Mr Rogerson called him back.

"Sit down, and I'll tell you what I know of Harold. You never saw him, you say, so you don't start with any prejudices. Five years ago I visited the old country, and stopped, of course, with my sister and her husband at Brixton. He's a doctor there, working like a galley slave for his bread and cheese, and there's no butter to it. But he wouldn't quit—too old, he said, and the heart out of 'im. My sister's an old woman before her time, and when she was a gel, she was 'ard to beat. The gels, her daughters I mean, seem to 'ave all the grit. Harold was a boy then, jes' thinkin' of leavin' school, and I wanted 'im then. If they'd given 'im to me then, I could

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'ave licked 'im into shape, and made something of 'im, but when he come this time, a full-grown man to look at, though nothing but a babby inside, I sees at once it was all up."

"He bore a good character at home, and was well liked," said Geoffrey, feeling bound to remonstrate.

"I'm not denyin' it, but there ain't anything in 'im excep' one idee—that England is God's own country, an' that there ain't anything in the whole earth to compare. He went about airin' them opinions among folk that knows better, and he wouldn't work. I never see sech an idle chap. It made me fair sick to look at 'im."

Geoffrey listened in a kind of quiet dismay. He knew too little about Harold Crosfield to make any attempt at denial. Besides, he had no doubt that Rogerson spoke the truth as it appeared to him.

"It was a soft job he wanted, and to make money quick, especially the last named," said Rogerson rather ironically. "An' he was too proud to learn the A.B.C. of his job. I tried 'im at everything, and nothing pleased. I wanted 'im to begin at the beginning, as my own lads did. There's one of 'em at Ottawa now and the other 'ere, and they ain't above

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their job, I can tell you. They can show anybody how to work. Did you ever see Harold's hands? No, of course you didn't, never 'avin' seen 'im at all. Now then, tell me about this gel of his. What right has a chap like that with a gel at all? He couldn't keep 'er. She'd 'ave to turn out and bring grist to the mill herself."

Geoffrey thought of Ethel as he had seen her last, with the sweet, wistful light on her face, the anxiety of her loving heart written large upon it, and he felt very sick at heart.

"She's all right," he answered dully. "But if it's as you say, I don't suppose the affair could ever come to anything. Indeed, it couldn't, because her people would not permit it. But can't anything be done for Harold? It seems to me that a year is a very short probation."

"A year's long enough to find out what's in a chap. He didn't like anything here, he was always comparing the old country, and explaining how much better everything was there, and he flatly refused to take 'is turn at the loggin' camp. I ask you, how's a man to handle the timber business successfully if he doesn't begin where they fell the trees, learn how to fell them, and which ones has to be taken and which left. I hadn't much patience with 'im,

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an' that's a fact. There was no gratitude in 'im. He thought I'd take 'im in, and set 'im down, see, on a office-stool, same as the one he'd left, that he'd git here at ten an' quit at four, only the pay was to be a lot bigger. And I didn't jes' see my way, that's all."

Once more Geoffrey rose to go.

"I must make a few other enquiries elsewhere. I'd like to come up with him."

"Last I 'eard of 'im he was in the Kootenay district, I believe somebody saw him at Nelson. It's a loafer he's become already, and he'd join the remittance gang, only they ain't got anything to remit at his place. I'm writing to my sister, so you needn't! I've put it off, but I'll write to-day!"

"I don't know Mrs Crosfield, and I shouldn't be writing," said Geoffrey. "Good-day, Mr Rogerson."

Rogerson rose to his feet, and stood a moment before the fireplace, still inclined to detain his caller.

"Look here, Mr Drage, I know that you think I've been 'ard on the young man, but I promise you that he's had his chance, fair and square. He was hanging about for ten months, eatin' good meals all the time, and not doin' an honest day's work. He's got to find his level in this country, and he will. But I

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don't mind saying that if you come across him, and he's in want of a job, and in a better frame of mind, that I'm willin' to take him back. I saw quite well that he'd never do no good till he'd been round on his own a bit, and learned what life actually is. When he come 'ere he didn't know no more about it than a babby. Couldn't talk of anything but tennis parties, and dances, and sech like. It made me an' the boys fair sick."

Geoffrey faintly smiled. He knew very well that to this hard Westerner, who had torn success from elemental things, much of Harold's talk must have seemed not only puerile, but incomprehensible.

"I understand, Mr Rogerson, and if I come across Harold I'll tell him what you say. Good-day."

But still Rogerson seemed disinclined to let him go.

"You're not a B.C. man, are you?"

"I was born here," answered Drage. "But I don't belong anywhere particular at present. I'm going over to Rupert Sound presently to have a look round."

Into Rogerson's eyes leaped a sudden light that was almost fierce, the light of the hunter who scents probable prey.

"You think with some of 'em that there's

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goin' to be a boom there, but you're wrong. I've prospected up there, and the prospects ain't worth a red cent. Why, man, the place is impossible. It's cut off, and the climate is too cussed for words. You'll only waste your time and anybody else's that happens to be interested in you."

"I think I'll take a look, anyhow," said Geoffrey casually. "I'll bid you good-day, Mr Rogerson."

"Come to supper to-night, and meet my lads. I'm stopping at the C.P.R., and they'll eat with me to-night, most likely. The boarding-house ain't jes' the thing, but they put up with it. That was the difference between them and Harold, he wanted to start right bang on at the C.P.R."

But Geoffrey pleaded his excuses. Truth to tell, he had no particular desire to see more of Rogerson, or to be introduced to his sons.

He was perfectly familiar with the type. It was a merciless type, which spared not its own endeavours, and swept every obstacle from the path of its progress.

As he went down the stairs Geoffrey wondered what would be the verdict of the men who had business dealings with the firm. He felt sorry for Harold Crosfield, and had not

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the slightest intention of relaxing his efforts to find him.

But even though his more charitable nature prompted him to discount some part of Roger-son's story, he had to admit that there was nothing cheering, out of which to make a letter that would be welcome to Ethel Wycherley. He must deny himself the pleasure of writing until he had some better news to send.

CHAPTER XII.

BUT though Geoffrey Drage was keen enough about his quest and anxious to satisfy or allay Ethel's anxiety, nearly a year passed away before he heard anything further about Harold Crosfield, or even had an opportunity of making any fresh enquiries. The only thing he did was to write to a man he knew in Nelson, asking him to keep a look-out for a young man of that name, but the answer received after the lapse of a few months was disappointing. "People come and go so much here," his friend wrote, "and the remittance men are so much on the increase, that it's like looking for a needle in a haystack. Probably your friend has changed his name, as so many of them do."

It depressed him that Harold should immediately be relegated to the ranks of the undesirables, without any real proof of his downfall; and somehow he found it difficult

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to get rid of the feeling that it might be true.

Rogerson's account of his nephew had not been encouraging, even after he had made some allowance for that hard-headed old man's point of view.

During all these months Geoffrey himself had not been idle. He found a good deal to interest and encourage him at the latest outpost of Empire, and the fascination of Nature and men in the rough kept him there longer than he intended. In spite of Eastern belief to the contrary, the place was growing. It made immense strides in the six months of Geoffrey's sojourn, even despite the fact that a regular rainy season was in progress.

Bolitho had not belied the place, the state of which was undoubtedly a little better. But the atmosphere was gentle and mild, and with reasonable precautions health could be preserved and enjoyed.

All the usual features of the newly-arisen township were to be found at Prince Rupert, some of them accentuated beyond what is common.

Being a port of sorts, it attracted the special types that congregate in such places, but its difficulty of access and the expense

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of living, kept out a large percentage of loafers. And the few who did come soon made themselves scarce, finding no happy hunting-ground for their particular qualities. The men who remained were the workers, the hard-headed, far-seeing pioneers who believed in the future, and were satisfied to endure discomfort and to incur certain risks in the full hope of a splendid recompense. To this small but efficient number belonged Ambrose Bolitho. The friendship between him and Drage suffered no abatement, but grew in strength, each respecting qualities in the other which he did not possess himself. Drage was often amazed at his shrewdness, his almost uncanny cleverness in his estimate of men and things. While other men were thinking and hesitating, Bolitho made up his mind and acted accordingly. So it came to pass that a great many of the very best chances for money-making in Rupert's Land came into his possession, or rather were grasped by him as they offered themselves. Also he created a few opportunities by the power of his own optimism and his persuasive tongue. He bought land extensively, and persuaded Drage to do the same. Before six months were over he induced him to sell again,

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clearing in the process exactly double what he invested. This is so common an experience in the Far West that it requires no commenting on it. It is possible to get rich quick there in sober earnest. But it takes a special cast of mind. The process fascinated Geoffrey Drage. He watched Bolitho's operations at first with a sort of lazy and amused interest, which soon developed into active admiration at his masterly handling of men. And he was perfectly honest; there was nothing of the shark about Bolitho, or Drage could not have borne his companionship so long.

"I'm going East," said Bolitho one day as he came into the sitting-room they shared together in the queer apology for a hotel. "It's time to go East, and blow the trumpet loud. I'll stop down a matter of three or four months till the hot season is over. We'll get to Ottawa before the Government quits for the holidays. Will you come?"

Geoffrey was ready. His thoughts had already turned with an almost overmastering longing to England. He had the right to go there now, his prospects and his position being assured. But first, he must make some further and more thorough search for Harold Crosfield.

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They began their journey almost immediately, sailing to Vancouver by the first available boat. They spent only twenty-four hours there—time enough to get some clothes, and for Geoffrey to make a call at Rogerson's office to ask whether anything had been heard of Harold Crosfield.

Rogerson himself, however, had gone to Ottawa, and his representatives knew nothing about his private affairs. So once more Geoffrey and Bolitho boarded the Canadian Pacific express to make the wonderful journey through the Rockies and across the plains to the Atlantic seaboard.

They parted at the Kootenay Junction, much to Bolitho's regret.

"If you do come up with him, Geoff, it won't be no good. Probably it would be better for 'em all not to know any more about 'im," he said gravely, and with the air of a man who knew.

"Don't talk about a man like that before he's down," said Geoffrey, rather nettled. "It doesn't give me nor him a fair chance. For all we know he may be doing something that's going to pan out A1, same as us. What's to hinder him?"

Bolitho winked.

"What's to hinder, as you say, but we

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don't think. Anyway, I wish you luck. If I wasn't so keen to catch the Minister of the Interior before he quits his job, I'd join in the hunt. But you'll come straight on after you're through with this business. Find me at the Russell House, Ottawa, and we'll see after that."

Geoffrey promised, and parted from his friend with genuine regret. It is a searching test of a man to spend six months with him in the wilds, cut off from all the restraints of civilisation, and Bolitho had stood the test well. He was a big man, whose heart lifted him clean above the temptations which assail and so often overcome lesser men.

Kootenay was a new district to Geoffrey Drage, and he was much interested in its fine scenery and evident possibilities. He came to the pretty little city of Nelson late in the evening, and over his dinner at the hotel asked a few questions about the mining camps of the district.

He hardly expected that Harold Crosfield would have drifted to any of them, he was not that type of man, but Nelson was the only clue he had. The friend to whom he had written before was in the town, but dining out, and Geoffrey did not reach him

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over the telephone till the next morning. His voice rang over the wires very cordially, and he asked him to wait in till he came round to see him, which he did inside of half an hour.

Howarth was a mining engineer who had done well in British Columbia, a very solid, hard-headed Yorkshire man, whose expert knowledge of his business had enabled him to reach a very solid position in the new country in a short time. He was now a large shareholder as well as consulting engineer of one of the most lucrative of the mining companies in the Kootenay district.

"If you've time, we'll go out to the Bonanza, if you like," suggested Howarth. "It would interest you. We've three thousand men working there, and the town is growing like a mushroom."

"I've time," assented Drage eagerly. "And I'd like to go."

He had the sort of feeling that he might at any moment compass the object of his journey.

"I was sorry I couldn't find out anything about the chap you wrote about, but in a place like this it's almost hopeless. They come one minute and go the next. It's a shifting population. Still seeking him?"

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Geoffrey said that he was.

"Well, I hope you'll come up with him one of these days. You never know your luck in this country. The oddest things happen. Shall we say nine o'clock to-morrow morning then, or would you rather go this afternoon?"

"I want to be off to-morrow morning, if possible," said Geoffrey. "I haven't any business to do here, and if you could make the time——"

"Oh, I can. Well, we'll lunch early, and go out in the afternoon."

They had a pleasant morning together, and Drage heard a great many interesting things about the mining section of Western life. His experience had indeed been considerably enlarged since he left England, but it had not taken the edge off his desire to go back. He had not shirked the truth, but had freely admitted to himself that Ethel Wycherley was the magnet drawing him to the other side of the ocean. If he could only find out something definite about the man in whom she was so deeply interested, he would take another trip without delay. What he was to gain thereby, he was not at all sure, indeed he had not thought of it in that light.

Bonanza Creek did not differ materially from any other mining community, excepting

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that it had now the distinction of being the largest and most important in Western Canada. The grimy little town presented all the features of the mining region, and the type of loafers to be met with at the bars and street corners did not commend themselves to Geoffrey Drage.

"Shouldn't care to squat here," he said to Howarth, as they dropped in at the principal hotel for some slight refreshment.

"No, I call it the limit myself, but there's no accounting for tastes. Look at this chap coming in now, he's the boss here. Looks a gentlemanly chap, doesn't he?"

Geoffrey turned his head and looked attentively for a moment at a man talking to two others in the wide porch of the hotel.

He looked quite young, certainly not more than six or seven-and-twenty, and though his face bore some of the traces of rough and free living, its features were good, even refined.

"He's been about here, off and on, for the last twelve months. I saw him first about nine months ago. He got in a bit of a row here, and I helped him out. He's a fool for himself. Anyone can see that he belongs to good people, but I never got at the bottom of his story, though I had a good try once or twice."

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"What's his name?" asked Drage, his interest deepening as he continued to regard the man's face attentively. He wished—though why the thought should enter his head at that particular moment he did not know—that he had tried to obtain a photograph of Harold Crosfield before he left England. And yet, as he had fully expected to find him through his relatives in Vancouver, such a precaution would have seemed unnecessary at the time.

"His name? Oh, that's a matter of no consequence. Some of them have a fresh one every few days. But I want to tell you the rest of the tale as far as the chapter here is concerned. The row I got him out of occurred in this house, at this very bar. It wasn't his fault, but the fault of the outsiders he was with, and I took his side. I offered him a job afterwards if he'd keep straight."

"Had he given way to drink, then?"

"A little, or rather a good deal, and he talked a lot about some bad treatment he had had on both sides of the water. When a man is his own enemy, he can always pitch a yarn of that kind. He took on the job I offered. It didn't amount to much, but it would have given him a chance, but next time I came

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out to Bonanza, what do you think had happened?"

Drage shook his head.

"He had made up to the landlady here, and they were married about two months ago. No, she isn't an old woman. You'll see her in a minute, but she isn't his class. Fancy a chap with any savait caring to settle down to this sort of thing? You asked his name a minute ago, and now it comes back to me. I believe he calls himself Rogerson."

Drage gave a big start.

"Rogerson! Is it a common name hereabouts?"

"Not so very. There's a lumber firm at Vancouver of that name. They operate pretty largely in the West, but they're no connection."

"You're sure?"

"Well, not blame sure, but I don't think they are. What are you thinking?"

"I'm just wondering whether this isn't the man I'm seeking, after all."

"But you said his name was Crosfield?"

"Yes, but men change their names every day, don't they?" he asked, with a smile.

"That's true enough. But don't you know whether he is your man then?"

"You see, I've never seen him."

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"Oh, that's another matter. Well, you can hardly go up to him and put the question straight. He's a fiery beggar. He'd resent it, for of course if he *is* the man you want, he doesn't need his people to know where he has landed."

"No, but it's worth a trial, isn't it? Let's both go up and ask him if he has happened to come across a chap named Crosfield, who was supposed to have come up in this direction."

"All right," assented Howarth. "Want to do it now?"

At the moment, the man of whom they were talking came sauntering in from the outside, with his thumbs tucked in his armpits, and his hat well drawn over his brows. Seeing Howarth, he nodded, and came forward.

"Good-day, Mr Howarth. Warmish day, isn't it? I hope you have what you want in my place?"

Geoffrey's quick ear detected the educated ring in the voice.

"Yes, thank you," answered Howarth genially. "This is Mr Geoffrey Drage."

"Oh," said the hotel-keeper, with a visible start. "Where does he come from?"

"I'm from Rupert Sound in the first

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instance, but I've been in England lately. I'm seeking a young man who came over about two years ago; name of Crosfield—Harold Crosfield."

"Got his man!" said Howarth under his breath, and turning on his heel sauntered to the door.

"Why do you look at me like that? My name's Rogerson," he said sullenly, but his colour had visibly heightened.

"I saw a Mr Rogerson in Vancouver not long ago, uncle to Harold Crosfield. *You* are Harold Crosfield," said Geoffrey quite quietly, and keeping his eye fixed steadily on the man's face.

"Well, and if I am, what's it got to do with you?" he asked sullenly. "I changed my name because the one I had was never any good to me. What are you seeking me for? I don't owe anybody anything. I don't want anybody to come sneaking and prying into my affairs. You can tell that to those who sent you."

"Could't we speak a moment?" enquired Geoffrey, with that engaging quality of frankness which won even hostile people to his side.

"It's no good, I tell you. I don't want anything to do with folks seeking Harold

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Crosfield. He's dead, and I'm living my own life here. It's a very good life. I've no quarrel with it."

Drage continued to look at him suggestively, until at last, with a small gesture of irritation, the hotel-keeper walked from the bar across the passage and ushered him into a small sitting-room marked private on the door.

"Who are you?—any relative of old man Drage, that left a property in Hertfordshire to people called Wycherley?" he asked, in the same sullen voice.

"I'm his nephew. I went over thinking to get the place myself, but they were in possession."

"Oh!" said Crosfield, with a gleam of sudden interest. "And didn't you fight them? I'd like to hear that. Nothing would give me greater pleasure."

"I didn't fight them," answered Drage. "There wasn't any need. It all hinges on a will which probably never existed."

"And do you mean to say you walked out without having a hit at them? I suppose the old man *was* your uncle?"

"Yes, he was."

"Then what happened?"

"Nothing. It's just as I said. You knew

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the Wycherleys, I suppose. Could anybody fight John Wycherley?"

"Well, no, they couldn't," Harold assented. "But *she's* a blue terror. Didn't you think so?"

"I certainly liked her less than her husband, but we needn't discuss them. I promised their daughter to do what I could to find you, but—but now I wish I hadn't."

Harold's face reddened and he turned away.

"I thought she'd have forgotten all about me—they hoped she would. They did their level best to get me shunted, and they succeeded. Look here, Drage, whatever happens to me lies at that woman's door."

"You're not speaking of Miss Wycherley, I presume?"

"No, her mother. If it hadn't been for her infernal ambition and side, I'd never have left the old country. Look here, what did my uncle say about me? Did you see him?"

"Yes."

"And what did he say?"

"Why ask questions? He had his own side to the story, of course, and yours will differ. I understand that."

"But what did you think of him?"

"That's rather beside the point. He's

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just an ordinary Westerner with his eye on the main chance; and you didn't come up to the scratch, where work was concerned. Of course the standard differs here from in England."

"Differs? I should just think it did. Look here, it's the truth that's wanting to be told badly about this country on the other side, and some day I'm going to enjoy myself telling it. They get young chaps out under false pretences and then grind them to powder. I told my precious uncle I wasn't having any, and then I quit, see? That's my side of the story. Every dirty little job lying handy he wanted to put on to me, and when I jibbed he went for me. Colonial relations at home, and in their own bit, are two very different affairs."

Drage neither denied nor affirmed; he simply waited, glancing towards the door as if suggesting that the interview might terminate.

"I shall be going back to England in the autumn, I expect. Have you any message?"

"No, none."

"You don't wish me to see your people? I don't even know where they live, but if I can do anything in that direction you may command me."

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"I don't command anything. I tell you Harold Crosfield's dead—I'm Charles Roger-son now, though why I took such an outsider's name, I don't know. It was my mother's, and I suppose I thought I had a right to it. No, I haven't any message to send. Why, how could I have? And I'll be very much obliged to you if you will keep your tongue inside your cheek where my affairs are concerned."

"But Miss Wycherley will certainly put a few straight questions to me about you."

"Well, if she isn't married when you get back, you can tell her she'd better take the best chance that comes along. I suppose Howarth has told you my yarn, probably with a few extras thrown in?"

"He told me you were settled here, of course."

"And married?"

"And married."

"Well, and I've got a bloomin' good wife—you can tell her that, too, if you like. She's not so darn particular, perhaps, as they are away back in the old country. She's willin' to give a chap a little rope, and without shewing him the wrong side of her face. There might be worse circs than mine. I wish you good-day, Mr Drage."

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Drage felt sorry for the man, for underneath his defiant and bitter words he detected the old ache at the heart.

In a moment of pity he extended his hand.

"Good-bye, and good luck."

Harold wrung it, and for one brief moment the real man, the old good-hearted Harold Crosfield looked from out his tired eyes.

"Say, boss, if it should be that you have a chance to marry Ethel Wycherley, if you get near enough for that, you can tell her she's got a better man, that she's well rid of me, and that she's not to give me one regret. I've put myself outside all that, and I've come to my own place."

He flung open the door, and at the moment from the direction of the bar came a high shrill female voice.

"Where's the boss? Harold, where are you? 'Ere's old man Turpin been wantin' you this good hour."

As he passed out, Geoffrey Drage had the opportunity of beholding the landlady's somewhat opulent charms. She was a woman of thirty, handsomely built, with high colour and coal-black hair, arranged in a large heavy fringe above her low forehead. She wore a white frock immaculately clean, and a bow of pink ribbon at her throat. She

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looked the picture of a successful and highly popular landlady, but recalling Ethel Wycherley's delicate elusive charm, Drage smiled queerly to himself as he rejoined Howarth outside.

CHAPTER XIII.

JOHAN WYCHERLEY and the Rector of Mitchelham were walking together on the Arnham Green Road in the cool, clear light of a winter afternoon. Wycherley had walked from the station, having spent the morning in town. He still adhered to his former simple habits, though he had now reigned undisputed Squire of Mitchelham for two years. Men like John Wycherley are never the sport of circumstance. Their natures lift them clean above it.

He was greatly beloved; none of his predecessors had ever wound themselves so firmly about the hearts of the people as the new Squire who had sprung from obscurity, and regarding whom they had been in such doubt. It was not so much the number and quality of his benefactions, though those were not to be despised, as the simple kindness of his manner, his humility, his true friendliness to gentle and

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simple alike. Wycherley's personality had won for his wife and children a position in the county such as they would not have won in the ordinary way in a generation. Men who met him outside, finding in him some rare quality which raised him above the common herd, sent their wives and daughters to call, and poor Mrs Wycherley's ambitions were more than realised. To say that she was happy and satisfied but feebly describes her state of mind.

Happiness undoubtedly imparts grace and beauty and a certain kindliness to hard natures, and Mrs Wycherley on the whole was liked for herself in moderation; but it was Ethel and her father who had stormed the citadel of county pride and prejudice and opened innumerable doors.

Wycherley's face wore its usual tranquil expression, which seemed to embody peace and goodwill towards all men, when he encountered the Rector at the end of a farm road from which he had emerged after visiting a sick woman in one of the cottages.

"Ah, Mr Wycherley, the very man I want to see," he called out genially. "I've just been to see poor Mrs Coverley. She's in sad trouble about that graceless Dick of

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hers. I wish something could be done to get him clear away from this place, where he has got into bad company."

"I went to London to-day partly on Dick's account," replied Wycherley with a smile, "and I have succeeded in getting a place for him in Norfolk, where the people will give him a chance. Shall we go up now and tell his mother?"

The Rector stood still a moment, contemplating the fine face of the Squire with a close attention not unmixed with wonder.

"Well, upon my word, Squire, you make me feel ashamed. I've been wondering for the last month what could be done about Dick Coverley. I only mentioned the matter to you casually yesterday, and already something *is* done. How do you manage it?"

Wycherley merely smiled.

"I have not very much else to do, Rector," he answered. "Well, what about going to tell his mother?"

"She had fallen asleep just as I left the house. I think perhaps we had better not go back now. I will make a point of sending her a message to-night, unless you wish to tell her yourself."

"Oh, no, it does not matter, but Dick will have to come and see me to-night and

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give certain undertakings. I met the lad yesterday, and I quite agree with you that it is time he was taken in hand. He had a hangdog look about him, and will never do any good here. How are you all at the Rectory?"

"All well. My daughter and Honoria are up at the Manor this afternoon. I suppose you have heard of the fancy-dress *fête* they are going to get up for the alms-houses. I hope you are agreeable that the Manor House should be stormed like this. Mrs Wycherley has kindly offered the use of the house. The rooms are so good for a thing of that kind, and then Mitchelham is so central for everybody, it's sure to be a high success."

"I've heard them talking about it. I shall be very pleased, I'm sure," said Wycherley. "It is the sort of thing all the young people will be keen about."

"And the old ones too, I can assure you," said the Rector with a broad smile. "We are all ready to be frivolous on the slightest notice here, but until you came to Mitchelham we missed having a lively family ready to plunge into everything. I was lunching at Plantains before I came down to see Mrs Coverley, and I found that

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Lady Dorothy was quite keen about it, and said she would go and see Mrs Wycherley and talk it over with her. You see, the almshouses are Lady Dorothy's pet charity, but she will not take the trouble of getting up a big entertainment on her own account."

"I see," said John Wycherley, but his air was a little absent, as if the matter did not greatly interest him. Sometimes, it must be confessed, he grew a little weary of the Rector's parochial mind, though he would not have admitted it for worlds. It seemed to him at times that, in spite of the lovely freedom of country life, the social atmosphere was even more narrow and prescribed than in any suburb he had known or heard of. Their interests were so petty, their jealousies so trivial yet so overmastering, their outlook upon life so limited, he felt a little dismayed. His wife had found precisely the same elements to fight against in Mitchelham as she had more or less successfully combated in Dulwich, only they were called by a different name.

"I had a letter from Geoffrey Drage this morning, Rector," he said suddenly. Instantly the Rector's interest leaped to white heat.

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"Had you? Honoria was only wondering this morning whether you ever heard. He has not written to us for quite six months."

"He has been very far out prospecting in land, and he writes very cheerfully. He has bought up a lot, and in full confidence that the All-Red Route is going to be made an accomplished fact, he is looking forward to making a fortune."

The Rector was silent a moment, pondering anew the curious settlement of the Mitchelham dispute, which he could never feel came quite within the scope of ordinary happenings.

"You managed that affair very skilfully, Mr Wycherley. Frankly, I have never been able to understand it. My sister Honoria has a theory of her own. May I mention it to you?"

"Why, surely."

"She thinks Drage fell in love with your sweet Ethel, and that because of her he relinquished his claim. Was there anything in that?"

"He had only seen her a few times, and I don't think there could be anything in it."

"It is a certain fact that after he had met her his whole attitude changed," said

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the Rector facetiously. "Well, any way, it was a good thing for you and for us that he was found so amenable. We in Mitchelham have certainly benefited. It is a different place since you and your happy crowd came into residence at the Manor House."

"But do you know, Mr Ludlow, there are times when I feel that I am merely holding the place in trust. As you say, Geoffrey Drage was most generous, and ——"

"Pardon, I did not say anything of the kind. You were generous, if you like. When the will, after fair search, was not found, you were not entitled to give him anything. Won't you come and take tea with me to-day, as I expect all my women folk are at Mitchelham."

"Come up with me instead, then," suggested Wycherley, but the Rector said he must go home, as a man would be waiting for him by appointment.

They parted at one of the stiles which pointed a footpath through the Mitchelham woods, every one of which had been thrown open to the villagers by Wycherley. Every old village right-of-way, every concession that had ever been made to them was upheld by him, and there was not one who did

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not speak of him with deep respect and affection.

Wycherley's heart was full of quiet happiness and thankfulness as he walked towards the green stretches of Mitchellham Park, and yet at the back of his mind there lingered two points of dissatisfaction.

He did not like to think of Geoffrey Drage pursuing the pathway of pioneer in the Far West, nor of Harold Crosfield, of whom nothing had been heard since the first letter which he had written immediately after his arrival at his uncle's house in Canada. It was easy to see that Ethel was fretting, and that she took but a half-hearted interest in what was going on around her. Yet it was a life which ought to have appealed to a beautiful young girl, towards whom everybody was kindly disposed, and who won so much love and admiration on every side. She was her mother's despair. So unworldly, so wholly detached from all the pomp and circumstance of her position, so true to the simplicity and single-heartedness of her own nature, it was impossible to kindle in her a single spark of ambitious fire. With the two undesirables (as such would Mrs Wycherley without hesitation now class both Geoffrey Drage and Harold Cros-

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field) safely out of the way, she had hoped great things from her beautiful girl. But though suitors came, and many would have wooed, she remained as cold as ice. As Wycherley stepped from the wood-end on to the smooth-rolled gravel of the avenue, a carriage and pair swept round the bend, and at sight of him the solitary occupant, a lady, gave orders to stop.

It was Lady Dorothy Wrexham, the most exclusive and most difficult of all the county ladies; and this was her first visit to Mitchelham since the inauguration of the new *régime*. She was rather an imposing and forbidding-looking person, shockingly dressed, as Mrs Wycherley put it, not having been able to get quite away from the suburban valuation of clothes. But the great lady's smile was astonishingly amiable as she extended a friendly hand over the carriage door.

"Mr Wycherley, I think; indeed, I know, for of course I have seen you in your pew at church. I have just been calling on your wife. It is so very kind of her to be willing to take all the trouble of that *fête*, which ought to be my duty, but, you see, I'm getting to be an old woman, and have no young people to help me."

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"My wife is very pleased, I assure you," replied honest John, in his usual simple, straightforward manner. "And the children, too; it's just the sort of thing they will enjoy."

"Well, it's good of you to put it like that. I'm sorry I did not call before, but, you see—well, I belong to the old order, and I'm not keen on the new," she said, with her candid laugh. "But everywhere I hear of your goodness, and I want to thank you for it. But don't spoil our people, Mr Wycherley. Even the best can be ruined by too much kindness."

"It is better to experiment in that direction than in the other, Lady Dorothy," answered Wycherley, with a smile.

"Well, perhaps. I say, that was a very curious story about old Halliwell Drage's nephew. I didn't speak of it to your wife, but Honoria Ludlow told me all about it, and I have really been very curious to meet this girl of yours, who is certainly the sweetest creature I've set eyes on for a good while. I suppose it is bound to have a story-book ending, and he'll come back and marry her after he has found the fortune he has gone to seek."

Wycherley looked rather put out.

"I assure you there is nothing in it, Lady

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Dorothy. As a matter of fact, my daughter was pledged to some one else."

"Ah, that's a pity. Don't let her marry any sort of a person. She's got the unworldly eye, she's your own daughter, Mr Wycherley, but remember you owe something to society now. Geoffrey Drage would please me. It would sort out the tangles—make things even, so to speak. Encourage it, Mr Wycherley, and good luck to you. I shan't let my son see her when he comes home from India next month. He's been shut up in a ghastly camp, where there wasn't a woman to speak to within a day's ride. It would be quite fatal for him to go to Mitchelham."

And with a genial laugh at her own joke the old lady, in the best of tempers, drove off, leaving Wycherley still further mystified. He heard these things for the first time. Ethel had not spoken Geoffrey Drage's name to him half a dozen times, yet the world of Mitchelham had evidently settled what was to be the end of the story.

He was in no way surprised when he arrived home to find his wife in a very exalted frame of mind. The Rectory ladies had left the house, taking Ethel with them. Mrs Wycherley was sitting still behind her tea-tray, dreaming of what had taken place that

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afternoon. When she saw her husband at the door she sprang up to meet him.

"Oh, there you are, John. I'm so sorry you happened to be away this afternoon. I've had such a lot of callers, and what do you think, Lady Dorothy has actually come at last, and was ever so nice and affable. You must just have missed her."

"I met the carriage, my dear, and she stopped and spoke to me."

"Did she? And isn't she charming? She took such a lot of notice of Ethel, and had Robin on her knee half her time, and said he must go to Plantains and spend a whole long day. And the Hon. Mrs Vellacott and Miss Honoria have been here all the afternoon. Ethel has gone back to the Rectory with them now to see some old book of costumes for the *fête*. Oh, John, my dear, we really are getting on!"

Wycherley sat down with a smile and suggested that he might have some tea.

"Don't you think we *are* getting on, dear?" she asked when the bell had been rung and the fresh tea brought.

"Yes, I suppose we are, if you say so," he answered whimsically.

"Oh, you are just like Ethel, you delight to cast me down when I get a bit of uplifting.

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You know how hard I have worked, and how difficult it has been to uphold the dignity of one's position, and at the same time not appear too pushing. But I do think I have succeeded."

"I am sure you have. Lady Dorothy was certainly very cordial, and I hope for your sake, as you are so keen about it, that the *fête* will be a success."

"It can't help being that, with the Rectory people helping and Lady Dorothy taking such an interest in it. She says she will come and bring her son, Captain the Hon. Reginald Markham. Now, that is the sort of match Ethel should make, if only she would be more sensible! After the *fête* is over I shall certainly approach Lady Dorothy about going to Court and taking Ethel. If she would present us what a triumph that would be!"

Her face was flushed and her hands working nervously. Wycherley munched his bread and butter and looked at her with a little of the old sad wonder. Just so, in vain endeavours to reach the unattainable, had she spent herself in the old Dulwich days, giving herself and her household no rest in the process.

"Of course, something unexpected and humbling had to happen in the very moment

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of one's triumph. Just on the back of Lady Dorothy—I mean about five minutes after she had been announced—who should be ushered in but Jane Tomsett from Dulwich. Mrs Tomsett—you remember her? But I can't remember that I was ever intimate enough with her to justify her in taking such a liberty."

"But I hope you were kind to her, Emma, and said you were glad to see her," said Wycherley, far more anxious about the reception accorded to their old friend than to Lady Dorothy, who was well able to look after herself.

"Oh, I said, 'How do you do?' of course. She made the excuse that she had been spending the day in the neighbourhood, but it was pure curiosity that brought her—anybody could see that. Of course, I did not introduce her to Lady Dorothy, but I took care that she should hear her title, and I hope she noticed the coronet on the carriage and the two menservants with it. I should just like her to tell about it all at Dulwich, though I do want to be done with that crowd, and I'm afraid I let Jane see it."

Wycherley sighed. This sort of talk, this view of the change in their circumstances, did more than depress him—it filled him with a

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certain slow irritation. But he was too mild a man to express it, though had his wife been less immersed in her own dreams and schemes she could not have misread the expression on his face.

"She didn't stay very long, happily," she meandered on. "She had to catch the five eighteen at Arnham Green, and Chappell's fly was to take her. No, Ethel didn't see her. She left with the Rectory ladies immediately after Lady Dorothy arrived."

"I'm sorry Ethel did not see her."

"I'm sure it didn't matter. Yes, she had some tea. Oh, I was not rude to her, John, so don't look so doleful; only I do think she might have waited till she was asked."

"They showed our young people a good deal of kindness in Dulwich, Emma."

"Well, we paid it back when we could, and she was always pleased to have Ethel, having no daughter of her own, when she had a party. I assure you Ethel earned whatever enjoyment she got when she went there. She was very anxious to speak about Harold Crosfield, but I didn't give her much chance in that direction. They haven't heard about him for over so long, and they fear all sorts of things. I don't think, really, he had much backbone, John, and I can never be too

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thankful that things were not serious between Ethel and him."

"But I think the child is worrying about him now," said Wycherley a little painfully. "Haven't you noticed anything?"

"She's dull, certainly, and doesn't seem interested. But I'm sure this *fête* will be a splendid thing to rouse her up. She really is interested in the costumes which will have to be got ready, and she is so clever at designing things. I must warn her not to tell everybody that she used to make nearly every stitch we wore. She's just like you, John, quite capable of telling such a thing at the most awkward moment."

So Mrs Wycherley rattled on, her busy brain in a perfect turmoil of scheming and planning. After a little time Wycherley was glad to escape to his own den, while she proceeded up to the low, sloping rooms on the top floor where there were still boxes of things that had never been explored. Mrs Wycherley had looked into the old chests once or twice, thinking she must set aside some convenient day to have their contents spread out. But in view of the coming *fête* and the numerous fancy dresses required, the old brocades and quaint stuffs of which the boxes were full would be most



"A SMALL FOLDED PAPER, OVER WHICH MRS. WYCHERLEY'S
FINGERS CLOSED IN NERVOUS HASTE."

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acceptable and useful. Nobody seemed to know where all these things had come from. Mallory had simply said they were in the house when she came, and her master had never spoken of them to her. Had she not been very honest she might have helped herself.

It was a very clear, fine evening, which prolonged the sunset, and as there were neither blinds nor curtains at these upper windows there was plenty of light for Mrs Wycherley to take a cursory glance through the boxes. A huge iron-bound oak chest, the value of which Mrs Wycherley did not know, stood between the windows, and with some difficulty she succeeded in raising the heavy lid. Some crumpled tissue paper, yellow with age, lay across the top. She lifted this, and the smell of old garments slightly damp, yet faintly perfumed with lavender and rosemary, greeted her nostrils. A gown of green brocade, with a raised pattern of velvet roses and a stomacher of old lace, lay on the very top. She lifted it in both hands and shook out the stiff folds. It was a beautiful thing, though slightly discoloured with age and careless keeping. She hung it over the back of an old armchair and proceeded on her tour of

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investigation, until she reached the bottom of the chest, where there were other things—a black velvet reticule with a massive silver setting, and an old cedar-wood box. It was quite heavy, and when after some difficulty she succeeded in raising the lid, she found it to be full of old letters, yellow with age and tied with faded ribbons. She took out the letters and proceeded to examine the box, recalling the fact that it was just in such places secret springs and hidden drawers were to be found. Presently her finger touched something, and a small drawer sprang open. It was very shallow, but there was room in it for a small folded paper, over which Mrs Wycherley's fingers immediately closed in nervous haste.

CHAPTER XIV.

IT was a sheet of ordinary notepaper folded thrice, and with the outer flap held by the inner one, so that it had to be carefully unfolded.

Mrs Wycherley sat still in the fading yellow light, looking at it with a strange apprehension and anticipation. Something told her what it was before her eyes sought to decipher the crabbed characters within. She rose at length, a little unsteadily, and walked to the window where the light was good, shining straight in from the gold of the western sky. Her fingers seemed to grow cold, but their trembling ceased when with an effort of the will she pulled out the flap, and suffered her eyes to devour the contents. The writing was very small, the words across the page few, but explicit in their dire purport. The scene might have been one in some poignant drama; certainly all the elements were there.

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"This is the last will of Halliwell Drage, which will set aside all former documents of a like kind. I leave my nephew, Geoffrey Drage, son of my only brother Christopher, my sole legatee. And I desire that every effort be made to find him, so that he may enter into possession, and that the old name may not die out of Mitchelham. As this later disposition of my estate may very well be an injustice to John Wycherley, who never sought me, nor desired aught of me, I request my executors to pay him ten thousand pounds out of the estate, so that he may be able to live the last days of his life in peace. This piece of paper, when found, cancels the will drawn up in favour of John Wycherley, and is given under my hand this twenty-seventh day of June, 190—."

Emma Wycherley stood staring for a few moments at the fluttering sheet—"This piece of paper, when found, cancels"—everything! It was surely a refinement of cruelty for the old man to write that, and then to hide it where in all probability some woman would find it—the woman to whom it meant so much, and whom it would rob of the things she prized beyond all telling. No man would ever have sought among faded finery for such a thing, and even Mallory had assured

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her that so far as she knew her late master had never opened one of these boxes or was aware of their contents. They were part of the old house and its furnishings, just as were the pictures on the walls, or the armoured figures which stood in odd corners, frightening little Robin, until he had been assured that there was no real man inside.

She sat down presently on the shallow window-seat, leaned her elbow on her knee, and still grasping the paper, looked out with a very real yearning upon the fair domain, which of late she had suffered herself to believe was hers by right, and could never be taken away from her children. One brief period of happiness and possession, and now all was over! She did not for the moment realise the value of the compensation Halliwell Drage had ordained should be offered to the man on whom he had played so scurvy a trick. Ten thousand pounds is a large sum of money; sufficient to buy a very beautiful home, and provide for a moderate family, but nothing could ever make up for the loss of Mitchelham. Emma Wycherley had gloried in her position as lady of the Manor, and had become by reason of it in some directions a larger-hearted and better woman. She did not feel herself to be a good woman

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in these sharp moments ; there was nothing but rage and hatred and despair in her soul. Just when they had got firmly established, when they were receiving recognition everywhere, the blow had fallen ! What was to be done ? She asked herself the question as she sat there remote from the rest of the household, left in solitude, as it were, to arbitrate the destiny of them all. There was one downstairs who would not hesitate about the next step. She believed that the sight of Halliwell Drage's last will would fill her husband with a very genuine joy, and that before he slept he would cable to Geoffrey Drage to come home. She would not show it to him yet, she would take a few more hours to think it over, to realise what it would all mean. There might even be a loophole of escape, legally, though she knew John well enough to be certain he would never seek it. Perhaps she could go obscurely and unknown to some strange lawyer and ask his advice on some parallel case, without committing herself to names. Mrs Wycherley was a born schemer, whose thoughts travelled rapidly. When she recovered from the undoubted shock of the moment her mind began to travel at lightning speed. She was quite unconscious of the

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passage of time, and it was getting dark when she heard Ethel's voice on the stairs calling her by name. She sprang up, thrust the paper into the bosom of her dress, and advancing to the door, threw it open.

"Yes, dear, I'm here!" she answered in an astonishingly natural voice; "I did not expect you quite so soon. Come up if you can find your way in the dark. I've made a great find."

She did not allude to the scrap of paper safely hidden in the bosom of her dress. When Ethel, flushed with the exertion of climbing the steep stairs to the attic, appeared in the doorway, she beheld her mother standing in front of the big chest, holding up an old velvet mantle trimmed with gold embroidery.

"Why, whatever are you doing, mummy? Nobody could tell me where you were until Tweeny said she had just seen you after tea, opening the door of the attic stair."

"I've been having a hunt, dear. Come and look at these lovely things! You will be able to make all sorts of things out of them, and when you get the costumes designed and the characters decided, we'll have Annie Gibbs, the sewing girl, down from Norwood for a week or a fortnight. Just look!"

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"Why, mummy, this will make a frock for Queen Elizabeth—and what a lovely cloak! How did you ever come to think of exploring here? I've often thought I should do it some day. It's getting dark, but I can feel the richness of them. And don't they smell of lavender and mildew! Why, what stories must be hidden in their folds! I wonder what dames of Mitchelham wore them, and whether we shan't be guilty of desecration if we cut them up."

"Oh, nonsense! The moth will eat them presently, if we don't. He has begun anyhow," said Mrs Wycherley with the utmost calmness. "And look, I've had another find in this box; I've found a heap of old letters and things that will be sure to interest your father. Do you think you could carry it down for him? We must go now before it is quite dark, for there doesn't appear to be a bell-pull here of any kind, and we might call long enough for a maid and a candle."

"Why, what a lovely old box! Say, mummy, perhaps the will is here," cried Ethel in an ecstasy of interest. "I shouldn't wonder! It is just the sort of place where a will would be hidden, far more likely, don't you think, than behind panelling; that's

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such a stale way of hiding a will. Old Mr Drage was an original; he would be sure to think of something better than that."

Ethel spoke lightly, suspecting nothing. They sometimes jested yet about the will, and what would happen when they should discover it. Use had perhaps a little blunted the keenness of their feelings about it, and since Geoffrey Drage wrote so hopefully and happily from the Far West, the sense of injustice done to him had become less acute in Ethel's mind.

"You can take it down to your father, and help him to investigate," replied Mrs Wycherley in the same cool voice. "And to-morrow we will come up and take everything out of this big chest."

Ethel lifted the box, which she found by no means a light weight, and preceded her mother downstairs. She carried the box straight to the library, Mrs Wycherley following, and she stood by quite coolly watching them empty the contents and hunting about for the secret spring. It was Ethel who found it, but when the little drawer flew out at a touch, it contained nothing but a little fine dust, which might have been caused by insects in the wood.

"I don't know whether we have the right

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to read these letters," said Wycherley as he touched the faded envelopes, but his wife merely laughed.

"It won't hurt anybody now, my dear. I looked at one of the dates—it was 1815—the year of Waterloo, isn't it? I thought they'd be just the thing to delight you, and help to fill up your evenings."

She went away presently, leaving Ethel and her father to revel in the old treasure. They talked a good deal about the will, and in the hope of finding it went carefully through the letters, which were of various dates, the most interesting being a series which had passed between a former lady of Mitchelham and her son, a subaltern in Wellington's army at the time of Waterloo.

It was a rich find for a man like John Wycherley, and it supplied him with food for thought and for speech for a long time. This was precisely what his wife desired at the moment, and she was able to make a little journey to London on her own account next day, framing the most trivial excuse without creating the least suspicion. She was gone till the late afternoon, and when she reached home Ethel noticed at once that she was either very tired or out of sorts. But in answer to her affectionate inquiries Mrs

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Wycherley replied somewhat snappishly that she was all right, but did not want to be worried. She showed herself more like the worrying house-mother of Goldhawk Road than the more gracious and even-tempered mistress of Mitchelham. But Ethel was too wise to say anything, expecting that the mood would pass. But she remembered afterwards that the change in her mother, which soon began to be noticed by them all, dated from the day when she had gone to London alone without explaining her business to anybody.

The preparations for the *fête* were pushed forward, but it was found that it would not be possible to get all the pictures rehearsed before Christmas, so that it was definitely postponed till the end of January.

Ethel's interest in the dresses and other preparations lifted her mind from her own concerns, but there were days when she wondered what could possibly ail her mother. Mrs Wycherley was so irritable, so erratic in her moods, and began to look so harassed, that she felt she must speak of it to some one. She came out of the house one afternoon in Christmas week with tears in her eyes, because her mother had spoken so very sharply to her for some trifling act of forgetfulness. Wycherley, walking to and

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fro on the terrace, came forward to meet her, and did not fail to notice her tears.

"Father, don't you think that mother is not well?" she said, as she hastily brushed the wet drops from her eyes.

"Why do you think that, my dear?"

"Well, because she is so different from what she used to be. Even during our worst times of worry in London she never was like this. And she's getting quite thin. Don't you think I might ask Dr Brinsmead to come up and see her? I shall be passing his house on my way to the Rectory this afternoon."

Wycherley stood still a moment undecided.

"I certainly have noticed your mother not like herself, and she does not sleep. Last night, for instance, she walked about for part of the night. She thought I was asleep because I did not speak. Certainly she was either in pain of body or of mind."

"Do you think she can have anything on her mind, father? I cudgel my brains all day long to discover what can be the matter, and I can think of nothing. All the boys are well, and everything is going smoothly. Why should she look like that? I'm sure it's something physical; but she never will consent to see the doctor unless we just send him in. Can I ask him to come up to-morrow?"

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"Why, yes, my dear. I did suggest it to your mother the other day, but she was very short with me about it. I am inclined to think that perhaps it is the reaction after all the strain and excitement of the last year. Your mother felt it all far more than we had any idea of, Ethel. It simply meant everything to her."

"Don't I know it? Sometimes I wish we had never seen Mitchelham, daddy; it's all so unreal somehow. We don't belong, and it's no use pretending we do."

Wycherley passed his hand a little nervously across his brow.

"I understand what you mean and how you feel. It is a conviction I have myself sometimes, but what can we do? It seems as if we must go on as we are in the meantime. When God's good time comes the way will open up. I think that we have done everything that could possibly be expected of us. My conscience does not trouble me, child, though I confess that my heart is often heavy."

"Oh, I know it is not a question of conscience, but this is not the life for us. We were never intended for it. 'Give me neither poverty nor riches' are words that rise oftenest in my mind. A position like this has its dangers and its snares."

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There are natures so finely wrought that they have visions not vouchsafed to commoner clay. Ethel Wycherley was one of these, and she was particularly impressed that bright December afternoon with the uncertainty of all human things. Perhaps that was why the thing that happened did not take her by an overwhelming surprise.

Ethel always walked to the Rectory by way of the woods, because she loved the solitude, the musical stirring of the leaves under her feet, the scuttering of the bright-eyed rabbits across her path, the quick rustling of the squirrel as he scrambled up the nearest boughs. She loved these country sights and sounds with a great love, and took her enjoyment of them to the full. The stream which ran through the Mitchelham park and across the roadway dipped at one part of the woods so as to form a miniature waterfall. A rustic bridge crossed just there, and made an ideal spot for a trysting - place. She lingered there just a moment in the red light of the setting sun, and drew a deep breath of the clear, sweet air. Suddenly her thoughts were disturbed by the sound of underbrush crackling beneath an approaching foot. She turned her head, but she neither cried out nor

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grew pale when she saw before her Geoffrey Drage in the flesh, very brown, and weather-beaten and thin, but smiling in the old pleasant way that had remained a memory in her heart.

"Now, this is a piece of uncommon good fortune, which I prayed for, but never expected," he said, as he stepped to her side with outstretched hands. There was no doubt about his satisfaction at sight of her; it shone in his eye and vibrated in every tone of his voice.

"I don't feel a bit surprised," said Ethel quite quietly; "I somehow thought you were coming."

Drage's colour rose. These words sounded sweet in a lover's ears, though perhaps they meant nothing beyond their own sound.

"I took it all of a sudden," he replied almost gaily. "When I thought of Christmas here the longing to come grew upon me. I arrived at Liverpool yesterday afternoon."

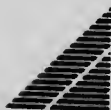
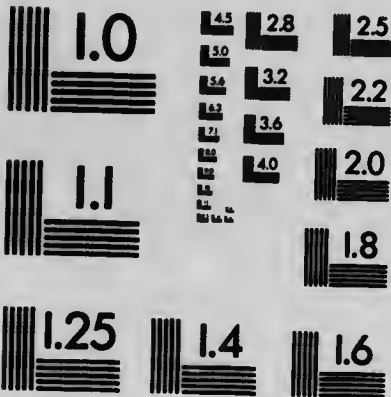
"And where have you been all night? At Royston?"

"Not this time. I put up at a London hotel, so that I could come here first. I wanted to see you before anyone else, but I hardly expected that I should have such good fortune. I have walked over from Arnham



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Green, and all the way felt it good to be alive."

"But you have brought some things; you will stay here with us over Christmas, of course — indeed, my father will insist on it."

"If you ask me I will stay," said Geoffrey Drage, greatly daring.

"Of course I ask you," she answered with a frankness that was somewhat disappointing, and he was not near enough to see the deepening light in her eyes or to read its meaning.

"How are you all at Mitchelham?"

"All well — at least, fairly so; and you?"

"Oh, I am fit as a fiddle. The move on the board I wrote your father about last month came off far more successfully than I expected or hoped. I sat down to write and explain and to send a money draft, but something kept urging me to bring the news in person. It hardly seems like a year and four months since we parted, does it?"

"To me it seems much longer," she answered, and turning from him she leaned her arms on the mossy parapet of the old bridge and looked down into the cool, clear depths of the rushing stream. The gold of her hair under the little fur cap caught

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the gleam of the sun, the profile turned towards him was so sweet that he was hard put to it to restrain his tongue.

But the time was not yet. Something had to be got over first, and the sooner the better. His face changed a little, a look of deep compassion that was almost tenderness was in his eyes; he forebore to look at her when he spoke.

"My own particular news is good, but there is something else. You have wondered perhaps why I have not written about Harold Crosfield since the spring. I did not write because I had nothing good to tell."

"I feared as much," she answered very low. "Tell me what has happened."

"It is quite a long story. Perhaps it would be better never told," he answered very gently. "The first thing I did when I arrived in Vancouver was to try to find out Crosfield. I called at his uncle's place——"

"Yes?" said Ethel in breathless expectation. "And did you see him?"

"No. By that time he had left his uncle, who did not even know where he was."

"But why had he left his uncle?" asked Ethel perplexedly. "I thought Mr Rogerson was very rich, and that he was simply dying to give Harold a chance to get on. I'm sure

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that's what Harold's people have thought all along."

"He was willing to give him a certain kind of chance, of course," said Drage rather guardedly. "But it was not the kind of chance that Harold wanted, apparently. Life is so very different out there, so rough—the standard is a sharp contrast to that in England."

"So Harold left his uncle? And what did he do then?"

"I could not find the smallest trace of him for a long time. I was myself six months in Prince Rupert's Land, prospecting with a chap called Bolitho. But when we came East again, I followed up a clue I had got at a place called Nelson in the mining region of the Kootenay."

"Yes, and what happened? Did you hear anything?"

"Yes, I both heard and saw. I came up with him at a place called Bonanza Creek, a little mining township not far from Nelson."

"And is poor Harold working in a mine there? What a shame! But I am sure he would not mind how hard he worked, if only he got fair play and a chance to get on."

"He was not at the mines," answered Drage rather vaguely, finding his task difficult

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and unpleasant to the verge of impossibility.

"First, let me explain to you that all kinds of men are not suited to Colonial life. Some are disgusted and disappointed with it from the start. When they arrive carrying English ideas of comfort and work with them, their case from the first is pretty well hopeless."

"Oh!" cried Ethel blankly. "You are not going to tell me, surely, that Harold is hopeless. I shall never believe it, Mr Drage, I do assure you."

"Crosfield, from all I could gather from others, and from what he himself told me, was not the stuff pioneers are made of," went on Drage steadily, as a man might plod through an uncongenial task. "He might have jogged along comfortably enough in England, and made a very respectable British citizen. But he had no initiative and not sufficient strength of character to carve a way for himself among conditions so—so—unattractive. I am very honest with you, dear Miss Wycherley," he added gently, "because in this case, I can't help myself. It is the only way."

"Well, and what happened? What is he doing, and where is he now, so that I may write to him," she cried impatiently.

"He's still at Bonanza Creek, and likely to

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remain; in fact, he's anchored there for life, and we are not likely to hear much of him in the future."

"What do you mean by saying that he is anchored?" asked Ethel, and he saw her face grow a little white.

"I must get through," he said nervously. "He's married to the widow of a hotel-keeper in Bonanza Creek, the only hotel, and settled down to the life. That's all, my dear. I wish for your sake I had a different story to tell."

She was silent a long time, and when she turned her face to him his heart bled for her.

"I sent him there," she said pitifully. "It was all on account of this horrible money. Oh, I can't think why God allowed this thing to happen to us! What had we done to deserve it? It has kept us in bondage, and now it has ruined Harold. Will you go up to the house now and leave me for a little while?"

He had not sought to gloss over the story, realising that with such a woman it were better to tell the whole truth and get it over. But his joy at sight of the girl he loved was dashed a little, as he walked on through the trees towards the house. The hall door stood

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SHE DROPPED, UNCONSCIOUS ON THE FLOOR."

[p. 281.]



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wide open, and after pulling the bell Geoffrey Drage stepped in. But before the butler could come from the recesses behind, Mrs Wycherley opened the door of the morning room and looked out. When she beheld Geoffrey Drage every vestige of colour fled from her face, and with a strange, low cry of absolute fear she dropped unconscious on the floor.

CHAPTER XV.

WHEN she came to herself, Emma Wycherley was lying on the couch in the morning-room with an anxious crowd about 'er, among whom was Geoffrey Drage. Her eyes fastened themselves on his face, as if seeking to read his inmost soul, but detecting nothing there but a polite and regretful consideration, she rapidly gathered her scattered forces once more, and prepared to carry on her part. She did not know how long it would be possible, but at least she would do nothing in haste. Such was the reasoning of this remarkable woman, as she sat up with an apologetic smile.

"I must apologise, Mr Drage. I haven't been well lately, and when I saw you standing in the hall there, something came over me. I have been reading a lot of occult books lately and my imagination got the better of me. I really thought you were a ghost. Oh, don't look so ridiculously anxi-

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ous, John! It's quite common for a woman to faint at a much smaller thing than that. It has not been a little pastime of mine, that's all."

She put her feet to the ground and sat up bravely, but her face was still ghastly white, and her eyelids flickering with nervousness.

"Emma, you make too light of it all, my dear. You must see the doctor at once; indeed, I think Ethel will call at his house this afternoon and send him up. We have decided that it is necessary."

"I don't need the doctor, John. I know perfectly well what is the matter with me," she answered, with perfect truth. "Now, let me shake hands with you properly, Mr Drage. What brings you back to England so soon?—such a tremendous journey as it is

The boys were tracing it out on the map one evening—about seven thousand miles, isn't it?"

"Thereabouts. I had some little business I wanted to talk over with Mr Wycherley, and a sort of inexplicable desire to see an English Christmas decided me to take the journey on a moment's notice."

"And you've arrived just in time," said Wycherley, and there was no doubt about

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his satisfaction. "Of course you will stay here."

"Perhaps Mr Drage is already a guest at the Rectory," suggested Mrs Wycherley with some eagerness, for she was not prepared to have Drage as a guest. He would seem too much like a skeleton at the feast.

"No; I only arrived last night, and put up at the Charing Cross Hotel."

"Then we'll wire for your stuff to be sent on here, my dear fellow," said Wycherley joyfully, and Mrs Wycherley was obliged to resign herself to the inevitable. She rose to her feet.

"If you'll excuse me I'll go upstairs and lay down in my room for half an hour. I assure you I'm quite all right now, John, and for goodness' sake don't fuss!" she said, almost irritably. "Where is Ethel? She will see to a room for Mr Drage. Yes, of course you will stay, unless you would very much prefer to go back for to-night, and bring your things down yourself to-morrow. They are so careless at hotels."

She threw out the suggestion eagerly, anxious for a little respite, but feeling weak and overwrought she was glad to leave them discussing it, and to throw herself on her bed, in her own room, where her thoughts

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could have free course. For one brief moment, when she had beheld Geoffrey Drage, she had imagined that he had come to claim his own, to denounce her as a thief and a fraudulent person, though she had the will safely hidden in a place where no one would think of looking for it. She had so hidden it for two whole months, which had seemed like centuries. Mrs Wycherley was not by nature intended for the keeping of secrets. There had been none in the little house at Goldhawk Road; indeed, the whole of their domestic life had been marked by a singular candour, and everything had been discussed openly in the family, before the children, from their earliest years. She had borne the burden of her guilty secret badly; it had already undermined her health and destroyed her peace of mind. Geoffrey Drage's return had added a new terror, a fresh complication to the situation, with which she felt herself just for the moment unable to cope.

She had, however, somewhat composed herself by the time Ethel returned, and came to her room.

"Mummy, I have spoken to Doctor Brinsmead, and he is coming to-morrow morning," said the girl as she bent over her. "No, it is no use protesting, you can't go on like

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this. Why should you faint at sight of Mr Drage? It shows a great weakness somewhere, because you know, dear, you are not a fainting woman."

"If anybody wants the doctor it is you, Ethel," retorted her mother with spirit; "I never saw such a washed-out rag. Have you seen Mr Drage?"

Ethel sat down and clasped her hands round her knees.

"Yes, mummy, I met him in the wood as I went down. He has brought back news of Harold, mother; he has married somebody out there, so that is an end of it all. Please don't say anything, and don't above everything sympathise with me. I can't bear it."

But the natural mother-love asserted itself in spite of all, and the next moment Ethel was weeping her heart out on her mother's breast as she had not done since her babyhood.

"There, there, dearie, he was never good enough for my own girl. I always said so. Don't take on like that—don't, darling, it kills me to see you cry so."

"But—but it was all my fault; I sent him away," sobbed the girl.

"No, I did, if it comes to that," put in Mrs Wycherley, setting her lips in a long,

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thin line. "You had nothing whatever to do with it, so don't blame yourself. I'm quite willing to bear the brunt of it. A little more or less, what does it matter, anyway?"

"It isn't the marrying, but he hasn't kept straight. He's—he's sunk down, mummy, and they were so proud of him—poor Mrs Crosfield and Ada, and all of them. They will never forgive me; I can't forgive myself!"

Mrs Wycherley put her hands together with a little gesture of dismay.

"I wish to goodness that we had never seen this ghastly place, nor heard of Halliwell Drage's money. We were happier, I do believe, at Dulwich; at least, we knew what we had a right to."

In the midst of her grief Ethel's face brightened.

"Let us go away and leave it, mummy, now that Geoffrey Drage has come home. Let him have it. I feel sure we shall never be happy till we do that."

Before her mother could reply, Wycherley appeared, anxiously inquiring how his wife felt, and Ethel slipped away. She was very glad to find Drage alone in the library, she wanted to ask so many questions about

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Harold. But now that he had told the whole story, Drage seemed loth to linger over the details.

"You must not run away with the idea that Harold Crosfield is unhappy, or that he feels any sense of degradation. They are going to build a new hotel in the place, and probably in a few years' time he will be a prominent citizen of a new town."

"Did he speak of me at all when you told him you were coming home, and that you would probably see me."

"Yes; but he asked me to call at his mother's house, which I will do the first opportunity I have."

"Make the best of it when you go there!" she pleaded eagerly. "They were very proud of Harold at home, and thought he was going to do great things."

"Well, so he probably will, in a certain direction. The woman he has married is much older than he, and has a keen eye to business. I assure you she will keep him straight, if anybody can. May I beg you not to let this spoil your Christmas, Miss Ethel? Of course, I understand that it is a blow."

"It is not quite as you think," she answered, a little hurriedly. "It is only for him I am troubled. I—I don't think I mind

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for myself. Perhaps if I had cared more it need not have happened."

Drage sprang up, almost unable to hide the satisfaction her words afforded.

"Then put it behind, Miss Ethel, and let us have a real jolly English Christmas. I look to you to give the poor Colonial a fair sample of it. Now, will you walk with me to the Rectory, to pay my respects? They were extraordinarily kind to me when I was here before, and I did not even write to tell them I was coming home."

Ethel said she would be pleased to do so, and they set out together. They were not fortunate, however, in finding a single member of the Rectory household at home, and Ethel remembered then that they had gone to attend an afternoon function at the neighbouring county town.

"I'm so sorry, because I knew perfectly well, and you have had your walk for nothing."

"For nothing, Miss Ethel? I can assure you I don't think of it in that light. Have I not your company?"

"Then you don't despise me for what I have done?" she asked, in a low voice. "Somehow none of us seems to be quite normal since we came here."

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"How could I possibly despise you? All the way across the Atlantic I thought of little else except the fact that I should find you at the journey's end."

Ethel smiled, well pleased, not in the least grasping the full significance of his words. She had so little personal vanity, it had not occurred to her that it was for her sake that Geoffrey Drage had come home, just as it had been for her sake he had, in the first instance, practically abandoned his claim to Mitchelham and gone away. She did know, however, that a singular sense of peace and well-being seemed to have come to her since the moment she had met Geoffrey Drage in the wood. There was a quiet strength and purposefulness about him which she found inexpressibly comforting. He had the gentleness born of true strength, and nothing could ever take away her appreciation of his consideration towards them all.

"It is the most astonishing thing I have ever known," she said suddenly. "It would not be believed out of a book."

"What?" he asked, bending towards her with a look of intense interest.

"Why, the way you have behaved. Of course, whatever you may say, whatever the lawyers may decide, we can't get away from

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the fact that Mitchelham ought to be yours, and yet see how kind and friendly you are to us, how light you make of your own deprivation."

"I am not conscious of it," he answered, truly enough. "I will own to you that when I came to Mitchelham first my soul was full of bitterness and all uncharitableness, but it melted away."

"Why did it melt away?" she asked, her sweet eyes fixed wonderingly on his face.

"Can't you guess?" he said, with a curious little awkward laugh. "It was you who destroyed it. It is impossible a man could look into your eyes and cherish any bitterness, and when I went away I took a vow to come back and win you if I could. I did not know how it was going to be done, but the vow was made."

She made no answer, but her face seemed to change, and her eyes were averted from his so that he could not see the sudden light that sprang in them, like the sun rising from a misty dawn.

"I didn't mean to speak so soon. There is something compelling about you. Try to forget it until—until I have proved myself. One thing more I must say, Ethel: will you believe that I did my utmost for the man I

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thought you loved? I put my own feelings and hopes behind me, and if he had been worthy you never would have heard of them. Do you believe that?"

She made no answer, and he suddenly stood still in the path.

"Now I have gone too far. I can only humbly beg your pardon. I will go away from Mitchelham to-night, and until you have forgotten or forgiven my folly."

She turned to him then, and the light on her face was good to see.

"There is nothing to forgive, and I do not want to forget," she said quite simply. "Say it again."

CHAPTER XVI.

WYCHERLEY sat down by his wife's bedside, and laid his hand on hers. To his dismay it was burning as if with fever.

"Dear, you are not well yet. You've had a shock. There must be a cause for all this."

"Yes, there is," she answered, with a hard little laugh; "I'll tell you all about it presently. Has Geoffrey Drage told you about Harold Crosfield—how he has married some impossible person out there, and sun! down? Ethel is heart-broken about it, and blames herself, but of course we know that it was I who sent him to Canada. I've been a wicked woman, John Wycherley, and to see you sit there looking at me so kindly is the worst punishment ever woman had."

He continued to chafe the hot, restless hand, and the tenderness did not leave his eyes. He believed that his wife was on the brink of some severe illness and that she must be humoured.

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"Don't let it all get on your nerves, my darling," he said soothingly. "Yes, Drage has told me, but he seems to think that Harold may yet do well for himself out there, and that his wife will keep him straight. Has Ethel spoken to you about it?"

"Oh, yes, she has been crying her heart out here this afternoon. Not that I think that she is still in love with him, but you know what a sensitive nature she has—just like yours, John. If I had listened to the voice of your tender conscience I should not be where I am to-day. When I saw Geoffrey Drage standing in the hall this afternoon, I thought my sin had found me out."

Still Wycherley did not take her words seriously, but attributed them to her weakness of body, acting upon nerves unstrung.

"Don't blame yourself too much, wife. Nobody else blames you, I assure you. Geoffrey Drage has come back to England very well satisfied with himself. He has turned over the money he took away with him to immense advantage, and will be, in a year or two, a very rich man."

"It was his own money he took away," she said feverishly. "You know that."

"It was his, of course, after I gave it to him. We came to a very amicable under-

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standing, and I am nearly certain there is not a single alloy of bitterness now in Drage's mind."

"John, you are as guileless as a lamb! Get up, will you, and open my wardrobe, and bring down the tray from the top, the very top; you will have to stand on a chair to reach it."

Wycherley, much mystified, did as he was bid, and carried the tray over to the bed. A small old-fashioned workbox was covered by some small articles of household linen, which she pushed aside, then opened the box with trembling fingers, Wycherley standing with a puzzled air by the bedside.

She took from under the top tray of the box a square envelope, from which she pulled a folded sheet.

"Read that, John, then you will know what sort of a woman you have got for a wife."

She watched him while he glanced over the brief, concisely worded page; she noted the swift hardening of his face, the sudden apprehension gather in his eyes. When he looked at her, she met his gaze steadily, and she gave a half hysterical nod.

"Where did this come from, Emma?"

"From the attic, out of what they call Dame Cicely's chest. It was in the secret drawer of

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the box that had her letters to her son—you remember Ethel bringing it down to you one evening in October."

"But there was nothing in the secret drawer then?"

"No, stupid, because I had taken it out."

"How long have you known of it, then?"

"Since that night—the seventh of October; and don't you remember next day I went to London by myself? It was to consult a solicitor—no, not Mr Yardley. I only wished to know what the legal position was."

"That was unnecessary, Emma; you knew it before you went. This makes good Geoffrey Drage's claim, and you have known it nearly three months!"

"Yes, and it has nearly killed me. Now what are you going to do?"

She looked at him with a sort of defiance, strangely intermingled with fear and anguish. She had no terror of the law, but she did not wish to sink in the estimation of the man who had loved her so faithfully and unselfishly all these years. To lose even one atom of that love would be intolerable to her. It was the only thing that mattered at the moment to Emma Wycherley.

"John, don't look at me like that! I was tempted and I fell. I could not bear that you

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should go back to the old wretched drudgery, and it might have been worse. You don't know how many times I have been tempted to destroy that bit of paper, how often I have stood with it by a lighted candle or a fire, and with the full intention of setting it alight, but always something seemed to hold me back."

"God!" murmured John Wycherley almost mechanically, and his very voice seemed to have changed.

"John, don't look like that! Say you forgive me!" she repeated a little wildly. "I don't really care for anything but that. Often when I have been lying awake in the night, thinking over it all, the only thing that appalled me was the fear that if ever you got to know, you would hate and despise me."

John Wycherley did not seem to realise for the moment the greatness of the miracle that had been wrought in his wife's heart. That she should sue him for forgiveness, or be a suppliant for anything, might have filled him with astonishment. But his thoughts still appeared to be almost painfully absorbed by some impersonal view of the case.

"Who am I to judge, my dear?" he said at last, and though his voice was quite gentle, it sounded hopeless and cold.

"You are the only judge I am afraid of,"

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she made haste to answer. "You are so good, and I have dragged you into this without your knowledge, and now you'll have to suffer disgrace with me. That's what I need forgiveness for. Won't you say you forgive me?"

"So far as I am concerned, I forgive you freely. What we have to do is to set about making instant reparation to Geoffrey Drage. I wonder how he will take it."

He spoke with painful nervousness, which increased his wife's quite visible terror.

"Oh, surely he will not be harsh and unforgiving! After all, we have not done him so very much harm. We have kept the place right for him."

"Yes, but remember how it was when he came home first. His position then was not very enviable. Even you did nothing to make it better."

It was the only reproach Wycherley permitted himself and she took it meekly.

"Supposing for a moment the positions could be reversed, what would happen?" he asked, looking straight at her. She broke into a small hysterical laugh.

"Oh, if he had done it to me I should never have forgiven him. I don't pretend anything else. I should have proceeded against him with the utmost rigour of the law. But

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if it had been you, John, why, nothing would have happened, nothing at all. You would just have forgiven him on the spot. The question is, which of us is he likely to imitate."

Wycherley shook his head, and seeing him so quietly hopeless, her distress and apprehension increased.

"John, what would the punishment be supposing he did proceed against me with the utmost rigour of the law, which I have been speaking about? Would they only fine me, or could they put me in gaol?"

Wycherley knew perfectly well what the usual sentence in such cases was, but he forbore to increase the distress of his wife. But the lines seemed to deepen on his face, and he turned towards the door as if he would seek some relief from the burden of his thoughts.

"Where are you going?" she asked desperately.

"I will try to find Drage and have a quiet talk with him outside. I'll do my best, Emma, but it will not be a pleasant task."

"Oh, tell him he can have it all, even the ten thousand pounds his uncle left to you, as compensation if only he will not prosecute," she cried a little wildly. "I will do anything, go back to a little house in London—oh, how thankfully!—and work my fingers to

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the bone for you and the children; but if they take me to gaol, I shall die. Then think of the disgrace for Ethel and the boys. We shall never be able to lift our heads as a family again."

Wycherley passed out as if already he had heard more than he could bear. Poor Emma Wycherley, an abject creature, crouched on the corner of the sofa, and surely in that hour of supreme bitterness and absolute terror fully expiated all the errors of her past life.

When Wycherley, with the step and bearing of an old man, stepped out into the clear wintry sunshine, he uplifted his face to the sky and for one brief moment felt that his faith was shaken. For he had tried with all the powers of his being to serve the Lord all the days of his life, and he told himself he had not deserved this, the final blow from fate.

He had neither sought nor desired riches, he had asked only simple and possible things, and now he must suffer and that cruelly for the sin of another. In this mood, certainly the darkest that had ever assailed that fine, sweet, generous nature, he came across the great spaces of the Park, to the edge of the wood through which the path led to the Rectory. It is possible that he even turned unconsciously

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towards his friend the Rector of Mitchelham to seek his counsel, sympathy and help.

He was conscious, as he stood, just for a moment, on the edge of the wood looking towards the beautiful old house set like a gem in its noble park, that he had loved it passing well, and that it would cost him more than a sharp pang to give it up. His sad and painful reverie was disturbed presently by the sound of voices in the distance, and when he turned his face to the wood he saw Drage and Ethel coming towards him. He was so deeply absorbed in his own painful thoughts that he did not observe anything unusual in their looks. But Ethel's colour was high and her eyes shone, while the face of Geoffrey Drage wore that expression of happy peace a man feels when his heart has found its true anchorage.

"Why, daddy," said Ethel with a kind of gay nervousness, "why are you wandering here alone?"

"I am seeking Mr Drage, my dear," he answered, and the words seemed to force themselves through his parched lips. "Now I have met you, will you run on home to your mother. She needs you; yes, I think she will need you very much."

Ethel, not in the least alarmed, and perhaps

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just a little relieved to have the opportunity of leaving her lover to tell the news, gave him a glance of mingled sweetness and appeal, and walked quickly away. Drage's face did not lose its smile until he turned towards John Wycherley with the words of confession on his lips. But he did not utter them, being immediately struck by the poignant expression on Wycherley's face.

"My dear sir, you surely are not feeling well?" he said with the utmost concern.

"No, I am not very well, Mr Drage; at least, my mind is greatly troubled. I hardly know how I am to tell you of the—great wrong I have most unwittingly done you."

"A wrong you have done me, Mr Wycherley!" repeated Geoffrey with his pleasant smile. "Oh, come, that is impossible. I am just going to ask you for something very precious. Have I your leave to speak?"

"Listen to me first!" said Wycherley, quickly hearing the words, but not grasping their significance. "It will be quickly said. My wife has found Halliwell Drage's last will, and Mitchelham is yours—it never has been ours."

"When did she find it?" asked Drage, and his voice did not even acquire a more serious note.

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"A good many months ago. She has kept silence about it, but God prevented her accomplishing its destruction. But we are in your hands, Geoffrey Drage. You have the right to exact satisfaction, and even, if you like, to punish her." He fumbled in the pocket of his coat and produced the folded document, which he offered to Drage, but he did not immediately take it.

"You and I have been friends, quite good friends, and for the sake of that, and on account of my children, I beg you to be merciful to their mother. We shall go out quickly and quietly, and whatever claim for compensation you may insist on, we shall endeavour to meet it. Only, I pray you, don't punish her. She was tempted and she fell. It is a thing that may happen to any or all of us."

There was a moment's strained silence, during which Drage took the sheet from John Wycherley's hand, and cast his eyes casually over it. But there was neither eager interest, nor rage, nor indignation on his face. He appeared perfectly calm and unperturbed.

"Well?" said Wycherley feverishly, for he felt that he could not much longer endure the strain. "We are in your hands. Be merciful to her, for the children's sakes."

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"Listen, Mr Wycherley," said Geoffrey then. "I love Ethel, and she has done me the honour to accept me. I could have no quarrel with Ethel's mother, even if I had one with her father, which I think would be impossible." His voice was reassuring, his sunny smile swift and warm and true.

The colour rushed with painful force to John Wycherley's slightly haggard face; and he lifted wistful, incredulous eyes to Drage's.

"Do you—do you mean to say that for Ethel's sake you will make no prosecution? You will let us go out scot free?"

"Why, yes, of course. I am one of the family now, and the members of a family ought to hang together. Let us go back and reassure Mrs Wycherley. I am afraid that by now she has nearly frightened Ethel out of her wits."

"Go on towards the house, Geoffrey. I will follow in a few minutes' time. I can't thank you. I want to be alone just for a moment," said Wycherley in a voice which trembled sorely.

Drage passed on, but at the stile he glanced back, and was not surprised to behold John Wycherley on his knees.

Public curiosity has never been quite satis-

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fied regarding the true story of the Mitchelham succession. But surmises were rife a little later on when considerable changes took place. The gossips, however, were so intensely interested in the engagement between Geoffrey Drage and Ethel Wycherley that it sufficed them for quite a good while. On the whole, the county was pleased. It seemed not only an excellent arrangement, but a most appropriate one. Ethel was greatly beloved, and no one grudged her her good fortune; for, of course, rumour had been busy with Geoffrey Drage's newly-acquired wealth likewise, and had exaggerated it out of all semblance to truth.

What they had the greatest difficulty in understanding was why she and Geoffrey should live at Mitchelham, and all sorts of stories were whispered abroad. The general opinion was that while it was a lucky thing for Ethel and her husband, it did not seem to be quite fair to the Wycherley boys. But as the Wycherleys merely removed their domicile to the Dower House of Parson's Pool, which stood on the outside confines of Mitchelham Park, and everybody seemed more than pleased with the new arrangement, the busybodies felt that the affairs of Mitchelham were a little too complicated for their un-

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ravelling. Some of the cleverest of them whispered in secret that there must be something behind it all that had been hushed up.

The secret never passed the lips of Geoffrey Drage, or of Ethel, his wife, and the father and the mother and the lawyers, the only other sharers of it, kept an equally unbroken silence. The younger members of the Wycherley family were merely informed that a will had been found absolutely establishing Geoffrey Drage's claim to the estate. But as they had still the freedom of Mitchelham Park and House, and there seemed to be plenty of money available for all purposes at Parson's Pool, they did not seek to enquire further.

They were all conscious, however—but only that they never spoke—of a great and abiding change in Mrs Wycherley. She became gentle and unobtrusive, being so humbly grateful for consideration shown to her by those whose hearts she had wrung, that she could not do enough to atone.

So were the last days of the Wycherley infinitely better than their first.

THE END.

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