THE REJUVENATION OF MISS SEMAPHORE

A FARCICAL NOVEL

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BY

HAL GODFREY

(C. O'CONNOR ECCLES)

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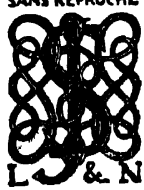
SANS PEUR ET
SANS REPROCHE



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MACKENZIE'S CURE DEPOT, READING.

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CONTENTS.

The Rejuvenation

OF

MISS SEMAPHORE.

CHAPTER I.

WHICH INTRODUCES MISS SEMAPHORE.

SEVEN o'clock had struck.

The gong at 37, Beaconsfield Gardens, South Kensington, thundered under the vigorous strokes of the bow-legged German waiter. By one, by two, by three, the boarders trooped down to dinner, the more sensitive to noise stopping their ears as they descended.

The very deafest could not ignore that gong. Müller always attacked it suddenly, as if running amuck or possessed by a demon. It reverberated far and near, and echoed faintly to Gloucester Road Station. Boarders, arriving late, were seen to run when their ears caught the familiar sound.

At the head of the central table in the fine dining-room, its three windows looking on the Gardens, sat the proprietress, Mrs. Wilcox. She was a bright-eyed, stout, florid woman of forty-five, dressed in black silk and a lace fichu secured by a cameo brooch. As she waited for her guests, she meditatively sharpened a carving knife.

By the sideboard stood her husband, Captain Wilcox, slender, dried-up, younger than his wife, and dominated by her. Where they met, and why they married, was a never-failing source of speculation in the house. It was asserted that Miss Tompkins took him in payment of a debt. Be that as it might, the mild, subdued little Captain was evidently a gentleman. He had been in a Lancer regiment, got into difficulties, and now at eight-and-thirty was a person of much less importance in his wife's boarding-house than her imposing cook.

Though never supposed to act as master, the name and authority of Captain Wilcox were frequently evoked by Mrs. Wilcox when any unpleasant duty had to be done. He it was, for instance, who sternly insisted that no credit should be given. He stood out for the weekly settlement of accounts.

He was responsible for certain persons receiving notice to quit. He made the unpopular rule that the drawing-room lights should be extinguished precisely at eleven. In a word, he was the Jorkins of the firm. For the rest, he held some small post in the City secured for him by his wife's brother, helped daily with the carving, and paid for his own keep.

Besides the central table, there were round the room several smaller ones, accommodating from four to eight persons. To one of these, some men and women concerned in our story were making their way. First came Miss Augusta Semaphore, a tall, thin, and rather acid-looking woman of fifty-three. Close behind followed her sister, Miss Prudence, who was ten years younger, and accustomed to be treated as a baby. Prudence wore a fringe that hung over her eyes in separate snaky curls, and in damp weather degenerated into wisps; she was plump and fair, had a somewhat foolish smile, and, as befitted her part of giddy, little thing, any number of coquettish airs and graces.

Their neighbours were, a stately couple named Mr. and Mrs. Dumaresq, Mr. Lorimer, a clownish youth, of good family and

aggressive patriotism, Major Jones, Mrs. Whitley, a small, mincing lady of recent and painful refinement, and finally a large and commanding woman with a terrible eye, who was vaguely believed to have taken out a medical degree.

"For what we are about to receive," said Mrs. Wilcox, "the Lord make us truly thankful."

With a creak and a rustle, some five-and-thirty boarders drew in their chairs. The covers were removed, and a ripple of prosy talk began.

As usual, it started with polite enquiries as to each other's health. In boarding-houses it generally does. No one cares a button for you or your ailments, but they ask after them all the same with exasperating regularity and take no interest in the answer.

"How is your cold, Major Jones?"

"Better, thank you, Mrs. Dumaresq—and your neuralgia?"

"Much worse; I never closed my eyes last night."

"But you are taking something for it?"—and so on, and so on, and so on.

New comers at 37, Beaconsfield Gardens, occasionally tried to be conversational. For

a time they were lively, animated, full of good stories and repartee. People listened to them in silence, and generally took offence. Conversation as a fine art was not encouraged. It was sad to notice how in a week or a fortnight the talkers talked themselves out, and subsided into the brief commonplaces of their neighbours.

The boarders, all respectable people who read the *Daily Telegraph* and voted Tory when they had votes, shared the profound belief of the middle-class Briton that silence shows solidity, sound judgment, and a well-balanced mind. Profound and continued silence they considered an attainment in itself. They scarcely realised, not being introspective, that two-thirds of the people who don't speak are silent from lack of ideas.

As a matter of fact, in such a *milieu*, subjects for conversation of general interest were almost impossible to find. By tacit consent, politics and religion were tabooed, since the discussion of either invariably ended in a quarrel. Though the boarders read novels, they did not talk about them, and they took no great interest in literature or art. A man who was supposed to have written a book was

rather cold-shouldered, for the Englishman—and in this case, as the preacher put it, man embraces woman—whatever his respect for literature in the abstract, thinks but meanly of those who produce it, if they do not happen to be celebrities. To be sure they are generally poor.

"Vill you beef, muddon, schiken, or feal?" whispered Müller, making his round when soup and fish had been removed.

"Veal, please," said Miss Semaphore.

"Feal, blease," said Müller under his breath, to impress the order on his mind.

"Vill you beef, muddon, schiken, or feal, Madame?"

"A portion—a tiny portion of the—a—chest of the fowl," said Mrs. Whitley.

"Roast beef," growled Mr. Lorimer, and Müller echoed "beef," adding "blease" on his own account.

"I saw you to-day, Major Jones, but you did not see me," said the younger Miss Semaphore archly, when the interest of choosing had subsided.

"You what?" asked Major Jones mildly. He was rather deaf.

"I said that I saw you to-day—down in the City, you know. Fancy! I went all

that distance by myself in an omnibus! There is such a sweet shop for bargains in St. Paul's Churchyard, and you passed me just as I turned in."

"You should not go into the City unescorted," said Miss Augusta Semaphore severely; "I have told you that over and over again, but you are so heedless. It is not *comme il faut*."

"What do you think would happen to her?" asked Mr. Lorimer gruffly. He was a young man of combative instincts and no manners, with whom Miss Semaphore waged a deadly but, on her side, perfectly civil warfare.

"My dear father," went on Miss Semaphore, without taking any notice, "who was a distinguished military officer, strongly objected to girls going about alone."

"That was all very well thirty years ago," objected Mr. Lorimer, "but nowadays, if people conduct themselves properly, there is no earthly reason why they should not go about alone at fit and proper hours, once they have come to years of discretion."

"I can assure you," said Mrs. Dumaresq, assuming a grand air, and slightly raising her voice, as she always did when she meant to

impress her hearers, "I can assure you that in diplomatic circles, a lady shopping without an escort, or at any rate without a maid, is unheard of."

In every boarding-house throughout the British Islands there is to be found a person who is the intimate friend of the Prince of Wales. At 37, Beaconsfield Gardens, Mrs. Dumaresq was that person.

"Yes, all very well amongst a lot of horrid foreigners," said Mr. Lorimer obstinately; "no wonder ladies are afraid to go about alone where there's a set of ugly, unwashed rascals that would run a dagger into them as soon as look at them, but grown-up English-women in their own country may do what they please."

"I do not approve of ladies going anywhere alone. It may do for middle-class persons," said Mrs. Dumaresq haughtily, "but I can assure you, from personal knowledge, that it is not done in diplomatic circles. When we lived at Belgrade, there was a Mrs. Twickenham who used to act in the most unconventional way, and one day the Princess—a dear old friend of ours—the Princess Hatzoff—you must have heard of her, first cousin to the Czar, a delightful

woman and so attached to me—said, 'Dearest Mimi'—she always called me Mimi—'are English ladies in their own country, ladies of position such as you and I, allowed this liberty, not to say license, of action?' and I replied, 'No, Helène, certainly not.'"

The Misses Semaphore, Mrs. Whitley, and the lady doctor listened attentively to these reminiscences, but Mr. Lorimer was not impressed.

"I maintain," he said, "that this is a free country, and that those ideas are old-fashioned."

"I assure you that is not the opinion of the Princess Hatzoff, a woman who mixed in the very best society; nor was it the opinion of my dear friend, the ex-Empress of the French, Mr. Lorimer," replied Mrs. Dumaresq with a lofty air. "However, we will discuss the matter no further. In diplomacy one learns to avoid subjects on which one's experiences are different from those of other people, and so not likely to agree."

There was a subdued acidity in Mrs. Dumaresq's tone, there was a battle-breathing obstinacy in Mr. Lorimer's accent that led peaceful Miss Prudence to change the conversation.

"The poor dear Empress," she said, "how I pity her!"

"Ah, you should have seen her in her splendour. Were you in Paris before the war?"

"You can scarcely expect my sister to remember Paris before the war, my dear Mrs. Dumaresq," interposed Miss Semaphore frigidly. "It is years ago. Prudence was a mere child."

Mrs. Dumaresq smiled slightly, and said, "Ah!" In diplomatic circles no one openly expresses disbelief in a statement.

"The dear Empress was such a friend of mine in the old days when we lived there. One day, I remember so well, we had been away for nearly a year. The Empress was standing at a window of the Palace with an *aide-de-camp* beside her, Comte de la Tour—you remember Comte de la Tour, Angelo?" This to her silent husband, who nodded assent. "The Empress suddenly said to the Comte, '*Mon cher*, who is that charmingly-dressed lady who has just driven past?' The Comte, dear man, answered, 'Oh, your Majesty, do you not know? that is Madame Dumaresq!' The same evening we met at a ball at the Spanish Ambassador's, and the

Empress graciously came up to me. 'Fancy,' said she; 'fancy, my dear Madame Dumaresq, I did not recognise you this morning. It is such an age since you were here; and oh! do permit me to congratulate you on the exquisite costume you wore.'"

The story made a distinct impression. The medical woman at the end of the table, who had an American's interest in high life, stopped short in a thrilling narrative of an amputation, and listened with all her ears.

"The Empress was a very lovely woman, but I believe she was not very young when she married," said the elder Miss Semaphore reflectively.

"Oh, dear no! Eight or nine-and-twenty at least. Some people said two-and-thirty."

"What matter does that make?" interposed the polite Mr. Dumaresq. "A handsome woman is only the age she looks."

Miss Semaphore sighed. She had carefully examined her face before dinner and discovered a new wrinkle. It was borne in on her that she scarcely looked as young as she felt, but she made an effort to seem as if eight-and-twenty, or, at most, two-and-thirty, was still before her.

"It must be dreadful to grow old," said Mrs. Whitley affectedly.

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"There are so many aids to beauty nowadays," said Mr. Dumaresq, "that no lady need look a day older than she likes."

"But the use of cosmetics is odious," cried Miss Semaphore. "For my part I never could understand how any one could use paints and powders."

Good breeding was not Mr. Lorimer's strong point, and, in boarding-houses, people say things to each other that elsewhere are the privilege of relatives.

"Dyes," he said, looking fixedly at Miss Semaphore's hair, "dyes are most injurious —worst of all, in fact. Horrible case in the paper the other day. A woman dyed her hair black one morning, died herself next! Instantaneous softening of the brain, they said. The stuff soaked in."

The obvious application lent point to the sally. The medical lady, who prided herself on being a fine woman, needing no aid from art, smiled broadly. She could not, however, resist saying there was no such disease as instantaneous softening of the brain.

Mrs. Dumaresq, mindful of her diplomatic training, looked so grave that a child would have suspected something wrong. Miss Semaphore murmured "How dreadful!"

She alone saw no personal allusion, for it never struck her that anyone could think she tinted her tresses. Miss Prudence looked as angrily at the speaker as her kind face permitted. Major Jones had just said, "Eh! what's that?" when Mrs. Wilcox rose, and at her signal the ladies swept upstairs, leaving the men to cigars and scandal.

CHAPTER II.

A BOARDING-HOUSE EVENING, AND AN IMPORTANT LETTER.

BOARDING-HOUSES all the world over have certain features in common. These are the result of haphazard association between people without common interests.

No. 37, Beaconsfield Gardens, South Kensington, was no exception to the rule. Its inmates were chiefly women, the widows and daughters of professional men. A few childless married couples lived there, and a sprinkling of unmarried men who were either old or extremely young. Some of the people were well-connected, others well-off, all were dull, a few pious. Several secretly considered themselves superior to the others. They focussed the attributes of the British Philistine, and were an object-lesson as to the low intellectual level of average respectable humanity.

Lacking occupation and mutual outside interests, the boarders were led to discuss each other freely. The men mostly herded together in the smoking-room. The ladies gathered in the drawing-room. A sort of armed neutrality was maintained between the sexes. He or she who ventured to invade the headquarters of the other was looked on as daring or brazen as the case might be. At meals alone did some thirty-five people assemble. Even then, they were not expected to change their place at table, so had to trust to chance for agreeable neighbours.

The few girls who lived in the house had not a gay time. Poor things! They had no lovers, no interests, no society, no prospects, and incomes that required management. Once they ceased to be new arrivals, the men, all of whom were ineligible, took no notice of them. They were treated with a nonchalance more galling than unkindness, and were subtly given to understand that they could not expect the same consideration as young women outside who lived in their own homes and had parents who entertained. The elderly people, and especially Miss Semaphore, looked rigidly after the proprieties.

Occasionally a dashing widow or an attractive and forward damsel temporarily upset the dulness. Dances were organised, round games started, heads turned. These brilliant meteors never lingered long on the horizon. Their stay usually terminated in some episode that led to a notice to quit. The succeeding flatness was the more marked.

There is no dulness in the quietest home like the dulness that falls at intervals on a boarding-house. It may be that at home one does not expect much, while living with a number of strangers one feels restless, as if something really ought to happen.

There are blanks and periods of depression, extending sometimes to months at a time, when life seems a waste. During these, efforts to get up any amusement are useless. No one will help, and so much cold water is thrown on every suggestion, that in despair the promoter abandons the project.

Such an interval was now being put through at No. 37. Conversation, as we have indicated, languished, being replaced by an occasional interchange of platitudes, failing any private or public sensation. An audacious flirtation on the part of one of the younger women, or a thrilling murder trial,

would have interested everybody, especially the flirtation, on the progress of which the boarders would have taken turns to watch and comment on.

Relieved of all household duties, the "ladies," as Mrs. Wilcox never failed to call them, passed the monotonous days in shopping, novel-reading, and repose. They made up temporary friendships between themselves and fell out with regularity. As usual, they were split into two factions, those who abused the proprietress and those who did not.

The drawing-room in which they nightly assembled was a spacious apartment. A Brussels carpet of pronounced pattern, red Utrecht velvet chairs—solid, as befitted furniture destined to much wear and tear—and gilt-framed mirrors, gave the apartment an early Victorian aspect. The light and airy found no place in this salon, for in boarding-houses everything breakable is broken, and nobody owns to the mischief.

Workbaskets, newspapers, and novels were brought out this evening as usual, and nearly all the party became absorbed in one or other of these excitements. They had exhausted each other, though one or two kept up a

dribble of civil enquiries for the sake of saying something.

"What pretty work. How do you do it?"

"Oh! it is a new stitch I have just learned."

"Were you out this afternoon?"

"No; I lay down and took a nap. Were you?"

"Yes, I went down to High Street for some wool."

The evening to which we refer, though as dull, was not destined to be as peaceful as its fellows. The cause of the disturbance was Miss Semaphore's dog. Miss Semaphore's dog was a mongrel, a snappish little brute called Toutou. Its brown hair was flecked with grey, for it was old, fat, and scant of breath. Toutou had been the cause of more unpleasantness at 37, Beaconsfield Gardens, than any other inmate. If, in the quarrels of men, *cherchez la femme* holds good, in the quarrels of idle women who live in boarding-houses one may not unfrequently look for the dog. To-night, unfortunately for herself, Miss Belcher, one of the younger women, trod on its tail. Frankly, it was difficult to avoid treading on Toutou's tail, for he had a trick of getting into the way that was

simply exasperating. Miss Belcher, a nice, harmless girl, jumped as if she had been shot.

"Oh, I am so sorry!" she cried; "doggie, poor doggie, are you hurt?" and kneeling down, she tried tenderly to soothe him. Toutou was not hurt, but he howled desperately. Judging by his actions he rather enjoyed getting people into trouble. In an instant Miss Semaphore swooped down, red and angry, seized her favourite, and casting a withering glance at the crestfallen Miss Belcher, carried him off to her own particular corner.

Everyone at 37, Beaconsfield Gardens, had a special chair or a favourite corner, and great was the indignation if anyone else took it.

"It was quite an accident," stammered Miss Belcher. "I never saw Toutou."

"Some people," replied Miss Semaphore, "have no eyes. They think it rather amusing to torture dumb animals, don't they, my precious?" As she spoke, she bestowed a kiss like a peck on the top of Toutou's ugly nose. The boarders all ceased work and listened attentively.

"But indeed, Miss Semaphore," cried poor Miss Belcher, almost crying, "it was not my fault."

"I suppose, of course, it was Toutou's," said Miss Semaphore with sarcasm.

Miss Belcher was getting the worst of it, when her mother, a large, deaf woman of majestic presence, interposed. She domineered over her daughter and everyone else, and had been silent so far because she had been having the state of the case explained in her ear by Mrs. Whitley.

"Don't mind, Emma," she said suddenly, "That ridiculous dog is in everyone's way. It should be got rid of." Turning to the embarrassed Mrs. Whitley, she made what appeared to be indignant comments on Miss Semaphore, the obnoxious word "old maid" being distinctly audible.

At this awful crisis the boarders stared panic-stricken at Miss Semaphore.

Miss Semaphore, under other circumstances, would have justified their apprehensions. Even she, however, saw it was no use quarrelling with a deaf woman endowed with a terrible tongue. Accordingly, she simply muttered, "Disgraceful!—ill-bred!" and something about "the result of association with such persons," and relapsed into an oppressive silence.

The innocent little dribble of talk dried up

before the sirocco of her suppressed wrath. A silence that might be felt reigned in the drawing-room. Though glances were interchanged, no one ventured to speak except Mrs. Belcher. She, greatly daring, and with the evident intention of flouting both Miss Semaphore and Toutou, addressed her daughter on all manner of subjects, compelling that unhappy young person to reply at the top of her voice. Miss Prudence, who always shrank from her sister's outbursts, buried herself timidly in the pages of the *Lady's Pictorial* and tried to look as if she had heard nothing.

When this painful state of things had lasted for some time, Mrs. Dumaresq, by way of creating a diversion, said in her most fascinating manner,

"That dreadful Mr. Morley has been making another speech. I'm sure it is a wonder how anyone can be found to listen to him. Radicals and Socialists and those sort of people really ought to be locked up."

"Perhaps, on their side, they think Tories should be locked up," said Miss Stott, a thick-set young person with views.

"No doubt they do," answered Mrs. Dumaresq with energy. "No doubt, if they

could, they would have all the aristocracy beheaded. As my dear friend, the Baroness de la Veille Roche, once said to me, 'My darling Mimi, the *canaille* would wade in our blood if they dared.'"

"I doubt it," said Miss Stott stolidly; "people are not as bloodthirsty as that, even if they are Radicals or Socialists. After all, human beings are very much alike in the grain whatever their rank, and none of us would care particularly to wade in blood."

"Alike!" echoed Mrs. Dumaresq. "My dear Miss Stott, you are mistaken. Between the upper and the lower classes there is the greatest possible difference. They have not our sensitiveness, our refinement, our delicacy." Mrs. Dumaresq said "our" to show she knew her manners, and to accentuate her diplomatic training.

"Do you think not?" queried Miss Stott. 'Of course they have not external refinement, nor the advantages of education. But do you really think they are less sensitive, less delicate in their own way? Why, every day there are cases in the paper that seem to show Belgravia and Whitechapel are very much alike when their blood is up. The chief difference to me appears to be that

the one does things and does not talk of them, while the other talks of them but does not do them."

"My dear Miss Stott!" remonstrated Mrs. Dumaresq.

"Yes," said Miss Stott, "why only to-day I read the account of an action taken by a servant against her mistress, a wealthy woman, who broke her fan on her maid's shoulder."

"How shocking!" said Mrs. Dumaresq. "But you must not judge the aristocracy by such persons. The woman, though she may have been rich, could not possibly have been a lady."

"So I think," replied Miss Stott; "no doubt, however, she considered herself one, for she was an Earl's daughter."

"Oh—h!" said Mrs. Dumaresq, with great surprise. "Then the maid must have been very provoking."

A rattle of teacups announced the arrival of coffee.

Miss Prudence Semaphore, who was seated in the centre of the room near the lamp, looked round to see if any of the men had come up, and dropped her *Pictorial*. As she recovered it, an advertisement caught her eye.

"To Ladies and Gentlemen of Means.

"The widow of an eminent explorer, being in straitened circumstances, is compelled to offer for sale a single bottle of water from the Fountain of Youth, vainly sought in Florida by Ponce de Leon. Its marvellous rejuvenating properties cannot be exaggerated. By its means a person of seventy may regain, after six small doses, the age of eighteen. This is genuine. No cosmetic. No imposture. No connection with any preparation making similar claims. The greatest marvel of this or any other century. Money willingly returned if above statement is proved untrue. Please address offers, which must be liberal, as this opportunity is unique, to X. Y. Z., Office of this Paper."

Greatly struck by the announcement, which she read twice, Miss Prudence passed the paper to her sister, saying, "Look at that!" She then pulled out some knitting, and became absorbed in the mysteries of "slip one, knit one, bring the thread forward, knit two together."

Miss Semaphore adjusted her long-handled eye-glasses, sole concession to failing sight. Spectacles were abhorrent to her, and even a *pince nez* she considered too plain an acknowledgment of weakness. She was even more impressed by the advertisement than Miss Prudence had been, and considered it at intervals throughout the evening.

Coffee had been handed round. The men who sauntered upstairs for a cup massed themselves together for company at one end of the room. If separate from their kind, they seemed forlorn and uneasy, and watched an opportunity to escape. One or two of the oldest, including Major Jones, and a Mr. Batley, who was young, but a newcomer and unacquainted with the ways of the house, advanced into what seemed to be looked on as the women's end.

Miss Prudence Semaphore moved her skirts slightly, so as to give a chance to anyone wishing to sit beside her. No one came. Pretty Miss Fastleigh and her sister, with an unconsciousness born of experience, had thoughtfully taken places as near the men as possible. Soon they were deep in conversation with the more courageous of the advanced guard.

Coffee over, the greater number of the men made a stampede. Some were studying for examinations and could not spare time. More sat in each other's rooms drinking whisky and soda, others again turned out for a game of billiards.

A whist party was formed by Miss Semaphore, her sister, Major Jones and Mr.

Dumaresq. Mrs. Whitley, Mrs. Dumaresq, the medical woman, Miss Belcher, Miss Fastleigh, Mr. Batley, and his sister, took part in a round game. Miss Primsby, a timid girl, very proper, and easily shocked, whose formidable mother went to bed early, after a time slipped gently downstairs to the smoking-room. There she taught chess to Monsieur Lemprière, a young Frenchman who had come over to learn the language. The better to explain the moves, she held his hand in hers.

"In England the Garden of Beauty is kept
By a dragon of prudery placed within call,
But so oft this unamiable dragon hath slept,
That the garden's but carelessly watched after all."

The second Miss Fastleigh, who had a good voice, went to the piano unasked and sang one or two songs. Finding no one took any particular notice, she amused herself by running up the scale and sustaining the high A, much to the exasperation of her hearers. The only woman who can endure scales is the woman who is singing them. Mrs. Belcher perused the paper. She did not take it herself, but borrowed it from Major Jones in the evenings. From time to time

she gave scraps of news to Mrs. Wilcox, who had read it all before breakfast. Captain Wilcox sat downstairs in his wife's office, balancing the books.

About half-past ten Miss Semaphore rose. Having carried all before her at the whist table, she was in high spirits, and bade good-night with much affability to everyone except the Belchers. She carried with her the copy of the *Lady's Pictorial*. When her sister, having as usual sat with her for twenty minutes, discussing the events of the day, had retired to her own room, which adjoined, she sat down and wrote the following letter :

"37, Beaconsfield Gardens,
"South Kensington.
"June —th, 189-.

"Madam,

"Having seen your advertisement in the current issue of the *Lady's Pictorial*, I am induced to reply I should like to become the possessor of the 'Water' you offer for sale. While willing to offer liberal terms, I do not of course know what you would consider such. I should be glad, therefore, if you could arrange for an interview, when we might discuss the matter. I take it for granted that the water is as efficacious as you represent it to be, and shall expect proof before purchase.

"I am, Madam,
"Yours faithfully,
"A. J. SEMAPHORE."

This was enclosed in an envelope addressed to "X. Y. Z., Office of the *Lady's Pictorial.*" Next morning Miss Semaphore carried it herself to the post.

CHAPTER III.

MISS SEMAPHORE RECEIVES AN ANSWER.

"I AM perfectly proportioned," said the medical lady confidentially to Mrs. Whitley.

Mrs. Whitley would not have thought so herself, but she made an assenting murmur, out of politeness.

They were seated at breakfast two or three mornings later, and the medical lady's statement was interrupted by the entrance of Miss Semaphore, who glided quietly to her place, and took up her correspondence with some appearance of anxiety.

"Perfectly proportioned," went on the medical lady in a lower key; "my dressmaker says she has no difficulty therefore in fitting me, and my gowns always sit well. I don't say this out of vanity. It is a fact. I fear, however, it would be no use giving her address to other people, for the result might not be as satisfactory."

Mrs. Whitley looked insulted, but she was a timid woman, and not ready of speech. She thought the medical lady's dress clumsy, and her figure shapeless, but had indiscreetly asked who made it—the dress, not the figure —with a view to employing the woman on some plain sewing. The medical lady's answer to her question had offended her very much, but she could not think of anything cutting to say in reply.

Without noticing her expression, or feeling any awkwardness, the medical lady continued,

"You know my velvet mantle? I have been told Miss Fastleigh says she does not like it. Now that is pure jealousy. It is an extremely handsome mantle, far handsomer than anything she could afford. But of course it could only be worn by a fine, tall woman. It is astonishing that so many people are jealous of me."

Mrs. Whitley wondered vaguely what grounds for jealousy the medical lady gave. She certainly was not popular in the house, but that was scarcely because anyone was jealous of her. Belief in her own beauty, however, and in the envy she imagined it excited, kept her happy; so sharp speeches or

covert hints alike failed to alter her. Mrs. Whitley she had chosen as a confidante, under the belief that she was a quiet little person who admired her. She would have been very much astonished to hear Mrs. Whitley's candid opinion.

"And how are you this morning, Mrs. Whitley?" asked Mrs. Dumaresq blandly. She was the next arrival.

"My cold is still bad, thank you," said Mrs. Whitley.

"Oh, indeed! No doubt the draught in your room increased it. All the small rooms here are draughty, as the doors and windows are opposite each other. Of course, as I have told you, when we came here we meant to stop but a very short time. I can assure you, my dear Mrs. Whitley, that to anyone who has moved in diplomatic circles, and been honoured by the gracious hospitality of royalty, a boarding-house, however well kept —and this is not without its good points— cannot fail to be objectionable. Though we meant, as I have said, to stay but a short time, I was most particular about having a good room. 'Angelo,' said I, 'let us take the best apartments in the house,' and so we did. I made a point of it. It is a

great pity that you do not move into a larger room. Not that it makes any difference to me. I am quite above such petty matters. I never was influenced by any worldly consideration in my choice of acquaintances; far from it. If I like people, my dear Mrs. Whitley, I like them whether they have a small room or not. I do assure you they may be stowed away at the very top of the house for all I care."

"Very kind of you, I'm sure," murmured Mrs. Whitley. The blaze of grandeur surrounding Mr. and Mrs. Dumaresq, caused her to take all that they said in good part. They had a certain suavity, an easy way of saying unpleasant things, that the medical lady lacked. Besides, Mrs. Whitley's one ambition was to get into Society, and she secretly hoped that if she was very civil to Mrs. Dumaresq, she might possibly be one day introduced to some of the distinguished personages whose names were so frequently introduced into her conversation.

"Yes," went on the lady in a glow of generous feeling and a somewhat heightened voice, "rank, and wealth, and position have never had any charm for me. As my dear friend, the Marchese Polichinello, a charming

woman, a reigning beauty at the Italian Court — You remember the Marchese, Angelo?—often said to me, '*Bellisima mia*' —she always addressed me as '*bellisima mia*'—'you are led too much by your heart.'"

"I suppose you are going to the Queen's Garden Party, Mrs. Dumaresq," said the medical lady, who had been reading the *Court Circular*.

"Oh, ah, yes," replied Mrs. Dumaresq, "I expect I shall. It is easy for me to go at any time."

"But guests must have attended a Drawing-room within the last two years to be eligible for invitations," said Mr. Lorimer gruffly, "and I thought you said you were out of England."

"Certainly, certainly," answered Mrs. Dumaresq, "we have of course been away, but the dear Prince will arrange all that; and then, practically speaking, I have attended a Drawing-room within the last two years."

No one asked what she meant.

Meantime Miss Semaphore was reading the following letter :—

"194, Handel Street, W.C.

"—th June, 189-.

"Madam,

"In reply to your communication, I beg to say that I shall be pleased to dispose of the Water referred to in my advertisement for the sum of £1000. This minimum price is absolutely fixed, and I cannot take less. Considering that the effect is guaranteed, and that I am the only person in the world who has this marvellous water to sell, I am sure you will admit the price is low. Were it not that I am in pressing and immediate need of money, I could easily get much more. If you are inclined to conclude the business at once, I shall be happy to see you here to-morrow at 4.30 p.m., and give you a proof before purchase. My bankers, Coutts & Co.; my solicitors, Lewis & Lewis, Dr. Llewellyn Smith, of 604, Harley Street; and His Grace the Duke of Fordham have kindly permitted me to name them as references, should you care to make enquiries about me.

"I am, Madam,

"Yours faithfully,

"SOPHIA GELDHERAUS."

Miss Semaphore ate her breakfast pensively and in silence, then made her way to her room. A thousand pounds! It was a large sum of money, a very large sum. The sisters were fairly well off, still that was a great deal to give out of their capital. But if this Mrs. Geldheraus—Miss Semaphore knew the name as that of a famous African

traveller of German birth—if Mrs. Geldheraus spoke the truth, the water was well worth it.

Miss Semaphore scarcely allowed her mind to dwell on the ecstatic delight of being once more nineteen—intelligent nineteen this time, nineteen conscious of its powers, knowing the value of youth, enjoying the mere being young as no one could who had not been old. Had she dwelt on it, she would have felt prepared for this one good to give not only one thousand pounds, but her entire fortune, and count it well spent. Still, common sense told her a thousand pounds was no trifle for a woman of her means. She could not raise it herself all at once.

On consideration, she decided to tell her sister, to share the bottle with her, and halve the expense. Prudence being younger, would naturally require less of the water. There was no need, however, to allude to that beforehand, else she might feel inclined to pay only in proportion.

The Misses Semaphore had had a life similar to that of many single women—a grey, colourless life, full of petty cares and petty interests. Born in a country town, where their parents were the magnates of a

dull and highly-respectable circle, they had had a martinet father and an invalid mother. Church work occupied the days of their youth. Few visitors called on them except elderly married people that they had known all their lives. The very curates in Pillsborough were married.

Colonel Semaphore, like many retired military men, had had strict principles, and had taught his daughters to be suspicious of everything that looked pleasant. Reading, except of devotional works, had not been encouraged in their home. Neither of the girls had been rebellious or particularly bright. They had tried to do their duty, and had found it monotonous. Seeing little of the world, and having no youthful society, they had grown elderly, prim, and formal without knowing it. Dreaming that their lives were all before them, they had waked up suddenly to find that life is youth, and that youth was over.

When their father had died at an advanced age, they had moved to London, feeling themselves most adventurous in making such a change. Years had hardened Miss Augusta and softened Miss Prudence. The former was the terror of the giddy at Beaconsfield

Gardens. Behind her back they made fun of her, and imitated her precise manner, but no one liked to come in collision with her. Miss Prudence, soft-hearted, soft-headed, and a little romantic, was the favourite. She was always ready to fall in love, but lacked opportunity. Her little airs, graces, and stratagems were as transparent as the day. She had difficulty in realising that she was grown-up, and would have called anyone who forced the truth on her "a horrid thing." Her strong-minded sister's dominion over her and her affairs tended to strengthen the delusion. Miss Semaphore managed the property and investments from which their income was derived, and seldom referred to Prudence in such matters, save when her signature was required.

Under all her severity, however, Miss Semaphore was by no means as rigid as she looked. Since coming to London, she had begun half-unconsciously to contrast the life she had led with the lives that young women about her led. Something stirred vaguely in her. She felt she had been defrauded of many things that were bright and pleasant and harmless in themselves. How matters in the past could

have been different she did not quite know, but she wished they had been different. All this was food to her desire to be young, to have her time over again, to enjoy herself just a little; and many of her disagreeable speeches might have been traced, by a student of human nature, to the bitterness towards others that sometimes wells in the heart of a lonely woman, making her feel, "I have had a bad time, why should not they?"

CHAPTER IV.

CASTLES IN THE AIR.

THAT evening, a little shamefacedly, Miss Semaphore told Prudence how she had answered the advertisement in *The Pictorial*, and received a reply from Mrs. Geldheraus.

Prudence was very much surprised and delighted, being in one of her rare spasms of remembrance that she no longer was a girl. She expressed herself as not only willing but ready and anxious to help in raising half of the money required, if the explorer's widow persisted in demanding a thousand pounds.

The sisters resolved, however, that Miss Augusta should endeavour to persuade her to accept £600, advancing to £800, and only paying the full sum if she remained obdurate. They decided, too, that despite her excellent references, it would be only judicious to post-date the cheque offered her, that they might have an opportunity of personally testing the

efficacy of the water before the draft was presented.

"She is very emphatic as to its genuineness," said Miss Semaphore; "but of course we do not know her, and she may not speak the truth. If she is an honest person—and certainly her references are all that can be desired—she will be quite willing to give us a chance of first finding out whether the water is really any good. A thousand pounds is a great deal of money, and we ought to run no risks."

"She says she is willing to give you a proof before purchase."

"I wonder what sort of proof?"

"Perhaps take some herself."

"I shouldn't like that. It would be a pity to waste any of it."

"I tell you what," said Miss Semaphore, after consideration, "I'll take Toutou and make her give him a little, just for an experiment. You see he would require much less than a human being, unless we had quite a young girl at hand, and on her it might not show. The poor darling is nearly fifteen. A mere sip should suffice for him."

"Perhaps it does not act on animals," suggested Miss Prudence.

"Why should it not? I once read something about the Water of Youth before in a book, and my belief is that they said it acted not only on people, but on insects, and on flowers; then why not on a dog?"

"Augusta dear! what will you do when you are young again?" asked Prudence softly.

"Oh, lots of things," said Miss Semaphore. "She did not like to own, even to her sister, the golden dreams that floated before her, and that she felt would be slightly ridiculous for a mature woman to confess.

"How old will you be?"

"Well, if the thing can be regulated, I should like to be about eight-and-twenty. You see that is considered young, but not too young. At eight-and-twenty a woman has sense, if ever she is going to have it, and is old enough then to know her own mind. Eight-and-twenty, and stay at it, is my idea."

"I should like to be eighteen," said Prudence.

"Too young. At eighteen one is generally either a fool or a pert Miss, and therefore unattractive to the best sort of men. However, I should not mind standing at twenty

if that is more convenient; but I must first find out how the water works."

"Just fancy you twenty and me eighteen! What young creatures we shall be! Oh, Augusta dear, do you know I feel quite frightened. What shall we do alone in London with no one to look after us?"

"Don't talk nonsense," said Miss Semaphore crossly. "We have only to consider our appearance. We shan't really be so ridiculously young, you know. I have no doubt we shall retain our present minds and experience, and be perfectly well able to manage for ourselves. Of course I shall make all enquiries to-morrow as to the effects and act accordingly. And for goodness sake, Prudie, if it is successful, don't keep remembering and talking about things that you could not possibly have seen or known if you were really only eighteen. That is just the sort of stupid thing you are likely to do. We must carefully look out the proper date and avoid remembering anything before that."

"Don't you think, dear," said Miss Prudence after a pause, "it will be well to go away from here before trying the experiment, away to some place where we are not known? It will be so awkward else."

"Yes," said Miss Semaphore reflectively, "I suppose it would be better; but we can consider that to-morrow, and now I am quite tired. It is time for us both to go to bed."

The sisters duly undressed and sought repose, but for a long time none came. The future was too full of bewildering possibilities. Each felt that she ought not to let her mind dwell on what might never come to pass. Mrs. Geldheraus might be an imposter, the Water of Youth a fraud. Still, supposing—there was no harm in supposing—supposing both were genuine, what a delightful prospect. To be at once young and experienced; could anything surpass it? Pitfalls might be avoided, amusement sought, courses of conduct followed after a fashion impossible to anyone who was eighteen or twenty for the first and only time in life. To get all one's chances over again, and to be assured of missing none of them, what luck! what unexampled good fortune!

Rosy visions of what they would do intruded on both of them, but we grieve to state that the wildest and flightiest of these visions were those of the elder Miss Semaphore. Were her eyes or those of her sister ever to light on these lines, were there a

chance that her acquaintances might see this veracious history, we should hesitate to set her fancies down, and this for two reasons. First, because Miss Semaphore herself would be confused and confounded to a painful degree, and this, as she is an excellent if somewhat hard woman, we have no wish to bring about. Second, because her sister and friends would write lengthy and indignant letters denying our statements, and citing her reputation for propriety, not to say rigidity, of conduct, and her severely religious tone, her want of sympathy with flightiness of any kind, as proof positive that she never could, would, or should have thought what we assert was in her mind.

Fortunately we need not fear either danger, and so in all truthfulness may state exactly what Miss Semaphore hoped to do with her renewed youth.

In her secret soul she had come to think that it was rather a pity she had not had a past to reflect upon. She had gathered no roses while she might. She had been only too well brought up, and she was determined, *en tout bien et en tout honneur* be it understood, to change all that. Someone has said, *il n'y a aucune austerité supérieure qui ne*

laisse pas quelques régrets. She would try the delights of an impeccable but more frivolous existence. She would be fascinating, coquettish, would avoid the misplaced gravity of her inexperienced youth, that had been not only afraid to enjoy itself, but had not known how to set about it, and had never got the chance.

As a preliminary to a dazzling career of conquest she decided that as soon as she was twenty she would take lessons in stage dancing and have her voice trained. Her father, or any of the worthy inhabitants of Pillsborough known to her, would have fainted at mention of the stage. Indeed, when young, Miss Semaphore shared their views; but she had been gradually coming round since she moved to London and found that even amongst the Philistines "the profession" was not in such bad odour as in the country. She felt it to be wicked but fascinating, believed she had genuine, if uncultivated, dramatic talent, and actually regretted that circumstances had kept her from cultivating it.

Now, she thought, she would not be stopped. This goes to prove that the most proper and severe persons often think a

course of action suitable for themselves which they would reprehend in others.

She argued, and with truth, that dangerous though the stage might be, she would have the experience of over fifty years to guide her, and would therefore be in a different position from other girls of twenty. In a lurid but delightful vision she saw herself gay, beautiful, famous, the delight of the stalls, the admiration of the gallery, the recipient of bouquets and *billets-doux*, her photograph in every shop window, offers of marriage coming by every post. At last she fell asleep, a beatific smile on her face.

She had quite forgotten how two or three years before she had brought pressure to bear on Mrs. Wilcox to give notice to a girl who had gone on the stage. Englishwomen are often shocked at others doing what they would do themselves, if they had the chance or the aptitude.

Miss Prudence meanwhile, in her little white room adjoining, thought kindly of Major Jones and yearningly of the Rev. Harry Lyndon, Curate of St. Botolph's, a consumptive young man of twenty-eight. She had always admired the Reverend Harry, though reluctantly admitting in her

heart of hearts that he was somewhat too young for her. But now what would there be to prevent their union? She fell into a train of reverie as to how the matter should be managed. Would she let him think she had always been no more than eighteen, or would she tell him of the wonderful water? Sleep came to her while deliberating.

CHAPTER V.

THE WATER OF YOUTH.

USUALLY the fond imaginations of the night wear a different aspect in the dawn; but the visions of the Misses Semaphore had lost none of their attractiveness by morning. Though, as before said, they tried now and then to check their super-abounding joy by the cold reflection that perhaps the explorer's widow was a humbug, and the Water of Youth liquid drawn from the nearest well, they had much ado to keep their excitement within bounds. Indeed their manner, despite all efforts, betrayed such suppressed exultation that Mr. Lorimer twice enquired of Major Jones if he thought "the old girls" were daft.

In the afternoon, punctually as the clock chimed a quarter to four, Miss Augusta, neatly dressed in black, and carrying Toutou in her arms, took her way to Gloucester Road

Station and booked to King's Cross, whence she took a cab to 194, Handel Street, W.C.

At about half-past six she returned. Prudence, who had been anxiously awaiting her, jumped up eagerly as she put her head in at the door and said, "Come into my room," in a voice full of mysteries.

Arrived in the centre of her own apartment Miss Semaphore turned round and faced her sister with much solemnity. She spoke no word and began slowly unfastening her bonnet strings. The air seemed big with fate.

"Well?" gasped Miss Prudence, "did you see her? Is it all right? What was she like?"

Miss Semaphore was in no haste to answer.

"The Water—tell me quick, was it any good. Did you buy it?"

"Look," said Miss Semaphore with a wave of her hand.

The eyes of Miss Prudence followed the gesture and fell on Toutou. But was it Toutou, this transformed dog? Old, shaky, querulous, rheumatic Toutou? She went nearer. There was a jolly, bright-eyed little beast, a mere puppy, slim, young, and frisky,

without a grey hair in his coat, who suddenly leaped on Prudence, barking and jumping round with lively manifestations of delight.

"She tested it on him," said Miss Augusta in a hollow voice, "and see the result. Can we doubt its miraculous power any longer?"

Miss Prudence sat down, looking quite pale and awe-stricken. This proof overwhelmed her.

"I am almost afraid of it," she gasped. "It does not seem right somehow, does it?"

"Oh, nonsense," exclaimed Miss Augusta pettishly. "Not right? Of course it is. For my part I think it a most glorious and beneficent discovery, and not calculated to harm anyone."

"Did she give much to Toutou? Do tell me all that happened. Was she nice?"

"Yes, she was very nice indeed, a well-bred, good-looking woman. The house was not much to look at, and the servant so untidy; but Mrs. Geldheraus told me she had only taken apartments there temporarily, as she is leaving almost immediately for the continent. Her boxes are packed."

"Does she look young herself?"

"About twenty-three; but she assures me she is sixty-four. I could not believe it. She

showed me her baptismal certificate. It was in German, so I could not make much out of it; but I saw the date eighteen hundred and thirty something quite plainly."

"Good gracious!"

"She was ever so civil, and insisted on giving me tea, but she would make no reduction in her terms. She said she knew she was asking what would be a good deal of money for an ordinary cosmetic, but for an absolute return to youth it was ridiculously little. Many dying millionaires or monarchs would be willing to give all their possessions for even a few drops of it."

"And then?"

"Then I spoke of requiring some proof that it was as efficacious as she said, so she offered to give me a little then and there. I was rather afraid to risk it, and said I'd prefer her to give some to Toutou first, but that she should not charge extra for that, as it was simply experimental. She agreed, and poured about half a tea-spoonful into a saucer, mixed some milk with it, and made Toutou drink it."

"And did he change at once?"

"No, he just came back in his slow, fat way, and lay down before the fire wheezing;

but she bade me watch him closely, and gradually I saw one by one the white patches dying out of his coat. Those that came last went first. Then I noticed that he breathed more freely, you know he was not asthmatic until two years ago. By degrees he grew thinner, his coat glossier, and his eyes less dim; then suddenly he sprang up and began dashing round the room in wild spirits, just as he used to. After this I could doubt no longer. Still, I told her our idea about post-dating the cheque, hoped she would not be offended and all that, but I had yet to prove if the Water would work as efficaciously on human beings as on an animal."

"And did she agree?"

"Well, she did not like the notion at all; said she had given me a positive demonstration, and so on, which ought to satisfy me, but I insisted. She then said she wanted the money pressingly and at once, that this was the only reason why she let us have it, and made what really was for her a bad bargain. The end of it was she agreed to my post-dating the cheque two days, if I promised in the interval to take a dose of the liquid that would satisfy me there was truth in what she said, so I consented to take just a little as a preliminary, to-night."

"Oh, — will you really? Don't you think it might be better to go away from here first and try it somewhere down in the country, as we agreed. They will be sure to remark so on any sudden change in you."

"I hope," said Miss Augusta with severity and dignity, "you do not mean to say I look so old that the taking off of a few years will make a very visible difference. I am quite aware I may not look as young as I once did, but that this is so very perceptible as you seem to imply, I really do not believe."

"Oh no! of course not. I did not exactly mean that," murmured Miss Prudence.

She had meant it, however, so found it difficult to explain away her words. One generally does find it difficult under such circumstances.

Miss Augusta, taking no further notice, proceeded to lock the precious bottle into a drawer, and had scarcely done so when the dinner bell rang.

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Prudence, "I must run and dress."

She hastily opened the door of her room, but the frisky Toutou was too quick for her. He darted forward and almost upset her in his eagerness to get out.

"How lively he is!" said Prudence in admiration. "Just like a puppy! How did you get him home if he danced about like this?"

"It was a troublesome business I assure you," answered Miss Augusta, who was too much interested and excited to sulk long with her sister. "He jumped out of my arms and frisked up and down the carriage in the liveliest way, so that I had the greatest difficulty in catching him again. He was in the wildest state of delight you can imagine, barked and leaped on all the passengers, just fancy, and he has been so rheumatic for years! I could scarcely hold him under my cloak. He sprang out of my arms once and very nearly broke the bottle I was carrying."

"How dreadful! What on earth should we have done if he had smashed it."

"Well, fortunately he didn't," said Miss Augusta shortly, refusing to contemplate such a calamity.

CHAPTER VI.

AN ACCIDENT AND ITS RESULTS.

With ill-concealed impatience did Miss Semaphore await her usual hour for retiring. With a sense of agreeable expectancy did she at last seat herself in her room before the looking-glass and proceed to brush out her scanty tresses. In the open drawer of the table reposed the abundant coils that graced by day the back of her head. As she brushed, she reflected that expensive though the Water of Youth undoubtedly was, it would at any rate spare her buying "Jetoline," her favourite dye, for many years to come. Women, guilty of a great extravagance, always find comfort in meditating small economies.

Her thoughts next turned to Toutou, and his marvellous recovery of vigour and gaiety. She wondered if her spirits would become

as light as his. As a girl she had not been particularly lively, but she hoped in her second girlhood her sprightlier and more freakish qualities might develop.

While thus reflecting, her door opened, and in came Miss Prudence to bid her good-night. Prudence, as we have said, was a large, soft woman, whose kindly, if feeble, nature and unruffled temper tended to preserve her youthful roundness. In her white combing jacket, her cheeks flushed, and her still abundant nut-brown hair falling on her shoulders, she seemed to her sister to look particularly young. To be sure, there was ten years difference or more in their ages, and Miss Semaphore was always accustomed to look on Prudence as a mere girl, but even allowing for this, to-night she might have passed for thirty.

"I think, dear," she said, "you really ought to put off that dose for a day or two. We might go to Ramsgate to-morrow and engage apartments, then, if you liked, we need not return here. I could come back and fetch the luggage, if you gave Mrs. Wilcox a week's notice; she would never suspect anything. We can pretend we want change of air."

"I do wish you were not so silly, Prudence," said Miss Semaphore with acerbity. "Do you forget that I post-dated the cheque for that woman to allow of my experimenting to-night, and she wants the money immediately. Anyone but you would see that once she has cashed it, we cannot get it back, whether the Water proves to be any good or not. It is essential to test it at once, and stop payment of the draft, if necessary."

"But they talk so here, I am afraid—"

"Well, really you are very rude. This is the second time you have said something like that. To hear your tone one might think I was a hundred at least. Oh! I know very well what you mean. It is all part of your ridiculous fussiness. It will make very little difference. The dose is one table-spoonful for every ten years, and having reached the proper age, a tea-spoonful at intervals keeps one at it. Now to-night I shall take very, very little, just enough to take off a year or two, so you may make yourself quite easy. No one will see any difference."

"I wonder if it tastes bad," said Prudence, after a short silence.

"Not at all," said Miss Semaphore more

graciously, "I have already dipped my finger in and laid a drop upon my tongue, and it tasted just like common water."

"There can be no doubt but that it is real?"

"Look at Toutou," was the convincing answer.

"Do you know I'm a little bit afraid of it," said Miss Prudence. "I wonder how it will feel, will it make one very queer or not. Don't think me selfish, Augusta, but I'm glad you are going to try it first, you have so much more courage than I."

Miss Semaphore merely grunted in reply.

"Where is the bottle, Augusta?"

"In my drawer."

"It does not hold so very much," said Prudence, meditatively lifting the bottle to the light.

"It does not, and oh! of course I shall require more than you, being older."

"But I paid for half," said Prudence mildly.

"Even so, it is quite fair. Less than half will have as much effect on you as the rest on me. We shall then be both of an age, and that will be much pleasanter. Don't you think so?"

"Ye—es," answered Prudence doubtfully, "it will be a little strange. But do as you wish about it, Augusta; you know best. By the way, did you remark that the bottle is cracked?"

"Cracked? No!" cried Miss Semaphore with a little shriek of dismay, and rushing to her sister's side.

Cracked it undoubtedly was.

"It must have been Toutou in the train," she gasped. "I was afraid of it at the time. Oh! the naughty, naughty dog. Do be careful, Prudence. Put it down softly. She said it was to be kept carefully corked."

"Oh, the crack is very slight; it does not matter," said Miss Prudence, as she obeyed. "Toutou, my precious," to the tricksy little dog that was now rolling on the floor, playing with the fringe of the curtains, and trying many long-forgotten games. "Toutou, you nearly did serious damage to your missus's property, naughty ducksie wucksie."

Toutou rushed at her with enthusiasm, and was with difficulty persuaded to enter his basket. Then Miss Prudence, with a portentous yawn, bade her sister good-night, and opened the door into the adjoining room.

Left alone, Miss Semaphore slowly divested herself of her wearing apparel, donned her night-gear, and tied on the night-cap of her youth, adhered to despite change of fashion. Notwithstanding the confidence of her manner to her sister, she was secretly a little nervous, now that she was actually to make the experiment. Her spirits went up and down like a see-saw. At one moment she saw herself surrounded by admirers, singing, dancing, with fresh, unwrinkled complexion, bright colour, dark curly hair innocent of "Jetoline." A ravishing picture. Again she felt like a patient at a dentist's about to take gas for the first time. What would it be like. Oh, if only Toutou, if only anyone who had tried it could tell her exactly how it felt. Would she lose consciousness or feel pain? Might it not possibly kill her? By this time she had worked herself to a state of intolerable nervousness. She got into bed, and, sitting up, hugging the precious bottle in one hand, and a tea-spoon in the other, tried to decide whether she would actually make the experiment or not. By her bed, within easy reach, burned a gas jet, which she always turned out last thing, and a small table stood near, on which lay a book, a newspaper, a box of matches, and a glass.

"Just a very little," she murmured, "that can do no harm. Only make me a few years younger. She would never have ventured to give me anything dangerous or poisonous."

Her hands trembled.

Can one fancy the impatience of an old woman who had missed the joys of life, to be young? A woman with the means in her grasp? Miss Semaphore panted with excitement; her heart thumped like a steam hammer. Twice she took up the bottle from the table. Twice she laid it down again.

"Just a very little," ran her thoughts, "a few drops to see what it is like."

Alas for her nervousness! By some untoward movement the frill of her sleeve caught the bottle, and knocked it over. For one terrible moment she sat as if petrified, watching the Water of Youth flowing across the table, and dribbling on to the floor on the side farthest from her. Then, quick as lightning, she jumped out of her bed, got down on her knees, and received the little stream into her open mouth as the liquid gushed over the edge. That her position was undignified did not trouble her, did not even enter her mind. The overwhelming nature of the misfortune, and how to rectify it, as far as possible, alone

occupied her. The bottle had broken in half where it was cracked, so that the contents rushed out at once. She swallowed all that flowed freely, and, damming the rest with her finger, stood up. The Water was horribly wasted. Some had soaked into the carpet. The newspaper had received a certain amount, and this, owing to a lucky crease, formed a little pool on its surface. Now, for the first time, Miss Semaphore thought of her sister, whose money had been equally invested in the purchase. Should she call Prudence, tell her what had happened, and bid her drink the little that remained? The fear that there would not be enough for herself prevailed, and stifling the voice of conscience, Augusta gathered up the paper with delicate fingers, carefully made it into a sort of funnel, and drank off its contents. Then she sat down on the side of the bed, and considered her conduct with a certain amount of shame, not unmingled with alarm. So far, she felt nothing more than the sensation of having swallowed a quantity of cold water of peculiar flavour.

"After all," she said, to stifle her remorse, "there was scarcely sufficient to make one person young, not to speak of two, and I

wanted it much more than Prudence. Why, she does not want it at all! She looked quite a girl just now. Besides, there really was no time. Before I could have roused her and explained matters the water would have soaked through the paper. Of course I shall have to return her the money she advanced. I am quite willing to do that if she makes a fuss. Perhaps it's just as well I did not call her. She was frightened to-night at the idea of drinking it. I really think she would prefer not to have any."

Despite these powerful arguments Miss Semaphore felt rather mean as she crept once more between the sheets, and turned out the gas with a jerk. For a long time she lay wakeful, thinking of what the morrow might bring, of how she could tell Prudence there was no Water of Youth left for her, or of how she could best get away from Beaconsfield Gardens without being noticed, if she found herself only twenty, and other reflections of the same kind, until at last tired out by the excitements of the day she fell asleep.

CHAPTER VII.

PRUDENCE RECEIVES A SHOCK.

Miss Prudence Semaphore slept placidly. It was her nature to do everything as placidly as possible. Nightmares rarely visited her. When Miss Augusta was crosser than usual, or the latest man at 37, Beaconsfield Gardens, on whom she tried to fix her easy affections, showed that he had no thought of her, she sometimes wept herself to sleep. Seldom, however, did she experience the discomfort of a *nuit blanche*.

On this particular occasion she dreamt that she was flying through space to Florida in search of the Fountain of Youth. Suddenly her wings failed her. She fell like another Icarus down, down, down, awaking with a start and a stifled gasp. She sat bolt upright in bed, and tried to think where she was. The familiar room dimly seen, the light of the street lamps, filtering through

the Venetian blinds, the sound of passing cabs, a neighbouring clock chiming three, all reassured her.

With a sigh of relief she turned over to sleep again, when a weird wailing attracted her attention. Miss Prudence listened. Her heart beat fast. The wailing seemed close at hand. Did it come from above or below? Noises are proverbially difficult to locate. Miss Prudence subscribed to "Borderland," and a thousand unpleasant conjectures assailed her. There was something unearthly, she fancied, in the cry, and though she muttered "ridiculous," the exclamation did not entirely restore her presence of mind. So far, indeed, was the idea from being really ridiculous to her, that, as the sound continued to rise and fall feebly, Miss Prudence lay back in bed, and pulled the clothes over her head. She could not be happy thus, however. Half suffocated, she emerged from time to time to hear if it still continued. When at last it ceased, somewhat tranquillised by the silence, she pulled down the blankets and began to consider what the cause of disturbance could possibly be.

A solution flashed through her mind—the kitten! She remembered suddenly that Mrs.

Dumaresq had lately complained of a pet kitten that played about the house having strayed into her room, and been locked up accidentally in the wardrobe.

"The very thing! It must be the kitten," thought Miss Prudence.

The wail, after a short interval, was renewed, and this time Miss Prudence distinctly recognised the cry of a young cat.

Full of courage she jumped out of bed, struck a light, put on her dressing-gown and slippers, and began to search for pussy.

She tried the wardrobe, the chest of drawers, looked under the bed and up the chimney, but in vain. The creature was not to be found. As she passed the door communicating with her sister's room, it seemed to her that the sound came from there.

She opened the door softly, and shading the light with one hand, gently called "puss, puss, puss." Nothing came. The cry, however, sounded distinctly nearer, louder, and more human.

"Augusta! what is that noise? Augusta! are you awake?" said Miss Prudence with renewed alarm.

There was no answer but a prolonged

wail. Really frightened, Prudence advanced into the room, holding the candle above her head. All was as she had left it, except, except—Where was Augusta? The bed was empty. The room was empty. Filled with an indefinable terror, Prudence advanced to her sister's bedside. Oh! horror! Augusta was gone, and in her place lay—what? A little, shrivelled, red-faced baby, wailing feebly, a huge night-cap fallen back off its bald head, a woman's night-dress lying round it in folds a world too wide.

"My God!" exclaimed poor Prudence, "what on earth is this? Am I going mad? Where is Augusta?" Her distracted glance lighted on the broken bottle, and a sudden gleam of intelligence lit up her brain. "Are you Augusta?" she cried to the baby. The tearful baby seemed to make a desperate but ineffectual effort to speak. It appeared to be on the brink of convulsions. There was intelligence in its eye, however, and her worst fears confirmed, poor Prudence dropped the candlestick on her toes, and went into violent hysterics.

Fortunately for her, the room was at the end of a passage, removed from the other sleeping apartments by an intervening bath

room. Underneath it was the now empty drawing-room, while overhead reposed the deaf Mrs. Belcher. Thus and thus alone did her shrieks fail to rouse the household. Every now and then she made an effort at self-control, but again and again the grotesque horror of the situation overcame her.

It was dawn before she pulled herself together and faced her position. With reflection came a burst of anger most unusual to the placid woman.

"Augusta," she said sternly to the baby, which had ceased weeping, as if frightened at its sister's distress. "Augusta, do you understand me?"

The baby apparently tried to nod.

"Can't you speak?"

The baby shook its head.

"It is no use, I suppose, in that case, asking how this terrible misfortune has come about?"

The baby blinked speechlessly. It was not an engaging child. To Prudence, much as she loved her sister, it seemed strange and absolutely hateful.

"You little wretch!" she cried, over-mastered by her rising anger. "Don't you see

the horrible position you have placed us both in? You took too much. You must have been a nasty, greedy, selfish, foolish thing to have swallowed up all that water, or this would never have happened. Are you really my sister? How can I prove it? Who will believe me? Perhaps the next thing will be that I shall be hanged for having murdered her." At this thought Prudence was for a moment on the verge of fresh hysterics.

"What on earth am I to do? There you are, a baby to all intents and purposes. My good gracious! what on earth shall I do with you? I cannot keep you in this house. How can I explain? They won't believe me—why, I wouldn't believe it myself if anyone told me. How shall I account for your disappearance? and you can't even speak to back me up if I tell the truth. Not you! You'd see me hanged and never say a word" —which was unjust, considering poor Augusta was not able to speak. Lashing herself to fury, Prudence paced up and down the room, wringing her hands.

"'Augusta! I always was a good sister to you, and bore with your tempers, and divided everything with you; but now, you horrid,

selfish, ugly little thing, I declare I hate you. I'll just wrap you up in a shawl, and drop you somewhere. Oh, you lit—tle wr—r—retch, I should like to shake you."

Suiting the action to the word, Prudence pounced on the baby, and shook it till its big cap fell quite off, and its head wobbled.

Augusta was terrified, and began to howl lustily. She was so small, so helpless, that a certain revulsion of pity came over Prudence. She ceased shaking, and tried to soothe her.

"There now! there now!" she exclaimed, exactly as if speaking to a real baby, "don't cry. I'll see what can be done. I suppose you took an overdose. Will you try and put up your hand if you did?"

The baby put up its hand.

"Does it hurt? do you feel bad?"

The baby shook its bald head, and made an ineffectual attempt to demonstrate that its sufferings were chiefly mental.

"Now will you just be quiet and cease crying, and let me think it all over. Try to go to sleep if you can. Perhaps some of it may wear off, and you'll be bigger by and bye."

Tucking the baby up in bed, Prudence began restlessly to pace the room, pausing

now and again to look at the queer little creature that had plunged her into such unexpected difficulties. In despair she thrust her hands into her hair, and gnawed at her fingers. Finally she flung herself into a chair by the window, and, staring blankly into the street, tried to devise some means out of her dilemma. The more she thought of it, the more serious and unpleasant did it appear. How Augusta could have been so foolish as to finish the contents of the bottle, how the bottle itself came to be broken, she could only imagine. The result at any rate was sufficiently deplorable. Her sister had not stopped at eight-and-thirty, nor eight-and-twenty, nor even eighteen, as would have been natural and delightful, but had gone at a bound to about eight days old.

"What a mercy," thought Prudence, kind-hearted in the midst of her anger and perplexity, "what a mercy that there were not a few drops more, or what would have become of her!"

After long cogitation the lady who had hitherto been the younger Miss Semaphore rose, went into her own room, dressed, bathed her swollen eyelids, and smoothed her hair. Then she returned to her sister's bedside.

Augusta was wide awake, but she had ceased crying. It was only by her eyes, big with intelligence, and looking weird and uncanny in her ugly little red face, that Prudence saw reason still reigned within her diminished body, A "queer child," a "fairy changeling," an "elfish infant," would be the terms applied to Miss Semaphore by anyone not in the secret of her rejuvenescence.

"Augusta," said Prudence solemnly, "I have thought it all out. Immediately after breakfast I will go in search of this Mrs. Geldheraus, and see if she cannot provide you with some—some antidote for this horrible state of things. If she cannot, I don't know what will become of you. It is no use telling the truth to the people in this house. In the first place it would be a very disagreeable matter to go into, and make us seem very ridiculous In the second they would not believe me. My only chance, if I don't succeed in getting something to cure you, is to tell them to-day that you have had a letter summoning you to the country on important business. I shall make excuses later for your having had to hurry off to catch a train without saying good-bye to anyone. Meantime I must hide you here somewhere in this room

or in mine until to-night, and knowing how much depends on it, I do implore you to be quiet and not cry. If Mrs. Geldheraus fails me, I shall enquire everywhere for some good, kind woman who will take care of you till you grow a little older, for of course you must see how impossible it would be for me to go about with a baby of your age. This evening, after dinner, when it is dark, I will try to smuggle you out unobserved to the woman, if I can find one suitable, then give warning, and go to some quiet place where nobody knows us, and where I can perhaps have you back to live with me. Now what do you think of my plan? Do you like it?"

Augusta evidently did not, for she shook her head as vehemently as she could.

"Well," said Prudence crossly, "if you don't you needn't. I can think of nothing better, and you are not able to give me much help or advice. You have only yourself to thank for having brought all this trouble on us. I'm sure I never was so worried in my life."

Augusta was perforce silent, but her eyes followed every movement of her sister.

"Now," continued Prudence, as the breakfast gong sounded, "I must go downstairs.

I shall say you have had a bad night, and desire no breakfast. I shall lock the door of your room so that the housemaid may not come in, and shall bring you up a cup of milk. I suppose that is the proper thing for you. Can you eat anything solid?"

Augusta showed two rows of toothless gums. Milk evidently should be her diet.

"Well, for goodness' sake keep quiet. I will come back as soon as I possibly can," and with this farewell, Miss Prudence descended. Alas! poor woman, dark as were her forebodings, she little knew what was to be faced, nor how difficult she would find the execution of her simple and excellent plan for the temporary concealment of Augusta.

CHAPTER VIII.

A CAREER OF DECEPTION.

NEVER did a placid, good-natured woman, habitually truthful, unaccustomed to all save the shallowest of plots, unused to taking the initiative, and indeed, preferring to depend on the advice of others, find herself in a more unpleasant predicament than did Miss Prudence Semaphore. That her dilemma originated in no fault of her own, served in no wise to console her. To a certain extent she rose to the situation and decided, with a promptitude that for her was marvellous, on a course of action, but she longed for some friendly soul to whom she could tell her difficulties, and whose counsel she could seek. Happily, perhaps, for the keeping of her secret, she had to bear her own burden in silence, and take all the responsibility on her own weak shoulders.

A very pale and tremulous Miss Prudence

appeared at the breakfast table on the morning of the tragedy related in our last chapter.

"Dear, dear! How ill you look!" was the medical lady's cheerful greeting. "Have you had a bad night?"

Miss. Prudence admitted that she had.

"And your sister?—How late she is to-day. She is generally one of the first down."

"She is not very well this morning, and I persuaded her to stay in bed," said Prudence, colouring to the eyes, as she embarked on her career of falsehood.

"Very wise of you; she had much better breakfast in her room if she is feeling ill. There is some nice kedgeree she might like."

"Thank you," said Prudence with embarrassment. "Do not mind it. She told me she would take no breakfast, but I said I would bring her up a cup of milk and make her drink it."

"One of her bilious attacks, no doubt, since she refuses to eat," said the medical lady.

"Yes, yes," assented Miss Prudence eagerly. "That is what it is—a bad bilious attack."

"Do you think then," asked the medical

lady severely, "that it is wise of you to give her milk?"

"Oh, yes!" said poor Miss Prudence "She likes it—it is good for her—she takes nothing else."

"Indeed!" said the medical lady, helping herself to potted sardines. "That is very singular for a bilious subject, but no doubt you know best."

"Does Miss Semaphore often suffer from these unpleasant attacks?" asked Mrs. Whitley.

"No," said Prudence. "Never—that is to say—yes—frequently."

Mrs. Whitley looked astonished, as well she might, and Prudence, to avoid further cross-examination, began to read the paper upside down. The paper, unfortunately, belonged to Mr. Lorimer, and was one of the points whereon he was touchy. He could not bear anyone to look at it unless specially invited thereto by him. Presently the abstracted Prudence became aware that an angry altercation was in progress, between her neighbour and Müller.

"Müller!" he growled.

"Blease?" said Müller enquiringly.

"Where the devil have you put *The Standard?*'.

Mrs. Whitley prepared to look shocked at such language, but first glanced at Mrs. Dumaresq, from whom she took her cue. Mrs. Dumaresq, however, only smiled slightly.

"I left it dere," said Müller.

"But you didn't. If you had it would be here now."

"I—I believe I have it," stammered Prudence, suddenly awaking to what was going on.

"Oh, you have, have you?" said Mr. Lorimer crossly, taking it without a word of apology from her outstretched hand. "I do not provide papers for the benefit of this establishment."

"It is more blessed to give than to receive," put in Mrs. Whitley archly, with the sweet smile of the peacemaker.

"No doubt, ma'am," replied Mr. Lorimer savagely, "but it's a good deal more expensive," and he became absorbed in the columns of his oracle.

The ladies exchanged glances. The subject of Mr. Lorimer and his paper was a standing joke in the house, and Mrs. Whitley whispered to Prudence not to mind him, it was "only his way." Prudence, indeed, poor woman, was too much occupied with her own

troubles to take the young man's rudeness to heart, and after passing a few minutes in breaking her toast and sipping her tea, she felt justified in rising from table. She took a cup of milk with her and departed, watched by the medical lady, who shook her head.

The younger Miss Semaphore found her sister rolling her eyes in the most alarming fashion.

"What is the matter?" she asked, but Augusta of course was unable to tell. She fixed an angry glance, however, on the door of her sister's room and nodded towards it. Something in that direction was evidently the cause of her displeasure. As a matter of fact she had had a fright. While Prudence was downstairs, one of the housemaids, not knowing that anyone was there, made an attempt to get in, and as the lock on that particular door was shaky, Miss Semaphore expected every moment to see the girl enter the room. She could not explain this, so had to content herself with looking cross.

Prudence pulled the curtains, moved a number of things, saying each time, "Is it this?" "Is it that?" but failing naturally, to get a reply, she gave up the attempt and began to feed her sister. The operation was not successful.

Prudence proved but an awkward nurse. Augusta being, in body at least, practically but eight days old, choked, cried, and had to be patted on the back when she got too large a spoonful of milk. Half the contents of the cup went the wrong way. Augusta kicked, and spilt a portion on the carpet, but at last the meal was got through, though with little satisfaction to either sister.

"Now," said Prudence, as she finished her task, "I shall have to leave you alone for some time."

Augusta evidently disliked the idea of being left alone, for she immediately screwed up her face into contortions that announced an outburst of weeping.

"Oh, stop! do stop!" cried her sister exasperated, "they are sure to hear you if you cry. How inconsiderate you are! For goodness sake do be quiet and think a little of someone beside yourself. What else am I to do? It is all very well for you to object, but something must be done and done quickly, and as you cannot help me, I must decide for myself. I shall go at once to Mrs. Geldheraus and implore of her to give me something to cure you. She is sure to know what should be done,

and in the meantime I beg of you keep quiet, or Mary will hear you in the corridor. I shall tell her you are ill and on no account to be disturbed."

Augusta apparently listened to reason, for gradually her features relaxed and she ceased whimpering. Prudence put on her bonnet, veil, and mantle, tucked in the elderly infant, locked the doors carefully, warned Mary, and started off to find the explorer's widow.

The poor lady's mind was a chaos of conflicting thought and emotions as she wound her way through the Bloomsbury squares to Handel Street. No. 194 was gaunt and dingy. Over the door hung a framed card, bearing the legend, "Apartments," and on the sill of the dining-room window sat a black cat, lazily washing herself in the sun. In answer to repeated ringing, a dirty servant, with her cap all to one side, opened the door.

"Mrs. Geldheraus," she said, "she ain't here. Left this morning first thing, she did. Had a tellygram last night to hurry up."

Prudence never knew till that moment when her heart sank heavy as lead, how hope had buoyed her up.

"Where has she gone to?" she asked feebly. "Will she return?

"She's gone to Paris," said the maid, "an' I don't think she's a-coming back."

"Can you give me her address in Paris?"

"She wrote something out for missus, as to where letters was to be sent for her. If you'll step in an' wait a bit, mum, I'll see if I can get it for you. I can't read them furrin names."

Prudence stepped into the stuffy hall and waited.

Presently the maid returned with a half-sheet of note-paper, on which only the words "Poste Restante, Paris," were written. Bitterly disappointed the younger Miss Semaphore turned away.

"Even if I write to her," she said to herself, "it will mean a couple of days delay at the very least, and great Heaven! what should I do if anyone saw Augusta in the meantime? I must see to some place for her at once, and get her out of that house."

The very weakest women, when forced into a position of danger and responsibility, will act with a certain energy, and will display a resourcefulness that surprises no one more than it surprises themselves. Necessity is a hard taskmaster, who makes people capable of feats hitherto undreamt of by them.

Miss Semaphore's first move, therefore, was to find a small stationer's shop, where she obtained permission to write a letter. The letter was to Mrs. Geldheraus, marked "Urgent and Private." In it she detailed the horrible accident that had happened to her sister, and implored the explorer's widow to write or wire particulars of an antidote, if there was one, and in all cases to let her know exactly how the Water of Youth worked, and how long its effects were likely to last in such a case. She said, "You can imagine the dreadful position in which I am placed. My sister is altered out of knowledge; though she still seems, so far as I can judge, to preserve her memory and understanding, she cannot speak. You have left England, and the story sounds so improbable, that I cannot hope any of our friends would believe me if I told them the truth. I live in terror of my sister being discovered under her present aspect, so implore you to lose no time in relieving my suspense."

This she posted, but the most gloomy apprehensions assailed her.

"Mrs. Geldheraus may not call for letters for a week," she reflected, "and where on

earth can I hide Augusta? Who will take her? What story can I tell about her? It is distracting!"

By degrees she grew a little calmer. It would not be difficult, she hoped, to find some decent woman to mind her sister at her own home. Surely there were plenty of people in London willing to take care of a child. She would enquire. Meantime it struck her that Augusta looked ridiculous in her great night-dress and cap, so that before placing her in the hands of any stranger it would be necessary to buy her a complete set of baby linen.

To this end, having walked to the top of Tottenham Court Road she hailed a hansom, and drove to Westbourne Grove.

CHAPTER IX.

A PROMISING ADVERTISEMENT.

With no little diffidence did Miss Prudence Semaphore, a woman quite unused to the ways and wants of babies, present herself at the special counter in Whiteley's devoted to their needs, and falter out that she required a complete outfit for an infant. The attendant who waited on her considered that she had a most extraordinary customer to deal with, for the lady neither knew the age of the child nor the names and quantities of the needful garments, and when she finally took everything that was suggested to her, she required instruction as to how and in what order the various articles were to be put on. Having requested that a parcel of the most indispensable objects should be given to her, and that the remainder should be delivered that afternoon at 37, Beaconsfield Gardens,

the next step for Miss Prudence was to find a nurse who would undertake the care of Augusta. This at once landed her in difficulties. She first thought of appealing to the shop-woman, but the manner of that superior young person was so lofty that the words died on Miss Semaphore's lips. The Universal Provider certainly did not provide homes for infants. Prudence dared not ask any of her acquaintances as to a suitable person, yet could not imagine how else she was to get one. She could not seize the first respectable-looking body that passed by and ask her would she mind an infant. Like a woman with a guilty secret she wandered up and down the Grove, looking vaguely into shop windows but seeing nothing, and wondering all the time what she was to do. It seemed almost as desperate an undertaking to get rid of a baby as to get rid of a corpse.

At last the idea struck her that the laundress who washed for herself and her sister might know of someone suitable. Mrs. Robbins lived at Hammersmith, and Miss Prudence, hailing an omnibus going in that direction, got in. If Mrs. Robbins could not help her, what was she to do? As she

journeyed on, however, doubts as to the wisdom of consulting Mrs. Robbins assailed her. She would put herself, to a certain extent, in the woman's power, and the civilest of laundresses might not be pleasant as a *confidante.* Again, Mrs. Robbins might gossip with the servants at Beaconsfield Gardens, and as Miss Semaphore's one aim was to avoid the tongues of her fellow-boarders, she felt the risk to be too great.

Accordingly, though she had paid her fare to Hammersmith Broadway, she presently signalled to the conductor to set her down.

"We ain't there yet, mum," said that functionary. "You sed 'Ammersmith."

"No matter, no matter," answered Miss Prudence, "I wish to be set down here."

The man obeyed, and the lady was left standing on the pathway, considering what she should do next.

Mechanically she turned down a side street, and noticed at the door of a clean-looking house a chubby-faced, bright young woman, nursing a baby. Summoning up all her courage, Miss Semaphore approached her, and with unconscious diplomacy remarked,

"What a very fine child! Is it yours?"

"Yes 'm," replied the beaming mother. "My third 'e is, just six months old, bless 'is little 'eart; but 'e ain't looking well now, not 'e, 'e's teething, and that do so pull a hinfant down."

"He is a beauty," said Miss Prudence. "Should you be disposed to undertake the care of another child—a—a little younger, if you were well paid for it?"

"No 'm, that I shouldn't," said the young woman promptly. "My own three is enough for me, an' my old man I know he wouldn't like it, nohow."

"Could you recommend any careful, respectable woman who would?"

"I can't say as I do. Ain't the child's parents living, or is it yer own?"

"Oh, no!" said Miss Prudence, blushing to the eyes, "the child is an orphan."

"Poor little thing. Sorry I carn't 'elp you, 'm, but I don't know a suitable party."

A second application, this to a decent-looking body who was sweeping out a particularly dingy chapel, met with no better success.

A third woman did know of someone whose child had died and who might, perhaps, be willing to care for a baby, but on looking for the street where the person was said to

live, Miss Semaphore found that some mistake had been made in the address, and that no one knew of any such place. The people she asked made various suggestions as to where she should go, and she tried them all without result.

Discouraged by so many failures, tired and weak from want of food, the spirits of our poor Prudence sank to zero.

"What am I to do with her?" she asked, as if calling creation to witness her perplexity "Shall I find no one to take her?"

While in this disturbed frame of mind she walked meditatively onward, and stopped before a little newspaper and tobacco shop, reading the posters displayed outside, without understanding a word. Suddenly, amidst the tumult of her thoughts, she noticed that a pleasant-looking woman was sitting behind the counter reading and knitting. This stranger might help her. She entered, and having selected and paid for a *Graphic*, and read some remarks on the weather, said as if though an after-thought,

"By the way, do you know of any respectable woman that would take care of a baby?"

"Do you mean a nurse to live indoors,

ma'am, or a person to take care of the child at her own home?"

"I mean someone who would take a baby to live with her, and show it every kindness."

"That's not so easy to get, ma'am, and I can't say as I do know anyone I could recommend." Then, with a sharp glance, "May I arsk if the child is your own?"

"Oh dear, no!" cried Miss Prudence hastily. "It is my sister."

"Your sister's—a— And is your sister dead?"

"Dead! of course not. Why should I want a home for her if she were?"

"Beg pardon, ma'am, I didn't understand you wanted a home for the lady too, I thought as you said only for the baby."

"It *is* only for the baby," replied Prudence in confusion. "The baby is my sister."

"Your sister?" repeated the woman, surprised. "Your sister a baby?"

"Yes," answered Prudence, rather nettled. "My sister is a baby, there is nothing so wonderful in that I hope."

The woman looked as if she would like to ask some further questions, but checked herself and said,

"Oh, of course not. It's none of my

business, anyhow—and by the way I've just remembered something that might do if I can find it. About six months ago one of my customers arsked me to put up a bill in the window, wishing for to adopt a child, an' I did, but nothink came of it, and so I took it down after a month or two and put it aside somewhere. If I could find it, it might be somethink like you want."

"Pray do look for it. I shall be greatly obliged."

After some rummaging in various drawers and boxes, and calling upstairs to an invisible "'Lizer," the document, dirty and fly-stained, was found under a heap of old newspapers and handed to Prudence.

It read :—

"A respectable married woman, having no children of her own, would like to adopt or mind a healthy baby. Comfortable home. Care and affection of a mother guaranteed. Premium required. Address, by letter only, X. Y. Z., 42, Plummer's Cottages, Barker's Rents, Elm Lane."

Miss Prudence was enchanted.

"The very thing!" she exclaimed. "'Comfortable home.' 'Care and affection of a mother guaranteed.' Just what I want."

She copied the address, thanked the shop-woman profusely, and gave her half-a-crown for her trouble. Lunch hour at Beaconsfield Gardens was long past, so Prudence ate a bun, drank a glass of milk, and thought she had done a good morning's work.

The chief drawback was that she should now have to keep Augusta concealed for at least another day, instead of being able to smuggle her out of the house that night as she had hoped. It was a risk, but she had no alternative, much as she dreaded the secret in some way getting out. She found Augusta sleeping. A vague hope had sprung up in her breast that on her return she might discover her sister in her normal condition, and be able to look back on the events of the night as a bad dream. She was doomed to disappointment. It was all but too real. Without disturbing the infant, at whom she gazed for a time with mingled pity and aversion, she sat down and wrote at once to X. Y. Z., asking that respectable married woman if she were still willing to undertake the care of a baby, and if she would write or wire by return, appointing a place of meeting, as there was a little baby girl she would like to entrust to her motherly care.

Though she was unwilling that the child should be permanently adopted, she felt sure that some mutually satisfactory arrangement might be entered into. She wound up, "Pray write or telegraph at once without fail, as the case is urgent, and I will pay you handsomely for your trouble." This she signed with initials, gave the address of a neighbouring stationer's, where letters were received at a penny each, and posted it herself.

CHAPTER X.

IN WHICH MISS PRUDENCE EXPLAINS MATTERS.

THE next thing Miss Prudence felt she should do was to see Mrs. Wilcox and prepare her for hearing at any time that Augusta had left suddenly. Mrs. Wilcox sat in the little room she called her Office, where she received callers on business, made up her books, wrote letters, and otherwise employed herself.

"I am so sorry to hear your sister is not well," she said as Prudence entered. "I hope she feels better now."

"Not much, I am afraid," said Prudence.

"Will she be able to come down to tea?"

"I—I fear not."

"Then she is worse than I thought. I had better go and see her. Will you tell her I will come up presently?"

"Oh, thanks, but I don't think it would be advisable to disturb her just now. She prefers keeping quite quiet. You see this is—is a very severe attack. I never saw her quite like this before."

"Good gracious! You don't say she is as ill as all that?" cried Mrs. Wilcox, whose one weakness was a frantic fear of contagious maladies. "You don't think it can be anything serious coming on? They say there is a lot of fever and diphtheria about. Excuse my asking, Miss Prudence, but what are her symptoms? We must take precautions in a house like this."

"Her symptoms? Oh, her symptoms—her symptoms are rather peculiar."

"Indeed. Head-ache? Sore throat? Pain in the back?"

"No, no. Nothing like that. I—am sure it is nothing infectious."

"I hope not, but please tell me what does she complain of?"

"A—a sort of shrinking feeling?"

"Oh! a sinking feeling. No doubt the stomach is out of order. She has taken something that disagreed with her."

"I feel sure she has."

"But if there is nothing more serious than

this feeling of sinking, she will probably be able to come down to dinner. Meals in the bedrooms you know are such a trouble to the servants."

"I don't think she can come down. She is far too ill. She won't take any dinner. Just a glass of milk."

"But, Miss Prudence, I fear she must really have some other symptoms that you are keeping back from me. Do pray tell me frankly what else you see amiss with her."

"Well," said the badgered Prudence, "I have noticed a—a—a sort of childishness about her."

"Good Heavens! You don't say so! She is not—not delirious? Not wandering in her mind, is she?"

"No, no. She is very silent—on the contrary—has not spoken to me at all."

"But you said she was childish."

"I did not mean in that way—it is difficult to explain."

"It seems to be," said Mrs. Wilcox drily, "in your place I should have Doctor Creedy in at once. You know, Miss Semaphore, we must take precautions—we must take precautions—and if your sister has any symptoms

betokening infectious disease, I lay it on you as a matter of conscience to tell me about it at once, that her removal may be arranged for before it is too late."

"You are mistaken, indeed, you are mistaken, Mrs. Wilcox," urged poor Miss Prudence, with tears in her eyes. "There is no possible need for alarm. It really is nothing catching. I only wish it were."

"I'm sure I don't," interjected Mrs. Wilcox, more than ever amazed by the confusion of Prudence.

"Well, I don't exactly mean that, but there is no earthly cause for alarm on your part. If Augusta had anything serious the matter with her, anything in that way, I'd be the very first to tell you, and to send for the doctor, but she hasn't. She just is—is—not quite herself—has very little appetite and so on—I—I saw a great change in her appearance this morning, and it alarmed me. I think, and she agrees with me—indeed this is what I came to say, that if she went away to-morrow or next day for change of air, and meantime kept very quiet, was not disturbed in any way or by anyone, she would soon be all right."

"You know best," said Mrs. Wilcox, "but

don't you really think it would be well for me to go up and see her presently? I would not disturb her in the least."

"Thanks, no. I should say it would be better not. She does not like being roused in any way. She is so silent; in fact," with a flash of inspiration, "she has completely lost her voice. Then the shrinking—I mean, of course, as you say, the sinking—is so painful."

"Oh, very well," said Mrs. Wilcox offended, "I do not want to press the matter. But I think she had better have something to eat. What shall it be? A glass of milk is nothing."

"She cares for nothing else."

"But don't you think she ought to have some beef-tea and a little dry toast? That cannot possibly harm her."

"Very well. Anything you like," said Prudence desperately, for she felt she could stand no more questioning, and gladly made her escape to her own room under cover of Mrs. Wilcox's directions to the cook on behalf of the supposed invalid.

Mary, the housemaid, presently brought up a tray and tried the handle of Augusta's door, only to find it locked. Prudence

peeped out of her apartment and bade the girl lay the tray on the mat, promising to take it in presently. At this, Mary, who did not like the Misses Semaphore, flounced angrily downstairs, muttering, "Some people is so mystearyous."

CHAPTER XI.

THE MEDICAL LADY INTERVENES.

MISS PRUDENCE did not appear at afternoon tea, so the symptoms of her sister, her refusal, or, at least, disinclination to call in a doctor, her extraordinary confusion and contradictory statements, as detailed by Mrs. Wilcox, were canvassed with much freedom by the boarders present. Mrs. Wilcox discreetly abstained from mentioning her suspicions, or using the ugly word "infection," but she privately requested the medical lady to visit the invalid, and make a truthful report as to her condition.

The medical lady was a woman who had no weakness about her. She always recommended drastic remedies, and applied them if possible. She professed to enjoy her cold tub in the iciest weather. Nothing would persuade her that anyone who paled or

fainted at the sight of blood or of ghastly accidents, or corpses, or took no delight in anatomical specimens in bottles, was not an affected creature. Mice she herself disliked, but that, she argued, was different. She administered physic with pleasure, and the nastier it was, and the more the ridiculous patient disliked it, the more she insisted on giving it as prescribed. She liked to take command of a sick-room as an admiral of his quarter deck, putting the invalid's relatives to one side and making them feel they were intruders. As she assured them that responsibility for the death of the person afflicted would lie at their door if they resisted, they were generally afraid to turn her out, while the invalid was unable. She inspired Miss Prudence with terror, which expressed itself in slavish deference and humility, for, conscious of her own weakness, she felt, and with justice, that the medical lady despised her.

The younger Miss Semaphore was sitting solitary in her own room by the window, absorbed in anxious thought. The door of communication with her sister's apartment stood open, so that she commanded a view of the bed and of the infant Augusta. Suddenly

she started to her feet. Someone had knocked sharply at Augusta's door, and immediately turned the handle. Finding it resisted efforts to open it, the voice of the medical lady was heard in the corridor, saying sweetly, "My dear Miss Semaphore, will you not let me in? I have come to enquire how you are."

Augusta heard, and, forgetful of her voiceless condition, evidently made a desperate effort to summon Prudence, for she gave a feeble whimper.

"Hush! Do be quiet," cried Prudence in a frightened undertone. Then opening her own door, she looked out into the corridor. The medical lady was discovered kneeling on the mat and trying to peep through the keyhole. She started into an erect position with marvellous celerity.

"Do you want anything, Miss Lord," asked Prudence timidly, yet with something of resentment in her tone.

"Oh! your dear sister," said Miss Lord, slightly embarrassed, "I just wanted to see her, but somehow I cannot open the door. I thought that possibly she might be glad of my services."

"The door is locked," answered Prudence.

"My sister is not very well, and does not wish to be disturbed. She is trying to sleep."

"But she will see me, my dear Miss Semaphore. I may be able to advise some course of treatment that will do her good."

"Thank you, Miss Lord. she is asleep just now, and I do not think would care to see anyone."

"Oh, but I'll not disturb her. I'll just have a look at her in order to reassure you. You must be uneasy about her. I hear she is very ill."

As she spoke the medical lady edged up to Prudence.

"Thank you; you are extremely kind, but I am really not so anxious. She is not so very ill, she is somewhat better now."

"But I hear that you told Mrs. Wilcox after lunch that she was very ill indeed. This is a sudden change."

"No—yes—not *very* ill. She'll be better to-morrow."

"But I think, my dear Miss Semaphore, you really ought to let me see her. As you decline to send for a doctor, someone with the requisite medical knowledge should be in

attendance; and, forgive me for saying so, I do not think you are a very competent nurse. Besides, we owe it to Mrs. Wilcox to make sure your sister is not threatened with anything contagious."

All this time the resolute medical lady had, step by step, moved Prudence back, so that they both stood within her room. Her eye caught the open door.

"Do let me in," said the medical lady. "I advise it in your own interests. Let me have a peep at her, and if, as you say, she is better and sleeping, I shall be able to reassure Mrs. Wilcox and the others. Miss Belcher and Mrs. Dumaresq are so terribly afraid of anything infectious, that at tea they were talking of leaving."

"No," said Prudence, driven into a corner, "you shall not see her, Miss Lord. She is getting on all right, and does not want to see anyone."

"Shan't I?" suddenly ejaculated the medical lady; and before Prudence knew what she intended, she made a dash at the open door leading to Augusta's room. Prudence, however, was too quick for her. She reached it first, pulled it to, locked it, for the key fortunately was on her side, and, putting

her back to it, stood flushed, panting, and breathless, facing Miss Lord.

"How dare you!" she cried, stung out of her ordinary meekness. "This is outrageous. Leave my room at once; no one asked you to come here."

Miss Lord was hateful to look upon at that moment. If a soft featherbed had risen up and struck her in the face, she could scarcely have been more surprised.

"Ha, ha!" she said menacingly, "so there is a mystery here!"

"Will you go, please?"

"Oh yes, I'll go."

She stopped at the outer door.

"You had better take care, Miss Prudence Semaphore," with a withering emphasis on the "Prudence." "Perhaps I know more than you think. You may be sorry for this yet."

With these vague but direful words she disappeared, leaving Prudence collapsed, her knees trembling under her, her mind filled with the gloomiest forebodings, and an undefined terror in her breast as to what Miss Lord might know.

How she got through the rest of that dreadful day Prudence never remembered.

. . .

She dreaded the ordeal of dinner; but though the medical lady had evidently told her story, and there was an atmosphere of disquiet, no direct questions were asked, so the meal passed off better than she had expected. Still, the marked avoidance of the subject of her sister's illness was a new source of uneasiness.

"I'm sure they think she has cholera or leprosy, or that I am poisoning her," mused Prudence dolefully, as she crumbled her bread, and a dull resentment against Augusta, who had involved her in all this trouble and deceit, smouldered in her breast.

There was an added loftiness in Mrs. Dumaresq's manner which showed that Miss Semaphore had somehow incurred her displeasure, while Mrs. Whitley omitted to pass her the salt and pepper, which, with fussy officiousness, she presented to everyone else.

Good-natured Miss Belcher alone, forgetting Toutou and Miss Augusta's bad temper, came up to her as the ladies filed out of the dining-room and said,

"I hope your sister is better."

"Yes, thank you," replied Prudence faintly.

"How tired and pale you look. I do believe you are fagged out nursing her. Do let me help, if I can be of any use to you."

"You cannot help me, thank you," said Prudence, with a sudden impulse to kiss her. "She does not like anyone else to come near her."

"Cross, tyrannical old thing," thought little Miss Belcher, who pitied Prudence for the slavery to which she submitted from her sister.

"Well, cheer up, dear Miss Prudence," she said sympathetically. "I am glad she is better. Perhaps she may be all right to-morrow."

"I'm sure I hope so," answered the depressed Prudence, as she made her way to her own apartment. To-night she had no heart to enter the drawing-room and angle for a few words of conversation from Major Jones, round-eyed, stupid Mr. Batley, or gruff Mr. Lorimer, or to join the game of whist that so often resulted in personalities.

There was still a painful scene before her. She must tell her sister that Mrs. Geldheraus had left England, and that there was consequently no immediate hope of her resuming

her proper size. Ever since Augusta awoke and saw that her sister had returned, she had followed her movements with anxious and enquiring eyes; but Prudence determined to give her no information until night, when all the boarders were safely in bed, and when infantile cries were unlikely to reach them. Accordingly, having waited until one by one the residents at 37, Beaconsfield Gardens, had departed to their several rooms, and the house was wrapped in repose, Prudence stole into her sister's apartment and communicated the disastrous intelligence. She had reason to congratulate herself on the choice of so late an hour, for Augusta, despite prayers and remonstrances, took it very badly indeed. She sobbed, howled, kicked, balled her little red fists into her eyes, and in every way that her circumstances permitted expressed her sorrow, anger, and disappointment. In vain Prudence implored her to be quiet. Her overwhelming dismay apparently shut out all other thought, and it was only when her sister actually put a pillow over her head, to stifle her cries, that she consented to moderate the expression of her grief. Once she grew quieter, the tender-hearted Prudence took her up, kissed and tried to comfort

her, walking her up and down the room as if she were in reality the baby she seemed to be, and continued this soothing progress until Augusta wept herself to sleep in her arms.

CHAPTER XII.

"GOOD MRS. BROWN."

EARLY next morning Prudence carefully locked all the doors of her own room and of her sister's apartment and went round to the stationer's to see if a letter had come for her from X. Y. Z. With much relief she picked out, from a bundle of others, a missive addressed to P. S., and proceeded to read it. It was tolerably written and spelled, the paper was clean, and the communication was signed "Mrs. Brown." "Mrs. Brown" agreed to meet Prudence at nine o'clock that evening in the first-class waiting room at London Bridge Station, and had no doubt they would come to terms. "She was prepared," she said, "to take the pretty little dear and treat it with a mother's love," and regretted that she was unable to make an appointment earlier in the day "on account of family reasons."

Perilous as was the delay to Prudence, she was pleased with the letter. The writer, if not a person of culture, was evidently kind and respectable, so she resolved to be patient, and bear the strain of the situation for a few hours longer.

Her next move was to purchase a feeding bottle, for her previous efforts to make Augusta swallow milk had been singularly unsuccessful, and she was filled with uneasiness lest her sister might be starved to death. She then returned home, fed Augusta, washed her, and dressed her in the garments provided by Whiteley, and finally proceeded to explain to her the measures she had taken.

"I have told you already," she said, "that if you remained like this it would be impossible to keep you here. They all look suspiciously at me downstairs, and I really believe they think you have either got the plague, or else that I am slowly poisoning you. Mrs. Wilcox spoke to me again about getting a doctor, and I am afraid that at any moment she may come with one, and insist on his seeing you. Now, I have our good name to consider, and I know that if you are not sent away, and sent speedily, Miss Lord will be capable of

breaking in the door. Then, if you are discovered, we shall simply be lost. As for telling the truth, they wouldn't believe me if I swore to it. It is no use your objecting, Augusta, if you mean that squirm for an objection. You have got yourself and me into this hole, and the least you can do is to be quiet and help me to avoid scandal. There you go again. What on earth do you mean? If you want me to keep you here until Mrs. Geldheraus replies, it simply can't be done. She may not write for a week, and every moment I am running risk of discovery. No, I shall convey you away to-night, whatever happens. Every question asked about you sends my heart into my mouth. I have been making arrangements for your comfort. You are to go to a nice, respectable, married woman, who has no children of her own. She guarantees you a good home, with the care and affection of a mother. I have thought out everything. When you are gone, I shall send some of our boxes to Paddington Station as a blind. I had better stay on here for a week or a fortnight after you, just to disarm suspicion. By that time we shall know what Mrs. Geldheraus can do for you, and we must

shape our future actions accordingly. Gracious Heaven! if she says she can do nothing for you, what will become of us? I suppose I shall have to pretend you are dead, and rear you somewhere as my adopted daughter! It is a horrible position to be placed in. I am getting hardened to telling falsehoods to those people downstairs, and yet I tremble at the life of deceit I see before me. We shall have to avoid all our friends —everyone who has known us. If I were even sure you would gradually grow up as an ordinary baby does, I might look forward to your speaking in a year or so, and then you might advise me what to do, but if you remain always dumb, and always a baby——!"

Overcome by her troubles, and by the long vista of difficulties she saw opening before her, poor Prudence sobbed aloud.

There was much to be done, however, so she bathed her eyes, powdered her flushed cheeks, and proceeded to pack up such indispensable articles as would be needed by Augusta. She kept to her room as much as possible all day. At dinner she announced that her sister was better, and that she herself might possibly spend the evening with some friends, so requested that the front door

might be left unchained, to permit of her letting herself in with a latch-key that she borrowed from Major Jones. Nobody made any comment. The general opinion as to her treatment of her poor suffering sister, was too strong to admit of anything short of the whole truth being spoken.

Prudence, congratulating herself therefore on having acted so well, slipped upstairs and arrayed herself in a black hat, a thick veil, and a long cloak. Augusta she tucked up warmly in an old shawl, gave her her feeding bottle, and, having hidden her under the voluminous folds of the mantle, peeped cautiously out to make sure the coast was clear. Not a soul was in sight, so Prudence, with as guilty an air as if she were carrying off Mrs. Wilcox's silver, crept downstairs, opened the front door, and closed it softly behind her.

She scarcely breathed until she was clear of Beaconsfield Gardens, and so closely did she keep Augusta pressed to her bosom, that when she perceived what she was doing a spasm of terror shot through her.

"How quiet she is," she thought. "Perhaps I have smothered her."

A glance reassured her, and she sped

onwards. Suddenly her knees seemed to give way. Advancing towards her, but as yet unconscious of her presence, was old Major Jones, who had just stepped out of a tobacconist's shop, and was smoking a post-prandial cigar. Prudence darted across the road, turned down a side street, and terrified of meeting someone else who knew her, ran all the way to South Kensington Station.

There was no one in the first-class ladies' waiting-room at London Bridge Station when Prudence arrived with her charge, except an elderly person on guard in a battered black bonnet and a woollen crochet shoulder shawl. It wanted twenty minutes of the time fixed by Mrs. Brown for the meeting, so Prudence, feeling really weak and ill from excitement and lack of food, that for two days she had been unable to taste, gave the female sixpence to hold Augusta, while she partook of a cup of tea in the refreshment room.

As she returned, piercing yells were audible long before she reached the waiting-room, and hastily entering she found her sister purple in the face, and bent backwards like a bow in the arms of the attendant.

Her nurse was jogging her roughly up and

down, regarding her the while with an eye of dissatisfaction, not to say of dislike.

"I'm glad you've come back, ma'am," she said, rising hastily as Prudence entered, and holding out her charge at arm's length. "This baby o' yours is the very crossest child I ever did see. I thought at first there was a pin in her clothes may be—it's a little girl, ain't it?—but I looked, and there's never a one to be found, so it's temper, so it is—and if I was you, ma'am, meaning no offence, I'd spank her well, young as she is, to take the mischief out of her. You can't begin too soon with that sort. Just look what she's done to my face!"

There certainly was a scratch on the old woman's nose.

Prudence took her sister in silence, and tried to soothe her. Augusta, she knew, was fastidious, and probably disliked being held by the snuffy old caretaker, yet she could not help considering that under the circumstances the infliction might have been borne. Still, the baby continued to yell so that the people looked in to see what was the matter. She made prolonged efforts to disengage one leg from her lengthy and cumbersome draperies, till attracted by the

frequency of the movement, Prudence examined her more closely. As she turned up the robe, Augusta stopped crying. There on her red-mottled limb was a nasty blue mark, where the irritated caretaker had given her a pinch.

Under other circumstances the tender-hearted Prudence would have remonstrated with the woman on her cruelty to a helpless infant. As it was, she did not dare risk a scene, so took an opportunity to whisper sympathy to Augusta, and implore her to be patient.

After many anxious glances at the clock, the hands marked the hour named by Mrs. Brown, and, at the moment, a bustling, fresh-complexioned woman of about five-and-fifty, stout and respectably dressed, hurried into the room, and, first casting a comprehensive glance around, walked over to Prudence, and said,

"Excuse me, ma'am, but are you here with reference to a child?"

"Are you Mrs. Brown?" asked Prudence, favourably impressed by her appearance of cleanliness and her businesslike manner.

"Yes, ma'am, I ham Mrs. Brown, otherwise X. Y. Z.—'good Mrs. Brown,' they calls me

down our wy; and you, ma'am, I suppose are P. S.?"

"Yes," said Prudence faintly.

"And this is the dear baby? Pitty ickle sing!" said Mrs. Brown, making a dab with a motherly forefinger at Augusta's cheek. Augusta looked at her very hard, and Prudence could not help hoping that she was as favourably impressed as herself.

"Yes," she said, "this is the baby I wish you to take charge of, and on whom I hope you will bestow motherly care."

"That, ma'am," replied Mrs. Brown, "you may rest assured on. How old is the little dear?"

Prudence was all confusion.

"I really don't know," she faltered. "A few years—I mean a few months old—about six weeks, perhaps."

"Is the byby your own, ma'am?" enquired Mrs. Brown in a tone of surprise.

"Oh, dear, no!" cried Prudence aghast. "It is not my child at all. As a matter of fact, I am not married."

"Indeed! You'll excuse me asking the question, ma'am; but in a matter of business like this you understand one has to be particular, with such a fine, comfortable, 'appy

ome as I've to offer too; and might I enquire exactly what relation the pretty dear is to you? All communications, ma'am, are treated in strict confidence."

"She is my sister."

"Your sister!" gasped Mrs. Brown, looking Prudence up and down. "Oh! your *sister's*. And now, ma'am, excuse my asking, but is your sister a married lady?"

"Of course not," said Prudence, adding with a sickly smile, "I think you might be pretty sure of that?"

"*Of course not!*" repeated Mrs. Brown under her breath in a tone of deep astonishment. "*Of course* not!" adding to herself, happily unheard by Prudence, "well, of all the braigen! and she lookin' so quiet too."

"Well, ma'am," she continued aloud, "under them circumstances of course you understand my terms is according."

"According to what?"

"To them circumstances, ma'am."

"They are unusual," admitted Prudence, "and I am quite prepared to remunerate you amply for any trouble you take with this dear child."

"That child, ma'am, though I say it, is a fortunate child in comin' to one as'll give her

—it's a little girl, isn't it?—as'll give her a mother's care and love; and take her I can't, ma'am, for less than a premium of fifty pounds down an' a weekly payment of one pound."

"It seems a good deal for a baby."

"No, ma'am, it's not a good deal, it's cheap, too cheap maybe, but I've my nater'l feelings, an' I've took to the child, so I'm makin' terms for you an' your sister as I wouldn't for another lydy in a similar case."

"Well, unfortunately," said Prudence timidly, "I did not expect to have to pay so much, and only brought a smaller sum with me."

"How much?" asked good Mrs. Brown briefly.

"Twenty pounds," said Prudence. "You see I never had to—was concerned in—I mean I never before had anything to do with babies, at least in this way, and I thought—that is to say, twenty pounds seemed a good deal, especially as I am to make you regular weekly payments as well."

"Twenty pounds!" shrieked Mrs. Brown. "Is it twenty pounds for a mother's care and love and dooty, and a comfortable 'ome an' no unpleasant questions asked?"

"Of course not, of course not," said Prudence hastily. "I see now it was too little, but how am I to manage about the matter, as I have not got fifty pounds here?"

Mrs. Brown looked at her keenly. "I'll trust you, ma'am, she said, "for I'm that soft-'earted, an' I've took to the child. Pay me the twenty down, an' send me thirty in Bank of England notes—none o' yer cheques—within twenty-four hours, and I'll take the little darling away."

"Very well," said Prudence relieved. "I will do as you say; but oh! Mrs. Brown, be sure you take every care of her, let her want for nothing;" and two big tears stood in the good-natured creature's eyes.

"Madam," answered Mrs. Brown, "it's a lucky child as comes to me; and now will you please give me your name and address, and just write a promise to pay on this 'ere bit of paper, and hand me over the twenty pounds and I'll give you a receipt; and give me the byby, for my train is about due, and you've got my name and address, and I expects to be notified whenever you're a coming to see the byby, and I never allows as payments to be more than a week in arrears, or I brings back the child."

Prudence was rather bewildered by Mrs. Brown's last lengthy and rapid speech, "I never allows no payments to be more than a week in arrears."

What could she mean by that? It really sounded as if she were familiar with transactions of the kind, but surely no respectable married woman, so nice in appearance too, even though her grammar was not faultless, would need more than one child to adopt; so, telling herself she had misunderstood, Prudence paid down the twenty pounds, kissed Augusta, saw Mrs. Brown and that infant into the train, and then relieved, yet with many cares on her mind, made her way back to Beaconsfield Gardens.

Meantime Mrs. Brown, who watched her standing on the platform until the train moved out of the station, began to feel she had made a bad bargain.

"I was a bloomin' idiot not to arsk thirty bob," she muttered, "an' a 'undred down. She's that soft she'd 'ave given it. There! stow it, you brat!" she added with sudden fury, turning to Augusta, who had set up a dismal wail.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MEDICAL LADY BAFFLED.

No. 37, Beaconsfield Gardens, South Kensington, was in a ferment of excitement. Something had happened. The boarders did not quite know what, but there was in the air that electrical unrest that spreads so rapidly from one individual to another.

The mystery of Miss Semaphore's illness was under discussion. What ailed her? She had eaten nothing for two days. Was she really better? Was she worse? Why this secrecy and embarrassment on the part of the usually garrulous and impulsive Prudence? Why was no doctor called in? Why, why, why, in a thousand forms, was the favourite interrogative pronoun on the lips of the ladies and gentlemen as they sat round the fire after dinner and discussed something more interesting to them than the *Daily Telegraph*, that oracle beloved of boarding-houses.

When tea was served, the maid sent up by Mrs. Wilcox to remind Prudence that it was waiting in the drawing-room, knocked long and vainly at her door, and at last, turning the handle, discovered that the apartment was empty. Knocking at Augusta's door likewise had no result, and the girl came down to say she thought Miss Prudence Semaphore must have gone out already.

This was confirmed by Major Jones, who remembered seeing someone like her turn down Tate Street when on his way home.

Where had she gone to? All the ladies at her table were anxious to know, but they asked in vain. The medical woman saw that her opportunity had come.

"I shall take advantage of her absence," she said resolutely, "to visit that poor, suffering sister of hers, whom I consider she has treated shamefully."

There was a murmur of applause at this noble resolution, and the medical woman, having hastily swallowed her tea, rose from table and made her way upstairs. Mrs. Whitley followed at a convenient distance. She was curious, but not daring. The medical woman knocked at the door of Miss

Augusta's room, and listened for a reply. There was none. She repeated the knock, and then tried the handle; the door was locked from the inside, and the key, sticking in it, prevented anything like a satisfactory view of the interior.

"My dear Miss Semaphore, it is only me," she murmured ungrammatically; "I have come to enquire for you. May I not come in?"

Miss Semaphore naturally did not answer. The medical woman stood straight up and reflected for half-a-second.

"It is my duty," she said aloud, and, thus braced to the task, marched to the door of Prudence's room, opened it, passed in, and entered the sleeping apartment of the elder Miss Semaphore. Mrs. Whitley by this time had come forward, and paused as she passed the threshold. The medical woman was just emerging with a bewildered face, when she saw her, and exclaimed,

"She has gone!"

"Gone!" ejaculated Mrs. Whitley.

"Yes, gone! There is no one there! The room is empty!"

"What an ex-tra-or-dinary thing! Why where on earth can she have gone to, and at this time of night too?"

"There is some mystery here," said the medical woman solemnly. "All is not right, but I'll see this matter out, or my name is not Jane Lord."

Downstairs went Mrs. Whitley and "Jane Lord" to tell the news. There was an excited chorus of enquiries to a duet of replies.

Why and how had Prudence Semaphore spirited away her sick sister? What had happened? She had certainly told Mrs. Wilcox that Miss Augusta would go for change of air, but who could imagine her sneaking off in the evening without luggage or farewell? There was something behind it, but what?

"It sounds just like one of those horrid police cases one reads in the papers," said Mrs. Dumaresq; "I do hope the poor creature has not been murdered and the body conveyed away."

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Mrs. Whitley, "surely you don't think her sister—"

"I don't think anything," said Mrs. Dumaresq with dignity; "but I must say Miss Prudence Semaphore's manner has more than once struck me as peculiar."

Mrs. Whitley lowered her voice to an awe-stricken whisper.

"Then you think, perhaps, she has gone mad and murdered her sister? How awful! The police should be told at once, they really should."

"My dear Mrs. Whitley, do not be so hasty. Whatever my suspicions may be, I have not formulated them. In diplomacy one learns never to jump to conclusions; but I confess this seems to me to be a very mysterious and unpleasant affair. It makes me regret ever having come to a boarding-house, in spite of the advice of my dearest friend, the Duchess of Middlesex. 'Don't go to any such place, Mimi,' she said. She always calls me 'Mimi.' 'You never can tell who you may meet or what may happen, and it is so very unpleasant to be mixed up with persons with whom one cannot associate.' Didn't she, Angelo?"

Mr. Dumaresq, as usual, confirmed his wife's statement.

"But do you really think there is something wrong—that a crime has been committed?" asked the little group of ladies one of the other.

"I, for one, should not be surprised," said the medical woman boldly; "but it is well not to speak till one is certain, and of course I may be mistaken."

"But did you—did you notice anything wrong in the room just now, any signs of a struggle, or—or poison of any kind, or a weapon?" asked Mrs. Whitley. "I suppose you looked?"

"Frankly," said the medical woman, "I did not; I was so surprised and taken aback when I found she was not there, that I just looked at nothing at all except the bed. That had been slept in apparently, and I think the room was rather untidy, but I did not stay a moment.'

"Don't you think, ladies," said Mrs. Whitley, in a low voice, "that it would be well for Miss Lord and myself to run upstairs now and thoroughly investigate the apartment?"

The others agreed; so the medical lady and her satellite made their way to Miss. Semaphore's room, and conscientiously poked into every corner. They found nothing except a twist of Miss Augusta's false hair, and a baby's knitted boot. This last the medical woman picked up and held out.

"Where did this come from, I wonder," said she; "I suppose one of them made it for some charity."

"No doubt," said Mrs. Whitley; and

having fruitlessly investigated everything that had been left unlocked, and shaken every door, box, or wardrobe that was securely fastened, they turned to make their way to the morning room, a little disappointed at their fruitless search.

Unfortunately, just as they were passing through, Prudence returned home, and meeting them on the threshold, at once divined that they had been investigating in her absence. They noted her frightened face, and the look of relief that crossed it at the recollection that after all there was nothing to find. The medical lady thought it best to carry off their proceedings with a high hand.

"Dear, dear!" she said, laughing; "don't look so startled, Miss Semaphore. We thought that as we saw or heard nothing of you at tea, we had better see you or your sister, and enquire if we could be of use to her in your absence; but you were both out."

"Yes," said Prudence, breathlessly, "we were both out; and I must say, Miss Lord, I consider it a great liberty for you and Mrs. Whitley to have entered my room and my sister's under the circumstances."

"Highty toity," responded the medical

woman, "we were trying to do our duty by your unfortunate sister, whom you left without proper medical attendance during her illness, and have apparently taken out of her sick bed this night at the risk of her life, and conveyed away without the smallest necessary precaution."

Terrible is the wrath of the sheep. Prudence stood at bay in a towering rage.

"Allow me to tell you, madam," she said, "that you know nothing at all about it. My sister is perfectly well, never better in her life, and I won't be dictated to by you, or Mrs. Whitley either, as to any course of action I think fit to take."

"Well, I'm sure," gasped the medical woman, "this is what one gets for trying to be kind to some people. Come away, my dear Mrs. Whitley, and leave this—person. Far from thanking us for our thoughtfulness to her sister and herself, she only insults us. Of course if poor Miss Augusta dies from want of proper care, we shall not be to blame," and, with much dignity, the two ladies swept downstairs, to tell the result of their mission.

That something was horribly wrong, all the boarders were agreed, but as to what that

something was, they differed. Was Miss Augusta Semaphore living or dead? If living, what was the nature of the mysterious disease with which she was afflicted that necessitated such prompt and secret action on the part of her easy-going sister?

Mrs. Whitley, as one who had visited her room, was terrified at this view of the case, and went into strong hysterics at the idea of having perhaps contracted some terrible malady during her investigations. She was not to be calmed until both she and the medical woman, by the advice of the latter, went through a course of thorough fumigation and disinfection.

Where was Augusta now? That was another interesting theme for speculation. Somewhere near, apparently, since Major Jones had seen Prudence by herself in Tate Street shortly after dinner. Nothing else was talked of all day, but as Prudence came down calmly to meals, seemingly happier and more composed than she had been for some days, excitement began to die down. Perhaps there was nothing in it after all. Augusta was queer; she might have insisted in going off in the night like that. Anyhow, nothing much could be wrong, or Prudence would

never look so cheerful. As for her having gone mad, or murdered her sister, even Mrs. Whitley now laughed at the idea; but the medical woman still clung to her belief that all was not right.

Poor, tired Prudence, weary of scheming, and lying, and being badgered, felt the change and rejoiced. If they only would question her no more, how happy she might be! A fortnight would soon pass, and by that time, all suspicion being averted, she might safely give notice, and join her sister. Meantime, to leave no room for speculation as to her movements, she went out very little, appeared at every meal, and told old Mrs. Belcher, the most sympathetic of the boarders, who immediately spread the story, that her sister had gone to the seaside for a change, and that if she did not speedily improve in health, she, Prudence, would soon join her there.

All suspicions were now apparently tranquillized, and Prudence, having despatched by the first post a cheque for £30 to good Mrs. Brown, felt sufficiently calm to await events.

CHAPTER XIV.

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR.

THE two following days passed peacefully over. Prudence told her carefully-concocted story to Mrs. Wilcox, and said she would probably follow her sister in a fortnight. She despatched a great box, avowedly for the use of Augusta, to Paddington Station, and left it at the cloak-room to be kept till called for. She took every precaution that suggested itself to her, and even contemplated announcing at table the receipt of a letter from her sister declaring she was enjoying the fine sea air.

In fact, she felt she was beginning to lie with an *aplomb* that at once frightened and delighted her, but was accompanied by twinges of conscience. Many tears she shed in secret over the deception she was forced to practise.

The interest and excitement about Miss Semaphore had already abated somewhat.

Her room had been turned out, cleaned, and made ready for a new boarder, and Prudence, who had sent on the additional thirty pounds to good Mrs. Brown, was congratulating herself on having acted with great promptitude, foresight, and caution, under trying and exceptional circumstances.

Her main idea now was to hear from the widow of the explorer whose fatal Water of Youth had proved the direful spring of all her woes. Night and day she considered the subject. Was there an antidote? If not, would her sister ever grow up? If she did grow up, would she grow up normally? Had she really, as Prudence thought, preserved her memory and understanding? Was she to be treated exactly like an ordinary baby? and, if not, in what respects should a difference be made? Should she be sent to school later on? Would her intelligence grow or lessen? All these racking questions, to which she could give no answer, tormented the younger Miss Semaphore continually.

When, sooner than she had ventured to hope, she found a letter lying on the hall-table addressed to her, in a foreign handwriting, and bearing the Paris post-mark, the

poor lady was so overcome between fear and hope that she scarcely had courage to open it. With tottering limbs, she made her way upstairs, locked her door, and sat down to read the most important missive she had ever received.

Mrs. Geldheraus expressed herself shocked and surprised at the sad story unfolded by Miss Prudence Semaphore, but, unfortunately, was not very helpful. She had never before heard of anyone taking too much of the Water of Youth, and knew of no method of counteracting its effects.

"I explained to your sister," she said, "that a tablespoonful took about ten years off one's age. Thus a woman of forty, taking two tablespoonfuls, would, in effect, be twenty. After that, a tea-spoonful every two years, would keep her at twenty as long as the Water lasted. She seemed quite to understand my directions. As such a case as you describe has never entered into my experience, I fear, dear madam, I can only recommend you to be patient under these distressing circumstances. I can give you no idea of how long the effects will last. Usually, the greater the quantity required in the first instance, the sooner the dose must be

repeated, as the acquired youth wears off with a rapidity in proportion to one's actual age. Whether this, however, will be the case with your sister, I cannot say. No one who has hitherto tried the Water has returned to infancy, so your sister's is a very exceptional and awkward position, especially, as you tell me, you are living at a boarding-house. You may be thankful that your sister did not take a little more, or she would probably have vanished for ever, and your circumstances would be even more painful than they are. It is most probable that she retains her adult memory and understanding unimpaired, remaining a woman in mind though not in body. I regret, dear madam, that I cannot be more helpful, and am, yours faithfully,

SOPHIE GELDHERAUS."

As she concluded, Prudence broke down utterly, and, throwing herself on her bed, gave way to a bitter outburst of weeping. There was nothing for it now but to let things take their course, to accept all the annoyance, deception, seclusion, and suspicion involved in so anomalous, so unprecedented a situation. She saw nothing before her but a life spent in avoiding acquaintances, in evading enquiry—the life of a fugitive, dogged by a blameless past.

"It is horrible, horrible!" she wailed. "If it were anything else, I think I could bear it, but this is so incredible, so unheard of. How am I to manage about our business matters? Will Mr. Carson believe me if I tell him the truth? Will he ever credit that the infant I show him is Augusta?" (Mr. Carson was the solicitor who managed the affairs of the Misses Semaphore.) "What about signing deeds and so forth? Then, if I pretend she has died, he will want to come to the funeral, or see the death certificate, or take out probate, or something of that kind that will involve enquiry. Oh! what, what am I to do?"

At last, exhausted by weeping, Miss Prudence lay still, and stared with sodden eyes at the flies dancing on the ceiling. The one agreeable object of her reflections was that at least she had got Augusta safely away, and placed her in hands that were both kind and safe.

A longing to see her sister came over her. Though Augusta was dumb and helpless, it would at least be some consolation to talk to her, to pour out her woes.

To a woman of the stamp of Prudence, the necessity for secretiveness, for independent

or uncounselled action, is terrible. She wanted someone to advise her, someone to lean on, and little consolation as she could expect from communing with Augusta, it would at least be a relief to say all that was in her mind.

Accordingly she rose, wrote a few lines to "good Mrs. Brown," announcing her intention of calling at Plummer's Cottages the following afternoon, and having donned a thick veil to conceal her distorted features, proceeded to post the note.

The walk did her good. A fresh wind was blowing, that cooled the hot cheeks of the troubled lady. In the air was something of rest that soothed her, and it was in a more equable frame of mind that she returned home.

At the door of 37, Beaconsfield Gardens, she became conscious that something unusual was agitating the inmates. A loud, angry voice reached her, muffled by intervening doors—a voice she seemed to recognise; and when, in answer to her ring, Müller opened the door, his face was flushed and his manner agitated.

"Oh, blease," he gasped, when he saw her, "I am glat that you, matam, hafe come.

Here it is a voman asking you to see, and ven I say you are not *zu Haus*, she *schimpf* and cry, and vill not go avay."

Prudence's heart stopped beating, and she caught the door-post to save herself from falling.

"Where is she, Müller?" she gasped faintly.

"I did show her into the morning room," said Müller, "ven she say that avay she vill not go; but therein she vill not remain, but valk into the hall and calls for you."

Before he could say any more, there appeared before the shocked eyes of Prudence a vision of good Mrs. Brown, flushed, dishevelled, her bonnet to one side. With unsteady gait, she lurched down the hall, and confronted the trembling lady.

"So you've come at larst," she said; "nice way to keep a 'spectable woman awytin for you. S'pose I've nothin' better to do than sitting 'ere?"

"What do you want with me, Mrs. Brown?" asked Prudence, in an agitated voice.

"Wot d' I want with you? Well, I likes that. Wot do I want, she sez! I want to know wot d' you mean by sending a

'spectable married woman for the keep of that there byby a cheque as she can't get no money for? Eh? Tell me that? A bloomin' shame, I calls it; but you just fork out that thirty pounds as you howe me, or I'll 'ave the law of you," said good Mrs. Brown, loudly but indistinctly.

Prudence was miserably conscious that two or three heads were peering over the balustrade from the landing above.

"Will you come in here, please," she said as firmly as she could, "and tell me exactly what is the matter?"

"The matter?" queried Mrs. Brown, as she lurched against her. "Matter enough! What did you go for to send me a cheque at all, wen I told you I wouldn't 'ave no cheques?"

By this Prudence had got her into the morning room, deserted, for a wonder, and closed the door.

"Now," she said tremblingly, "what is all this about, and what do you mean by coming here and making such a noise? I am sorry I sent you a cheque, but I quite forgot you told me not to, and it is all right; there is nothing wrong with it."

"Nothin' wrong! Wy wot d' you take me

for, a-sendin' me a cheque as no one 'll change?" said Mrs. Brown. "Nice conduck of a female as calls 'erself a lydy, a-sending of a pore woman to one public hafter another, an' not one o' the lot 'll change the thing!"

"Let me see it," said Prudence, bewildered.

Mrs. Brown glared rather unsteadily at the speaker for a minute, and then fumbled in her bag. After many futile dives, she at last turned out the contents on the table. There, amidst papers, a thimble, sixpence in coppers, some pawn tickets, a half-crown, a reel of cotton, a stump of blue pencil, and various other odds and ends, was the letter of Prudence, with her cheque, now very crumpled and dirty, protruding.

"Calls 'erself a lydy," pursued good Mrs. Brown, "an' sends me that!" Here she banged the cheque on the table.

Prudence, from force of habit, had crossed the cheque and marked it "not negotiable," as the family solicitor, when first she had the handling of money, had instructed her always to do.

"I am sorry," she said, "the cheque is crossed, and that is why they would not change it. It should be passed through a

bank. If you will wait here quietly for a moment, I will write you another."

Good Mrs. Brown at first seemed indisposed to allow Prudence to leave the room at all. "Give me my money," she said; "I don't want none o' your cheques. Money down's the thing for me!"

A vast amount of explanation was required before she seemed to grasp the sense of what the unhappy lady was saying. Then she suddenly sat down on a chair and burst into tears, much to Miss Semaphore's alarm and distress.

"You won't try to starve the blessed hinfant," she said, "and rob a pore woman of 'er 'ard earned money?"

Prudence earnestly assured her she would not, that nothing was farther from her intentions. She apologised again and again about the unlucky cheque, and implored her unexpected visitor to be calm, to be patient for one moment while she ran upstairs to fetch her cheque book.

Mrs. Brown, however, followed her to the door, and protested huskily against the younger Miss Semaphore's "giving" her "the slip."

As poor Prudence escaped, she had the

misery of seeing the heads of Mrs. Whitley, the medical woman, and even of the stately Mrs. Dumaresq herself, hastily withdrawn from over the balustrade on the first landing. Every minute seemed an hour until a fresh cheque was made out, and good Mrs. Brown, grasping it tightly in one hand, had gone off to negociate it after a deal of explanation. Prudence felt quite sick with agitation and apprehension.

"I really almost believe," she said to herself, "I really am inclined to think that Mrs. Brown must have been drinking."

A dreadful uneasiness as to how Augusta might be faring weighed heavy on her heart.

"I will certainly go to-morrow and see the place," she resolved, "and if I do not like it, I'll take Augusta away."

Her spirits drooped at the prospect of an impending conflict with good Mrs. Brown, for even if her thoughts wronged the respectable woman, that afternoon's experience showed that the lady in question had another side to her character besides that observed by Prudence at London Bridge Station.

CHAPTER XV.

PRUDENCE CALLS AT PLUMMER'S COTTAGES.

NEXT morning Prudence, after a restless night, was up betimes. Never in the past had the placid, good-natured spinster known sleeplessness, except in a very modified form. Since Augusta's misfortune, however, that was changed. She thought more than she ever had thought in her life, and constant anxiety was making her face look drawn and worn. Her brief triumph at having got her sister safely out of the house had vanished with the unexpected and unwelcome visit of "good Mrs. Brown."

Wearily tossing on her bed, waiting for the dawn, she pictured that mistress of a comfortable home, pursuing her with threats; while babies, cheques, Mrs. Dumaresq, and the medical lady whirled wildly past in a waking dream.

At four she rose, and beguiled the weary

hours until the breakfast bell rang, by watching the gardener sharpening his scythe to cut the grass, and observing the sleepy maids unfastening the shutters of the opposite houses, shaking mats, and washing the steps. She wished to go then and there in search of her sister, her anxiety and impatience grew every minute, and she fretted, as we all have done, at the restrictions that prevent one paying a casual call at six in the morning, and the laziness that fails to enforce the running of trains the twenty-four hours through.

Not even a cab could she see. Many a time had she opened her window, looked out, closed it again, taken a novel, put it by, looked at her watch, walked up and down, re-arranged her hair, fidgeted, opened her door, listened if anyone was moving, shut it and sat down, before the welcome boom of the gong, struck by Müller's stout arm, announced the first meal of the day.

Poor Miss Prudence made but a dismal pretence at eating. She knew that her queer visitor of the previous evening was remembered and discussed, and she felt that every morsel of bread would choke her. She crumbled a slice on her plate, drank a cup

of tea, and then rose hastily from table. Consciousness of terrible guilt could scarcely have made her more miserable than she, good innocent creature, was at the moment.

Guilty people usually have a certain hardness of nature that makes them indifferent to the opinion of others, while Prudence, with all her woes upon her head, was a timid, unsheltered, soft-hearted body, to whom an angry or contemptuous glance was as bad as a blow.

By half-past nine she had donned a black bonnet and mantle, and had left the house, carrying in her hand an envelope on which she had written "good Mrs. Brown's" address. She hailed a passing omnibus that was going in the direction, and, still pursued by her sombre thoughts, tried to imagine what she should do with Augusta if, as she feared, Mrs. Brown's house was not the happy home she had anticipated.

Plummer's Cottages were not easy to find. No one knew where they were; but then every civilian of whom one asks the way in London is sure to be a stranger, so Prudence applied to a stalwart policeman.

"If I was you, mum, I shouldn't venture," he said, "they're a low lot down there."

"But I must," urged Prudence nervously.

"Well, if you must, take the fourth to the right, and then the second to the left, and the first to the right again. That's Barker's Rents. You walks straight past the Model Dwellings, which models they are, and you'll find Plummer's Cottages."

Prudence, having laboriously counted her streets, followed his directions. The second turn to the left brought her into a dingy by-way, and the first to the right again into a slum. Barker's Rents towered up to the sky, and at the door of the Model Dwellings a group of slatternly women were discussing personal topics with much freedom, and a running accompaniment of "sez he," "sez I," and "sez she."

No. 42 was an inconspicuous cottage, with a battered green door, reached by a single step. Prudence knocked at it with the handle of her umbrella without any response. She repeated the summons, but in vain, and, having shaken the door, which resisted her efforts to open it, she endeavoured to peep through the dingy window. Her proceedings excited considerable interest amongst the ladies standing at the Model Dwellings, as indeed amongst all the residents

in the neighbourhood, who came out by twos and threes until at last, Prudence, turning round, was surprised and alarmed to find herself the centre of an unwashed and, to her eyes, menacing crowd.

"'Tis no good your rapping," said a burly woman, pushing her way through. "There ain't no one there. The 'ouse is empty."

"Empty!" ejaculated Prudence. "Since when?"

"They cleared out last night like winking."

"Oh, but there must be some mistake. I am looking for a Mrs. Brown."

"You bet!" said the woman, addressing the crowd, "she's one o' them. Nice lot she must be to 'and 'er own flesh an' blood hover to Sal Brown."

The crowd signified approval of this view by a series of hoots and cat calls.

"But I don't know what you mean," cried the frightened and bewildered Prudence, "I want to find a Mrs. Brown, who told me her address was 42, Plummer's Cottages, and now that I come here, I find the place shut up and you say the woman is gone. Can anyone tell me where to find her?"

"I'll tell ye fast enough," said the burly woman. "She's in the lock-up, Sal Brown

is; she's to be brought up before the beak to-day on a drunk and disorderly."

"But good gracious! my sister! Where ——where is the child she was taking care of?"

"Oh! so you *are* one o' them. A nice 'uzzy you must be to give an innercent byby hover to Sal. Blest if you'll find it alive, an' no doubt that's wot you wants. The perlice made a swoop on the lot last night, an' they say the Sercierty for the Prewention o' Cruelty to Children's carted 'em off somewhere. I wish you just saw 'em, so I do."

"Them? What do you mean by them?"

"As if yer didn't know! Wy, the hinfants to be sure. The Sercierty took the whole fifteen o' them, an' now they're going to try to find the parients. They'll be glad to 'ear of you. They'll 'ave somethink to say t' you wen they sees yer."

"Fifteen infants! Why what do you mean? I only know of one child that was given over to Mrs. Brown to take care of. She wanted to adopt it. She said she was a respectable married woman, and would give it a comfortable home.

A burst of jeering laughter greeted this.

"Precious comfortable," said a thin woman,

"with Sal on the booze! Wy d'you mear to tell us you didn't know she wer a reglar wrong un?"

"A wrong one?"

"Yes, farmed kids and that?"

"I don't know what you mean," protested Prudence tearfully.

"Well, y'are a deep 'un, or a softy, blest if I know which, not t've found all about 'er from the start, if yer not lyin', as is most likely."

"But what am I to do?"

"Dunno. You go 'long to the perlice station, an' p'raps the bobbies 'll tell you."

"Where is it?" asked Prudence wearily.

Several of the women pointed out the direction, and followed by a little procession of interested but shock-headed observers, who made unfavourable comments on her manners, morals, and appearance, the younger Miss Semaphore took her way, for the first time in her life, to the police station, and made tearful enquiries of a constable at the door.

"Step this way, ma'am," said he.

While the disappointed crowd hung about, and, foreseeing no startling or tragic *dénouement*, gradually melted away, Prudence was

ushered into the presence of a severe official seated at a table covered with neatly docketed papers.

The constable, a fresh-coloured young fellow from the country, saluted.

"Please, sir, this person's called about the Plummer's Cottages Baby Farming Case. Says she's mother to one of the hinfants."

"Sister," corrected Miss Semaphore timidly. "I am not a married lady, my good man."

"Will you kindly state your business," said the inspector, after an awful pause, during which he took no notice of the presence of Prudence, but went on writing stolidly.

Prudence told how a few days ago she had entrusted her sister to the care of a woman named Brown, and had paid her two sums of twenty and thirty pounds respectively. That now she found the woman had left the address given to her, that the house was shut up, and, having been told Mrs. Brown was under arrest, she had come to the station to make enquiries and to discover, if possible, the whereabouts of her sister. The narrative was told in broken words interrupted by many sighs and tears.

Inspector Smith had made a reputation in

connection with baby farming cases, and he looked on this Plummer's Cottages business as one of the worst transactions of the kind he had ever come across. Sal Brown he considered less guilty than the wicked and unnatural parents who had delivered over their offsprings to her. What he inwardly designated the "crocodile tears" of Prudence did not move him a whit, and he surveyed her with manifest disfavour. She might of course be a dupe, but he inclined to believe her a criminal.

"Do you say that the child in question is your sister?"

"Yes."

"But did you not tell the constable just now that you were her mother?"

"Oh dear no! He misunderstood me. I only said I had come to enquire about a child."

"But you must be aware that all the children found at the woman's house were extremely young—infants in fact. None of them were over two years of age."

"My sister is"—Prudence hesitated—"extremely young."

"Well," said the Inspector doubtfully, "of course I cannot compel you to speak

the truth. They'll do that elsewhere. The babies are mostly in a terrible way, starved, dirty, and diseased. We are trying to trace their parents, as several names and addresses were found in the possession of Brown, and you would probably have been subpœnæd to give evidence at her trial. Meantime the children have been taken to the workhouse."

What all this portended Prudence scarcely grasped. One fact, and one fact alone, stood out luridly before her. Augusta was in the workhouse.

"Oh!" she gasped in dismay, "in the workhouse! My sister in the workhouse, Where is it? Let me go at once. I must take her away."

"I think you had better not attempt to do anything of the kind," said the Inspector stiffly. "The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children has taken the matter up, and you'll hear more of it later. You had better just leave the child alone. She is in good hands now anyway, very different from those you put her into. My advice to you is to keep quiet. You'll see her all right later on, and may be you'll have to tell your share in the case."

"My share in the case is easily told," said

poor Prudence. "As I explained to you already, I thought I was placing her in a good home, with a kind, respectable woman, but it seems I was mistaken."

If anyone has formed an opinion that another is wily, the simplest speech or action tends to confirm it. In the heart-moving accents of Prudence, Inspector Smith heard only duplicity. In her open, though tear-stained, countenance he read nothing but low cunning.

"It's quite wonderful," he said coldly, "to see how easy it is to deceive people when it is to their interests to be deceived; they ask no questions and they are told no lies, and a troublesome baby is got rid of, that's how it is."

"Well, I did want to get rid of her for a little time," admitted Prudence, with the characteristic foolish candour that so often covers the innocent with suspicion, "because it was not convenient to have her where I live. If you knew the circumstances, sir, you would feel for me. They are very peculiar and extraordinary, but indeed I asked questions and Mrs. Brown told me lies."

The Inspector looked at her under his shaggy brows, he did not quite know what to

make of her simplicity. She was either an admirable actress or else—she seemed really white and ill and frightened, but with that kind of woman one never knew how much was "fake."

"Will you please give me your full name and address," he said.

"Prudence Elizabeth Semaphore, 37, Beaconsfield Gardens, South Kensington.

"Condition?"

"Sir."

"Condition, married or single?"

"I am unmarried, as you must have heard me say to the constable."

"Unmarried, hem. Age?"

"Age?"

"Yes, age. How old are you?"

"That, sir," said Prudence with dignity, "is no concern of yours; I decline to answer."

"Well," said the Inspector grimly, "I won't press the question. Perhaps you may answer it later. That'll do," and with a nod he dismissed her.

"But the workhouse where my sister is, where is it? How can I get there?"

"She is at St. Mark's Workhouse, but you had better leave her alone."

"Would you mind," said Prudence pleadingly, "writing down the name and the name of the street where it is situated? I must go there at once."

"Oh, you can remember well enough," said the Inspector rather gruffly. "St. Mark's Workhouse, Bush Street."

With this Prudence had to be content.

CHAPTER XVI.

MRS. DUMARESQ IN AN UNDIPLOMATIC CIRCLE.

WHEN Prudence found herself in the street, she looked in a bewildered fashion from right to left, not knowing which way to turn. The good-natured young constable pointed out the direction of the workhouse, telling her it was quite near, and thither she bent her steps. Knowing nothing of the intricacies of the neighbourhood, she walked some considerable way before realising that she was lost, and that her best plan was to take a cab. Cabs, however, were few about there, and she discovered one with difficulty. As she drove towards the workhouse she had leisure to reflect on the bewildering incidents of the morning, and speculate on the condition of mind and body in which she would probably find Augusta.

"The poor dear," she thought, "what she must have gone through! Oh! what a misfortune to have come across that terrible woman. And she looked so nice, so clean, so respectable. Thank Heaven, Augusta was not with her very long." She went over in her mind her conversation with the Inspector.

"What a disagreeable man! He seemed quite to doubt my word that Augusta was my sister. Perhaps I had better say in future that she is my half-sister. She does look ridiculously young."

Suddenly poor Prudence bounded from her seat. She had but just remembered something the Inspector had said—something scarcely noticed at the time amidst so many conflicting anxieties and emotions.

"We are trying to trace their parents, as several names and addresses were found in the possession of Brown, and you would probably in any case have been subpœnæd to give evidence at the trial."

"Great Heaven!" she thought, "so there is to be a trial."

The full meaning of the words burst suddenly upon her. It should all come out—the whole story. She saw herself in court,

heckled, badgered, cross-examined, made perhaps to contradict herself at every turn, surveyed critically by the boarders at Beaconsfield Gardens, who, of course, would flock to hear the case. She would be flouted, disbelieved if she told the truth, tripped up and convicted of falsehood if she lied, accused no doubt of perjury, perhaps of murder, ordered to the cells to undergo terrible and unknown penalties, while Augusta—the only person who could prove her innocence and good faith—Augusta was a helpless, speechless infant, unable to testify in her favour. Of law, of legal procedure, of what a judge could or could not do, Prudence was profoundly ignorant. All that was plain to her was, that she could not produce her sister in the flesh as known to and recognisable by her acquaintances, and that no one would credit her if she produced the baby and said that was Augusta. Even at the best, if no question as to her sister arose, no suspicion of murder, how bad it looked to have smuggled a child away, and given it to such a person as Mrs. Brown to cruelly use. Cold beads of perspiration stood out on the poor woman's forehead. No! she would not be mixed up in it; she would not go into

court at all; she would get back her sister and flee far away from London, and Mrs. Brown, and the medical lady. In agonised haste she pulled the check string, and bade the cabman drive back at once to the station. She would tell the Inspector that she declined to give evidence under any circumstances—surely they could not force her to if she refused—and bitterly she reproached herself for her unpardonable stupidity in not having done this at the time.

She tumbled out of the cab, and made her way like one distraught to the little office where she had seen the Inspector. Alas! he had just gone out. No one knew where he had gone to or when he would return. Prudence had therefore to content herself with leaving a verbal message with a subordinate, to the effect that nothing would induce her to appear against Mrs. Brown or anyone else, or to enter a court of law under any circumstances. This done, she returned to her cab with a mind rather more at ease, and resumed her journey to the workhouse.

Workhouse porters are not usually chosen for their urbanity, and he of St. Mark's was no exception to the rule. "It is not visiting day," he said to her, "and you ought to

know better than come bothering here." He was deaf to her appeals to see Augusta. "It can't be done," he said. "You should come on Thursday between three and six. It's no use your making a disturbance." As she still persisted, he lost his temper, and told her she had better go, or he would have her turned out.

The frightened Prudence hurried back to her cab, and, sobbing miserably, directed the driver to South Kensington. Worn out by the fatigues and excitements of the day, she arrived at 37, Beaconsfield Gardens, in time for dinner.

She would have given anything not to be obliged to put in an appearance at that meal, but she did not dare to remain in her room. Her fear of attracting notice was morbid.

The boarders, for a wonder, were discussing Dickens as Prudence took her place at table.

"Dickens is an author I have never read," Mrs. Dumaresq was saying.

"Really!" responded Major Jones. "Why not?"

"My dear mother did not approve of his works when I was a girl," said Mrs.

Dumaresq, "and, since then, what I have seen of his writings has not induced me to form a different opinion."

"But I never heard it said that Dickens had written anything objectionable."

"Oh, objectionable! Well, not exactly objectionable in the sense you mean," answered Mrs. Dumaresq; "that might not matter so much, but he deals with people who are not in our set."

"It says in to-day's paper that the Princess drove over yesterday to see the motor cars," said Mrs. Whitley suddenly to Mrs. Dumaresq.

Now Mrs. Whitley spoke indistinctly, and with a lisp, which no doubt accounted for Mrs. Dumaresq's unexpected reply, for that lady said,

"Oh, yes, to be sure; so she did. They are dear old friends of ours. Such charming people!"

Mrs. Whitley looked astonished. "I'm afraid you don't quite understand me," she said; "I spoke of the motor cars."

"Oh, ah! Yes, to be sure," said Mrs. Dumaresq, slightly embarrassed. "The motor cars—yes, I have seen them."

There was a long pause, during which the lady regained her self-possession.

"Have you heard from your sister, Miss Semaphore?" asked Mrs. Dumaresq, after a time, as she ate her soup.

"Yes, thank you."

"And how is she?"

"Not so well—at least, better. I mean she is not yet quite well, but is better than she was."

What further embarrassing questions the lady might have put Prudence could only speculate, for, providentially, Mrs. Dumaresq was appealed to by the medical woman for her opinion on some hotly-contested question of Government policy. This was being discussed by Major Jones and Mr. Lorimer, who, it has been said, like most gentlemen that live in boarding-houses, were staunch Conservatives. A new boarder had just given utterance to deplorably Radical sentiments.

Mrs. Dumaresq had not heard, and politely requested information as to the point at issue.

"My husband," said the wife of the new boarder, "remarked that, in proportion to their means, the poor are taxed far more heavily than the rich, and he advocates reversing this. What do you think?".

"Really," said Mrs. Dumaresq with lofty sweetness, "I have no opinion on the subject. I know absolutely nothing of politics."

"Oh! Then you are a Conservative," said the new boarder's wife abruptly. "I have always noticed that when a woman begins by telling me she knows nothing of politics, it means that she is a Tory."

Mrs. Dumaresq looked offended. "Well," she said, after a brief pause, "my sympathies are naturally with the aristocracy, amongst whom my life has been passed. In military and diplomatic circles everyone is Conservative, so if I have any bias, it is in favour of my friends."

The wife of the new boarder happened, unfortunately, to be an earnest woman, so she did not let the matter drop.

"But why," she pursued, "should you, a member of the great English middle-class, set yourself to uphold a system inimical to the interests not only of the poor but of your equals."

The listeners felt the position to be strained. No one had ever pressed a point on Mrs. Dumaresq before, and all the ladies thought the new boarder's wife was audacious

and ill-bred. She herself, however, was quite at her ease, though eager and interested.

Mrs. Dumaresq smiled rather acidly. "I can scarcely claim the privilege of belonging to what you call 'the great English middle-class,'" she said. "My relations have not been in that sphere."

"But surely," said the new boarder's wife, "you do not consider that you belong to the working class? That would be absurd. You are too modest. Why, business people on such a very large scale as your relatives might almost rank with professional men. My husband comes from Northampton, and I have often heard your brother spoken of as one of the most well-to-do men in the town. Does he keep on the pawnbroking business still? There was some talk of his retiring from that after he was elected Mayor."

For a moment Mrs. Dumaresq looked as if she had received a blow. She went white and red in rapid succession, then rallied, and smiled artificially at the unconscious and unconcerned wife of the new boarder.

"I fancy you misunderstood the drift of my remarks," she said. "And so your husband knows Northampton. Busy town,

is it not? Yes, my brother does own—a—a—some business houses there, that were left to him as portion of the vast estate of—um—a wealthy relative, and, I believe that, finding them very profitable, he has allowed them to be kept on. So many people nowadays do not shrink from trade as they used when I was young. This is a democratic age, is it not?"

"Why, I thought it was your father who founded the business," said the new boarder's wife; but Mrs. Dumaresq had just begun to tell Mrs. Whitley of a sale of work that she had been to that afternoon, which had been opened by Her Royal Highness the Duchess of York, and she failed to hear the observation.

There was an uncomfortable silence. The prestige of Mrs. Dumaresq was rudely shaken. Then everyone began talking together, while the medical lady meditated questioning the new boarder's wife later, and finding out all she had to tell about the family of Mrs. Dumaresq, whose superior airs had more than once irritated her.

CHAPTER XVII.

A SENSATION IN "THE STAR."

WHEN dinner was over, and the feminine boarders had filed upstairs as usual, a fresh shock awaited poor Prudence. There was sudden great excitement in the street. A dozen newsboys, with stentorian lungs, bellowed up and down Beaconsfield Gardens the words, "Extry Speschul—'orrible case—*Re*-volting details," alone being distinctly audible.

The women crowded to the window trying to hear, and speculating what the sensation might be. Major Jones went to the front door and bought a copy of *The Star*, which he kindly brought up to the drawing-room for the benefit of the ladies.

"Well, Major, what is it all about?" asked little Mrs. Whitley eagerly, when Major Jones entered the room.

"A dreadful Baby Farming Case," said the Major. "Fifteen babies discovered in

a horrible state of dirt and neglect somewhere at the East End."

"I thought it was a murder," said the medical woman, somewhat disappointed.

"Oh, this is just as bad! Do read it, please," cried Miss Belcher, Mrs. Whitley, and Mrs. Wilcox, who had just finished pouring out tea.

Major Jones rubbed his glasses with a silk handkerchief, holding *The Star* tightly under his arm the while. Then, having adjusted his spectacles, and taken up a position immediately under the gas, he read in a quick, monotonous voice:

"HORRIBLE BABY FARMING CASE!

REVOLTING DETAILS!!

FIFTEEN HELPLESS INFANTS CONSIGNED TO MISERY AND STARVATION!!!

SEARCH FOR UNNATURAL PARENTS.

"At the Arrow Street Police Court to-day, before Sir John Jenkins, Sarah Anne Brown, 50, residing at 42, Plummer's Cottages, Barker's Rents, E., and variously known as 'The Scorcher,' 'Soothing Syrup Sal,' 'Amelia Tompkins,' 'Mary Ann Martin,' 'Mrs. Ash,' 'Mrs. Fry,' &c., was charged with being drunk and disorderly, and assaulting the police. Police-constable Brady X 2001 deposed to being on duty in Pitt Street last night at 9.30. He saw the prisoner, who was the centre of a noisy crowd

of roughs, dancing before the door of the 'Bunch of Grapes,' from which she had been ejected. In her arms she carried a sickly baby, and when requested to move on, she threw the child at the constable, making use of disgusting language. The child was severely bruised, and when remonstrated with, the prisoner scratched the constable's face. She then flung herself on the ground and kicked. So violent was she that it took four men to bring her to the station, where the doctor discovered that the child was suffering from the effects of neglect and starvation. The wretched infant was immediately conveyed to the headquarters of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, whence an officer of the Society was at once despatched to prisoner's address. On enquiries being made at her home—a miserable hovel—it seems that no fewer than fourteen unregistered infants were discovered, the place being in fact a baby farm on an extensive scale. The children were in an indescribable state of filth and misery. There was only one feeding bottle on the premises, and that was half-filled with sour milk. Two of the older children were gnawing a crust of dry bread. All were nearly naked, being wrapped in various old rags. A number of pawn tickets of recent date for articles of infants' clothing seemed to show that their wearing apparel had been disposed of by the woman Brown, who appears to have carried on an extensive traffic in infants for some years. On the floor of the principal room was a wretched, filthy, flock bed. There was neither fire nor light in the house. The unfortunate little sufferers were at once removed to St. Mark's Workhouse, and provided with food and medical care. Four of them were not expected to live.

"The prisoner, who seemed to be still under the influence of drink, made a long and rambling statement

about a baby, a crossed cheque, and a lady, but she was interrupted by the magistrate, who told her she ought to be ashamed of herself. This was one of the most disgraceful cases that had ever come before him.

"Mr. Ramsden asked that the accused should be remanded to enable the police to make enquiries, as a further charge would be preferred against her, that she, being an unlicensed person, had undertaken the charge of fifteen infants under two years of age.

"The magistrate accordingly desired the case to stand over until the 18th. It appears that the police found several names and addresses at the prisoner's house, which are supposed to be those of parents or other relatives of the unfortunate little ones. They are diligently following up these clues, and Sir John Jenkins expressed a hope that the publicity given to the case would induce all who could give evidence to come forward."

As Major Jones concluded, there was a stir and a sudden rush amongst the ladies; Miss Prudence Semaphore had fainted.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A DETECTIVE ON THE TRACK.

BOARDING-HOUSE life tends to make one selfish; "each for himself and God for us all," is the boarders' motto. Where people come and go, drifting in and out like weeds upon the tide, deep interests or affections are rare, but even in boarding-houses men are sometimes thoughtful, and women sympathetic. This is especially true in cases of illness. The medical lady and Mrs. Dumaresq rushed to the assistance of Prudence when she stumbled off the sofa in a dead faint. She was conveyed to her room, smelling-salts, strong brandy-and-water from Major Jones' private store, burnt feathers, and other powerful but unpleasant remedies were applied until she opened her eyes and gasped:

"Where am I? What has happened?"

Before anyone could answer, memory

apparently came back to her, for she went into a fit of the wildest hysterics.

"There now! there now!" said Mrs. Dumaresq soothingly.

"Don't talk to her like that, or she will be twice as bad," observed Miss Lord in a low stern voice. "Now, Miss Semaphore," she continued sharply, "that is quite enough. Just you stop laughing and crying, or I shall try the effect of a pail of cold water on you."

She evidently meant it, and with a few gasping, choking sobs, Prudence subsided. Though there were two or three violent relapses, each was promptly checked in turn, so that she allowed herself to be undressed, put to bed, tucked in, and left quietly weeping, until she fell asleep from sheer exhaustion.

Next morning she was too ill and unstrung to rise. The consuming anxiety that urged her to be up and doing, to recover her lost sister and flee from London, worked her into a fever. The medical woman, who, much to the patient's distaste, had established herself in the sick-room, and ruled with a rod of iron, absolutely refused to let her rise. Seeing the papers, and reading or writing

letters were likewise prohibited. Prudence had neither the bodily strength nor the firmness of character to resist. She simply wept and moaned, and wrung her hands, and swallowed all the nauseous doses the medical woman prepared for her. Meantime, the fever increased so rapidly, and the poor creature was so prostrate, that Miss Lord advised calling in Dr. Creedy, physician-in-ordinary to the Misses Semaphore. Accordingly, without consulting Prudence, Dr. Creedy was sent for. He was a little, fat, bald-headed man, of few words, and thought Prudence very ill indeed. When he left her room he had a long conversation with the medical woman and Mrs. Dumaresq, pronounced the patient to be suffering apparently from the effect of shock, and enquired where her sister was. Mrs. Dumaresq told him Miss Semaphore had gone to the seaside for a change, having herself been seriously and mysteriously ill.

"I think she ought to be communicated with," said the doctor. "I should not alarm her, but this may be a grave matter, and it would be wise to let her know that Miss Prudence is not very well. She might help us to soothe her, for Miss Prudence has

evidently some trouble on her mind. Unless we can remove the cause of her anxiety, my medicines will have little effect."

"But we don't know Miss Semaphore's address, doctor," objected Mrs. Dumaresq. "I believe she wrote yesterday to say she was better, but her sister did not tell anyone where she had gone to."

"No doubt our patient will give it to you if you ask her," said the doctor. He prescribed a composing draught, ordered a certain course of treatment, which the medical woman guaranteed to carry out, then took his hat and his departure.

Mrs. Dumaresq, like Miss Lord, loved anything that gave her a little temporary importance, so Dr. Creedy had no sooner gone than she approached the bedside of Miss Prudence, and said in her sweetest tones:

"I think, dear Miss Semaphore, that perhaps your sister may be uneasy if she does not hear from you. You know the doctor says you are to make no exertion for a day or two. I forget where you said she was staying, but if you will give me her address, I shall have much pleasure in writing to her and telling her all the news."

To the speaker's intense alarm, she had not concluded this apparently harmless sentence when Prudence had a relapse so sudden and violent that it at once brought the medical woman on the scene. Without ceremony—her manners had never pleased Mrs. Dumaresq—she bundled the diplomatic lady into the corridor, and left her reflecting bitterly that since the new boarder's wife had betrayed such inconvenient knowledge of her family, Miss Lord had been much less civil.

After about twenty minutes the medical woman joined her, and enquired abruptly:

"What were you saying to her to set her off like that again?"

"Nothing at all. I cannot account for it. I only asked her for her sister's address that I might write to her. You heard the doctor say she ought to be told how ill Miss Prudence is."

"Look here," exclaimed the medical woman, "this is more of the mystery about her sister which I feel persuaded is at the bottom of her illness. You shouldn't have mentioned her at all, and the woman in such a state of nerves. I wish I could find out what really is the matter. It seems to me to be all of a piece."

"Oh! I don't believe it has anything to do with her sister," said Mrs. Dumaresq, offended. "Why, she went off in a dead faint last night when no one was speaking of her sister. I thought at the time it was something in that case Major Jones was reading out that affected her."

"About the baby farming woman?" asked the medical woman. "Why, what 'earthly effect could that have on her? She could have nothing to do with that."

"I confess," said Mrs. Dumaresq, "I don't see exactly how it could, but I'm persuaded there is some connection between the two. Did you notice her face when he began to read? No? Well, I did, and I never saw horror more plainly depicted on a human countenance. I have been thinking matters over, and putting two and two together. Do you remember the extraordinary tipsy woman that called before dinner on Tuesday? I am certain I heard her say something about a cheque and bringing back a baby. I happened to be going upstairs at the moment, as you may recollect, and stopped on the landing to tie my shoe string."

"Oh, that's absurd on the face of it," said the medical woman. "Miss Semaphore is

a perfectly respectable woman, and not likely to be mixed up with people of that kind. Why I was on the stairs at the same time, and I did not hear a word of this; there was certainly something said about a cheque, but not about a baby."

"But I beg your pardon," said Mrs. Dumaresq with asperity, "perhaps your hearing is not as good as mine. I certainly heard the woman say threateningly she would bring back the child, or the infant, I forget which word was used, if something were not done."

"They are charitable," reflected the medical woman, "perhaps they subscribe to a home or institution, and this was some tipsy pensioner."

"Perhaps so," said Mrs. Dumaresq oracularly, "time will tell."

"I'm certain she is upset about her sister's mysterious illness."

"And I'm certain she is upset about that woman's visit, and that there is some connection between it and the case in the papers. I have an instinct in such matters."

"Take care it does not mislead you," said the medical woman. Mrs. Dumaresq again noticed bitterly that her friend was much less

deferential since the new boarder's wife had spoken so abruptly of her brother.

Whatever the cause of the younger Miss Semaphore's illness, there was no doubt that it had alarmingly increased since Mrs. Dumaresq injudiciously questioned her. Fever, extreme excitability, restlessness, and a tendency to delirium, all manifested themselves, and it was only when a composing draught had been administered, that the patient sank into a troubled slumber. As she sat watching her, the medical lady heard a slight knock at the door, and opened it cautiously.

It was Mary the maid.

"Please 'm," she said, "there's a gentleman in the 'all wanting to see Miss Prudence Semaphore."

"What does he want with her?" asked the medical woman surprised. "Did you tell him she was ill?"

"Please 'm, I don't know. I did tell him she was ill, but 'e said 'e should see 'er whether or no."

"I shall go down to him," said the medical woman with dignity, and she went.

"My good sir," she began, "Miss Semaphore is extremely ill, and must on

no account be disturbed. If you have any message for her, I shall be pleased to deliver it when she is strong enough to attend to business."

"I come from Scotland Yard, madam," said the man respectfully, "and my business is with Miss Semaphore herself. I shall not detain her long, but I must see her."

"Quite impossible," said the medical woman with decision. "The doctor would never allow it. She is extremely restless and feverish, and has just been given a sleeping draught, so that it would be most dangerous to rouse her. But what do you want with her?"

"She is required to give evidence in a case."

Her conversation with Mrs. Dumaresq flashed through the mind of the medical woman. Could it be that her theory was right after all? Without considering what she was saying, she asked with an air of confidence and knowledge:

"Is it the baby farming case?"

"Yes," said the stranger.

"My good gracious heavens!" said the medical woman, sitting down abruptly and heavily on the hall chair. "Who would

have thought it? What has *she* to do with the case?" she asked insinuatingly, but the stranger from Scotland Yard had already repented saying "yes," and replied:

"I really can tell you nothing about it, madam, my business is entirely personal to Miss Semaphore."

"Well, she cannot see you, you know," repeated the medical woman. "I am nursing her, and will not take the responsibility. Can you not call again?"

The stranger hesitated.

"I suppose I shall have to. When do you think she will be able to receive me."

"If she has a good night, and is kept perfectly quiet to-morrow, she may be able to see you next day, but I can't answer for it."

"Very well," said the man, "I will call again the day after to-morrow."

The medical woman belied the statement that great bodies move slowly, for she broke the record in speeding to Mrs. Dumaresq's room. She had scarcely patience to wait for a "come in" in reply to her agitated knock, when she burst out with:

"I do believe you were right after all."

"How? What do you mean? About what?"

"About that baby farming case. A detective—a detective"—and she paused to observe the look of horror that the face of Mrs. Dumaresq assumed at the word—"has just been here from Scotland Yard to see Miss Semaphore. I told him she was too ill, and asked his business. He said she was required to give evidence in a case, and when I said, 'Is it a baby farming case?' he said 'Yes.'"

"I knew it," said Mrs. Dumaresq, clasping her hands with fervour. "I knew it from the very moment I saw her face of guilt and terror. Oh! to think that I should be in the same house with such a woman. As sure as you stand there, this address will get into the papers, and what will become of us? If my friends see it, I am lost."

The two women stood looking at each other blankly.

"The best thing to do," said the medical woman, "is to go to Mrs. Wilcox, tell her our suspicions, and insist on this—this person being moved the very first moment she is fit."

"It is horrible, horrible," ejaculated Mrs. Dumaresq. "When do you think she will be able to go?"

"Not for a couple of days, I fear," said the medical woman. It is better to say nothing about this detective to her. It will only agitate her and throw her back, and spoil the chance of her speedy recovery, which, of course, we must promote in every way."

"My position," said Mrs. Dumaresq, "is horrible. The idea of knowing such people! What will my friends say?"

"What will all our friends say?" exclaimed the medical woman abruptly. "We are every one in the same position. It will be an awful scandal, and the worst of it is, that I fear this is not the whole story. You take my word, there is more to come out. I had my suspicions from the first, but I am naturally good-natured, and could not bring myself to believe them. Every day, however, confirms their truth. A woman who could for so long deceive us as to her real character, a woman who led me, *me*, to look on her as, at worst, a harmless fool, and was all the time mixed up with police and criminals and baby farmers, is capable of anything."

"Then you think she is?—she has?" queried Mrs. Dumaresq breathlessly.

"I shan't say what I think just yet," said the medical woman. "I will make some

searching enquiries first, and if my worst fears are confirmed, I will reveal all to Mrs. Wilcox this evening, and let her take action. My dear, we are lucky if we find she has been guilty of baby farming alone."

CHAPTER XIX.

A COUNCIL OF WAR.

THAT evening there was a mysterious private gathering of ladies in Mrs. Dumaresq's room, chosen because it was the largest To it came first of all the medical woman, bursting with importance and revelations. Mrs. Whitley, Mrs. Dumaresq herself, and the specially invited Mrs. Wilcox made up the conclave.

Mrs. Wilcox was nervous and agitated. She felt sure the medical woman had something dreadful to tell her, and whether that something related to the contagious nature of Miss Prudence Semaphore's illness, or to something darker but less infectious, she did not know.

"Well, ladies," she began nervously, as by Mrs. Dumaresq's request she seated herself, "what have you to say to me? I hope,"

she added, turning to Miss Lord, "that your patient's illness has not taken a serious form?"

There was an awful pause. The medical woman knew when she had got a good thing, and was in no hurry to begin.

"Is it—is it diphtheria?" quavered Mrs. Wilcox.

Still the medical woman sat silent, with every eye fixed on her.

"Oh, do tell us! Tell us the worst," pleaded Mrs. Wilcox. "Is she going to die?"

"She will live," said the medical woman solemnly. "She will live—to die on the scaffold."

"Gracious Heavens!" exclaimed everyone simultaneously.

"Yes, ladies. To die on the scaffold. I repeat it. Prudence Semaphore is, I fear—a murderess."

Mrs. Wilcox screamed.

"Miss Lord, Miss Lord," she cried. "Pray be careful. Do not say such dreadful things. Miss Semaphore and her sister came to me with the highest recommendations, and you really—"

"Aye," said the medical woman, with

stately and awful triumph, "she came with her sister—where is her sister now?"

"At the seaside somewhere, I suppose. She did not leave me her address," said Mrs. Wilcox weakly.

"At the seaside you suppose," echoed the medical woman with fine scorn. "No, my dear madam, she is dead—and Prudence Semaphore murdered her—murdered her in this very house. Oh, you need not look at me like that. I've not spoken until I have traced every link in the chain of crime."

"What did I say?" interposed Mrs. Dumaresq.

"What did I say from the very first?" She looked round appealingly at Mrs. Whitley. "I said I hoped she had not been murdered. You remember I used those very words."

No one heeded her, for everyone was looking at the medical woman, as she gloated over the sensation she had caused.

"For pity sake, tell us all—all in strict confidence," gasped Mrs. Wilcox. "What Captain Wilcox will say, I really cannot imagine."

"Well," said the medical woman, "I had my suspicions from the first, but they were

vague. I felt that something was wrong, but did not know what that something was. The confusion of manner of Prudence Semaphore, her refusal to say plainly what ailed her sister, her reluctance to call in a doctor, and the extraordinarily small amount of nourishment she provided for her, were all remarkable. Then she would let no one see her. She put you off, Mrs. Wilcox, and she burst into quite a rage when, in the interests of humanity, I desired to visit the poor neglected sufferer. No doubt by that time Miss Semaphore was beyond human help, for now I recall, there was an indescribable air of guilt about that unhappy woman, and she showed a ferocity of character for which I had not given her credit. Still, I said nothing. Then came the discovery that Miss Semaphore had disappeared. That threw me off the scent for a time. I am always disposed to think as well of other people as possible, and while her leaving the house so suddenly and mysteriously seemed to point to her having a dangerous and possibly infectious illness, and being smuggled out of the way by Prudence, I did not seriously think she was dead. Our search of the room revealed nothing. The renewed calm of

manner shown by that wretched creature, and the plausible story she told of her sister having gone to the seaside, I confess, lulled my suspicions to sleep. The story was queer, but it was not too improbable. Then came the visit paid Prudence by a drunken woman, who insisted on seeing her, and made such an uproar in the hall. Mrs. Dumaresq declares that she heard her say something about a cheque and an infant—"

"So I did," corroborated Mrs. Dumaresq.

"Well I didn't catch the words, but events have proved that you were right. Next followed"—she hesitated.

"Her fainting," said Mrs. Whitley.

"Yes, her fainting suddenly in the drawing-room, when Major Jones was reading out something about that horrid baby farming case. I did not connect these events, Mrs. Dumaresq did."

"Yes," said Mrs. Dumaresq, with modest triumph. "I observed her face of terror, and remembering what the woman had said, I put two and two together."

"Well, you mentioned the matter to me, and I confess I was sceptical. My suspicions ran in a different groove, but it now seems that we were both right."

Mrs. Wilcox and Mrs. Whitley gasped simultaneously.

"You know some of what followed," said the medical woman, addressing Mrs. Dumaresq. "This afternoon a man called to see that wretched criminal. I, suspecting nothing, went down to see him and ask his business, for she had just taken a sleeping draught. He told me—." The medical woman paused to gain her full effect. "He told me that he was a detective from Scotland Yard, and that his business with Miss Prudence Semaphore was personal and private. Mrs. Dumaresq's words flashed on me like a thunderbolt, and quite suddenly I asked him, as if I knew all about it, if he wanted to see her in connection with the baby farming case, and he said 'Yes,'—he said '*Yes.*'—I expect he saw then he had made a mistake, for I could not get another word out of him after that, but he is to call again the day after to-morrow."

The horror of Mrs. Wilcox and Mrs. Whitley could not be expressed. Mrs. Dumaresq listened with the calm air of one who has been in the secret all along.

"When I saw," said the medical woman, "that Justice was upon her track, that she

was mixed up with detectives and baby-farmers, all my former suspicions came back with a rush, but I felt the necessity for being calm and just. I remembered the curious circumstances I have mentioned, and also the queer relapse she had to-day when Mrs. Dumaresq asked for her sister's address, finally saying she did not know. The whole thing was as plain as possible. Her sister had disappeared, because she had been somehow made away with. No doubt there were circumstances in the past life of Prudence Semaphore that she dreaded coming to her knowledge, for we all know how particular poor dear Miss Semaphore was. Still, I resolved to search, to enquire before I decided. I told Mrs. Dumaresq about the detective, and then I began a rigorous investigation, beginning quietly with the servants."

"But perhaps her sister really is at the seaside somewhere," suggested Mrs. Wilcox. "All this is very shocking about the detective and the baby farming; but Miss Semaphore may be alive and well, for all that proves to the contrary."

"Wait till you hear," said the medical woman, shaking a solemn finger at Mrs.

Wilcox. "First of all, I made cautious enquiries from the servants. Mary tells me that from the day Prudence reported that Miss Semaphore was ill, she was never permitted to enter her room. Never saw her again, in fact. She tried to get in, but the door was always locked. This, too, was my own experience. Then something was said about a letter having come for Prudence from her sister. Müller and Mary both know Miss Semaphore's handwriting, and they agree that to their knowledge no such letter has been delivered here. I next enquired as to whether anyone had seen Miss Semaphore leave the house. It was unlikely that an invalid, probably still weak from illness, should be able to get downstairs and out of the house unobserved. Besides, there was the question of luggage. She could hardly have gone and taken nothing with her, not even a change of dress. But no one saw her. I then put on my bonnet, went out and spoke to the men on the two nearest cab ranks. They all agree in saying that none of them took up a lady fare, or two ladies, with or without luggage, on the Tuesday, from this house. Major Jones tells us he saw someone, who he is sure was Miss

Prudence Semaphore, and alone, crossing the road hastily near Tate Street. That would have been shortly after dinner on Tuesday evening. It seems absolutely plain, therefore, that Miss Semaphore did not leave the house at all."

"But we saw her empty room that night," said Mrs. Whitley. "We saw her empty bed. She must have gone some time before we went upstairs to visit her."

"My theory is," said the medical woman, "that she was then concealed in that very room."

"But where? Not in the wardrobe, for we opened that, nor under the bed, for we looked there, and there really was no place else."

"Oh, yes, there was. You remember that the very next day, I think, Prudence sent away two boxes, ostensibly full of her sister's belongings. Now my theory is, and time will prove whether I am not right, that in one of those boxes, the big grey one, bound with iron, was the body of Miss Semaphore!"

By this time the medical woman's hearers were trembling in every limb.

"How awful!" quaked Mrs. Whitley.

"Why it is just like that East End tragedy. I forget the name—when a woman—no, a man, was taken away dead in a box."

"This is a serious accusation," said Mrs. Wilcox, after a time of digestive silence, "and it doesn't seem to me to be proved."

"Doesn't it?" enquired the medical woman indignantly. "Well, I presume you'll believe it when you see the poor creature dead before you, and are called on to identify her remains, as I have no doubt you will be."

"But Miss Prudence is really so gentle; besides, what motive could she have for killing her sister?"

"Gentle? A woman—a hypocrite like that, with her baby-farmers and detectives after her? Don't tell me! And as for motives, it seems plain enough that she may have had several that we cannot guess at. Mary tells me the Semaphores had a violent quarrel about a fortnight ago, and probably that decided her."

"Oh, they often quarrelled. Poor Miss Semaphore, you know, was trying enough at times, but Miss Prudence never bore malice."

"Oh, Mrs. Wilcox, it seems to me you think she is a plaster saint, and if so, there is no use my saying anything more—but I warn you. Time will tell."

"Indeed, I don't," said Mrs. Wilcox hastily. "I think the whole affair is terrible and disgraceful enough on the face of it, and the sooner I get Miss Prudence Semaphore out of the house, the better. I must speak to Captain Wilcox at once. But then murder—. No, I can't believe it."

"Well, if you are going to risk allowing an infamous criminal to escape justice, a Cain whose hands are dyed in her sister's blood, I confess I am surprised at you."

"But think of the disgrace to the house," pleaded Mrs. Wilcox. "It will be put in the papers, and we shall be ruined, and you know, after all, Miss Lord, we are not quite sure. Miss Semaphore may be alive and well somewhere, and what fools we should look if we made a fuss, and then she turned up all right."

"She never will turn up," said the medical woman gloomily. "There never was a clearer case of circumstantial evidence. It doesn't take a Sherlock Holmes to piece it together."

"But what do you want me to do?"

"I think that as I have placed all the facts before you, your duty is to inform the police at once. You are the head of this house,

and if you sanction such goings on, it is no place for respectable people."

Mrs. Wilcox wrung her hands despairingly.

"I appeal to you, ladies," she said, addressing Mrs. Dumaresq and Mrs. Whitley, "to consider that if Miss Semaphore is alive, we might, by saying a word, lay ourselves, all four, open to an action for libel. It may be as Miss Lord says; still, until things develop, until we know a little more about this trial and the baby farming, and the connection of Miss Prudence with it all, it is better to be silent, and get her away peaceably. Even if nobody saw Miss Semaphore leave, there is no proof that she did not slip out unobserved, though I grant it seems unlikely."

"Do as you wish," said the medical woman in a towering rage. "I will be no party to these concealments. My duty is clear, and however painful it may be, I will do it."

"But the libel, Miss Lord," suggested Mrs. Whitley. "What Mrs. Wilcox says is true. If Miss Semaphore turns up, her sister may prosecute you."

This rather sobered the medical woman.

"Well," she said, more conciliatingly, "what do you suggest should be done?"

"I think," said Mrs. Dumaresq, "I think it would be more diplomatic to wait until this trial, or whatever it is, comes off. If Miss Semaphore is alive, I should think it certain she will turn up at it. Or perhaps, indeed, the suspicion of the authorities has already fallen on Prudence. We don't really know why the detectives are after her. Let us wait. Let us go to that trial and hear what comes out. If she does not clear herself of this charge, whatever it may be, and if her sister does not put in an appearance, I think it might be well for you, Mrs. Wilcox, to suggest to the prosecuting counsel that he should cross-examine her as to her sister's whereabouts. Then, if she cannot give satisfactory replies, and if anything to her disadvantage comes out, she will probably be suspected, and the whole affair will be gone into without our making ourselves responsible in any way."

"That," said Mrs. Wilcox, "I consider to be an excellent idea. And now, ladies, I beg of you not to let a word of all this escape you. In a house like ours, one cannot be too careful. Until we really know the truth, there is no use in telling anyone what we think. Will you all promise me to be silent about it?"

Mrs. Dumaresq and Mrs. Whitley agreed, and after some persuasion a reluctant consent was won from the medical woman, who promised to hold her tongue, until after the trial, any way.

CHAPTER XX.

NOTICE TO QUIT.

With the curious intuition common to the sick, Prudence felt that something was wrong. There was an atmosphere of unrest about her.

She noted the frown on the brow of Mrs. Wilcox and the hardness of her tone when she asked her how she felt, and if she thought she would be able to sit up for a while to-morrow, though Mrs. Wilcox did her best to speak in her natural voice.

She remarked the averted face of her old enemy, the medical woman, but she was too prostrate to heed them, or to enquire if anything unpleasant had occurred.

She did not seem to mind much what happened now. Justice was probably on her track. She was a criminal hiding from the law. She would be hunted down, exposed, put to public shame. Augusta—her poor

Augusta—how was she? In what condition would she be found? Tears of sorrow and weakness gushed from the eyes of the afflicted lady, but the rest and quiet and the absence of fresh agitation gradually calmed her nerves, and she had leisure to reflect on her course of action. There was nothing for it but to come forward, if compelled, and speak the whole truth. She had had enough of subterfuges and prevarications. She would tell her story—they might believe it or not as they liked. She thought, in the apathy of despair, they probably wouldn't—time would tell, for surely Augusta, if ever she became able to speak, would confirm her testimony—granted she had not lost her memory of the events connected with her previous life. There would be two or three years to wait probably, but that could not be helped. She might, meantime, be cast into prison. For that she was prepared. With the courage of despair she braced herself to meet whatever fate might have in store for her. At any rate, it could not be worse than the tortures she had already endured.

When, two days later, the detective from Scotland Yard called, she was able to receive him in Mrs. Wilcox's sanctum, for that lady

would not suffer him to be shown into the drawing-room. It was with a sense of having been through all this before, that Prudence read that "Victoria, by the Grace of God, Queen," summoned her to give evidence at the Arrow Street Police Court, on the ensuing Monday morning, "in the case of the Queen *v.* Sarah Anne Brown, otherwise," &c., &c.

"Well, the worst had come, and she would go through with it somehow. What awaited her when the trial was over she did not venture to speculate. That she had come within the clutches of the law she did not doubt, and her future loomed vague and dreadful. Where could she go if she escaped prison? Her name would be in every paper, her story on every lip. Even the lady who sold the Water of Youth had never heard of a case of a grown, an elderly person, being transformed into a baby by its effects. She foresaw that it would be generally believed that she had got rid of Augusta, and that the baby was—but who or what the baby might be considered was a point on which she absolutely refused to speculate.

Long after the man from Scotland Yard

had taken his departure, she sat in a sort of stupor, taking no note of objects round her, and unaware that she was alone, when she was startled by the entrance of Mrs. Wilcox.

The air of that lady was portentous.

"Miss Semaphore," she said, "there is something I have been anxious to say to you for several days back, but did not like to speak while you were ill. Now, however, that you are able to receive *visitors*"—with sarcastic emphasis—"I think you are well enough to hear what I have got to say. It is this, that I desire that you will look for accommodation elsewhere, and leave my house at the very earliest opportunity."

"You mean to turn me out?" asked Prudence in alarm.

"Far be it from me to turn anyone out," said Mrs. Wilcox. "I merely request you to leave."

"But why?" said Prudence timidly.

"Why?" echoed Mrs. Wilcox almost in a shriek. "Why? I think you had better ask yourself that question, Miss Semaphore. I have always tried to keep my house respectable, and I must say, Miss Semaphore, if I was to die for it, that I looked to you and your sister to aid me in that endeavour,

rather than to bring disgrace on a first-class and well-conducted establishment. 'Why?' indeed!"

"I have had a great deal of worry lately," said Prudence, "quite without any fault of my own, but neither my sister nor myself have done anything to bring disgrace on your establishment, Mrs. Wilcox."

"No!" ejaculated Mrs. Wilcox angrily. "Then what about all this baby-farming business, and detectives from Scotland Yard coming here looking for you?"

Utterly confounded by such unexpected knowledge on the part of her landlady, and ignorant of how much more she might have learned, Prudence could only gaze at her in helpless bewilderment, while Mrs. Wilcox stood nodding her head and grimly enjoying the confusion she had occasioned.

"I have been—I am in great trouble," Prudence stuttered; "but I am not to blame —no one is really to blame, if you'd only believe me. The whole thing was an accident. If you know anything at all about it, you must know it was an accident!"

"An accident?" shrieked Mrs. Wilcox. It flashed through her mind that perhaps after all the medical woman was right.

"Quite an accident," said Prudence. "Simply an overdose. The bottle broke, you see, so the poor dear made haste to swallow the contents, and accidently took too much."

"I really think, Miss Semaphore," said Mrs. Wilcox very slowly, "I really think your mind is wandering."

"Oh no, indeed I'm not wandering. That was how it happened, and of course after that I had to get rid of the poor dear, especially as I never dreamt you knew anything about it."

More and more confirmed in her belief that Prudence was either raving or confessing a murder, Mrs. Wilcox spoke.

"Well, without enquiring further as to what has happened, or how it happened, having no desire to be mixed up in a very painful affair, I think, Miss Semaphore, we had better part, and the sooner you can make it convenient the better."

"Oh, do keep me until after Monday," cried Prudence, breaking down. "The trial will be on Monday, and that will decide what course I must take; but now I am ill, I am not fit to undertake packing. I cannot go."

"I am sorry to insist, Miss Semaphore, but go you must. I will tell Jane she is to help you to pack. Even if I were willing to keep you, Captain Wilcox is not, and in such matters he is terribly severe. I really cannot gainsay him. He says he will not have you under this roof for forty-eight hours longer, and would sooner forfeit payment for your week's board now due than let you stay."

Prudence got up and groped her way blindly to the door.

"Very well," she said, turning on the threshold. "Send Jane to me at once. I will leave before dinner."

With the assistance of Jane, Miss Prudence put her belongings together, dressed, and desired the maid to call a cab. No one came to the door to see her off; but, glancing at the windows, she saw Mrs. Wilcox peeping out from her sanctum, and Mrs. Dumaresq and the medical woman from the window of their respective apartments.

With a heart full of bitterness, Prudence turned away, and bade the man drive on. Up one street and down another they went, the unhappy lady taking no note of where she was going, until she was roused from her brown study by the cabman, who drew up,

descended from his box, and thrust his head in the window to ask where she wanted to go.

"I don't know, cabman," said Prudence helplessly. "I am looking for apartments. Do you know of any that are nice and respectable?"

"Why, yessem, I do," said the man, "which my wife's own sister, she keeps 'em in Victoria Crescent, an' clean an' respectable they are, that I'll hanswer for; an' she cooks splendid."

"Then drive there, please," said Prudence apathetically, and fell back into doleful musings, until the cab stopped at the address.

Mrs. Perkins, the cabman's sister-in-law, married to an ex-butler, was a kindly, cheerful body, who willingly accepted a week's rent in advance in lieu of references. In her sage-green parlour Prudence sat down with a feeling of rest and privacy, to which she had long been a stranger, and braced herself as best she might for the ordeal before her.

"My poor darling Gussie," the good-hearted creature murmured over and over again. "What you must suffer! My dear sister, what must you think of me for sending

you to that dreadful woman? But I did it for the best, I did it for the best."

The excitement of the move was a great strain on Prudence in her weak state of health; but Mrs. Perkins proved an admirable nurse, and though quite unable to leave her bedroom for the next few days, the unhappy spinster rejoiced at being free from the supervision of the medical woman.

CHAPTER XXI.

AT THE ARROW STREET POLICE COURT.

NERVOUS people are generally too early, and on the fatal Monday morning Miss Prudence Semaphore, who was still weak and ill, but meantime had found comparative repose in her quiet and obscure lodgings, presented herself at the door of the Arrow Street Police Court almost as soon as it was opened. She was dressed all in black, and with her white face and long veil looked like a newly made widow.

The baby farming case had excited great interest in the neighbourhood, where "good Mrs. Brown" was a well-known personage, and though three cases stood before it on the list, already dirty drabs from the surrounding alleys, with still dirtier infants clasped in their arms, had gathered on the pavement in hope of seeing the prisoner and witnesses arrive.

Prudence had the satisfaction of hearing herself described as "the mother o' one o' Sal Brown's children," and of being threatened with personal violence by a brawny matron, who shook her fist under the poor lady's nose, and exclaimed, in an access of virtuous indignation, "I know your sort, I do," promising, if Prudence would come outside, to give her "a jolly good 'iding." At this point a policeman interfered, and conducted the terrified victim to a private room where she awaited in misery the usher's summons.

Meantime the witnesses began to collect. The various serjeants and detectives concerned in the case, the spectators of Sal Brown's war dance when she used a baby as a weapon, and others arrived singly or in groups. Amongst the rest came a workhouse matron, and an assistant in charge of the infants concerned, since in accordance with the usual procedure, the infants had been sent to the workhouse while awaiting the trial of Sal.

The matron was a portly, red-faced woman of fifty, with that brusqueness of manner acquired by officials accustomed to deal with those whom they consider their inferiors. Her friend was a pale and highly genteel

person who made many objections to appearing in court at all. The children, miserable, pinched objects, with the big, bright eyes, long lashes, and weird faces of the starved, were packed by twos and threes in perambulators in charge of a couple of pauper women, fifteen unhappy infants in all.

Weirdest of the party, was the elder Miss Semaphore, in a pink cotton frock, an infant's bib, and an old and often-washed white shawl. Little Augusta was a singularly unprepossessing baby.

"Drat the child," said the workhouse nurse. "She has just the look of a little old woman, and I never did see one of her age that took such notice of everything a body does. I declare to you I took a sip of her milk just to see if it was sweet, and when I turned round I caught her eye, an' I'm blest if she didn't wink. It gave me quite a turn. A real wicked wink it was, an' when I gave her the bottle if she didn't push it away, and wipe the top before she'd drink a drop."

"She was starved, nurse," said her subordinate. "That's what it was. Them children that is starved has a look and ways as if they was ninety. Many a one of them I've seen brought in here, so I knows the kind."

"Oh! this one couldn't have been starved. It was only two days in Brown's place I hear. They do say its mother is a lady, and gave it to Sal with a hundred pounds in gold, and told her to get rid of it as soon as she liked. Sal went on the spree with the money, an' that's how she was run in. The neighbours said that child had not been long with her. Look! it's a deal plumper than the others. They're regular starved I'll allow, but this 'un has queer ways. Now to give you an idear, the matron and me we had a friendly glass of punch last night after a 'ard day's work, and the matron, she says to me, as how she'd like to see the children in the baby farming case, as there's so much interest took in it you know, it made her curious, an' so I brought her in to see 'em all a laying in their cots. An' this 'ere one was awake, staring at us with all its eyes. So matron, she stoops an' says, 'Ow waz-zums?' an' kisses it, an' the cretur it makes a face at her, turns away its head, and pulls out a bit of blue ribbon as was on a doll I gave it, and makes signs to her to take it. Struck all of a heap she was. 'Watever does it mean?' sez she. 'Wy take the blue ribbon,' sez I, half jokin', for I couldn't believe it, and

the objeck looks at me and nods three times very slowly, just as if to say 'you're right.' It frightened me, it did."

"'Tis your imagination, nurse, that's wot it is."

"Not it," retorted the nurse. "Imagination don't trouble me, so it don't; but I see wot I see, and there's no good a trying to persuade me different. That child is queer. Just look at it now a sucking its thumb and listening to every word we say, and taking it all in you'd think."

Augusta, her scanty downy hair brushed, her nose and cheeks shining with recent ablutions, certainly had something weird about her, or so it seemed to both the women. Her eyes had an elfish intelligence that was startling. She looked as if at any moment she might speak.

That she understood was only too evident, for she obeyed every direction given to her when it was to her fancy. At times her efforts to find a voice, to tell all she knew, could not be mistaken, and inspired as much fright and pity as the inarticulate cries of the deaf and dumb.

"What is she doing of now?" said the subordinate suddenly.

Augusta had been looking at her fixedly until she attracted her attention, and when the eyes of the nurse and her assistant were fixed on the elderly infant, they saw she was making violent efforts to get up.

"What is it, pet? What is it now?" said the assistant soothingly. "What does my precious want?"

"I vow and declare," said the matron, "that child is making signs as if she was writing. Look at her finger, do. She makes me nervous, she does. 'Tis no way for a baby like that to go on."

"How old would you say she was, nurse?"

"Oh, 'bout a year I'd say, or fourteen months."

"Would you now? Well, p'raps she is; but d'you know when first I saw her she didn't seem to look a month old. Queer, wasn't it? p'raps 'twas the light, but she do seem a deal older now."

"Wat an interest you take in her," said the matron. "Wy 'er more 'an the others? Nasty little varmint she is I thinks myself. She might be an 'undred by the looks of 'er."

"Wot ken you expect from a pore little neglected come-by-chance? She's 'ad a bad time, she 'as. I wish I 'ad 'er mother 'ere, an' I'd give 'er wot for, so I would."

"Will you stop that talking, please," said a burly policeman, thrusting his head into the room where the witnesses were assembled. "They can 'ear you in court."

The voices fell immediately.

"Oh, there they are, poor little dears!" said a new-comer, bustling in, a neighbour of "good Mrs. Brown," who had been called on to give evidence as to the condition in which the children were kept. "Let me see, there's Florrie and Joey and Ada and Rosy and Tommie; yes, everyone of them, but where's the last child? The one Sal got all the dibs with?"

"Here she is," said the workhouse matron, indicating Augusta.

"No you don't," said the woman rudely. "'Twas a new-born hinfant, it was. That child's a goin' on two years old, or I'm a Dutchman, an' I never set heyes on her before. She don't belong to Sal's little lot."

The matron made an angry reply, which Sal's neighbour resented, and trouble would have ensued, but that the big policeman interfered once more and commanded silence. Both parties appealed to him, but he would listen to neither, and gruffly told them to

"stow their talk, and keep their story till they got into court."

While this went on in the waiting-room, Prudence was sitting in an agony of apprehension expecting the summons.

At last the case of The Queen *v.* Brown was called, and Sal was put forward on remand charged with the criminal neglect of certain infants under one year, committed to her charge, and for that she, an unlicensed person, did receive more than one such infant, contrary to the regulations of the Act 25 Victoria, section 22, clause 4.

An officer from the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children deposed that the police had informed him of the deplorable condition of the unhappy infant, whom Sal was using as an offensive weapon on the occasion of the arrest. He went to the station where the woman had been charged, obtained her name and address, and proceeded to make enquiries. A graphic description of Plummer's Cottages followed, and of the wretched objects found there—starved, dirty, and miserable.

Witness after witness was called to testify to the children being left for hours without food, fire, or attention. The children were

formally exhibited. The workhouse matron deposed to their condition when admitted.

Finally, it was announced that the names and addresses of parents or other relatives of the children had been found, some of them people of good position, and that they would be brought forward to swear to their condition when delivered over to the prisoner.

There was a thrill of excitement in court, anticipative of scandals. People of good position do not hand over babies to a Sal Brown without strong reason. To the rustle and stir succeeded a strained silence as the usher called the name of "Prudence Semaphore."

CHAPTER XXII.

A SCENE IN COURT.

Miss Prudence Semaphore, in after years describing her sensations when placed in the witness box, was accustomed to say she didn't know whether she stood on her head or her heels. If any desire to experience the feeling, without enduring the varied miseries that a cruel fate inflicted on the unhappy lady, let them, if unaccustomed to public speaking, be called on for an after-dinner speech. The swimming in the head, the sea of faces dimly seen, the weakness in the knees, dryness of the tongue and throat, confusion of thought and general helplessness experienced, will help them to realise her emotions. The impossibility of dying suddenly then and there, ere forced to break silence, will appear a hardship, but they will be spared the terror of having somehow brought themselves within the clutches of the

law, that appalled Miss Prudence. Speech-making is not penal. Would that it were; but a respectable spinster, mixed up in a baby farming case, the only witness to her truth and *bonâ fides* a helpless, speechless infant, can scarcely hope to clear herself satisfactorily.

Prudence knew that her story was wild and improbable; her illness had further disheartened her. She felt sure that no one would believe her on her oath, and this conviction gave a hesitation to her manner, an uncertainty to her statements, that branded her in the eyes of all as an audacious but unskilful liar.

"Come! she might 'ave told a better one than *that!*" was the whispered remark in the gallery when, in answer to a question, she declared that the infant handed over by her to the prisoner was her sister.

"Do you mean your step-sister?" asked the magistrate. "She is very much younger than you."

"No, sir. She is my sister. My elder sister."

There was a roar of laughter at this extraordinary statement.

"Your *elder* sister?"

"Yes, your worship."

"Are your parents living?"

"No, your worship."

"When did they die?"

"My mother died sixteen years ago, my father three years later."

"And yet you say this infant is your elder sister?"

"Oh, sir, my lord, your worship," said the weeping Prudence, "I assure you I am speaking the truth. I know I can't expect anyone to believe me, but indeed it is true."

There was movement and merriment at the solicitors' table, and a voice said in a whisper,

"Queer delusion! Mad as a hatter!"

Prudence heard the words, and drew herself up with some dignity.

"No," she said, "I am not mad; it is no delusion. Will you allow me to make a plain statement, your worship? The child I handed to that wicked woman is my sister, and is older than I. We bought a bottle of the Water of Youth that we saw advertised in the *Lady's Pictorial.* She should have drunk very little, but unfortunately she took an overdose, and you may believe me or not,

but I found her changed into the infant you see in the middle of that same night."

A roar of laughter drowned her words.

The counsel for the prosecution was very stern.

"I do not know, madam," he said, "what may be the state of your mind, though I should advise your relatives to have it enquired into, but we cannot have the time of the court taken up in listening to such ridiculous and impossible statements. Remember, please, that you are on your oath, and give truthful replies to the questions put."

"I am speaking the truth," wailed Prudence. She was desperate, careless of consequences, driven into a corner. "You may put me in prison if you like, but I can say nothing else. My sister bought the Water from a Mrs. Geldheraus, of 194, Handel Street, on the 27th of June last, at three o'clock in the afternoon. She took a dose of it that same night, broke the bottle, I think, by accident, and unwilling to lose the wonderful water—at least, so I conclude, for I was not present—drank up all that was left. I heard her crying in the night, and found her turned into a baby. I could not keep

her at the boarding-house, for the sake of my own good name. Everyone was prying and questioning about her, so I gave her to the prisoner to take care of, believing that she was a good and honest woman."

"And where is this Mrs. Geldheràus now? Does she know you? Can she give any evidence as to your mental condition?"

"Alas!" said Prudence, weeping profusely, though even the prisoner at the bar wore an incredulous grin, "she has gone away to Paris. She was on the point of leaving London when my sister called on her."

The counsel for the prosecution looked triumphantly at the magistrate. The woman was an absolute Bedlamite. No mere liar would invent so lame, so preposterous a story.

"You may stand down," he said abruptly.

"Please may I say one word?" asked the distressed witness. She looked full at the magistrate. He was a soft-hearted man, and something in her pathetic, tear-stained face touched him.

"Well," he said, "what is it? You must be brief."

"Would you mind having my sister—the child—brought forward?"

The woman in charge of Augusta stood up, and exhibited the quaint, weird-eyed infant.

At sight of her an extraordinary change came over the face of good Mrs. Brown. She whispered eagerly and excitedly to the barrister engaged for the defence, pointing at Augusta, and accenting her remarks by beating her closed fist on the edge of the dock.

In a moment he was on his feet.

"Your worship! On behalf of my client, I beg to say she disclaims all responsibility for the child now produced in court. She knows nothing about it, and has never seen it in her life before. She desires me to say that the baby committed to her care by this lady was evidently under a month old. I appeal to every mother in court if that child is not between two and three years of age at the least."

Great excitement followed this statement.

"Is that the child you gave her, or is it not?" asked the magistrate.

"Yes, my lord—your worship, I mean—that is the child, my sister, I'd know her anywhere. Her eyes are the same, and she always had that little wart on her forehead—but she looks bigger, certainly."

Sal vehemently protested from the dock.

"Your worship," said her counsel, "I emphatically deny that that is the child. The witness has already shown herself unworthy of belief, and has tried to palm off a ridiculous cock-and-bull story on the court. As men of the world, we can all see her motive for that, but what her reason for insisting that this child, which is quite two years older than the other, is hers, I confess I do not understand."

"Is this the child that was placed in your care?" asked the magistrate of the workhouse matron.

"Yes, your worship. They was all identified wen they was brought into the 'ouse, and I put a kyard on each with its given name. This 'ere child is Augusta, or some such name. She 'as never been out of my keeping since."

"How old was she, supposed to be at the time?"

"Three weeks or a month, I b'lieve, yer wusshup, though I do think now"—doubtfully—"she looks a deal older than that; but the light wasn't, so to say, good when she was brought in."

"This is very extraordinary," said the

magistrate. "Who gave particulars as to the child's apparent age?"

"The prisoner, I b'lieve, yer wushup, an' two of her neighbours that identified the children, and gave the names by which they was known."

"Let me look at it."

Augusta was held up for the magistrate's nearer inspection.

"Well," said he, hesitatingly, "I'm not much of a judge of babies, but that child does seem to me to be quite three years old. When was she born?" he asked Prudence.

"Fifty-three years ago—on the 21st of April, 18—."

Another roar of laughter greeted this reply, but the magistrate was annoyed. The woman was too ridiculous, for it was easy to see she was not as mad as she pretended.

"Madam," he said severely, "you must be aware of the impression I have formed with regard to the ridiculous story you have thought fit to tell, and I would warn you, in your own interests, to remember that it is advisable to speak the truth."

At any other time, his stern tone and frowning brows would have frightened poor

Prudence out of such little wits as she possessed. Now, however, she seemed to be paying no attention, but, with dilated eyes, kept staring at Augusta, who was certainly conducting herself in a very extraordinary fashion. To the dismay of the nurse, she was bending, wriggling, and stretching in her arms.

As the magistrate ceased speaking, there was a sudden sound of rent material, a shower of buttons flew about the heads of the junior counsel, and Augusta's sloppy workhouse frock and pinafore, that had been gradually tightening to bursting point, split explosively up the back and sleeves.

"Look, look!" cried Prudence, in a fever of anxiety. "It is passing off. I told you so. She is growing older. Oh! wait a little, your worship. Before long perhaps she will be able to speak. She will confirm what I've told you. Augusta dear, for heaven's sake, speak if you can. They don't believe me."

The nurse, with alarm depicted on every feature, and drops of perspiration standing on her brow, gave up her efforts to hold the child, whose weight had increased amazingly, and put her sitting on the bench beside her,

watching her the while with undisguised trepidation.

Everyone saw that something extraordinary was going on. Augusta choked, whooped, gurgled, turned red and spotty, purple and white, alternately. She seemed passing every minute through months of childish growth, long-past croups, convulsions, measles, and so forth, sweeping over her in flashes, as she began once more her painful, and in this case, rapid, journey towards maturity.

The public in the gallery rose *en masse.* Business was a standstill. The juniors stood on benches. The magistrate, bewildered and confounded at the unexpected turn of events, wiped his spectacles with the air of a man who sees the end of all things.

The women round the children were rigid with fright, and dared not lay a finger on the prodigy. The matron was the first to recover. Her sense of propriety awoke, and rapidly taking off her long cloak, she passed it round the struggling, elderly child, who each instant was outgrowing her garments more and more.

"Oh! speak, Augusta, do speak if you can!" implored Prudence.

"Don't you see I'm trying to?" replied Augusta, suddenly and sharply, in a clear, childish treble. "Of course what you said is true, though, as usual, you have said a great many things you were not called on to tell. I did take an overdose of that dreadful stuff, and now the effect is passing off, I am in great agony, as anyone might see, and will you please take me away at once? This is a most disagreeable position for a lady. Call a cab and take me away; what I have suffered in that woman's clutches no tongue can tell."

The magistrate turned pale, Sal Brown shrank into the farthest corner of the prisoner's dock, and, with a scared face, listened to the words of her rapidly-developing *protegée*. Beneath the matron's ample cloak the form of Augusta was waxing ever longer and wider, like the melon plant beneath the cloth of an Eastern juggler.

"I think, madam," said the magistrate in broken accents, "you had better take the —it home."

"Your worship," hastily interposed the counsel for the prosecution, "this child, I mean lady, is a valuable witness for us. I propose that before she is permitted to

leave the precincts of this court she shall be examined. The examination shall be as brief as possible. I suppose she understands the nature of an oath?"

"Of course I do. I understand everything, but really cannot undergo examination now," said Augusta squeakily but crossly. "I do not feel able for it to-day. Some other time I shall have no objection to put your worship in possession of the facts of my compulsory residence with Mrs. Brown. There are also certain circumstances in connection with the workhouse management of infants that I should like to bring before you. At present, however, I must beg leave to retire, and seek that repose I so much need."

"Well, in all my experience," said the magistrate solemnly, "I never heard or imagined such a case as this; it is quite unprecedented. I really am at a loss how to act. To my mind, the best course is to grant another remand, to admit of the appearance of the child—a—I mean lady, in the witness box. I think what she says is reasonable. Under the extraordinary circumstances, we could barely expect her to give evidence to-day. She must be shaken by

her unparalleled experiences. As for you, madam," he continued, addressing Prudence, who was still weeping hysterically, "I must express my regret for having doubted what I now perceive to have been a truthful and unvarnished narrative. My excuse must be that your sister's experience has been so exceptional, that neither I nor anyone who heard it could be expected to believe it without positive confirmation. This has been unexpectedly supplied, and I think I may say you leave this court without the smallest suspicion on your *bonâ fides.*"

There was a round of applause from the gallery, instantly suppressed, and Prudence, weeping, blushing, smiling, and bridling, all at the same time, walked out of court with the shivering Augusta.

By this time the latter had assumed the appearance of a girl about eight, with bare feet, and toes to which still adhered the rent fragments of a baby's knitted woollen bootees. The news had spread, and a dense crowd had collected at the door of the police court to see them pass. Prudence drew back terrified at the sight, and a friendly policeman, seeing her agitation, summoned a cab to a side door, and placed the sisters in it. As

they drove off, the baulked and excited crowd perceived them, and a tremendous 'round of cheering woke the echoes of Arrow Street.

CHAPTER XXIII.

CONCLUSION.

Of our story little remains to tell. Augusta was driven to her sister's lodgings and put to bed. In less than twenty-four hours she had arrived once more at the time of life she had temporarily abandoned. Her experience had been a disappointment, but her intense relief in feeling that she was once more in command of the helm, prevented her dwelling on that. It was delightful to array herself once more in her own clothes, to be no longer a helpless infant, pinched, tweaked, starved, insulted to her face. The joy of being able to speak was in itself so intense that Miss Semaphore was in a constant flow of good humour, and in all her experience of her sister, Prudence never had so good a time. . .

After the first excitement had cooled down, she feared that Augusta would be morose, soured by the failure of her experiment; but

no. She seemed to find perennial satisfaction in contrasting her present state with that she had so unwillingly endured. The great drawback to her happiness was the notoriety given to her case. Three times the sisters had to change lodgings, because of the curiosity they excited amongst their neighbours, and the crowds that collected to watch them pass in or out.

When the trial came on the following week, Arrow Street was crowded to suffocation. All the boarders from Beaconsfield Gardens were once more in the front row, and unbounded interest was excited by the evidence of Prudence. The papers were full of the circumstances. The *Daily Telegraph* published a leader on it, would-be interviewers made the life of the sisters a misery. Their supposed portraits, horrible caricatures that their own mother would have failed to recognise, appeared in the halfpenny evening papers. The sixpenny weeklies sent artists to sketch them as they sat in court. The medical press took the matter up. Samples of the Water of Youth were called for to be analysed, but without avail, since Mrs. Geldheraus and her mysterious potion had disappeared into the *Ewigkeit*.

Never were inoffensive and obscure women dragged so suddenly into notoriety. A wax model of Augusta was set up at Madame Tussaud's, and the baby clothes she was wearing when taken to the workhouse were shown in a glass case. She netted £700 by their sale, which she looked on as in a measure compensatory for her outlay on the Water. The devotion of Prudence to her sister was everywhere commented on. She became quite a popular personage, and to her surprise and delight, received no less than five offers of marriage from persons totally unknown to her.

While their interest in the case was unabated, the medical woman, Mrs. Whitley, Mrs. Dumaresq, and the other boarders, felt somewhat shy of making any advances to the sisters. Soft, and gentle, and foolish, as Prudence was, they felt that she could not and would not forgive their impertinent curiosity and interference; and yet there was much to excuse their conduct, for such cases as Miss Semaphore's are rare. When the sisters were finally making their way out of court, having heard good Mrs. Brown condemned to a term of six months imprisonment with hard labour, Major Jones, how-

ever, rushed forward, and with a profound sweep of his hat, requested permission to escort them to the hansom in waiting. He did not say "good-bye" until he had asked for and obtained leave to call on them, a privilege of which he henceforth took frequent advantage.

There is an opinion afloat, this time not merely in the mind of Prudence herself, but in the minds of the boarders at Beaconsfield Gardens, that the younger Miss Semaphore will before long be requested to change her name. Since her painful experience, her character has developed. She is more self-reliant, steadier, less unduly girlish in her ways and dress, and seems likely, if her mature love affair runs smooth, to make an excellent wife for the Major. Should her future, as it promises, prove happier than her past, she, for one, despite the mental agony she struggled through, will not regret the temporary rejuvenation of Miss Semaphore.

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