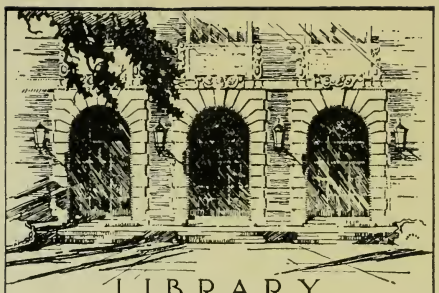

ONLY TO BE MARRIED.

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A Novel.

BY

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AUTHOR OF "FREDERICK RIVERS."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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CHAPTER I.

ALL THAT GLITTERS IS NOT GOLD.

The Hall was certainly most beautiful. It had been prepared for Mrs. Forester, without the slightest regard to expense, by those infatuated tradespeople who, in their fixed determination to possess themselves of a fair share of an heiress's fortune, had forgotten that it was very possible indeed that the heiress's husband was quite as wide awake as they were. Mr Edwin Forester was not the man to put himself to the smallest inconvenience, much less was he the man to fetter himself with all the bonds of holy matrimony, for the sake of putting money

into the pockets of Messrs. Thompson and Co. If he had really married an heiress, he would have felt it a mean thing to waste her money on the payment of debts; and he would have thought it quite sufficient for Thompson to know that he really had money and could pay, though it might be one of the playful peculiarities of his disposition to put off the day of that calamity as long as possible. He would have said to Thompson, just as if a speech were as good as a bank note—

"Well, really, my dear sir, I'm sure you can't exactly mean to be importunate, or to do anything in the nature of dunning. If I were a poor devil, without even a penny to bless myself with, then your calling upon me with this charming regularity about every twenty-first day would be quite intelligible; but I really can't, for the life of me, make out why you should trouble yourself to come and see me so often, when you know your little account is

just as safe as if the money were in the Bank of England."

Now, considering that everybody knows that the Bank of England is guarded by some dozen or score of Guards, and that to get money out of the Bank of England, when you don't happen to have an account there, is one of the most difficult problems that has ever been offered to a burglar for solution, it is not very easy to see wherein would lie the true and genuine comfort of Forester's assurance; but he had a charming way of talking, and wonderful similes by which to represent the perfect security of everybody who was in any way connected with himself. And many a man like Thompson would come to Forester for cash, and go home again with nothing but metaphors, rejoicing that he was counted worthy to retain for a little longer the opportunity of adding a larger and larger percentage of interest to Mr. Forester's account. For that charming gentleman was not at all

the person to lose anything that could be gained by genial conversation or cheerful correspondence. He never left an application for money unanswered for five minutes; he knew quite well that mankind so much prefer the form to the substance, that creditors are often almost as much annoyed at having their letters unanswered, as they are at having their bills unpaid. Indeed, it cost him nothing to go through the humiliation, not simply of writing letters, but even of visiting his very attached friends, and telling them face to face how deeply moved he was by their unremitting attentions. With his pleasant chatty manner he might have got in debt two or three thousand pounds more with ease, while a man of greater modesty and ten times Forester's chances of paying every penny, would have found himself years before in jail.

So it came to pass that Clayton's Hall had been decorated from roof to basement, and fur-

nished with all manner of luxuries without costing its master a single farthing. Indeed, that was little for such a genius as Forester. He had contrived so judiciously to avail himself of the confiding alacrity of Thompson and his companions in greediness and misfortune, that he had found it by no means difficult, in this great gush of trustfulness, to get hold of two or three hundred pounds for that pleasant trip to the Lakes with which his married life had begun. He would very much have preferred going to the Lakes on credit, but the railway officials of the London and North-Western are proof against all blandishments, and invariably prefer cash to metaphors.

And now they were at home together, and Forester was almost as pleased as Patty with the improvements in the Hall and grounds; though he knew full well how little gold there was beneath all the glitter. Without the slightest loss of self-possession or cheerfulness,

he even received a visit from Mr. Thompson, who came, not of course for money, but to ascertain how far his best endeavours had given satisfaction, and whether any final touch might yet be needed to make all complete. They parted at the gate with friendliest farewells.

"By the way, Thompson," Forester called out to him, as he was going away, "you needn't be bashful about calling round for any little remittance; I suppose I shall be sure to be seeing you in some eight or ten months?"

"Thank you, Mr. Forester," said Thompson, "I'll be sure to look up. Eight or ten months," he muttered to himself, as he walked away over the bridge. "What credit these young fellows do take: but, however, I half expected it, and I think, perhaps, my charges will about cover the interest. I'll give him a call about next Lady-day, and it's sure to be safe in the end."

"Poor beggar," said Forester to *himself;* "we've had a very agreeable interview. I wonder

whether he'll like the next interview as much. Let's see, this is August; he's to come if he likes in eight months,—September, October, November, December, January, February, March, April. I'll be bound he'll call on April Fool's-day; poor beggar, there's no knowing what a day may bring forth."

He had very much to show his wife, and among other things the neat iron rails that he had had put on the bridge.

"It's not the least likely," he said, "that you'd ever fall off the bridge again, though, by the way, you never did fall off at all; but it's not very probable that another of our medical advisers will go down by water to visit one of his patients, and be washed up on to the lawn. Of course all our doctors drink in this neighbourhood, but it's very seldom that two drunken men fall down over exactly the same paving-stone. So I consider the old gentleman who preceded you down the water rather in the light of

a vicarious sacrifice, who was offered up for the purpose of making the bridge safe for all other medical men for many a long year to come. However, the bridge was rather dangerous, so I thought it would be better for a railing; and so there the railing is, my dear; and there, at the other side, is the little path up the wood; and I dare say if you looked for it, you'd find the very stump of the tree that you went to sleep upon. Indeed, I remember looking for it myself once, soon after you'd gone back to Manchester; and I found an old stump, and I said to myself I'll be bound this is the very stump she went to sleep upon. Very likely it wasn't the same stump, but to a strong imagination it just answers the same purpose; and you know I'm not an artist, Patty. By the way," he went rattling on, pointing to a house to the left, just visible through a long avenue of trees, "do you see how dilapidated Strawberry Hill is getting? One of old Aaron Higgin-

botham's daughters married a curate, who had the use of Strawberry Hill in lieu of stipend, with, I think, a cow and a carriage in addition. As they hadn't a horse, of course they couldn't use the carriage; so they borrowed ten pounds upon it, and sent it away to some coach builder at Manchester. He'll never see the ten pounds again, and they'll never see the carriage; and all you can say is, that exchange is no robbery, and one good turn deserves another, and all that kind of thing. The cow might have been a useful article if they had been able to keep it; but the only thing the curate could do was to read prayers, and of course a cow does not care for the Liturgy. Poor Aaron Higginbotham hadn't given his daughter a fortune that was at all compatible with extensive farming; and so, when meat was dear, and the cow was getting very thin, they killed it and ate it, lest if they waited any longer it should have had no flesh on its bones at all. Poor

creatures, they're in a very bad way: they cannot dig, and to beg they are ashamed. I'd send them a five-pound note, if I—if I wasn't afraid it would hurt their feelings."

Thereupon suddenly Forester pulled up; for in his rapid conversation he had brought himself to the brink of a precipice almost without knowing it. He was very far from wishing Patty to know that his supply of ready money was at all times extremely limited; and he had been preserved from outraging the delicate sensitiveness of a poor curate by a gift of five pounds, not only by his own generous and considerate disposition, but also by the extreme paucity of his bank-notes.

Old Mr. Platt was dead, and another tenant was in Lucy's cottage; but, of course, Patty must see the old places that were once so dear to her, and were so dear still. Somehow they made her feel almost as if the best part of her life was over. Since she went to London, she

had been really working; she had found something that she could do well, and she had done it to the utmost of her ability; and like all earnest workers she had found that in all labour there is profit. Now, on the contrary, she seemed to have become a mere idler. She had half thought, when Forester was talking to her in the Park, that he was as anxious as she could be to promote the well-being of those who had fallen into misery and shame. Nay, with a not unpardonable pride, she had even thought that there was much in himself that was not altogether without its weakness and unhappiness, and that she might possibly be of service even to him. And yet, if it could have been so, would that triumph have been really greater than any one of the triumphs that she had been deserving and obtaining at Oak Villa? Perhaps, after all, she had been very selfish, thinking of her own unprotected condition, and of the dignity of being the mistress of a household, and

the delight of having all her half-understood womanly desires satisfied; forgetting all the while how much she would have to give up, even if, at last, she obtained what she was hoping for. And this she seemed very far from obtaining. She had scarcely heard a single sober speech from Forester since the day when, for better or worse, she had uttered the irrevocable "I will." Sometimes, indeed, she had tried to speak with him on some of those subjects that her London life had made so interesting to her. She had tried to feel sure that he would see them in the same light that she had seen them in, and she wanted to know how far the plans that she had been adopting, and which her friends had considered of great importance, were justified by his superior knowledge of the world. She and her friends had been trying to preserve and increase the self respect even of the lowest and most fallen, and she wanted to know whether that mode of treatment seemed reasonable to a

man of ordinary understanding and knowledge of human nature. But she had scarcely ventured upon the discussion of such subjects before she discovered, though for a long time she tried to disguise the fact from herself, that her husband did not care a single straw what plans were adopted for the restoration of evil-doers, and whether they succeeded or failed.

"Oh! don't bother yourself, Patty, about these things now," he once said; "I thought you'd forgot them all when you were married. I wonder they didn't bore you to death before you'd had to do with them a year. Very interesting young people you met with, I dare say; but, of course, you must know, quite well, that the majority of them are hypocrites, and that the more they snivel, and the more piously they talk, the more hypocritical they generally are. My belief is, that if a woman gets off the line, it is very much like a train getting off the line; she never gets on again.

She's generally smashed to pieces; or if she can be used any more, she's used for very short stages or for rickety excursion trains. When once a woman's gone, I'm very sorry for it, but all I can say is, she *is* gone."

"Well, Edwin," said his wife, "if you'd seen as many of these people as I have, perhaps you'd think differently. You should hear the history some of them have to tell of the way in which they were beguiled into mischief, and then, perhaps, you'd understand how they are often more sinned against than sinning."

"All the force of imagination, my dear girl," said the husband; "inventive genius where you'd least have expected it. And, after all, perhaps they're not much to blame. If a man makes up a history of somebody's misfortunes, sins, miseries, and all that sort of thing, makes a novel out of it, in fact, and sells the copyright of it to a respectable publisher for a couple of hundred pounds, he is called a genius. If, on the

other hand, a "social evil" invents a wonderful story of virtue, trust, seduction, poverty, misery, and all that sort of thing, and gives her own name to the heroine, she is not called a woman of genius, but a liar. What's in a name, my dear girl? I remember finding out in a Greek lexicon, when I was an interesting little boy, that the word that means "prophet" is somehow connected with the word that means "mad;" and anybody can see how the words artist and artful are alike. There's not much difference between a lie and a fiction, and I wouldn't be too hard on the girls you took so much care of because they often imposed on you. It's only one of the many interesting though inconvenient forms of human nature."

"Well," said Patty, "I don't think that. I'm sure some of them were sincere enough, and they had nothing to gain by trying to impose on me. Some of them had been brutally ill-used and utterly deceived."

"Ah well! Patty," said Forester, "you're a charming little innocent; but women are much more wide awake than you take them to be. They are all of them up to a thing or two, you may depend. For my part, I think the *men* are generally the victims; besides, a woman hasn't so much liberty as a man has, and a very good thing too."

So poor Patty was "shut up," convinced only of one thing, that it was absolutely impossible to make her husband understand the sort of life she had been leading, and much more impossible to persuade him to let her lead a somewhat similar life in the future. Indeed, in something he said to her, he seemed in some way to have anticipated that she might, one day, propose to transfer the benevolence of London to Derbyshire.

"In London," he said, "where people have far too much to do to know one another, and where you can easily be a perfect stranger to

your next-door neighbour, institutions like Mr. Whitehouse's may be all very well; but in a place like this such a thing would be absolutely preposterous. If, for instance, you were to turn *this* house into a reformatory, the only effect you would produce would be that every one in the neighbourhood would think I kept a harem. I dare say I'm no better than I ought to be," he added, with charming candour, "but still I don't care to be regarded in that light. Of course, there are plenty of women about here fit enough for Mr. Whitehouse; pretty factory wenches, naturally fond of flirting, and thereby coming more or less swiftly to grief; but if we brought them here to reform them, the only effect would be they would flirt with me, and then, you know, my dear, you would have to send *me* to a reformatory, and that would be a nice business."

So he would rattle on, half in banter and

half in earnest—doing nothing, scarcely even thinking; with not a single thorough earnest purpose about him. He could see nothing in sin except its oddity; that comic side of it which, when it gets found out, it always presents to cynics; or when it seemed to him tragic at all it was only when it cut across his own interests. There was nothing deep anywhere in his character except his selfishness; that was so deep that his whole being was soaked in it—drowned in it.

"What a double-damned fool I must have been," he soon began to say to himself, "to get married. I've got all the expense of this big house on me, all these disgusting tradespeople beginning to dun me already, and, good God! that other little matter always threatening to turn up and fling me down into hell-fire! And what have I gained by it? I never could have believed I was capable of being such an idiot; I'm fool enough to get my foot crushed, and

boxed up with that snivelling old Leighton for weeks, till I become an absolute lunatic, and marry myself to an incarnation of virtue and philanthropy. It's a wonder I didn't turn revivalist preacher, and go about the country with a converted coalheaver, and a mob of psalm-singing donkeys braying at our heels. I wish to goodness my charming wife had dropped off the bridge, and paid her first visit to the old Hall on a stretcher—and yet——"

"Yes, indeed, and yet——" Surely it was no fault in his wife that she was good and virtuous, and that she had spent the happiest part of her life in trying to make other people so? She would have been the last of all women to lure any man on to matrimony; and surely it was nothing better than some unaccountable impulse of generosity that had brought her to marrying Forester at all. She knew full well that she could make any man happy, who was capable of being made happy,

by love and goodness; and he did seem so earnest, so subdued and gentle, presenting to her so tenderly the affectionate side of his weakness, that she felt sure she might trust him. And is it not every woman's duty to be married, if with an honest and true heart she may? And, moreover, there were around Forester old associations of wondrous power. He seemed to belong to the old Leigh holiday times, to the river, and the fishes playing among its pebbles, and the birds feeding their young ones on its banks, and the meadows and the wood, and dearest of all, the mother, dead and gone. Through all this glorifying halo had Patty looked on Forester as he was talking to her so earnestly and so fondly in the Park. Alas! when women look at men, they ought to do to themselves what oculists do to bad-sighted people; they ought in a manner to half paralyse their eyes, so that they may see exactly what is, without retaining the power to

alter its proportions and appearance by the movement of their own muscles.

Moreover, the inevitable want that torments, sooner or later, every reckless prodigal—the want of money—was beginning more and more constantly, gallingly, dangerously to punish Forester. The Thompson fraternity were patient and confiding *to* the last degree ; but it was not very long before that last degree was reached, and of course they could go no further. The first of April, waiting to suit nobody's convenience, had come long ago ; and made an April fool of the smiling upholsterer. The creditors began to whisper to one another that somehow the Bank of England was keeping Forester's money very much safer than they desired, and to hint to that gentleman, with rudely increasing plainness, that they should prefer to be bankers for themselves. Then there were acceptances, renewals, loans, writs, costs ; with such angry conferences, such

ever thickening dangers, as began to turn the unprincipled idler into an equally unprincipled wild beast. He was losing all the gaiety and frivolity that had once given his wife so much uneasiness, lest after all he should be nothing better than a shallow trifler; but he was becoming sullen and irritable, and unutterably restless. He scarcely dared to stay in the house lest some unwelcome visitor should insist upon an interview, one of those dreadful interviews that could now no longer be made even tolerable by ever so entertaining banter. And yet he dared scarcely leave his house for a single hour, lest somebody should in his absence reveal prematurely to his wife his unfathomable beggary.

"Are you not well, Edwin?" said Patty to him one evening. She had been doing some work for baby—for baby had come by that time; and she had been watching her husband, and the deepening darkness of his face, as he

sat by the fire trying in vain to read. He could not be reading; for she noticed that he turned the pages as often backwards as forwards. Nay, he could not much longer even pretend to read, as he sat in anxious, useless thought, restlessly biting his nails to the quick, staring frowningly into the drear space crowded with peril and terror, seeing nothing nearer. And then he would lay his book down and pace the room, as if the disquiet of his heart might perhaps be relieved by bodily exertion; and soon again he would sit down by the table with his book before him, shading his eyes that no one might see how often they wandered from the page.

"Is anything the matter, my love?" again asked Patty.

"Oh, no, nothing at all," said Forester; "why should there be anything the matter?"

"What book are you reading, dear?" said Patty; "is it one I should like to hear?"

"It's—it's——. Why, by George! it's a gazetteer. I took down the wrong one."

"And have you only just found it out, Edwin? Do you know, I thought you couldn't be very much interested, you read so slowly. What *is* the matter?"

"I wish, Patty, you would not sit watching me in that nasty sly way. You seem always suspecting something or other."

"My dear Edwin," she said, tenderly, "it needs no watching or slyness to see that some heavy weight is on your heart. Mayn't I help you to bear it? Has it anything to do with those people who keep coming for their money?"

"No, it hasn't," he said, surlily; "besides, you know nothing about money and business; it couldn't do a bit of good if I did tell you all the vexations I ever have to put up with. You're much better without knowing anything about them."

"But I can't help knowing something about

them," she said; "and I might be much less anxious and unhappy if I knew all. That man, Thompson——"

"Well, what about him?" said her husband, interrupting, with a flushed face and eager eyes. "I should think I gave *him* a satisfactory answer only the other day."

"Yes, he said so," she continued; "but the time was so long now. Couldn't *I* possibly hasten it a little?"

"Well, and what then? Didn't you order him out?"

"No, dear; how could I? It was natural enough for a man to ask for his own money. But I told him I never meddled with your affairs, and, in fact, knew nothing about them."

"Well?"

"'It was only,' he said, 'I thought I might take the liberty to ask, so far as it depends on your own fortune——'"

"Impudent beggar!" Forester broke out.

"No, no, love," said Patty; "he must have quite misunderstood something or other you have said to him. But I soon put him right."

"How?" said Forester, turning ashy pale.

"I told him I had no fortune."

Beside himself with rage, Forester rose to his feet and paced the room, muttering fearful oaths. He turned fiercely upon his wife, as if *she* had been betraying and ruining him. He clenched his fists almost as if he would have struck her to the ground in his unreasoning fury. When the violence of his passion was over, the utter helplessness of his despair seemed even more dreadful, more pitiable.

"What can I have done, dearest?" said Patty. "Tell me, Edwin, tell me. What does it all mean?"

Turning to her a face so changed that it seemed in those few moments to have been

emptied of all goodness and to have nothing to express but cruelty and cunning—

"You've *ruined* me," he said, "that's all. But I'll fight it out yet. If you've driven me to fight with poisoned, devil's weapons, I can't help it—but, by the living God, I'll fight."

Patty rose to leave the room. That was no place to weep in, and she *must* weep and pray and commune with her own heart—or go mad. On the way to a little sitting-room, fitted expressly for her own use, she met the servant with a letter. She knew the writing, took the letter to her own room, read it, and threw it into the fire. He might be saved that blow, at any rate. No need to pour oil on those burning passions that were already consuming him.

"Sir,

"Many a laugh in your sleeve you've had by this time at the poor fools who were

so willing to trust you, contemptible liar and scoundrel that you are. Your wife hasn't a penny. You're a common thief—a mean, sneaking swindler, cheating—God bless her—even your own poor wife. But your part of the game's over, you slimy hypocrite. I hope you'll like the next move. It's the turn of

"Your obedient servant,

"J. THOMPSON."

"And this," said Patty, "is my married life! For this I left my work, my friends! This is the man that I am to honour and lean upon!"

She sat there she scarcely knew how long, weeping, praying, full of vainest regrets. At last the servant knocked at the door.

"Master's gone to Manchester, ma'am," she said. "I was to say it was on very important business, and he might have to go to London before he came home again."

Was Mr. Leighton thinking strange sad thoughts that night—living the old days over again; hopelessly, fruitlessly wishing that his heart had been less faint when he was so near the prize, the only prize he could ever care to win? Or is the mystic sympathy and subtle fellowship of hearts that truly love, a vain and taunting dream?

CHAPTER II.

MEGGY VICKERS.

Forester went to Manchester in the vain hope of appeasing some of his most dangerous creditors—in the hope that they might not yet know his "little game," and might therefore still be responsive, as of old, to his meek and honeyed words. If he could only get time—any time—a mere week, in his agony of fear, seemed an age—he would try to get money somehow, some poor instalment, some slight token that the rest was not utterly and for ever lost. "And after all," he said to himself, "I never said a word about my wife's fortune. If they chose to make up a nonsensical story for themselves, and repeat it and circulate it till they half made even me believe it, that only shows

what contemptible greedy fools they are." Unfortunately, however, his creditors took quite another view of his amusing little deception; and his creditors had already heard of it and seen to the deepest bottom of it. Thompson had made the best of his time and of his information; and indeed, at the very first house where the poor hunted spendthrift called there was Thompson himself.

"Charmed to see you," said the sarcastic upholsterer; "you're the very man me and Whittaker were talking about."

"And as you are here," said Whittaker, "it may be as well to have a word or two on business, Mr. Forester. We're all beginning to get rather tired of waiting for money, and to wonder whether it will ever come at all."

"You see, sir," said Thompson, "the Bank of England's so precious safe, and marriage settlements, and all manner of lawyer's rubbish so precious slow."

"Well, of course they are," said Forester; "I didn't make them, did I?"

"No, certainly not," said Thompson, "and what's more, they'll never make you. You've not a penny in a bank, and your wife has not a penny for her fortune."

"Who ever said she had?" asked Forester.

"Well, that's pretty cool," said the tradesman; "who ever said she had? That's pretty cool at any rate."

"Well, *I* never did," said Forester, "that's all. Neither did I ever say she hadn't: you seemed to know so much about it, I thought it would be a thousand pities to contradict you."

"You are a contemptible swindler!" said Whittaker.

"A mean, sneaking, cowardly thief!" added Thompson.

"Now, look here," said Forester, the wild beast in him getting more and more savage—

even his habitual stoop over-mastered, so that he seemed a strong, tall man—"look here, you miserable, pettifogging, money-making snobs; owing you money's one thing, and taking your damned impudence is another. If you like to give me time, time corresponding to your exorbitant charges, you'll get every penny. If you don't choose to give me time, you may or may not ruin *me*, but you'll most certainly lose every farthing of what I owe you. Which are you going to do?"

"Come, come, Mr. Forester," said Thompson, "it's no use breaking out in that way; we only want our own; and you must really pay, and pay it at once."

"Don't be a fool, Thompson," he replied; "pay it at once! Try to skin a flint, or get the 'breeks off a Hielandman.' Do you really think that if I'd got the money I should have put up with your dunning all these months?"

"You take it pretty cool, sir," said

Whittaker; "but if we can't get your money, and if you can't keep a more civil tongue in your head, we'll take *you*."

"Very considerate of you indeed," Forester answered; "generous and self-denying. But I've already put my affairs into the hands of a *moderately* shrewd lawyer; and I fancy your little game's spoiled. If you'd chosen to give me a few months I might have saved you something, that's all. Good morning."

That was not a very conciliatory mode of treating the British tradesman; and Forester felt, the moment he left the house, that he was a fool; that his bluster was the bluster of cowardice not of courage. He felt keenly the meanness of his position, and was not without his fear that there was a point beyond which even a shopkeeper would care more for self-respect than for money. All the more reason why *he* should get *money*. So it *was* necessary for him to visit London before returning

to the Hall. He missed the fastest train, but he reached Euston Square about five o'clock in the evening; and found a quiet lodging for the night.

There was nothing that he could do till morning, so he went for a walk along the not unfamiliar streets—Pentonville, Islington, Canonbury Square. He passed the very house where Patty had lived so happily as an adopted child; and paused for a moment, as he fancied he heard the cheery voices of her foster-parents. But he soon hurried on again into the lighter, noisier streets, where he might forget himself as completely as he was lost in the busy crowds of strangers. He was walking along Compton Terrace, when a hand touched his shoulder and Mr. Leighton was at his side.

"Why, Mr. Forester," he said, "London's the place for surprises. Not hurt your foot again, I hope?"

Nothing more likely than to meet the doctor

then and there, but Forester was utterly bewildered, even terrified. He felt almost as if he were arrested, as if he were tracked by spies, as if every one of his base deceits and crafty schemes had been detected and published to the world. It was impossible for Mr. Leighton not to see how strongly he was moved.

"I'm afraid something really is the matter," the doctor said, looking into his face. "Come across to the chemist's shop there, and let me get you some medicine."

"Oh, nothing's the matter," he said, "thank you; I was quite surprised to see you, and I'm very tired with my journey from Manchester."

"And how is Miss Pat—Mrs. Forester, I mean?" asked the doctor.

"Oh, she's very well," said her husband. "The Hall's a little dull after London, I daresay; but she doesn't seem to dislike it so much as some women might have done."

"Are you staying long here?" said Leighton.

"Not a minute longer than I can help. I've come on business; and I shall be very glad to get it over and get home again. Business isn't much in my way," he said; "I was born under the wrong star to be a successful merchant or any thing of that sort."

"But shall you not be able to spare some of your old friends at least an hour or two?" said the doctor.

"Well, no, no, not this visit," Forester replied. "Perhaps I may be coming up again before long. Good night, Mr. Leighton."

"Good-night, Mr. Forester; give my kindest remembrances to your good wife, she may be sure that none of her old friends forget her."

And so they parted, saying little, but thinking the more.

"He looks worse than ever," thought

Leighton; "he looks getting bad, dissipated, cruel. I always thought he'd turn out a wild beast, for all his weak sleek ways. Does he drink, or gamble—or is it worse profligacy—that gives him that seedy, jaded look? Poor darling Patty!"

"I wish he'd had her," thought Forester; "I could have cut the whole affair then. But a wife and child can't be carried about in a knapsack, nor even left for the workhouse, until pretty nearly every thing else has been tried. What a fool I was! And she's not a bit of use in such difficulties as mine. I doubt whether she'd tell a lie to save my neck. Stupid noodle, to spoil my only chance with Thompson."

He went back again to his quiet lodging in Drummond Street, almost too tired and restless to sleep until nearly half the night was gone. Not much the better, therefore, at ten o'clock next morning, not much less jaded and fatigued than

when Leighton touched his shoulder, did he present himself at the offices of Mr. Abrahams —solicitor, bill discounter, friend of the destitute, money-lender without security, and therefore, of course, at merely nominal interest. Forester had first made the acquaintance of Abrahams in the columns of the "Daily Telegraph," where the self-denying Israelite offers his services on most moderate terms, and in perfect confidence, even to the neediest of mankind. His offices were on the first floor of a dingy house in Maddox Street, Regent Street. There was a front office for general business, and a back office, "private"—the private room, of course, for cases of confidence. Both rooms were shady, untidy, suspicious-looking to the last degree. Abrahams the Great was not at home, but his managing clerk could transact any necessary business, and could obtain the instructions of his chief in the course of a day or two—possibly even that day. A little pre-

liminary fee, meanwhile, of three guineas, would be necessary to defray the cost of inquiries.

"And what if ——"

"Yes," said the confidential clerk, "if the inquiries are not quite satisfactory, you will see they will have cost exactly as much as if they were, and we shall lose the pleasure and the profit of the transaction besides. Of course, Mr. Forester, we *want* to lend."

"And you feel pretty certain Mr. Abrahams will make the advance?" asked Forester.

"If the case be as you describe I feel sure he will," said the clerk.

"And shall I call in the morning?"

"Certainly, if you choose, but it may not be settled so soon. Is the case very urgent? Any summonses, or writs, or executions?"

"Oh no, nothing so bad as that; but don't lose time. I'll call to-morrow."

It was hard to keep cool with so quiet a

questioner, and in front of a table covered with all manner of legal instruments of torture. Forester felt like a thief; the fact that, in Mr. Abrahams' office, it was the rule to count every man a knave until he had been proved honest, and that the clerk counted *him* a knave, cut him to the soul. But he must get money somehow. Young men who will enjoy the luxury of bullying their creditors must reckon upon paying a high price.

There might or might not be executions or writs, but the clerk of Abrahams could see plainly enough that Forester had no time to lose. He thought it better, therefore, to instruct his principal not to visit Maddox Street that day. The inquiries were moderately satisfactory. The security was, of course, precarious, as the security of any borrower who came to Abrahams was sure to be; but it was still sufficient. There might be secret liabilities and claims, but Abrahams could not find out

that there were, and it seemed scarcely likely that "his client" would run the risk of felony. At the same time he might as well be kept waiting till he grew more eager, and he might be compelled to take a much smaller sum than he had asked.

"Mr. Abrahams did'nt come to the office yesterday," said the clerk, when Forester appeared; "so I can give you no decisive answer till to-morrow. He's sure, however, to advance something, though I can't recommend much more than half what you asked—say five hundred pounds."

"Why, the security's worth three times that," said Forester, in dismay.

"Very possibly," said the clerk, "but it may very much deteriorate, and there are many risks. However, I can only *advise* Mr. Abrahams; he *may* be inclined to run more risk than usual. Give a look round again in the morning."

It was no use grumbling. *Some* money Forester knew he *must* have; and now three precious days were wasted—and in fact another day in town, even in a cheap lodging in Drummond Street, would leave him penniless. So of course the morning came, and of course he "gave a look round" in Maddox Street. All was ready. The legal instrument for signature, the affidavit, the receipt for five hundred pounds—the promissory note for repayment of the same—the money itself in four one-hundred pound notes, three twenties, three tens, and two fives. The interest for the first year at twenty per cent., it was Abrahams' method—invariable and unalterable—to deduct from the principal, and likewise the fair cost of legal advice and government stamps, at the moderate rate of one per cent. So Forester signed the documents, put three hundred and ninety-five pounds into his pocket, and without a single syllable uttered, went his way.

How could he speak? He wanted money sorely; he wanted it then; he knew that he must have it. Yet now that he had obtained it he hurried like a maniac along the streets. He shook his wrists, as if to assure himself that there were no handcuffs on them already. He was haunted by the dread that pickpockets had been watching him, and would surely rob him of his hard-earned gold before he reached his lodgings. He called a cab, and bid the driver make all speed to Drummond Street, that he might take the very next train to Manchester, and seek such rest as might be had at home. And then at last he utterly broke down and wept—a perfect torrent of tears, tears of passion and selfishness, of hatred and disappointment, of agony and despair. Alas! such drops can only petrify the heart to a stonier hardness.

The Hall was very cheerless while Forester was away, not indeed that it would have been

cheerful had he been at home. It seemed highly doubtful whether anything could make Patty's married life happy any more. She had lost all faith in her husband. He had not, indeed, so far as she knew, committed any crime that the world would regard as unpardonable, or even disgraceful. It is, indeed, a crime to obtain a penny on false pretences ; but to obtain a woman's heart on false pretences, to take possession of her whole life, to become her absolute master, to obtain on false pretences the right to reduce her to mere beggary and shame —that is an every-day occurrence. And Patty knew quite well that it was exactly that, that Forester had done. She knew that he was a liar, that he had lied to his tradespeople, that he had lied at least by implication to her. She knew that if he had any virtue at all, it was of the coarsest and vulgarest sort, far more coarse and vulgar than the virtue of those whom he was in the habit of despising as snobs. For he had

not been ashamed to attempt to involve even herself in his deceits. He had allowed people, even without rebuke or contradiction, to calculate upon her fortune, till he had exposed her to the danger of being accounted an accomplice in his trickery. He had refused, or at least omitted to confide in her, and she felt—well, at any rate she felt that her married life was not what it should be. Perhaps a man is not bound to tell his wife what he has and what he owes; most certainly he is not bound to tell these secrets to any other woman. Only what is to make the difference between a wife and any other woman, if no secrets whatever are entrusted to her. Patty, however, had no need to argue out the matter in her mind. Nothing could possibly make plainer than it already was, the miserable conclusion to which even her brief acquaintance with Forester's character had compelled her to come. It was not with her a question whether or not she could love

him, for love does not depend wholly upon the merits of those who are loved, and Patty had spent the best part of her life in offices of affection to people who were always undeserving, and often ungrateful. Nor even did she ask herself whether it was possible that, after some years of patient endurance on her part, and bitter experience on his, he might become a true man. She had not married that she might have the situation of a governess, with a big, unruly, shameful pupil to train; it had been no part of her design to spend the best part of her life in a kind of weary work, the fruit of which could only be gathered, if at all, when she had become too old to enjoy it. She had never dreamed of being the prop for some weak-natured man to lean on. Whatever Forester might become, after years of trouble, he could not *then* at the most be better than he ought to have given her every right to believe him to be, on the very day that he took her to

the altar. Alas! she knew already, with only too complete a certainty, that he never could be to her what she had too readily hoped and believed he would prove. Of course she would love him, or at any rate try to love him; she would discharge for him the duties of his wife, of the mother of his children, but most certainly it was no longer possible for her thoroughly to reverence him. She knew that by her marriage with him she had gained not strength, but weakness; and that bitter disappointment which has perhaps no other comfort than this, the reflection that only noble natures are able to experience it. Even Forester might have found a wife so weak, that his impulsive recklessness would have been a kind of support to her. Assuredly Patty would never have gained comfort by the loss of that strong, calm goodness which constituted her own superiority.

The old Hall would have been dull indeed if

it had not been for the baby; and for a girl, who was partly baby's nurse and partly Patty's companion. She was a girl that Forester himself had chosen and hired for Patty's service, at a far higher rate of wages than was customary in those parts, because she was really a bright, intelligent girl, with a moderate education, and was especially self-sacrificing in her devotion to children. For some four or five years she had had the sole charge of a little boy, an orphan, about whose parents there was some sort of disagreeable mystery, which at once rendered Meggy's charge more difficult, and her fidelity more praiseworthy. Some said that the mother of the boy was Meggy Vickers's sister; that there had been a runaway match, or worse; that Meggy had gone after her sister in defiance of her father's anger; had found her deserted, alone, dying; had brought her little baby back again to old Bob's cottage, and had compelled the stern old man to allow her to

take charge of it. But, of course, when nobody knows the rights of a case, it may almost be taken for granted that the story that is most plausible is least true. Some said that Bob Vickers had no children at all but Meggy; and she was so pretty and good, they said, that it was very doubtful whether even she was his. And when anybody ventured to speak once to Bob himself about the little boy, the meddler was generally only too glad to retreat from the manifest dangers and discomforts of an unbridled curiosity. "Look here," Bob would say, "it will, perhaps, be pretty near as well for you if you just keep your impudent thumbs for poking into your own pies. I don't suppose you ever heard me ask any questions about people at your house; and you'd a damned sight better stop asking your prying questions about people in my house, I can tell you that!" Nobody ever tried Bob Vickers a second time on the matter of that mysterious

little baby. As a general rule, Bob's passions found vent in such dreadful and profane oaths that his language was absolutely unrivalled in that whole district. In any ordinary quarrel his opponent let him swear till he had eased his mind; but when anybody asked him questions about that little grandson, or whatever else the child may have been to him, he was far too enraged to curse, and nobody dared quarrel with Bob Vickers while he had a quiet tongue in his head.

So attached was Meggy to the little boy, that, until Forester hired her to be his wife's companion, no one had been able to persuade her to accept any situation that would take her away from home. Even Forester had not ventured to suggest anything like a permanent arrangement.

"As to the little boy," he said, "my wife will call round and speak to you. Possibly,

after awhile, we may be able to arrange for you to have him with you; and you know, Meggy, if we can't do that, you can quite easily see the smoke of your father's chimney from the Hall windows."

So Meggy came to be baby Forester's nurse; and very often the little boy she was so fond of came over from the cottage, that she might see with her own eyes that no harm was coming to him. He was a beautiful, fair-haired, blue-eyed child, for ever prattling and asking questions, with a temper so sweet and winningly trustful, that surely even surly, blaspheming Bob must have had many harder tasks and sorer troubles than to take that little fellow to his home. He was quite sufficiently like Meggy to justify the belief that she really was his "auntie," as he always called her. For she also was fair-haired, blue-eyed, a slender figure, somewhat above the average height, perfectly graceful in every movement, with

that natural refinement which no artifices of society can ever completely imitate. It was impossible to hear her speak without that strange thrill which seems meant to warn us we are in the presence of a potent, subtle spirit, that has power to bind us with magic spells. None who knew her ever needed to be told that she was entering the room where they were; they could *feel* her coming; often they seemed to know the very words she would utter, as if they were penetrated by her very self. She was only a country girl, daughter of blaspheming Bob; but the gifts and mystic powers of nature refuse to be bound by the conventionalisms of artificial life. Unhappily, they are not always bound even by the deserts of highest virtue; and the secret of Meggy's fair-haired, blue-eyed boy was all too near to Patty's peace. And jolly little Freddy, with his endless prattle, his guileless trust, his pure affection, his sweet, bright beauty, how little,

thank God, could he know into how dark and wicked and sorrowful a world he had been born.

CHAPTER III.

LOST AND SAVED.

Forester had returned from London, and was sitting late in the evening in his wife's sitting-room. He was busy examining accounts; his table was strewed with papers, and there was a little roll of bank-notes on his desk. He had paid both Thompson and Whittaker fifty pounds each, thereby not largely reducing their claims, but reducing by nearly a third the scanty supply he had brought with him from London. He was wondering which of his other creditors it would be most necessary to conciliate, and trying to estimate with his usual effrontery how many would be induced, by the bare fact of his having made a payment to

somebody, to trust him longer, if not further. He wrote out, with a neatness that would have done credit to a merchant, a moderately-accurate list of at least the most pressing of his liabilities; and it was with a kind of grim despair that he perceived that, even the most trifling and inadequate recognition of every claim, would far more than exhaust his little store of cash. Moreover, it was quite impossible for him, being in possession of bank-notes at all, to allow every one of them to be expended on the cheerless business of paying debts. The list of his liabilities had not altogether engrossed his attention so far as to prevent the formation of one or two little schemes for at least a few days' holiday; some brief change of scene, some reckless and extravagant amusement, in which he might forget the awful danger to which he knew quite well he was exposed. With his characteristic weakness and wonderful fickleness of temper, he was rapidly

putting away from his mind the more painful thoughts which for the last few days had almost paralysed him. He was already in imagination enjoying himself with his wife and the baby, and Meggy the nurse (for he would have no excuse for leaving them at home), as far away as he could get them from the gloomy Hall and his accursed creditors, and all the fears and anxieties by which he was so dreadfully oppressed. So he put away his papers, tying them up into a small compact parcel, and he held only his neat, melancholy list of liabilities in his hand, musing. "What's the good of keeping it?" he said to himself; "I might forget to lock it up, or I might leave my desk key in one of my waistcoat pockets, or at any rate it might get somehow into Patty's hands, and it would be a horrible bore to have to explain it all to her; and there'd be a deuced row if I did: besides, I shall remember them all well enough; and if I should happen to

forget, my affectionate friends, the creditors, would be perfectly certain to remind me. No," he went on, "I think I shall burn it," and he rose and went to the fire, and thrust it between the bars, standing with his head leaning on the mantel-piece, looking into the fire as the paper burnt away.

"Ah! there they go," said he, with a bitter laugh, "every one of them settled and done with. Would that I could only find some fire that would burn up all these horrid tradesmen's account-books, and I should not care a bit if the dunning old fools themselves were burnt up at the same time. However, it's no use wishing any such impossible rubbish; but they are very much mistaken if they think they are going to have all those bank-notes between them. I can't for the life of me make out which is the biggest ass, or the most relentless savage, so I will just leave chance to decide. They'll be sure to be soon giving me a call about their

little accounts; so first come shall be first served, and shall bear joyfully home with him the very smallest sum I can persuade him to take; and if I fret my life away I can't make the money go farther than it will."

He still stood silently leaning on the mantelpiece and looking down into the fire, when that strange thrill passed over him, the meaning of which he knew so well, and in another moment a little hand touched his shoulder, and Meggy was looking round into his face.

"Mrs. Forester has gone up-stairs," she said, "and is just finishing something for baby in her bed-room; so I thought perhaps you might want me for something, or have something to tell me after your long journey: and very ill you looked too when you got home."

"Ah, Meggy!" said Forester, "how glad I am to see you. I believe you are the only person in all the world who really cares a straw about me; and yet I haven't brought you any-

thing back from London,—not a dress, or a ring, or even a bunch of blue ribbons to tie up your bonny brown hair. But see here," he went on, with that affected cheerfulness which drains so fatally the very fountains of a man's life, "see here, it's a long time, my pretty Meggy, since you saw me with such a lot of money as this, isn't it? As I wasn't able to buy anything, you must just take one of these and buy something for yourself and for little Rowley Powley," and he pushed towards her, on the mantelpiece, a five-pound note.

"And are you going to tell me all about it?" she said, pushing the note back to him, not without something of haughtiness, as she felt how weak he was in her hands. Her deep-blue eyes were looking into his face with eager inquiry, and with a strange expression of power and firm purpose which almost alarmed him.

"What do you want to know, Meggy?" he said; "all about what?"

"Nay, nay, nay," said the girl; "what is it that you have to tell? If I knew what I want to know, I need not trouble you to repeat it, need I, Edwin?"

"Meggy, are you cross with me?" said Forester; and he put his hand out to stroke her hair, and stooped forward as if to kiss her. Instantly she stepped back from him.

"Do you want me to go back to my father's cottage, Mr. Forester?" she said. "I cannot stay in this house another day, if you will not remember your agreement and keep your word. So you won't tell me all about it?" she went on.

"I don't know what you mean," said Forester; "I haven't anything to tell."

"Edwin," said Meggy, "you must be a poor, unhappy coward to lie to me," her eyes flashing fire. "If you have nothing to tell *me*, I have something to tell *you*. Before another month is over you will be a bankrupt; you

will leave this house; you will leave the neighbourhood; you will leave me!" she said, her voice quivering with a passion that seemed to be made up of almost all passions—rage and fear, and love. Forester looked at her white face and glowing eyes, and held up his hand as if he would have laid it on her lips.

"Hush!" he said; "you don't know what you are talking about, girl. I don't intend to leave you. And indeed, Meggy," he added, not without a touch of honest shame, "perhaps it wouldn't harm you if I did; it's little good you have ever had from me."

"No, indeed, Edwin," she said; "little good have you ever done me; but, alas! I have given you that which no woman who gives as I do, can ever take back again—not my honour, Edwin; I am grown too mad to care for that; and besides, nobody knows our secret except my father, and a man would easier tear meat out of the jaws of a hungry wolf than

tear that secret from him. But I have given you my whole love—I don't know why I love you, but I most surely know that I do. I know that you are a coward; I know you are a bankrupt—don't stop me," she said, as he raised his hand imploringly, and she spoke in a louder voice as she went on, forgetting utterly where she was in this great outburst of her emotion; "you have brought a gentle wife home here, good and pure and true as an angel from heaven, and I know that you are cold to her and cruel, and that perhaps before many days are over you will sneak away and leave her to poverty and shame. And yet, with all my poor weak heart, I love you as no woman ever loved man before. How little does your Patty think whose child she fondles, as our little Freddy plays about her knees, and how little will you ever know what millions of scorpions are stinging my soul as I silently watch them; and yet I love you as madly as ever. Oh,

Edwin!" she said, hiding her face in her hands, "if I ever can cease to love you, I shall hate you more than all the devils in hell!"

As she finished speaking they heard a gentle rustling, and, as they thought, a sound of light footsteps passing very quickly and very quietly by the door. Meggy rose to her full height, speechless with horror, pressing her hand upon her heart; and Forester grasped the mantelpiece against which he was standing, lest, in the dizzy sickness which came over him, he might fall. Meggy was the first to regain some sort of composure.

"*She* knows our secret now," she whispered. "Good God! all the world knows it."

Forester laid his hand upon her arm that she might not move.

"Do not stir for a moment," he said; "perhaps we were mistaken, after all; perhaps it was the wind."

They listened minute after minute, but not a sound was to be heard.

"It couldn't be her," said Forester; "she couldn't have got up stairs so quickly and so quietly that we should not hear another foot-fall. Go you to your own room as quietly as possible. If you do *not* see me in half an hour you may be sure that all is right."

She went away at once, and Forester still stood for a few minutes longer, trying to remember every word that had been spoken, that so he might know how far they had compromised themselves if there had been any listener to hear them. With swift mendacity, also, he was inventing such explanations as might meet any difficulty which as yet he might foresee. And then he went to his wife's room. She was already in bed, and perfectly silent, breathing calmly and regularly. He listened for a moment, and gained courage to look into her face. She was fast asleep.

"Good God!" he said to himself, "I thought at last the hour had come, the one great misery that every day I dread."

He lay down by his wife's side, thinking, wondering, scheming, until his great weight of care and dread utterly exhausted him, and he slept like one who had been drugged.

For another hour his wife lay quietly by his side, and then she gently rose and took a glass of water from the chair by her bed-side and drank it eagerly, as if perhaps that might cool the fever in which she was scorched.

"Yes, O great God," she said, "the hour *is* come, and the great misery."

And still she lay wondering what way could be found out of this dreadful unhappiness. She could not meet him in the morning and put up her face to kiss him, and talk and go about her household duties as if she still were ignorant what manner of man he was. She knew that she would be unable to conceal her

knowledge from those quick, searching eyes of Meggy's, and she feared lest in her great trouble she might even do some sudden wrong to the sweet trustful child who had so often played about her knees and brightened the old Hall as with the sunshine of Heaven. And if she were to speak, she knew not what she could say. Even then, in the first burst of her indignant sorrow, she could not forget every lesson she had learnt at Oak Villa, and she knew that if Meggy had sinned, there was one who had sinned far more deeply, far more inexcusably. But she could determine upon nothing. She could hear no voice saying, "That is the way, walk ye in it." Duty and passion seemed alike to fail her; utterly powerless, both of them, to give her guidance. Plainer and plainer it seemed to become, as she lay silently thinking, that there was nothing for her, at least till the first shock was over, but flight. And then, whither could she fly? At

any rate, wherever she went, she must escape for a while from that dreadful house, which seemed too ready to repeat the tragedy in old Lucy's sad story of cruelty and disgrace. She looked into her husband's face and saw that he was still sleeping heavily; so she rose and quietly dressed herself, and taking with her what still remained of the little store of her own earnings, she passed out of the house. It was still dark, and every road from the old Hall was gloomy and lonely; but it little mattered to her then what the outside world might be, such wild tumult was there in her own heart. She looked up to the window of the room where her own little child was sleeping, and where often slept also that other child so bright and beautiful; children whose "angels do always behold the face of their Father in heaven"; and she lingered under their window, speechlessly blessing them, lingering still, and even turning back and back again, as if she could

not tear herself away without one word, one kiss. But no, she must stay no longer; and the dogs, too, began to whimper, hearing even the light tread of her well-known feet. She passed round by their kennel, for she knew that she could quiet their barking; she put her arms round their rough necks and kissed their honest faces, while they licked her hands and cheeks.

"Yes, yes," she said, as the rain of comforting tears began to pour down at last; "good-bye, dear old faithful creatures; God bless you all; man and beast—all."

She took the road at the back of the Hall, through the wood which joins, at the top of the hill, the road from Leigh to Stockport and Manchester. Under the arches that the tall trees made, there was pitchy darkness; and though she knew so well every inch of the road, she found that she was walking along in a zig-zag way, coming now upon one

wall, now upon the other, till at last she was obliged to guide herself by passing her hand along the stones. When she came out from the deep shadows of the wood into the Leigh Road, she was able to advance more swiftly and surely, for even in the night-time she would have been able there to distinguish the path, and now also the first faint light of morning began to dawn. She almost wished that for some hour or two longer she could still have walked under the thick, dark arches of the wood, for anybody for some miles round the old Hall would have recognised her if she had been seen. Her first real fear was as she passed "The Jolly Sailor," the public-house where the coaches from Leigh to Manchester make their first call.

"When didst lose him?" said the stable-boy to an ill-conditioned, rough-looking man, who was standing at the door with a pewter pot of beer in his hand.

"I've seen nowt of him sin' yesterday morning," said the man. "Forester's gardener would ha' me let him go along wi' him to Stopput, and th' little chap mun ha' slipped out o' the cart somehow. Gardener feller thowt he was sleeping, and never missed him till he'd got a good mile and a half this side o' Dan Bank Bar."

"Does th' auntie know?" said the stable-boy.

"No, thank God!" said the man; "and if we dunno find him, I shall never ha' the heart to tell Meggy."

He put the pewter pot down on the window-ledge, and drew his rough coat across his eyes.

"I mun just sit down on th' bench a bit, lad," he said. "I'm welly beat, what wi' walking and what wi' thinking."

Eager as she was to hurry forward to get out of sight and reach of all who might

recognise her, Patty stood as if rooted to the spot while this conversation went on. She could not doubt what it all meant; for that rough ill-conditioned looking man, sitting on the bench weeping like a child, was indeed no other than blaspheming Bob. And now, too, she remembered that Freddy had not been that day to the old Hall, but had been sent out of the way with toys and sweets to old Vickers' cottage, lest his innocent prattle and simple questions should jar upon the anxious, careworn spirit of her husband. She could not linger, however, in sight of those two men, either of whom would have recognised her in a moment. She hurried onwards, wondering what it could all mean. Had God taken him away from the evil to come, that no sin of the father might have the power to blight the happiness of so fair a child? Or perhaps, she had been sent out herself to find him. At any rate she hurried forward; for her own

road was the very same along which the gardener must have driven. She also must pass through Dan Bank Bar; through that valley, dark and gloomy even in broad daylight, where often enough, for hours together, the only sound that could be heard was the melancholy gurgling of the river. As she came nearer to Dan Bank she almost forgot even her own grief, in her anxiety and alarm for Freddy. She walked on as quickly as she could, often stopping to listen; often thinking that she could hear his weak cry for help. Again and again she climbed the rough stone wall up the bank, and far in among the trees and brushwood, misled by that dear voice which was only sounding in her own troubled memory and heart. At last, after more than an hour had been lost in these fruitless searchings, she came to the bottom of a hill, to Dan Bank Bar, to the gloomy river, gurgling under its low bridge, and to the rough narrow path,

which, crossing the high road, takes the course of the river unprotected by wall or hedge. The sun was now rising, but she could take no heed of its warning. She felt absolutely certain that Freddy must be somewhere in the wood; and she remembered, as if it were but yesterday, her own horror, years ago, when she woke up in the darkness alone and cold, on that night so fruitful of bitter results, when Edwin Marie Forester had found her on the bridge and carried her to Bob Vickers' cottage and to the old Hall. So, careless now of recognition, she asked the woman at the turnpike if she had seen a little boy wandering there alone or heard any cry or shout.

"No," she said; "nowt o' the kind. And Bob Vickers, from Clayton's, has been by, late i' the night, asking the same question. Is it th' same child as you want?"

"Yes," said Patty. "It's the little boy his daughter Meggy takes care of. Can you let

me have a glass of milk? I'm very tired and faint. And if you find him, or anybody brings him past, be sure to bring him on to the old Hall by Clayton's factory, and you shall be well paid for your trouble."

"What sort o' child was it, missis?" said the woman.

"Large blue eyes, fair curly hair, and——"

And poor Patty could say no more. Her lips quivered and the tears fell fast, as she tried to tell the woman the thousand beauties and dear winning ways by which she remembered Freddy.

"Sit thee down, missis," said the woman, gently, her own voice also trembling; "I'll just call Tom to mind th' gate, and we mun go down by th' water side and seek him. I'll go this side and you can go t'other, and we're safe t' find him. It's a 'only place of a dark night."

Tom minded the gate, and the woman and Patty went their opposite ways to seek the lost

child. The sun was shining down the valley, gleaming in Patty's eyes, covering the whole surface of the shallow, rippling river with millions of sparkling stars. It was the only hour of sunshine the valley had, and Patty could scarcely see where she was going, with the dazzling light in her eyes. But she hurried along, turning often aside, where the bushes were thicker, or where there seemed some little trace of an unused footpath, or where there was a more dangerous slope towards the water. Unnerved by her own trouble and the dreadful conflict of her sleepless night, she seemed to be losing her own self-control; she began to call, "Freddy!" and the echo of her own voice from either hill mocked her, torturing her even more acutely than the death-like stillness. What could she do? She was herself growing faint with fatigue and fear. Once again, looking onwards along the course of the dazzling water, seeing now the green of the meadows

where the valley ended, she called for the last time—not loudly, for her voice was choked with despair—and listened.

"Missy Patty," said a little voice, almost at her feet, "I did think I was in my own dear licka bed."

And there was little Freddy sitting on the water's side, just waked from sleep, with his blue eyes wide open now, clear and calm as heaven. There was no trace of fear in his sweet face. He had been alone with God. And why should little children be afraid of HIM? Where he had been resting there was most surely a ladder from earth to heaven, and for him, as for the patriarch Israel, the angels of God were ascending and descending upon it. In another moment he was in Patty's arms. She sat down on the grass, pressing him to her bosom, rocking him in her arms, murmuring over him a thousand blessings and endearments and thanks to the merciful God. And

then she wept and sobbed, and her whole frame shook with the violence of her emotion. Poor Freddy prattled and kissed her cheek, and tried to wipe the tears from her eyes with his tiny hand, until at last her trouble frightened him, and he could do nothing but cry and struggle out of her arms, and call for Meggy. But Patty soon regained her self-control; and she easily quieted Freddy, and told him how he had been lost in the wood, and how they had been out all night seeking him, and how she would take him home to Meggy and baby. They soon reached the gate, and Tom was heartily thankful to be relieved from watching, and soon found his mother, and brought her back to the cottage. Freddy had some hot bread and milk; but, when his first surprise and pleasure were over, he seemed exhausted and numbed and was extremely cold. Patty got some hot water and a tub from the good-natured gate-keeper, gave him a good bath, and

put him to bed for at least a few hours, till she might be able safely to move him to the old Hall. She sat by his bedside, in the little gate-house chamber, thinking, weeping, praying. She knew whose child she was nursing, and she thanked God that she loved him still. Was it not better that this little child had been left in the wood to find her and take her home?—for surely she had been more lost than any child could be. Her husband and Meggy knew by this time that there was nothing more to conceal, and she *must* see him and her own baby. "For better, for worse, for richer for poorer, until death us do part." There was no escape.

But when Freddy woke, it was all too plain to Patty's experienced eye that it would be impossible to move him that day. So she got such paper as she could, and wrote to Forester, sending the letter by the coach which passed in the afternoon.

"Dan Bank Bar.

"My dear Edwin,

"Tell Meggy I have found Freddy in the wood by Dan Bank Bar. He had been sleeping all night by the river-side, and is now very exhausted and feverish. I will stay here and nurse him. Send me some paper, and I'll let you know every afternoon how we are. Send also some wine. Meggy can trust me to take care of her little boy; and I would rather some hours at least should pass before I see either of you again. I know your secret. May God help me in my sore trouble; help me even still to feel and act as

"Your ever true wife,

"Patty Forester."

Stunned as he was, it was a kind of relief to Forester when he read these words. Even he could appreciate the advantage of having to deal with a lady—with a thoroughly good and

noble woman. He sent what Patty had asked; with a short note, which might mean almost anything, according to the wishes and hopes of the reader. "He, too, was thankful that just a little time was given them to seek calmness and wisdom and strength."

Day after day passed by, however, and still little Freddy lay in the gate-house chamber fighting with death. His patient nurse was with him day and night, anticipating every want, using every means that her experience and sagacity could suggest to sustain his strength, till the fever which was consuming him had run its course. No one from the old Hall came near her; but she was aware that she could trust Meggy, in spite of all she knew, to take care of the babe she had left behind; and her spirit was rested and healed by her gentle offices of love for the innocent child.

It was just six weeks before Patty and little

Freddy—thin and pale, but still beautiful as an angel—entered once more the doors of Clayton's Hall.

CHAPTER IV.

LONDON AGAIN.

And how was Patty to meet her husband and Meggy? She almost wished she had never heard the passionate, eager words which had compelled her to listen on to the end; and besides, what explanation was any longer possible? In one sense the evil was at an end —irrevocable indeed, and irremediable, but perhaps repented of and outlived, no longer clinging to the very man himself. It was plain, too, that Meggy had a dignity of her own and some sort of consideration for the unhappy wife of one who was so little worthy of her. And yet how madly Meggy still loved the man: how plain it was that nothing but

some great convulsion in her soul could ever shake her love. They must be separated! Forester and Meggy were far more husband and wife than Forester and Patty; for the legal status, without the mutual reverence and affection which are supposed to have produced it, is the hollowest and most hypocritical of mockeries. And no wife can bear to live in the same house with a favoured rival, no matter what decencies of conventional disguise may partly hide the rivalry. And little Freddy, dearer to her heart than ever, how could she bear to be torn away from him? The child seemed to be the good angel of the house—its bright hope—its memory of innocence; above all, the sure token that not even sinners may be chastened by unloving hands. Yet even Freddy must live with them no longer. *Why* not? Perhaps Patty could scarcely have answered; but as she looked into the sweet face of that little child, it seemed as if Meggy were compassed

round about by hosts of guardian spirits, and her very sin seemed radiant with ineffable beauty.

But, fortunately, Patty was spared the pain of suggesting or doing those things which were at once so necessary and so painful—fortunately, if at least we are able to estimate which of two great misfortunes is on the whole the best for us. Even if Patty had wished ever so earnestly that Meggy and Freddy might remain with them it would have been no longer possible. The old Hall was no longer a home for her; it was all too plain that Meggy had measured far more acutely than herself both the character and the embarrassment of Forester. It was not indeed possible for Forester either to suffer the disgrace, or to avail himself of the advantages of an actual bankruptcy; but that which Meggy had feared had already come to pass. Forester was hopelessly ruined, and the house which he had decorated and prepared for his

bride by so costly an expenditure of other people's money, was now in possession of some one or other of his enraged and implacable creditors; and which of them had fallen first on what poor spoils were left, the master scarcely knew or cared. The thing he did know, and did care about, was that his property was ridiculously inadequate to meet his liabilities. It was a mere matter of time; very soon every creditor he had would know the desperateness of his circumstances, and then there would be writs and judgments and executions, and nothing for anybody to take except himself. He had little enough of high principle, but he had much pride, and he knew perfectly well that a single day in a gaol would turn him into a devil; besides, might he not by fair means or foul—some plausible falsehood, some desperate venture, nay, even if it must be so, some undiscoverable crime—still ward off the evil day and show a fair front to society? Not, indeed,

that he had much society to care for; but the poor devils, whom nobody ever thinks of, are the very people who are in the most utter bondage to the most worthless conventionalisms.

And yet when Patty came home, bringing little Freddy with her, so hardly rescued from death, Forester was deeply moved. For once in his life at least he felt utterly ashamed, and realised how mean and cruel a scoundrel he was. It was not for long, of course, that his vanity and selfishness failed him; but for a little while he did clearly see that he had brought the gentle woman who stood before him to such depths of shame and want, as he was utterly unable himself to fathom; and that all his conduct towards her, that which was outwardly affectionate and considerate no less than his ill-tempered severity, was black with unutterable baseness.

"Don't upbraid me now, Patty," he said, "I

have already more trouble than I can bear; and how will you be able to bear it if it is too heavy for me? I have saved what little I could for you, and we must get ready to leave this place as soon as you feel strong enough for a journey. I am sure you will not care to stay an hour longer here than you can possibly help. I can scarcely see an inch before me, Patty, and I can plan nothing with these vulgar brutes about the house; but our first move must be to London."

Patty could not speak a word; she sat down and lifted Freddy upon her knee, and her lips refused to utter the question which must next be asked.

"Yes," said Forester, guessing what she meant, "Meggy has gone to her father's, and of course the little boy must go there too. I'll get one of them to take him there as soon as he is a little rested."

"No, no," said Patty, "I will just sit still for

a few minutes, and then I will myself take him to Meggy. If we are to go so soon, I must see her now."

She sat still for about a quarter of an hour, and then set off for Bob Vickers' cottage, leaving Forester to make the best arrangements he could for their immediate departure for London. There was no danger as yet to his personal liberty, and the people who were in possession of the house had already made up their minds that he would, if possible, escape out of the country before any fresh writs could be served upon him. Of course they could not leave the house to watch or to pursue him, and he did his best to mislead them into the belief that he was starting first of all for Liverpool, and then by the next and quickest ship for New York. He wrote his name and some Liverpool address upon a piece of gummed paper, as if he had meant it for the direction of some package ; and then he tore it up into pieces, not too small,

and scattered them about an empty room. He laughed to himself as he saw his watchers cover with their hands as he passed by them these worthless fragments, and wink knowingly at each other. But he never dreamed of leaving the country until every hope should have failed, and the utmost resources of his cunning and dishonesty should have been exhausted. He felt sure that in the great wilderness of London he would be more completely hidden than in any other place in the wide world. His only fear was of Patty. He knew that with him and for him she would bravely suffer any extremity of misery, but then it was no part of his intention to suffer the extremity of misery if he could possibly avoid it. He wanted a wife who could get him *out* of scrapes, not one who would comfort him while he was *in* them; and he knew that for that service Patty was as entirely useless as his most implacable creditor. Already the new-born generosity had died out

of his soul, and he bitterly cursed the folly which had encumbered him with the dangerous and useless burden of a wife and child. As he had most truly said he could as yet not see an inch before him. But in London, he thought he might live quietly under some false name, might get into some sort of situation, might earn money somehow, anyhow—he didn't care so long as he could get hold of money and be off to some safe and lively place to enjoy it. Anything, he thought, even life-long falsehood, and the perpetual perils of dishonesty, would be better than a gaol.

Meanwhile Patty was knocking at the door of Bob Vickers' cottage. The water was rushing over the fall almost as loudly as on that wild night, when she herself was first carried senseless to the same door by the man who was now her husband. She had to knock three or four times before she was heard, and then the door was opened by Bob himself. He instantly

snatched up little Freddy, hugging him almost to death in his rough affection, covering his face with kisses and tears. And then he remembered who it was that had found him and nursed him and saved him from death, and he held out his hand to Patty.

"May God Almighty bless you, missis, for ever and ever," said blaspheming Bob, sobered into reverence and half choked with gratitude and love; "there's not a woman i' all this country as 'ud a' done what you've done. Come down, Meggy," he called out, "here's little Freddy."

There was no need to tell Meggy that her boy was there, nor to say who had brought him. And yet she could not come down; the forgiving love of Patty was far harder to meet than reproaches and scorn. Indeed, there would have been a kind of injustice in reproach or scorn, and it is far easier to bear injustice than generosity. But Patty also had no desire

to let Bob Vickers hear and see everything that might pass between her and Freddy's mother. This might be their last meeting—and her own future was almost as dark as Meggy's. The man to whom she had entrusted her all was a weak and worthless creature, whom it would now be her one hard task to keep, if possible, out of utter ruin. If he had been merely weak, she herself was strong, and so there might have been some hope. But he was wicked, and in his wickedness he was self-willed and determined, and poor Patty knew by this time that she might have only too soon to choose between those dread alternatives, the utter ruin of all temporal hope and comfort and the utter ruin of virtue and self-respect.

"Don't call her down," said Patty to Bob, "I'll take Freddy up to her. I want a little quiet talk with Meggy."

So the two went up the steep narrow staircase to Meggy's room; little Freddy calling

"auntie" as loud as he could, and wondering where she could be that she didn't hurry forward to meet him. She was sitting at the bedside as they entered, with her head buried in her hands, sobbing almost hysterically.

"Here's dear little Freddy come back, Meggy," said Patty; "he's quite frightened to see you crying so; and he's hardly strong enough yet to bear a fright."

Meggy took the boy to her knee and kissed him, and wept till the passion had somewhat calmed itself—not without stormy, fervent thanks to the gentle woman who had saved her child.

"Don't hate me, dear lady," said the poor girl, "it was all long before I had seen your face or heard even your name. And God knows how sorely I am punished. And there were many sweet promises that made me forget myself——and——but I at least have been true."

"Meggy," said Forester's wife, "that is exactly what I want to speak about before we go away. You know we are going away, Meggy?"

"I know there's great trouble at the Hall, and I quite expected you would scarcely care to stay there," she said.

"No," said Patty, "we cannot stay there even if we would, and I don't know where we shall go. I don't reproach you, Meggy. How could I, without far more bitterly reproaching one whom I am ever bound to shield? But ——you'll be true to *me* also will you not? Will you promise me to try to see him no more, remembering how much misery and sin might come of it? It will be very hard for you, Meggy; almost as hard as it has been for me to bear what I have borne these last weeks; but it will be far the best for all. Do you promise me?"

"It isn't for myself, Mrs. Forester?" said

the girl, "I don't want to see him any more—but my little Freddy—I could not bear to see *him* come to misery and shame. I should be compelled to find help for *him*, and who could I go to but one?

"Yes, yes," she went on eagerly, rising from her seat and kneeling by Patty's side, holding her hands, while little Freddy stood in frightened wonder by—"I promise you, I hate my folly and sin; I promise anything to your love. You are as merciful and tender as God. But let me know where *you* are. Let me have some way of writing to *you*—to tell you about Freddy—that he may not be quite cut off from hope. He is not like the rough children about here. And perhaps our sad secret will be known now, and they will scoff at us and at him, my poor little child. God help me!"

Poor little Freddy, so beautiful, so unconscious of wrong; of being a dreadful link of misery binding ruined fortunes together in a

more complete and complicated ruin! The two mothers bent over him together, their lips almost meeting on his lips; and their tears fell fast, and it might almost have been hard for a stranger to know whose child the beautiful darling was; and surely none could have guessed what the two women were to each other.

"Yes, Meggy, you shall know," said Patty; "and we must trust each other. It may be necessary to keep our place of residence a secret. When I write I shall have the letter sent to the post-office at Stockport. Always inquire on the first of the month, and, if you find no letter, inquire again on the fifth. I will tell you in each letter where to direct to me. And now, good-bye, Meggy. God help us both. Good-bye, Freddy."

And then her own strength failed. The boy had become to her like God's angel, the token that God was with her, the sure sign that even sin can never destroy the divine covenant

or the blessed order in which we live. The child had seemed also the assurance that even her husband might yet become brave, manly, strong—all she had hoped and prayed. While she was nursing him she could for awhile forget all the uncertain forms of the sure misery which was awaiting her. And now she must leave him and go back alone, she knew not whither. But it must be done. With blinding tears and breaking heart she mnst speak the hard farewell.

"Good-bye, Freddy; may God ever bless you."

She could not speak as Bob held out his hand again; she could only grasp it firmly and hurry away out of the cottage.

"Oh, that I had died in this river!" she said, "when he found me on the bridge, and brought me to this man's house. What would have been the swollen stream, the roaring falls, the hard bruising stones, compared with the weari-

ness my heart feels now; its drear monotony varied only by transitions from pain which is dull and stupifying to acute agony?"

Out of sight of the cottage, where the winding of the river hid both Freddy's home and the Hall, that was just ceasing to be her own home, she clambered down the steep bank to the very edge of the water, and sitting on a large rough stone against which it broke and babbled, she drank and bathed her brow, and once again, as years ago, when she used to sit for hours at a time by the bank above the bridge, higher up the stream, she saw the little fishes playing, and the haunts of birds, and all nature seemed pitying her, and making signs of comfort and hope to her like a dumb friend.

"Oh, mother!" she murmured, "if you had only spoken to me a few hours sooner! How could I know whom you wished me to choose? How could I see so far as you, from your high heaven, bright with the light of God? Pray

for me, and come and help me if you may. I am going away into the dark without a friend. Oh! that I could be one of the poor girls at Oak Villa; above all, that I could be back again to live with them and serve them.

She rose to go, and climbed again the steep bank, and turned into the well-known path by the side of the beautiful lake-like reservoirs. And now she seemed to be walking through an enchanted land—a land old and new, familiar and strange. And her mother was with her, and old Mr. Platt, and the Rhodeses, and the Carlisles, and Mr. Whitehouse, and Mr. Leighton. And then again they left her, excepting only her mother and the doctor; and soon they also, with arms linked together, as if they were mother and son, waved her a fond and smiling adieu and vanished from her sight. It was a mere waking dream, the embodiment of her own thoughts and recollections, but it seemed to renew her strength, and to assure her that,

come what might, she would not be utterly forsaken and alone.

When she reached the Hall, her husband was already waiting for her, impatient to be off. A carriage (ordered from Stockport, to avoid Leigh gossip) was at the door to convey them to Manchester, for Forester knew that a traveller to Liverpool would be sure to take that nearest and quickest road. Moreover, to go to Manchester he must pass through Stockport, where he would find the nearest station for a quick train to London. The servants had been already dismissed, and Forester was in eager haste. Patty's clothes were packed and on the carriage, and there was nothing else they might move. Just a little bread-and-butter and a glass of wine in her quiet sitting-room, and then Patty was also ready to start.

"Drive to Manchester," he said. "To the Hunt's Bank Station. I want to catch the train to Liverpool."

He knew quite well that the men were listening, and so he gave these directions in a kind of loud whisper. They drove along by the road through the wood, the same road that Patty had gone on the night when she was escaping from her own trouble to find Freddy. They passed the "Jolly Sailor," where she had seen blaspheming Bob and heard that the child was lost. They drove along through Dan Bank Bar, past the gate-house that she had so lately left, and then swiftly forward on the Stockport Road. They reached the Stockport station just in time to catch the afternoon express. Patty's thoughts were occupied by the wants and caresses of her little child until he fell asleep on her lap; and then she was so weary that her physical fatigue dulled her pain of mind. Forester was glad to beguile the time of the journey by being one of a railway whist-party, and by half past ten o'clock they were once more in London.

CHAPTER V.

A NEW OCCUPATION.

The next morning, leaving their little child with a good-natured looking girl, they set off from the very quiet lodging-house where they had slept, to seek a new home. Forester had nothing in the world but the remnant of the money he had obtained so lately from the benevolent Abrahams, and his own wits, sharpened by danger, and thoroughly roused at last from the gentlemanly laziness of the easy old days. The immediate object to be secured was a quiet obscurity in which he might be forgotten; and from which he might emerge in a while to get such employment, or at least to earn such money, as he would be

sure to need. Even as he wandered with Patty through the monotonous streets of new neighbourhoods, he felt freer and less miserable than among the luxuries and rural splendours of Clayton's Hall. Nobody in all those rows of houses, so drearily alike, could possibly know him or tease him for money, or upbraid him for broken promises of oft-renewed engagements by which their patience had been exhausted. What might be going on at Leigh he was glad to forget; it was sure to be ruinous work; and though, by remaining on the spot, he might have saved something from one creditor it would have been instantly seized by another. Surely it was very much more comfortable to let them fight it out among themselves, and each get what he could out of the general scramble.

They took the upper part of a small house in Dalston, a house let off in two flats; each flat having a parlour, a bed-room, and a little

kitchen; with a garden at the back, about the size of a good dining-table, for the use of both tenants in common. The furniture was very plain and there no was "attendance;" the rent was to be six shillings a-week "for a permanency." But there was one little matter to be settled first of all, and Forester could hardly settle that in the presence of the amiable proprietor of the apartments—the question in what name he should take the rooms. So he arranged that the rooms should be reserved for an hour, at the end of which time the lady and himself would return and let Mrs. Habbishon know their decision.

"They're good for nothing," said that lady to herself, though for once partly mistaken; "when people take an hour to decide I know very well they've made up their minds *not* to take the rooms. They know what they can afford; and as to the rooms, why bless your soul, a handy carpenter would scarcely need

half-an-hour *to make* as many things as I've got in my first floor."

"Patty," said Forester, as soon as they had turned a corner; "I know you won't like it, but we must go by a false name here. What shall it be?"

"Why must we have a false name at all?" she asked.

"Because I don't know how much danger I may soon be in, and I must keep out of harm's way."

"But there must be scores of Foresters in London," said Patty, "and nobody here will know you."

"Nonsense, it won't do; we must run no risk; I shall take the house in the name of Wilson."

"Edwin," she said; "I've never lived such a life before. Is it utterly necessary to do this? It seems so base and dishonest."

He was very angry; angry because he knew

that this was only a very small instalment of what must be given to the devil; and he fancied it was necessary to "break his wife in" to what she would have so soon, as he believed, to do and bear.

"Really, Patty," he said, "don't let us be ruined by sentimental nonsense. I'm near enough to ruin, and do what you will you can give me very little help; but at least you may abstain from driving me to utter distraction. At any rate, if you choose to make a fuss about such a trifle as this, I'd better go to the workhouse at once, as an easy preparation for a gaol."

He turned sharply round and they walked quickly back to Mrs. Habbishon's house. The good lady could scarcely conceal her confusion at the recollection of having suspected them.

"We'll take the rooms," said Forester; "and Mrs. Wilson will stay here now, if convenient,

while I go back to the hotel for our luggage and our little boy."

He sent back therefore to the lodging-house that he had called the hotel, and relieved the little maid of her charge, and was back again in an hour at Mrs. Habbishon's with the luggage and child. If he could have consented to carry the child about with him every day, that would have been almost the best disguise he could have invented. He had an utter indifference, not to say aversion, to all children; and if he only could have affected some show of tenderness, even to his own boy, that sort of conduct would have been decisive against his identity, if any passer-by had fancied for a moment that he recognised in him an old acquaintance. It was, however, no part of his intention to devote his energies to a nursery; and unfortunately, in the small apartments in Dalston, the nursery was in every room in the house. The presence of a child was to

Forester a perpetual irritation ; and yet it was quite impossible, excepting when the child was asleep, that he should enjoy even his wife's society without that troublesome addition. Patty took kindly enough to their altered circumstances, for, indeed, Clayton's Hall had been to her, almost from the very first, lonely and desolate. She knew, and even before she knew she somehow felt, that there was something wrong, and that even such dreary pleasure as she had there could never last. The training through which she had passed before her marriage had quite preserved her from that false pride which is ashamed of honest work ; and if only she could have trusted her husband, she would have been far happier, even as maid-of-all-work, in those small rooms in Dalston, than she had ever been in the old Hall. But she could not trust her husband ; and it was exceedingly obvious that, in his judgment, she had become in a manner

debased and unladylike, because of that necessity of hard, rough work, to which his own recklessness had brought her. He complained that she could not come out with him ; he was constantly irritated because she had to leave the table to change the dishes and plates. As he had no one else to speak with all the sourness of his temper, all his recklessness and disappointment, vented themselves upon her. With that most common unreasonableness, which produces far more discomfort than even great calamities, he somehow managed to make what should have been his comfort the occasion of his worst humiliations and distresses. He might have known when he was angry with his wife, when he was scolding and complaining about some trivial inconvenience, when he was irritated with the playing and prattle of his child, that the real cause of his pain was far deeper. He was really tormented by poverty, and disgrace, and responsibility, and even per-

sonal danger. Probably not a single person who knew him had as yet met or seen him since he came to London ; but scarcely a day had passed on which he had not been terrified by seeing some one in the distance whom he thought he knew, and to avoid whom he had found it necessary to turn into by-streets. Moreover, his money was going ; and even in his extreme poverty his old extravagance haunted him, and he often gave himself such trifling comforts as his circumstances could no way justify out of sheer pity for his own distress. In fact, his powers seemed getting paralysed ; he could scarcely sit down to think or form a plan for the future ; and when his wife would ask him what he meant to do when their little store was exhausted, he would grow angry and violent, as if she were driving, or dunning, or torturing him.

"What's the use," he would say, "of your constantly boring me about what I'm to do

next, as if I were not thinking about it every minute of my wretched life."

"Well, dear," poor Patty would say; "our money will soon be gone, and I do so want to know what is to become of us. You don't seem to have any plan at all, or to be trying anything."

"You're a nice comforter," Forester would retort; "do something yourself. Perhaps *you* can form a plan instead of grumbling at me. But you're not a scrap of use to a man like me."

And then he would frown and mutter, and most likely go out in a pet, to wander about the streets till he was tired, or frightened home again.

They had been about six weeks in Dalston, when, one evening, strolling about in his usual listless, restless manner, along the dreary streets, he saw a parcel on a door-step, lying as if it had fallen from the pocket of some

errand-boy who might have been loitering or resting there. It was addressed simply to "George Rodgers, Esq." The name on the door was "Schneider, Professor of the French and German Languages," so Forester put the parcel into his pocket, and hurried home. He said nothing to Patty about what he had found, for already he had made up his mind that it would be by far his wisest course to take her into his confidence only when a necessity for confidence should arise. Of course he could not guess what the parcel contained, but at the same time, whatever it might be, if it could be made easily serviceable to himself, Patty's assistance would be unnecessary; and if it could be made serviceable only by the addition of some trifling dishonesty, he knew quite well that his wife would be more in his way than even a detective officer. So, when he reached home, he shut himself up in his bedroom to examine his treasure—and it was not much of a treasure

after all. It was a large envelope, containing a bank-book and a month's returned and cancelled cheques. Evidently it had been dropped by some errand-boy, and the finder of it could scarcely hope for any further advantage than, at the most, some paltry reward which Forester would be too proud to take. Nevertheless, he carefully examined the bank-book and every cheque, and soon arrived at a moderately adequate knowledge of the manner in which Mr. Rodgers' cheques were numbered, and had even produced some very faithful copies of Mr. Rodgers' signature. Not, indeed, that he could perceive what useful purpose his skill might serve, but he was always thinking and scheming and trying to find some road quick and easy out of his numerous embarrassments. He decided that at any rate he would take the parcel to the bank, find out Mr. Rodgers' address, and return him the bank-book and the cheques next day.

That night he began to talk to Patty about the future.

"I cannot imagine what to do," he said, "to get a living; and this great big London seems drearier and lonelier than the very desert itself. Not only am I without a single friend here, but it's almost more than I can manage to keep myself concealed from my bitterest enemies. Nobody can get a situation in London worth taking without some sort of decent references, and I cannot possibly refer to anyone without saying where I am, and entering into all kinds of explanations."

"I have often thought of that," said Patty; "and yet I can't exactly understand why it should be impossible for you to get a character. To be very poor and very much embarrassed is surely not the same thing as to be a thief or a swindler."

"No," said Forester, "of course it isn't the same thing, only it happens to produce very

much the same effect. For instance, if one of my amiable creditors could only snap hold of me at this very minute, I should most likely have to date my letters to-morrow morning from the Queen's Hotel, Cripplegate, or some other place of entertainment equally charming. If a man has to go to prison at all, it's really in many respects an exceedingly trifling consideration what he goes for. To tell you the truth, Patty, even though I should take to gaol with me a moderately clear conscience, I very much prefer keeping both my conscience and myself outside the gates."

"Then what do you mean to do?" asked Patty.

"Now isn't that exactly like your stupid way of talking?" said Forester, getting angry in a moment. "There isn't a woman in all the world that is your match for asking useless questions, and there isn't a woman in the whole world more good-for-nothing in the way

of answering them. Can't you, just for once in your life, vary your practice, and give me, for the first time in our difficulties, some trifling assistance?"

Patty knew quite well how useless it would be to offer a word of remonstrance or explanation. Forester was in his own judgment a most unhappy martyr, and he felt that somehow or other his perplexities were enormously increased by his marriage. It seemed never to have occurred to him that Patty could be a sufferer or a loser through *him*.

"Don't you think," she said, "that the clergyman at Leigh might give us some assistance?"

Forester seemed to think that possibly he might—at any rate, perhaps, there was no one who could be so safely trusted with the secret of their residence; and yet he hesitated, more perhaps from pride than even from fear itself. He had been in the habit of looking down

upon the clergyman as a poor feeble creature, with a wretched stipend, and a wife who had brought him no money. When in former days he had noticed him at all, it had been rather with a patronising sympathy than with any feeling of equality, or with any notion that he could by any chance ever need the clergyman's assistance. But he was now far away, and most likely would never see him again. To have to write to him on such business was no doubt humiliating, but at any rate he would not see him read the letter, and he might guard, even by a removal to some other lodging-house, against the greater part of any possible danger that might arise from a betrayal of his confidence.

"Well, perhaps that would be the best thing that we could do," he said to Patty, "and you can write a much better letter than I can; so suppose you just write to him to-night. Tell him as little as you can, of course, and just

ask him to let us have an answer as soon as possible. He had better direct the letter to the post-office, to be left till called for, and he'd better address the letter to Miss Martha Wilson."

So that night Patty wrote to Leigh. She explained to the clergyman almost as much as she knew of her husband's difficulties, and especially that he was in danger of imprisonment, if any of his creditors should be malicious or implacable. She reminded him that, while so great a misfortune would bring themselves to utter ruin, it would bring no sort of advantage to Forester's creditors; and that, therefore, to avoid so terrible and fatal a disgrace, the apartments in which they were living had been taken in her maiden name. She asked him to write a note, if he felt at liberty to do so, to say that he knew something of her husband's misfortunes, and had reason to hope that he was most anxious, not only by patient labour

to provide for himself, but also to satisfy to the full any claim that might be made against him. Patty concluded her letter by saying that she had written in the strictest confidence, relying entirely upon the honour of a gentleman and of a clergyman to keep her secret, even if he should be unable to render her any assistance.

The next morning Forester went into the City to find out where Mr. Rodgers lived, and to return him the parcel. He found him an exceedingly pleasant and gentlemanly man; he was very glad to recover the book and the cancelled cheques and bills, and all the more so because the poor errand-boy who had lost them had been so alarmed by the possible consequences of his truant carelessness, that he had not ventured to present himself at Mr. Rodgers' office. They had some general chat together, and when Forester rose to take his leave, there was a puzzling little conflict between the

delicacy and the generosity of the worthy merchant.

"I almost wish," said Mr. Rodgers, "that you had been some poor errand-boy, that I might have had the pleasure of offering some sort of reward for this service you have rendered me."

"Ah! well," said Forester, "it's not always easy to guess how poor a man is by looking at his coat. I couldn't possibly receive any reward for being commonly honest, but I am one of those unhappy mortals who have seen better days, and I find that honest pride is a very unremunerated virtue. At any rate, I am doing my best to get rid of the pride, and I am looking out for some sort of a situation, anything that is not absolutely menial. If you should hear of a clerkship or anything of that sort, with a salary sufficient to keep body and soul together—or rather, I ought to say, enough to keep three bodies and souls together—I should really be very glad to know of it."

"Why," said Mr. Rodgers, "strangely enough it happens that I shall be myself in want of a clerk in about a fortnight's time."

"Then let me call upon you again," said Forester, interrupting him. "My circumstances are very peculiar, and might need some little explanation. I have written to one of my friends, a clergyman, for such testimonials as he may please to give me; but you know, Mr. Rodgers, better than I do, that testimonials are always most easily obtained by people who don't need them, and of course I cannot tell how far my clerical friend may feel bound to recognise the innocence of misfortune. At any rate, if you will allow me, I will call upon you again this day week."

And so they parted. Everything seemed to depend now upon the answer to Patty's letter; at any rate there was a ray of hope, and Mr. Wilson, *alias* Edwin Marie Forester, in the prospect of his renovated fortunes, felt justi-

fied in comforting and congratulating himself with a little quiet dinner in town before returning to the dreary monotony of Mrs. Habbishon's lodgings.

The answer came from Leigh by return of post. The clergyman, who had begun his curate's life with the large house at Strawberry Hill for his residence, and a cow in lieu of stipend, who had a young wife and a rapidly-increasing family, could well understand the misery of straitened circumstances. He had known very little of Forester himself, but he felt that, even if he had been imprudent, he must have been severely punished by the destitution and danger to which he had sunk. He had no reason to suppose that Forester had been in any way dishonest, and he had a sort of notion that perhaps the necessity of living under somebody else's control would be the best possible cure for extravagance. So he wrote in the friendliest way to Patty, express-

ing the great regret with which he had heard of their misfortunes, assuring her of his sympathy, and testifying to what he had always believed of her husband's high respectability. He only wished, he said, that he could render them some more substantial assistance, but would at any rate have the greatest pleasure in answering, so far as they might think it prudent to give him authority, any inquiries which might be made of him.

Taking this letter with him, Forester called at the time appointed for him at Mr. Rodgers' office.

"I am very glad to see you, sir," said Mr. Rodgers.

"I am very much obliged to you, sir," said Forester; "but I really scarcely know whether my calling will do either of us much service. You want a clerk, and I want a clerkship; but then there are thousands of clerks in want of situations, and probably any one of them might be

willing to offer some kind of premium for the chance of good employment, whereas I shall be obliged at the very outset not only to intrude very much upon your confidence, but to ask you to run a certain amount of risk for my benefit. Shall I go on any further with the matter, Mr. Rodgers?"

Forester was not, after all, a bad-looking fellow. Indeed, when his gentler feelings were predominant, there was still sometimes a singular sweetness in his voice, and a certain frank and confiding manner which was almost fascinating.

"Don't let my real need of assistance," Forester went on, "induce you for a single moment to compromise your own interests. Don't be too far moved by the reflection that if you took me into your employ you would be doing me a genuine kindness; for business must be conducted as business, Mr. Rodgers, and not as benevolence. I shall not be disap-

pointed if you decline to enter further into the matter, for I have all along expected that I had a very hard course before me."

"Well, Mr. Wilson," said Mr. Rodgers, "it seems to me that, to begin with, any compromise of safety will be chiefly on your own side; all I can say for the present is, that if you don't mind telling me your story, you may at any rate be sure that I will keep your secret, and if I can be of any service to you, as I hope may turn out to be the case, I shall be very glad indeed."

So Forester told him his story, or at least told him *a* story, which, if not wholly true, was at any rate more true than false. He told him that there had been some mystery about his mother's marriage; that if it had not been for her prudence in making a will, acting under the advice of the clergyman and the surgeon who visited her in her last hours, he would have been a mere beggar; that, as it

was, there had been much delay and suspense, and it was for a long time uncertain whether he would obtain his rights at all; that even when he had secured his property, he found it greatly diminished in value by the heavy law expenses of a long suit, and, in fact, his income had for several years been barely sufficient to repair the house and to keep up the estate, of which he had come into possession. Pressed by difficulties, he said that he had obtained a considerable loan through the agency of a solicitor, from a person who was recommended to him as being a respectable client, with a good deal of money, which he was anxious to invest, and not at all likely to be exacting or unreasonable in the conditions of the advance, or the repayment. It turned out, however, Forester said, that the lawyer was a scoundrel, and that the respectable client was a common Jew money-lender. With a recklessness which, Forester admitted, amounted to sheer infatua-

tion, he had signed deeds which had left him on the first default in any one of the instalments of repayment completely at the mercy of the Jew. Of course there had been a default; in fact, the second instalment had been owing for a week, and he had been obliged to ask that it might stand over to yet a week longer. It was not a mere pretence; his own receipts had been delayed, and though he cursed the folly which had left him so narrow a margin for making provision against any accident which might interfere with his punctual repayments, yet he had not the slightest doubt that the very short time he required would be cheerfully granted. To his utter astonishment and alarm, the only answer he received from the respectable client of his solicitor was a couple of vulgar brokers, who were to take possession of his house, and who, moreover, served him with writs, in case the property itself should not be sufficient to meet

all the claims against him. He at once perceived, that whatever use he might make of the legal routine of appearances and pleadings, the utmost that he could gain would be a very brief respite, with the sure effect of increasing his own liabilities, and exasperating the Jew. He therefore left his house in the possession of the brokers, and hurried away to London, taking his wife's maiden name and living in very quiet apartments in Dalston; hoping that so he might be undiscovered by his relentless enemy, and obtain some means of earning, perhaps a scanty, but at any rate an honest living.

"And now, Mr. Rodgers," said Forester, "I've no doubt I've wasted your time, and made you think me rather a fool than otherwise. And yet, to tell you the truth, it's very lonely being in Dalston in a kind of miserable disguise; and it's a relief to tell one's trouble to anybody in whom I know I can confide. Good morning, Mr. Rodgers."

"Well, well, Mr. Forester," he said; "but there's the other side of the communication. You've said your say, and now I must say mine. Did you hear from the clergyman you spoke of last time I saw you? Or would you allow me to refer to him?"

"Oh, certainly," said Forester, "pray write; but I have heard from him myself. He has written very kindly, and you are quite at liberty to see his letter."

Of course Mr. Rodgers read it and considered it very satisfactory.

"But don't let this letter prevent your writing," said Forester. "I should much *prefer* your writing; and as to the clerkship, you see only too well, that you needn't be afraid that a little delay will rob you of *my* services. May I call again the day after to-morrow? then, perhaps, we may decide the matter one way or other."

It was duly arranged that Forester (alias

Mr. Wilson) should call again as soon as it was possible for Mr. Rodgers to have received an answer from the clergyman at Leigh; and so he returned to Dalston, feeling pretty sure that an opportunity would now be afforded him of earning a moderate but honest living. He was certainly glad to see even that road out of beggary; but he had never yet earned a penny in his life, and an office-stool seemed scarcely more cheerful than a workhouse or a model prison. It was not, therefore, mere affectation, or for the sake of increasing Mr. Rodgers' sympathy and confidence, that he had abstained so carefully from *pushing* himself into that gentleman's employ. Moreover, it was certainly very desirable that no master should ever be able to say that he had taken him into his service without a character. Indeed, he was *not* without a character. He had been very unfortunate in his property, and far from skilful in the management of his own

finances; but that was no proof that he would be unskilful in managing the finances of other people. Spending money, and keeping an account of the way in which somebody else spends money, are widely different employments, and require very different kinds of ability. Nevertheless, Forester felt that he was quite throwing himself away upon Mr. Rodgers; and if that gentleman had manifested the slightest harshness or suspicion, the haughty beggar would have been half gratified to avoid the escape from poverty by the sacrifice of pride. He hated work, and he had a presentiment that the new clerkship would be a very temporary expedient. Meanwhile he *must live;* and butchers and bakers wanted much more substantial remuneration for bread and meat than the bare honour of supplying the wants of an unfortunate gentleman.

"After all," he said to himself, "I can easily get out of this if anything better presents

itself—a month's notice, or even a week's notice, would set me free."

So he loitered through the next two days, and allowed the third to pass, and then he went once more to the City to know his fate.

"I quite expected you yesterday, Mr. Wilson," said Mr. Rodgers.

"Well, yes," Forester said, "I knew I was at liberty to call then, but there might have been some delay in the post, or my friend might have been out when your letter arrived at Leigh; and it would have put me for a moment in a false position if my references had seemed unsatisfactory. I presume, however, you have heard by this time?"

"Yes," said Mr. Rodgers, "the letter came yesterday, and is everything you could wish. Indeed, it might almost make me afraid of offering so poor a position to you, Mr. Wilson. But you know, as well as I can tell you, that

there's no disgrace in honest work, nor in honest poverty either. Disgrace is in idleness and crime. Besides, a man of ability is sure to rise, and this clerkship is only the day of small things, my friend. Is it to be a bargain between us, Mr. Wilson?"

"I shall be only too thankful," said Forester; "its being a very different position from what I'm used to, is just one of the things I must be content to put up with. Very likely I may find it in some respects a better position. There's no knowing till one tries. At any rate, I'll do my best, Mr. Rodgers, to serve you; and I've no doubt we shall get on very comfortably together."

There was a good deal of talk; salary and office hours were duly arranged; Mr. Rodgers explained the kind of work his clerk would have to do, and after a quiet luncheon together Forester wished his new master good-morning, and with a mingled feeling of relief and

bondage strolled leisurely home again to Dalston.

"Well, Patty," he said, "it's a good thing I thought of writing to the parson. I've got a '*situation.*' It's not, perhaps, what you'll like, nor what I like; but it will, at any rate, pay for board and lodging till something better turns up."

"Thank God!" said Patty; "you can't imagine, Edwin, what a relief it is to my mind. Every hour, every minute, I've been weighed down with anxiety, wondering what we should do when our very, very little store was exhausted. And I didn't like to tease you with questions and suggestions. Indeed I didn't know what to suggest. I'm so thankful you've found something at last."

"Well, Patty," said her husband, "you've not had a monopoly of anxiety or trouble I can assure you, though you almost seem to think

so. I wish you had; I wish either of us had. Or that we could take it in turns, week and week about; so that each of us might get an interval of moderate cheerfulness. But," he went on, "you've not even asked me what my new 'situation' is."

"Why, I was so glad to hear you had found one at all, that it didn't seem to matter much what it was, so long as it's honest. But what is it?" said Patty.

"Oh, never mind," said Forester; "of course it doesn't matter. I'm not *used* to picking oakum, or breaking stones on the road, or sweeping a chimney, or catching rats in the main sewers—but so long as they're all honest occupations, one's as good as another."

"Now you're not vexed with me, Edwin, are you?" said Patty. "You know quite well what I meant. I only wish *I* could find something to do, that would save you from workin

at all, though baby and housekeeping don't leave me much spare time."

"Well, well, Patty," said Forester, "it's all right. I don't want you to work; you've more than enough to do already, God knows! I'm going to be clerk to the old gentleman whose bank-book I found. Quite a godsend, wasn't it? He seems a very decent old party; and the parson wrote him such a flattering letter about me, that he seems half bashful about accepting the services of so distinguished a gentleman. It's a pity his modesty didn't lead him at once to offer me a partnership. However, I'm to begin work on Monday; and most likely by that time he'll be prepared to appreciate my merits more accurately."

And so he rattled on; getting good-tempered and cheerful, more like his better self than he had been for a long time. No doubt there was a kind of falseness under his mirth, and his laughter was far more melancholy

than tears. But at any rate, thought Patty, there is work to be done and bread to be earned, and surely God has not utterly forsaken us.

CHAPTER VI.

BOB VICKERS.

Poor Meggy found Leigh unutterably dreary when the Foresters had gone. The place would have been most bewildering and wretched even if they had remained at the old Hall. It would have been very hard for her to be at once so near and so far away, so familiar and yet so strange. Moreover, the change in her relations with Edwin and his wife would have been sure to attract attention; and idle village gossips would have spared no gentle heart in their coarse explanatory guesses. And yet poor Meggy felt that the Foresters were her friends and protectors, and would never have suffered her to be wronged. Strange, too, as it may

seem, she clung with her whole soul to Patty ; with shame, indeed, and bitter self-reproach, but yet with such trust as only the pure and noble can ever inspire. Even Edwin was still dear to her, nay, dearer to her than ever; and she could scarcely bear the suspense and uncertainty to which his sudden departure had doomed her. She had as yet received but one letter from Patty, and that was only to say that they were in London, and that their arrangements were far from complete. The days dragged on so slowly that it seemed as if the next day for a journey to the Stockport post-office would never come. Meanwhile, for poor Meggy, memory and anticipation were alike empty of comfort; she could dwell with no satisfaction on the past, and she had no hope for the future. Even to live as in the old days with her father in old Bob Vickers' cottage was fast becoming intolerable.

Not that blaspheming Bob was harsh or

unkind to her. Indeed a strange gentleness had come upon him. He was quite subdued by Patty's love, and though the secret over which he had so long kept angry watch was known, yet somehow even that was a relief. Moreover, it was known only by those who would themselves be most anxious for their own sakes still to keep it. The rough old man was touched also by Meggy's trouble; and could not fail to see that the grief, and shame, and anxiety of the last few weeks were breaking her spirit and undermining her health. Little Freddy, too, was very feeble, very slowly recovering from the exhaustion of his fever. Then there was the tormenting gossip of the neighbourhood about the old Hall; those endless questions and cruel guesses which were like daggers in Bob's heart. There seemed everywhere a blight. The old man would sit brooding at home in the evenings when his work was over; he seemed afraid

of meeting his old companions, and was weighed down as with the shame and dread of one who has committed some great crime.

Meggy knew how great a change had come upon her whole life—upon her cottage home, upon the old Hall, upon her own heart. She often felt as though she could not draw breath any longer where she was—she must go elsewhere or die. And yet she knew not where to go. The rich can never understand from how many torments their wealth is every day saving them. Money cannot buy real peace of mind, but it can very often secure the absence of innumerable sources of irritation. The sorrows of the poor must be endured without such comfort. Meggy's heart was broken, wherever she might be; but how unspeakable would have been her relief if she could have escaped the cruel stare of inquiring, half-accusing eyes—the galling pity of neighbours—the feeling that she was living on in a place

where the very life of her life was dead for ever. Anywhere but in Leigh she might begin afresh; and if she could never more be happy she might at any rate be able to find some alleviation of her pain. Where could she go?

Of course she thought of London—where *they* were. But it was easier to think of London than for a poor girl to travel two hundred miles. Besides, would it not be a breach of faith? And if she ever reached the great city would not her difficulties be increased? Where would she find a home? What could she do with Freddy? Who would give her work, or even take her into service? English society, like London policemen, think everybody guilty till he can prove his innocence.

The neighbours really knew much less than Meggy fancied they knew; but they unquestionably began to suspect that little Freddy was the centre of a much deeper mystery than

they had at first supposed. There were whispers, too, that there was something strange in Patty's finding him and nursing him so tenderly. The change in blaspheming Bob increased suspicion; for his comrades judged, not quite unreasonably, that it must have been a very heavy blow which had stunned him into so harmless a gentleness. They soon discovered that these questions or broad hints gave him much pain; but that it was no longer dangerous to approach his cherished secret. They ventured upon loud whispers, which were meant to be heard; and when he turned sorrowfully away they jeered at his soft-heartedness even more than they had trembled at his curses and fury. At last he could bear it no longer.

He had walked one evening along the Stockport road, as far as the "Jolly Sailor," and was sitting to rest on the same bench where Patty had seen him when little Freddy was lost. He

was sitting very silently, with his glass of ale almost untasted in his hand, thinking over the past and the future. He was in that state of mind and feeling to which the present is utterly unreal; an ever-falling bridge over which one hastens in fear and danger to something more firm beyond. Though there was company in the "Jolly Sailor's" parlour, and its window was open behind him, he neither saw nor heard what was passing around him till he heard his own name.

"Old Bob Vickers has had a good deal o' taming, you may take your oath o' that," said one of the company.

"Ay, and his lass too. It's as much as she dare to look above her own feet. It'll all be out afore long," said another.

"It's my belief," said a third, affecting to whisper, though he was scarcely a foot from Bob's ear, "that the little nevvy's a little ——"

"Mates," said Bob, suddenly turning round

on them, with a quiet determination in his face which terrified them almost more than his old ferocity—"there *was* a day, many a hundred days, when the biggest and boldest of you would ha' bitten his tongue out sooner than dared to whisper about Bob Vickers's Meggy so close behind her own father's ears."

He doubled his fist till it seemed as hard as a cannon-ball, and shook it before their cowardly faces, as he went on—

"And there's just that sort of devil in me, every now and then, that makes me feel as I'd just as soon beat the brains out o' some o' your gossipping spiteful heads as not, and swing for it. What's Meggy done to any o' you, I 'ud like to know, as ye should be making so free wi' her and the little bonny bairn? Good God!"

He wanted his fist now to cover his own face, but he went on with that quiet slowness

which indicates that a man has to fight a hard battle for every word he utters.

"Nay, nay, mates, you needn't look afeard —no, nor yet pretend you're not afeard—for I shall fist no more. Ye might ha' known summut heavy had dropped on me; and ye might ha' just helped to lift it off a bit instead o' hammering it down. But it's not for me to grumble; I've been hard enough myself, God help me! Good night to you, mates all."

He turned away, leaving them sorry and ashamed—for, to do them justice, they had not meant to wound so deeply—and walked slowly home again, through the wood, past Clayton's Hall, by the side of the reservoirs, to the old home by the waterfall. He knew now that their secret was out. He had been compelled to appeal to the compassion of rough men who have little feeling for the broken-spirited. He sat down in his chair and wept; a strange faintness seemed creeping over him, his eyes

grew misty and dim, and the cottage home faded away from his sight, and the dashing water grew silent. He knew not how long he had been sitting unconscious, when he became aware that he was not alone. Meggy and the mother were at his side, and little Freddy calling him, with his pretty coaxing voice, so dear—so dear.

"Bring the little lad up," he whispered.

They brought Freddy to his knees, and the old man laid his hands trembling on the young child's head.

"God bless thee, little darling — little darling! and thee, Meggy wench; and thee, mother—and—mind——"

Again the little room was swimming round, the old home was fading out of sight, the dashing water was growing still and silent—still and silent for ever. With a blessing and a prayer blaspheming Bob had died. His rough heart was broken, for all its seeming hardness

—just as one sees hard crystals splitting to pieces almost at the touch of one who knows where to strike the blow. The neighbours were shocked, in their way; and the company that had seen him last at the "Jolly Sailor" had, for a while, a guilty feeling that they had themselves helped to kill him. But, "the evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones." Villagers are not sentimental. Not even the grave was holy enough to shelter Bob from their harsh judgments, though happily it could shelter him from the torment of them. In a few days they had said all the poor little they had to say about their dead neighbour, and had time to turn their attention to Meggy and the boy.

Now, indeed, Leigh had become utterly intolerable to Meggy. With the bitterest grief she had ever known she followed her dead father to the grave; and then her one

burning desire, the impatient longing of her whole heart, was to get away to some new home where the very strangeness of all people and things would be a kind of comfort to her. Then she would be able to see people whispering, without fearing to hear her own name. Then she might find playfellows, perhaps schoolfellows, for her boy, who would know no cruel secret wherewith to crush his spirit. At any rate, the very air of Leigh seemed to suffocate her. She must have a change, even if it should be for the worse, or die.

The owners and managers at Clayton's factory were very kind to Meggy and her mother. Bob had been a steady workman, and even his roughness had been no injury—had been, in fact, an additional security—to his employers. Moreover, he had left in their hands, weekly, for seven or eight years, a small portion of his wages, to prepare against a rainy day, and they had invested the money for him in a

benefit society, which secured ample support in sickness, decent funeral expenses, and a moderate sum for the widow in case of death. Soon after Bob's funeral one of the managers of the factory called at the cottage to see the wife and Meggy, to explain to them their position and to offer such service as he might be able to render them. He told them how sorry he was to have lost so good a servant. "None the worse servant," he said, "in a neighbourhood like this, for being a little bit rough."

"He was never rough to us, sir," said Meggy.

"No, no," said the gentleman, "I'm quite sure he can't have been rough to you, for he has been making very careful provision for you for several years; indeed, I called chiefly to let you know exactly what it is you are entitled to, and to ask if I can do you any service."

He then showed them a full account of what he had been receiving from Bob, and explained to them how he had invested the money; and he undertook on their behalf to make all necessary arrangements to obtain from the benefit society the amount due to the widow.

"I have appointed a man to go on for the present with Vickers's work," he said; "but I am not at all sure that he will in all respects suit me, and you are very welcome to live in the cottage until I find one that will. Of course, when the time comes for you to move, I shall be very glad to render you any assistance in my power to find either employment or another house."

He advised them to think over what it would be best for them to do, and he said that when they had had time to make their calculations he would call again.

There was really no separate provision for

Meggy, but her mother knew well what Bob would have wished, and she and her child had only common interests. She thought that most likely they would live and work together, and the income of one would be the income of the other also. She was, therefore, scarcely prepared for the passionate earnestness with which Meggy addressed her.

"Mother, I can't live any longer in Leigh. It's killing me fast. Let me go out to service—far away—anywhere, but I shall die if I stay here."

"Why, what ails thee, wench?" said the mother; "thou'rt upset wi' thy poor father going so sudden like. Thou'lt be better in a bit."

"No, mother," said the girl, "I shall never be better here; and it's the same thing that killed poor father. Often and often I've sat watching him, and I knew what it would come to. We must go away—at any rate *I* must go away."

"And where wilt go to, wench?" said her mother; "thou'rt none fit for service, and we know nobody to take thee. It's none so many about here as wants lasses like thee."

"I know that, mother," said Meggy; "but I *must* go. I shall ask Clayton's manager about it."

"And what dost mean to do wi' Freddy, eh, lass?"

What indeed! Not all his bright beauty and winning ways could change his history, or make him other than a burden to those who loved him best. Meggy covered her face with her hands and wept. Who could advise her? Still there was one deep, firm resolve—she must and would leave Leigh, even if she begged her bread from door to door.

"Thou'lt have money enough for a while, lass," said the mother, "wi' half o' this; but it'll none last for ever; and th' boy'll grow and want clothes, and Bob was always for giving

him a bit o' schooling like, and making a fine gentleman on him. Eh, but Bob thought a deal o' little Freddy"—

And with that the poor woman fell to crying again.

"Mother," said Meggy, "I don't want half thy money—just a bit to set me going like. But if I could get a place somewhere—some big place like Manchester, or Liverpool, or—or—London, I might have Freddy at school while I was working. Father would ha' liked that."

"Well, well, wench, thou must do thy own will. Go and ask Clayton's manager; he'll do what he can for thee."

So the next evening Meggy called at his house, and told him what she wished. He was not the least surprised to hear it; for he knew there was troublesome gossip about Meggy and little Freddy, though he had never cared to listen to it.

"Well, Meggy," he said, "I'll do my best. The great difficulty will be the little boy; unless you change your mind and leave him with your mother."

"No, sir, thank you, I must keep him with me; and father was so wishful to put him to school; and there is no school here, none that I could send him to. It would be much better if I could get to some large town."

"There is a family from London coming down to live at the Hall," the manager said; "possibly they might be able to help us. At any rate I'll ask them. They'll be here this week."

The family came that week. They were leaving their London house to a daughter just married; and they fancied that, in their declining years, a quiet country residence would be full of peace and healthy pleasures. Meantime their daughter was very dull, as most women are for the first year of their married

life ; and she wanted a servant who would be almost a kind of companion, fit to be trusted with dresses, marketing, and all the odds and ends of easy work, which no ordinary domestic can be trusted not to neglect. Meggy was just the sort of girl she wished to meet with ; not experienced, indeed, but sensible, good-looking, with a sweet voice, and the manners of a born lady ; a girl, too, whose honesty was above suspicion. Indeed, the daughter, who had come down with her parents to see their country home, and to help to put things right, and to get a little change from the dull monotony of sitting alone all day with nothing to do while her husband was in the City, fell in love with Meggy at first sight, and it was soon arranged that when the Leigh visit was over she should accompany the young bride to London. There was much discussion about Meggy's mother ; but Mrs. Elliotson (that was the bride's new name) advised that she should

go to London too. There was plenty of woman's work to be had, she said ; and Mrs. Vickers might take care of Freddy and see to his schooling ; and Meggy might go and visit her little favourite whenever she liked.

Mrs. Elliotson was soon tired of Leigh. She was a Londoner to the very core. Fresh air and romantic scenery were all very well, if only she could have merry companions, and in fact take a bit of London with her into the country. But wherever the London might be, she could enjoy life only there,—nowhere else. Then at Leigh there was only one delivery of letters a-day ! and it was quite uncertain, to an hour or two, at what time the letter-carrier would make his appearance. He had to bring the letters from Stockport ; his pony was slow ; the roadside inns had as much right to letters as any other houses ; and nobody in Leigh was in a hurry. There was not a shop within a mile of the Hall. The butcher came only

twice a week; and if his customers forgot to give their orders, or he forgot to execute them, there was no alternative but three days of vegetarianism or fasting. The fashions never reached that benighted district till they had already become obsolete almost everywhere else; and, more provoking still, you might wear the best dress in Europe and nobody would know or care. The factory people smelt horribly of oil; and Mrs. Elliotson could scarcely believe her own eyes, though they told her again and again how delicately beautiful many of the girls were, though they wore no bonnets and stamped past in wooden clogs. The agricultural few were more stupid than their cattle; and the London lady hated to see them lounging about in their smocks when the day's work was over, talking their rough dialect, swearing, fighting, laughing loud vulgar laughs. So she was glad to get to town again. The meadows were very green

and sweet! but so was Hyde Park, in its way, and the perfumers' shops in Bond Street. The wood and the river, the fishes and the birds, were beautiful and melodious, but they were dreadfully monotonous. So good-bye, Leigh. "Perhaps it may suit papa, but mamma will soon be sick of it." And for Meggy and her mother also, good-bye, Leigh—good-bye, the Hall, the river, the cottage, the newly-covered grave. Good-bye slanderous gossip, cruel whisperers, all the fear and shame and struggle which had made life a burden and a curse. Good-bye, Leigh!

CHAPTER VII.

THE CLERK.

Two days before they left for London, Meggy went to the Stockport post-office for the anxiously expected letter. It had been waiting for her for some time; and brought the news of Forester's new occupation. It brought also new warnings of the great need of caution, lest by some unlucky discovery of his residence, any of Forester's implacable and unscrupulous enemies should in a moment blight their prospects, and even rob them of the means of getting an honest living. The letter was full of kindness and wisdom; and when Meggy read it she almost felt that there was a sort of treachery in the very step she was about to

take. She knew in her heart that she wanted to go to London, above all places in the world, because Edwin was there; and yet she knew also that she must never see or speak to him. And she inwardly resolved that she never would. It would do no harm, in the very busiest hours of the day, when he would most certainly be hard at work, to walk past his office and just touch the walls. But she would never meet him; never break her promise to Patty, never venture again into temptations the power of which she knew too well. Should she even tell Patty she was leaving Leigh? And yet, if not, how would she ever hear of them? So she determined to tell Patty all; and to urge her to keep the secret even from Forester himself.

"My very Dearest Friend,

"You are never out of my thoughts, and I never think of you without both shame and

joy. Yet I fancy I know now what the Bible means when it says that perfect love casteth out fear. I am afraid of everybody about here; of the rough men and the gossiping factory-girls. And yet I've done *them* no harm. But when I think of you, though you have suffered so much through my folly and sin, I know that you are the best friend I have, and I would give all I possess to be with you, and to be able to ask your advice, and tell you our plans. We've had a very sad, sad loss since you left Leigh. Six weeks ago my poor father died. I'd seen, for a long time, that he was going. After little Freddy was lost, and you went away from the old Hall, he seemed quite broken down; he would never go out with his old companions; indeed he seemed to be afraid of them. It was all through me. People began to whisper about me and about little Freddy, and poor father couldn't bear it, and yet he wouldn't swear and threaten to

strike them as he used to do. He was quite changed. He used often to draw me close to him and kiss me, and say 'God bless my wench,' or perhaps not be able to speak a word. He never seemed happy to have Freddy out of his sight. He died quite suddenly one evening; we found him in his chair in a dead faint, and he only just came round enough to bid us good-bye. He'd been saving money for us; and Clayton's people are very kind.

"But you won't wonder, my dearest friend, that Leigh is now very dull. I feel scarcely able to breathe here; and our manager has been getting me a situation as a kind of companion to a newly-married lady in London, the daughter of the people who have come down to live at the Hall. We shall leave Leigh the day after to-morrow; and I cannot tell how thankful I shall be to get away from these people, and the places which bring so many sad thoughts to my mind. And yet I feel that

I shall be almost further than ever from *you*, my best friend; it will be so hard not to see you and talk to you, that I shall almost wish myself back again, or in Australia, far across the sea. For I know we must not meet. I will be very, very cautious, lest your secret should be found out; and most sincerely do I hope and pray that you may become prosperous and happy. I will write to you again when I get to London, and tell you where to direct your letters.

"Little Freddy is getting quite strong now. It is partly, indeed chiefly, for him that I wanted to get away from Leigh. And poor father was so wishful to have him put to school. Mother is coming to London with me, and Freddy will live with her; and Mrs. Elliotson (the lady I'm going to live with) says that in London there are plenty of infant schools, where quite little babies are taken care of and taught.

"Good-bye, my dear, dear friend. I shall

never forget your love and kindness. I feel very, very dull. It all seems dark; and even Leigh—oh, how I used to love it! Good-bye again, my best friend, and believe me always your very grateful, humble friend,

"Meggy Vickers.

"P.S. Do not tell *anyone* that I am coming to London."

It was not with altogether unmixed pleasure that Patty read this letter, not without some faint presentiment of danger. And yet, what was there to blame? It was plain enough that Meggy could live no longer at Leigh; that even more for Freddy's sake than for her own, it was necessary to seek a home where her fatal secret should be unknown; and there is no such hiding-place in all the world as London. Meggy, too, had her presentiments of evil, though she was strong in the resolve never to see Forester again. And yet, when

the express train was hurrying her on from Stockport to London, almost without a stoppage, it was of him that she was thinking; grudging every moment's delay, almost bending forward in the carriage that she might reach him sooner. Reach *him!* Alas! for the good resolutions that have to contend with our strongest passions.

Meanwhile, Mr. Rodgers' clerk was devoting himself with great energy to his new work. It was dreary enough at first, but in time he began to find it even exciting. His dangers and misfortunes had sharpened his wits, and made him eager and quick to see and learn whatever might be turned to his own advantage. With all his profound contempt for tradesmen he began to perceive that a successful merchant can scarcely be a fool. To make money may not be the noblest ambition for a human spirit, but it requires a combina-

tion of very many most excellent and valuable qualities—confidence and caution, foresight, industry, self-denial, sensitiveness to all changes in the commercial atmosphere, knowledge of human nature. And, after all, to make money is at the least better than to waste it—and what honest work had Forester ever done until a cruel fate had compelled him to occupy the stool of honour among the clerks in Mr. Rodgers' counting-house? Then again, he began to know several of the people with whom his employer had business. Sometimes he heard secrets about them that made him almost proud of his office stool.

"Poor devil!" he would say to himself, as some customer, with lengthening account and shortening credit, and the defiant look which never fails to reveal extreme anxiety, would pass his desk; "poor devil! here's a nice little statement I'm preparing for you. It's all very well to look as if nothing were the matter, but

don't you think it would be better to suspend payment at once and seek the protection of the court? That's what it will come to sooner or later—why not say sooner? The sooner you're in the mess, the sooner you'll be out again."

He grew quite cynical, and so he began to acquire the very worst meanness into which tradesmen are tempted to fall—the belief that most men are rogues and liars, and that because "business is business," it can never be tempered by humanity and generosity. Almost forgetting, in his long-continued impunity, that he was himself never for a single instant out of the greatest danger, he would often urge Mr. Rodgers to acts of severity from which the merchant would shrink—and all the while he believed himself much more of a "gentleman" than his employer.

"It's really a very bad case, Wilson," Mr. Rodgers would say; "I've given him long

credit, and all kinds of chances. I don't like to push him to extremities; and yet I don't know what to do. What do you think?"

"Nay, sir, you know much more about business than I do," Wilson would reply. "I only consider your interests; and from that point of view everything is remarkably plain. You ask me whether you shall make this man a present of five or six hundred pounds. I don't know anything about it. It would be magnificent generosity."

"No, no, Wilson, not a *present*—just another trial, a little time; the man has a large family, and one doesn't like to——eh, Wilson?"

"To *what*, sir? I didn't quite hear."

"Well, to sell him up, or anything of that sort."

"Exactly—most generous; there can't be two opinions."

"But what do you really think?"

"As moral philosopher, or as merchant's

clerk? Merchant's clerk. Very well. Then I think he's imposing on your good nature. I think you care more about his wife and family than he does himself—and, chiefly, I'm sure that if you don't sell him up, Tipper and Smithson will; and so you'll lose your money and do no good."

"Damn it!" old Rodgers would mutter to himself, "he's a most invaluable clerk; but his misfortunes have made him anxious not even to appear to sacrifice my interests to other people's feelings—he isn't so hard as he seems. Wilson, tell my solicitors just to give him another reminder—and to say that it's positively the last time. If they don't hear satisfactorily they must proceed."

"*Really* proceed, sir?"

"Yes, of course. Just see to it. I must be out for about an hour or an hour and a-half. I shall be back before you close."

CHAPTER VIII.

AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE.

Forester did not wish to inflict pain, but he was simply careless whether he inflicted pain or not. As Mr. Rodgers' clerk he banished, as far as possible, all feeling from his heart, and kept to his books and his business. At the best of times he was utterly selfish; but in his prosperity he had been able to indulge his selfishness without hurting other people; indeed, he found he could increase his own pleasures by allowing other people to share them. So he had sometimes passed for a good-natured man of the easy, passive sort. It was adversity that proved him and showed how cruel he was. He was no longer able to

minister to the pleasures of others. It was a hard struggle for him even to earn a bare living for his wife and child; living lonely in one of the dreariest of the new districts of London. He was himself constantly in personal danger. And he grew under this discipline envious and cynical. If his master's customers failed to meet their liabilities, he found in their calamities a kind of alleviation of his own. "Yes, *your* turn's come now," he would say to himself, "and you needn't make such a fuss. Why should *you* get off any better than others? I've had my turn long ago. It would be pretty justice in the world if I were to be the only loser."

In some such mood as this he was one afternoon returning home from Mr. Rodgers' office, when he was startled by a tap on the shoulder as he was walking along St. Paul's Churchyard. He turned round to chastise the impertinence, and found himself face to face with

that grim destiny which he had been so long avoiding, which had hunted him down at last.

"Ah, my good sir," said the man who had stopped him, "I thought I couldn't be mistaken. I should know you anywhere. And yet I didn't think you were in London at all; I understood you were in America."

"Wouldn't it be better," said Forester, his face ghastly white, his lips quivering, his whole soul paralysed by the dread that had fallen upon him,—"wouldn't it be better to walk down Dean's Court a little way? We can talk more quietly there."

"Certainly," said Mr. Abrahams, the friend of the distressed, the Jew money-lender, the most completely spiteful and implacable of all Forester's creditors. "Or why not walk on to my office? Or let us take a penny boat to Charing Cross—there's a beautifully cool air on the water—and then walk up Regent Street."

"Anything you like," said Forester, utterly

helpless; knowing perfectly well that Mr. Abrahams would take care never to lose sight of him again, and that if there were any hope for him at all it must be in conciliating the man into whose power he had fallen.

The air on the Thames may have been cool, but Forester never felt it. He could scarcely have made oath the next morning that he had been on the Thames at all. All the way to Abrahams' office he was fairly gasping for breath; his brain was throbbing as if his heart were beating in his head; and in the wild tumult of his fear he could form no plan, he could complete not even one train of thought. Before he could finish considering how far he might seek assistance from Mr. Rodgers the thought of his wife and child would break up his half-formed purpose; and then he would wonder what arrangements to make for his office work. It seemed as if he had to crowd a whole life into an hour; and he felt as little

able to control himself as if he had been smitten with madness. It seemed an age of agony, walking up Regent Street with that Jew devil at his side ; and yet he had had time to think so little, that he seemed to have passed by a single step from St. Paul's Churchyard to Abrahams' office in Maddox Street.

Bitterly enough he cursed the day when first he entered that dingy room ; and yet what could he have done better? The money he borrowed had delayed the crisis. It was the same shady, suspicious-looking place. The table was still covered with parchments and every kind of legal litter.

Abrahams sat down, and bid his "client" be seated too. The Jew's face was harder and more cruel in its expression than when Forester had first seen him ; otherwise he might have been sitting there without moving, ever since the fatal documents were signed, so little change was there in him and his surroundings.

"Well, Mr. Forester," said the Jew, taking a heap of papers out of a drawer beside him, "you are at least a clever hider; we've spent a good deal of money in looking after you. It's the best course to be perfectly plain with you, and so I may as well tell you that, if we don't arrive at a very satisfactory arrangement this evening, you'll be provided with furnished apartments in Whitecross Street."

"Mr. Abrahams," said Forester, "I must earnestly implore your kind indulgence. I'll do anything I can, but——"

"Yes, yes," said Abrahams, interrupting him, "what did you say was your name and address —the name you go by, I mean? You're not likely to have had many letters directed to 'Edwin Marie Forester, Esquire (of Leigh), Poste restante, London.'"

"Edwin Wilson, Mrs. Habbishon's, Lavender Road, Dalston," said Forester.

Mr. Abrahams thought it desirable to check

this address by a reference to the latest Directory.

"It's quite a new neighbourhood," said Forester.

"And it's quite a new Directory," answered the Jew. "All right; Mrs. Habbishon has been there at least a year. Why Wilson?"

"Because my wife's maiden name was Wilson."

"Your wife with you? Any children?"

"Only one; both wife and child are with me."

"And what are you doing for yourself? how are you getting a living?"

Forester seemed hesitating, for the answer to this question would put him wholly at the mercy of his enemy.

"Oh, never mind," said Abrahams. "I thought you might like to save me the trouble of finding out. It won't take me half a day. But we needn't make matters worse than they

are, need we, Mr.—which name would you like me to use ?"

Forester, with an imbecile sort of apology, gave him the name and address of Mr. Rodgers.

"But you'll not——" he began to say.

"Not ruin your chance of making money ? Certainly not. We want you to make money ; indeed, we shall *insist* on your making money, and *bringing it here*, Mr. Forester. You cannot have forgotten that, apart from interest and law expenses, you owe us five hundred pounds!"

Mr. Abrahams began to untie the bundle of papers—the receipt, promissory note, and all manner of legal instruments.

"Of course you are aware, Mr. Forester, that we have judgment and execution against you ; and under the circumstances there was nothing for it but a *ca. sa.* Of course we'd much rather have your money than your person. What can you arrange ?"

"What do you suggest ?" said Forester.

"I've nothing in the world but my salary, and that is barely enough to live on; but still——"

"Yes, exactly so; people scarcely know how much they can manage to spare, when it is really necessary," said the Jew.

"Still," said Forester, "what little could be spared would be a mere trifle towards clearing off what I owe you."

"It wouldn't even pay the interest, as far as I can guess," said the Jew. "Where's your wife's money?"

"She never had a penny," said Forester.

"Not a penny!" said Abrahams, incredulously; "you never could have married without money surely, and when you were so much embarrassed too?"

"Yes, I know I was a fool," said Forester, almost gaining a little vestige of confidence as he felt himself a martyr to the tender passions; "but I *was* a fool, and I can't alter it now."

"Then there's nothing for it but your employer. Won't he do something?"

"I couldn't possibly ask him," said Forester.

"Mr. Forester, do let us understand each other," said the Jew, with a look of savage determination. "Business is business; we don't mean to lose our money. If you don't choose to help us to get it we shall put you in prison. You'll lose your present situation, and you'll never get another. If you don't ask Mr. Rodgers to help you now, you'll be glad enough to do it after a week or two in gaol. It's very unpleasant, but that's not my fault. In fact," he went on, looking more savage still, and tying up the bundle of papers again, "if we were not to make an example of people who treat us as you have done, we might as well give up business."

Forester sat silent and bewildered. Perhaps Mr. Rodgers *would* help him; he was thinking how to manage the matter.

"Perhaps," said Abrahams, "you'd like to think it over for a day or two in——!"

"No, no, no; never that," Forester said, shivering to his very bones with fear. "What am I to do?"

"Ask your governor to be security for you—say for seven hundred. If he will, we'll give you time."

"He would certainly refuse," said Forester, "even if I had the impudence to ask him."

"You *must* ask him, young man; you *must* get money somehow. Perhaps he would accept a bill, or he might discount one, and you could get the money together while the bill was running. You *must* see him, and tell us what you have arranged. Do something satisfactory by this time to-morrow, and meet me here again."

He put the bundle of papers into the drawer again, put on his hat, and rose to go. Forester rose also.

"Just one word more, my friend. We've found you now, and there's no fear of our losing you again. If you *don't* come here again to-morrow you know the consequences."

Forester went out, and Abrahams called a boy from below.

"Put your cap on directly," he said; "keep that man in sight, and tell me exactly where he goes. If he goes to a house in Lavender Road, Dalston, wait about for an hour, and if he doesn't come out in that time come back and let me know. I shall be at home."

The boy was back again in about three hours.

"He's there," he said; "but it looks rather queer. Two men have been in, and they hadn't come out again when I left. They looked uncommon like officers."

CHAPTER IX.

ONE BURDEN LESS.

THE two men were not officers. Nevertheless a higher sentence than that of any earthly court had that day been executed in the Dalston home; and Forester had one burden the less to carry with him through his weary life. Two undertaker's men were busy with the remains of their only child. The child had been always ailing; a tiny creature, with large wide eyes, and thin transparent skin, through which one might almost see the blood flow. Over and over again convulsions had tried to wring from it its weak life, and now at last they had conquered. Just about the time when Abrahams laid his finger on Forester's shoulder,

the little suffering child escaped from the thick darkness of this world to the light of heaven.

One of the undertaker's men, with considerate kindness, was watching for the father's return, that so the poor mother might be saved the shock of being the first to announce the sad news. As the man opened the door Forester stepped back in terror, thinking that it must be some messenger from Abrahams, and that the awful worst had come. He was utterly horror stricken when he heard that his boy was dead ; it seemed as if Almighty God were taking part with his enemies, and cursing him from heaven. How often had he wished the child unborn ; how often, after its many imperfect recoveries from dangerous attacks, had he wished what he scarcely ventured to utter even to himself in words. At this very moment he perfectly realised that one great difficulty in his path, possibly the greatest of all, was gone. And yet he knew not how he could

look into his wife's face—with all that *she* had to tell, with all that *he* had to tell.

"Where is Mrs. Forester?" he said to the undertaker's man.

"I don't know, sir; I don't think she can have come yet. I've seen nobody myself but Mrs. Wilson. She's dreadfully cut up, sir; as you may well believe."

Lies are always dreadful when we can dare to realise that they *are* lies—but lies, as we are bending over the calm face of a dead child!

Forester found his wife almost stunned with grief. Ever since she left Leigh her life had known no change, beyond the varying needs and sicknesses of her poor boy. She knew they could never rear him; she even knew, remembering what he had suffered, that it was unspeakably better that they should not. But none the less for that, he had been her one care and solace; ever gentle and patient, nestling in her bosom, the only thing, she sometimes

thought, in all the world, that truly loved her. How could Forester comfort her? knowing what heavy trouble he must yet lay on her overburdened spirit.

But when the undertaker's man came to ask, in his soft, quiet way (not wholly professional), what name and age and epitaph should be written on the coffin, then Patty felt that she *must* cast off the burden which had for months almost crushed her.

"Just wait a few minutes, please," she said, "and we'll write it down for you."

And then, when he had left the room, she almost fell at her husband's feet, imploring him that the one lie of *her* life might come to an end.

"Edwin," she said, "*must* we write a lie on the dead boy's coffin? I'd rather be in a coffin myself. *Do* spare me!"

"Patty, my dear," he said, "we need keep up that disguise no longer. I'm discovered."

"Thank God!" she said; and then checking herself, she added, "I don't quite mean that, Edwin—don't be cross with me now—God keep you from all danger, but there is *no* danger like lying."

He tried his poor best to soothe her—never unhappy wretch more needed pity than he did. "If any man walk in the night he stumbleth; for he cannot tell whither he goeth." Poor Forester knew that he was walking in the night, and that it was deepening all around him—and no mere *wishes* can turn night into day. At any rate he told his wife exactly what had happened; in what danger he was placed—and that he really could not tell what awful trouble any moment might bring. What did Patty know about bills, accepting, discounting, and all the hellish devices for smoothing the slippery road to bottomless ruin? How could she so much as imagine a wretch like Abrahams? And with their dead child at the

foot of their own bed—(they had only one bedroom)—how could he so much as try to explain ?

The next morning there was a loud knocking at their front door. Both Forester and Patty trembled ; and neither dared stir to admit the stranger. Again and again the knocking was repeated, till Forester was obliged to run all risks and open the door. The visitor was Abrahams, and two evil-looking men were lurking about outside, evidently in communication with him.

"Well, young man," said the Jew, "you're a pretty scoundrel, to make a bargain with me when you knew you had executions in your house already. I had you well watched last night. Who's in possession now ?"

"Death !" said Forester.

"Come, come," said Abrahams, "I'm not a fool, or a girl. You'll neither frighten me, nor

bamboozle me. Who is it in the house; and what does he want?"

"I've told you," said Forester.

"Very well, then I'll tell *you* something," Abrahams answered, moving to the door.

"Don't play with a desperate man, Abrahams," said his victim; "I've nothing to lose. I don't care a straw even for my life, and I care unutterably less for yours. Mind what you do."

"Show the man who it is that is in possession," said Patty, coming out to stay the strife; "come with me, man, and see your rival. You'll know him better some day. Come with me."

She opened the bedroom door, and led him in; then she closed and locked it.

"Lift up that white sheet," she said, "all our best treasure is there—don't be a coward—don't hesitate to strip us of our all. Look, man!"

The Jew hesitated. He thought after all it

was a dodge. There could be nothing dreadful in their own bedroom. There might be plate. It might be gone in an hour if he turned his back upon the house and left it there. He raised the white sheet, and saw the white, calm face of the dead child.

"Let me go!" he gasped.

"Are you satisfied now," she said, "that at least for a few days you may leave us alone with our misery?"

He hurried out of the room.

"I give you three days more," he said, as he rushed past Forester into the street.

The three days were soon gone, and they had brought Forester no nearer to the settlement of his difficulties. The funeral of the little boy had occasioned its own sad bustle and occupation of thought and time; yet, with the utter uncertainty of the future—uncertain in everything but ruin and pain—the very

sanctities of mourning for the dead were desecrated. It was very plain that they must descend to a far humbler mode of life than even Mrs. Habbishon's dull house afforded. They must try to manage with one room, and Patty must do something to increase their slender finances. There was nothing now to require her care at "home." Forester had written to Mr. Rodgers, to tell him that his little boy was dead and that his secret was discovered; asking leave of absence for the funeral, and that he might call upon him to ask his advice in the great danger and difficulty which the discovery of his residence had occasioned.

His employer answered at once, in a letter of most unaffected sympathy, giving a week's holiday to his clerk, and adding that, if agreeable, he would himself call upon Mr. and Mrs. Wilson the next day. He was deeply moved by their pitiable condition, and seriously alarmed by what Forester had told him—

though it was far short of the truth—of the power and malice of his implacable creditor.

Mr. Rodgers had really been well served by his clerk; he had found Forester's first representation of his circumstances confirmed in all the most important particulars, not only by the clergyman's letter, but even by this new calamity. He could see in Patty's face nothing but truth and honour—except indeed the traces of bitter trouble. He was always generous; but in the midst of sorrow and death his impulsive kindness felt almost ashamed of offering what was really a most unusual and unselfish arrangement.

"Will you allow me, Mr. Forester—for, do you know, I hate false names even when it seems necessary to use them—to pay you £150 of your salary in advance? That may relieve you at least from immediate pressure or personal danger. I can't offer to make you a

present of any such amount. I wish I could. I'll repay myself by easy instalments; and if you work on for a year or two as well as you have done already, your salary will soon be much better than it is, and what remains of the loan will become your own."

Forester and his wife were only too thankful to accept so generous an offer; and Mr. Rodgers, giving them a cheque for a hundred and fifty pounds, taking no more security than his clerk's receipt for that amount of salary in advance, with many expressions of sincere kindness, took his leave.

Forester set out immediately to Abraham's office in Maddox Street. The Jew was in his accustomed place, surrounded by his instruments of torture. His hard bitter temper was no way improved by the needless exhibition of his barbarity which he had made in the chamber of death. He was as cowardly as he was

cruel; but that was itself a reason why when a victim was wholly in his power he should torture him to the last extremity.

"Well, Mr. Forester, what have you brought?" said Abrahams.

"A very good instalment of the five hundred pounds," said Forester; "much more than I at all expected to be able to get."

"*How much?*" repeated the Jew, "it's not much use if it's under three hundred."

Forester's heart sank within him. Mad with rage, he was nevertheless so completely in his tyrant's power that he dared not even by a look give expression to the passion that was consuming him. So much the worse for both of them.

"Don't be hard upon me," he said, a great dry lump in his throat almost choking him. "I couldn't get half that sum."

"Then why don't you tell me at once what you *have* got?" Abrahams asked. "I've no

time to waste, nor money either. Bring out what you have got."

Forester produced the cheque and handed it to Abrahams.

"I thought you said *not* half of three hundred?" said the Jew; "you needn't try to play with *me*—bring out the rest."

"By the living God," said the wretched victim, "I haven't another penny in the world —search me if you like"—and he stood up before the Jew—"and I must have some of that back to buy bread to eat."

"Pooh, man," said Abrahams, "you'll have none of this. Bread's cheap enough. When are you going to bring the rest?"

"Three hundred and fifty pounds are not so easily got together," Forester said, "and almost every shilling of my salary will go to pay back this hundred and fifty, for a couple of years to come. You'll surely give me time?"

"Three hundred and fifty? What do you

mean?" said Abrahams. "What you've brought to-day will barely cover the extra interest and costs. Now I'll tell you what," he added, "we don't want to be hard upon you. You may accept a bill at three months for five hundred and fifty and settle everything."

"Nonsense," said Forester.

"Just as you like," the Jew replied; "but you know we can't be satisfied with this, and so we must proceed to extremities—as you've made up your mind to force us to it."

"Why, I could never get such a sum in three months, or three years either."

"Pooh, man," said Abrahams, recognising the wavering tone of Forester's voice and drawing the bill, "I knew you'd be reasonable. You're not a fool. You'll easily find ways of getting the money. Besides, we might perhaps renew the bill, if you were doing your best."

In abject misery, in complete despair—knowing perfectly well that he was signing his

own death-warrant, but utterly powerless to resist—Forester wrote his name across the bill, and hurried out into the street. He clenched his fist and shook it at the accursed house, while a whole legion of devils seemed swarming in upon his soul.

"If ever I get the chance of cutting your throat or beating your brains out, you damned dog of a Jew, by the living God Almighty I'll do it."

"We shan't make such a bad speculation of that after all," said Abrahams, chuckling, as he put the accepted bill into a drawer.

CHAPTER X.

MEETING A BILL.

If time hangs heavily on the hands of any man who is not a regular trader, let him accept a bill. The first few days or weeks of his liability will pass away with the easy rapidity which results from temporary relief. "That's all right for the present; I've three months to look about me." For so long a time the possibilities of "something turning up" seem almost boundless. But time flies, and vague hopes are not marketable commodities; and if something won't turn up, it must somehow or other be dragged up. It takes time to decide which of several "highly promising schemes" for raising money should be tried first. Then

there is perhaps a correspondence ; at any rate, there is a disappointment. Then the next best scheme offers itself with fresh attractions. How stupid not to see from the first that it was much the better scheme of the two ! Indeed, there's no doubt of its answering. Meanwhile, somebody's out of town, or a letter miscarries, or a friend would have helped in the matter *with pleasure*, but he's just done the very same thing for old Jim Green—and he hasn't a loose pound. He'll ask a friend of his to do it, though it's not quite certain whether he'll be able. *When* is the bill due ? Ah, on next Friday. You shall hear by Thursday night ; but don't be too sanguine—try something else. The friend's friend can't do anything, and three months and three days have sunk down into the unfathomable past.

Forester (for we may now for all purposes resume his real name) was for a while considerably relieved by the doubtful accommodation

of his new arrangement with Abrahams. He and his wife had left the house in Lavender Street, and had taken a single room at half-a-crown a week—bed-room, sitting-room, kitchen, all in one—and no nursery now. A man may soon become accustomed to external discomforts; and, after all, Patty took good care that all should be clean and orderly whenever her husband returned from his office. It was not many waking hours that he needed to spend in their poor dwelling; and he found that in the incurable restlessness of his mind he could neither read nor talk—nothing, when his work was over, but roam the streets. All his mental power seemed paralyzed—his wits were blunted—he was fast becoming a positive terror to himself, so changed he seemed, so utterly unable to keep even his thoughts under his own control. He verily believed that he was going mad; he almost wished that he might lie down in the throng of the crowded

streets and be trampled to death—anything, anything, but this weary burden of debt and danger.

The three months were fast gliding away, and he had done absolutely nothing towards meeting the dreadful bill for five hundred and fifty pounds, which Abrahams had induced him to accept. He was doing nothing still, often he could not clearly think of it; and yet it left him not a single instant's peace. When he was not rushing along the streets he would sit by the fire-side dazed and dreaming. He would scarcely hear a word that his wife might say to him; he could not have told her what he was thinking about; it seemed to him as if the very substance of his brain were broken up, and no clear lines or channels left for feeling or will. He would read hundreds of advertisements and determine to answer them; and yet he had not nervous force enough to keep to his resolution. Everything was "no use."

Everybody was against him—it was no use trying.

Two months and a week had gone, and still nothing had been done. Patty did not often dare to speak on the matter which was the constant subject of her thoughts; and yet as the time wore away, she ventured again and again to advise her husband to speak once more to Mr. Rodgers, or even to see if he could not make some fresh arrangement with Abrahams himself.

"Well, I might write to him," Forester would say; "but it's no use."

"Hadn't you better see him, dear?" Patty would urge; "you would be much more likely to prevail upon him in that way."

"*Nothing* will ever move that devil; I'd as soon go to hell as to his office—it can't be worse."

Nevertheless, there was nothing else for it. The Jew *could* help if he would, and it might

be even his interest to give time—better slow payment than none at all. So Forester went once more to Maddox Street ; and more than ever as he went along through the gay West-end streets, did the horrible contrasts of London life smite upon him, as if all social order, and even the happiness of the virtuous and deserving, were a complicated machinery for crushing and torturing *him*. Regent Street and Bond Street were crowded with carriages. Laughing girls were wasting, without a pang, on the thousand needless luxuries of wealthy idleness, fifty times the money that would have made Forester free and happy. And yet, while they could be cheerful and extravagant, he must creep into the dingy office of a dastardly Jew money-lender to buy even his mere liberty, at a usury which must ultimately bring him to ruin.

The Jew would do nothing. The bill was not yet at maturity. There was no knowing

what might happen in the next fortnight—Forester might meet with some friend to help him—his employer might make him a further advance; and, if not, it would be quite time to talk of renewing the bill when the bill was due.

"But get the money," said Abrahams. "We shouldn't of course renew the bill for nothing, even if we renewed it at all; and what we want is the cash. You shouldn't accept bills if you can't meet them. It's no use coming back to me for any purpose, without half the money at least."

Lessons on economy and forethought from a Jew money-lender were almost more than Forester could bear; but he did not dare to reply. He only laid up in his heart a new store of hatred against the day of vengeance.

But there was no help—no relief. The Jew would do nothing—promise nothing. To meet the bill was as impossible as to undo the past

and never to have accepted it. Even to get together a hundred pounds seemed scarcely less difficult than to provide the whole.

And yet, as Forester searched the advertisements, without friends, without any means whatever of escaping from his difficulties by any of the ordinary methods which successful tradesmen can always adopt, he lingered longer and longer around those tempting baits, which he already knew, by bitter experience, cover cruel hooks. Might not one devil be at least less devilish than another? And, if not, he *must* get money, and he could get it no other way.

"MONEY, one hour after application, from four per cent, WITHOUT SURETIES, in town and country. Tradesmen's bills discounted. All loan office routine dispensed with, and the strictest confidence observed. Apply to Mr. S. G. Machintosh, opposite St. James's Street, Piccadilly. Office hours from ten to four. As

Mr. M. deals directly with capitalists, and has no connection with any other loan agency, the strictest secresy is guaranteed."

Mr. Machintosh, Forester thought, could scarcely be a Jew; more likely a Scotchman. Scotchmen were not in the habit, he fancied, of engaging in very hazardous business; but still, Mr. Machintosh might be an exception; and after all, he tried to persuade himself, a money-lender's business was not so *very* hazardous. The profits were so enormous that such a man as Abrahams might easily lose a full third of all the money he advanced, and yet be a gainer. Then, again, a Scotchman would scarcely be a swindler; he might do business very hardly, but still, Forester thought, he would be honest. At any rate, he was not going to ask a favour, and he knew perfectly well that it would be useless to expect any mercy. He knew by experience the only conditions on which he could expect to obtain the assistance he re-

quired ; he knew that those conditions were certainly hard, and would be probably ruinous. But the only alternative was a gaol ; and if he could get money from Machintosh he would at any rate secure a few more weeks of freedom, though he might come to a gaol at last.

Machintosh's advertisement was one of about a dozen ; and it seemed by far the very best of the twelve. First of all, the name sounded Scotch ; then there was no need of sureties ; above all, perfect secresy was guaranteed ; and this seemed all the more likely to be trustworthy because money could be obtained "one hour after application"—a time far too short for much searching or disagreeable inquiry. Of course Forester knew perfectly well that if these advantages really existed, they could be purchased only by enormous usury ; indeed, they were so great that it seemed doubtful whether any usury whatever could purchase them. If people without sureties might obtain

money from a money-lender or loan office upon their own application, within an hour, it may well be doubted whether even the Bank of England could meet the demands for such accommodation which would be made in even a single month. Forester knew there would be something wrong; some great danger or huge sacrifice. But what of it? What would the danger be? It could be no more than the danger in which he was already placed; and as for the sacrifice, the best of all defences against robbery is absolute beggary.

Mr. Machintosh's office was in Piccadilly; much lighter and more cheerful than the gloomy den in Maddox Street, where Abrahams lurked for his prey. He occupied the two front rooms on the first floor of a house nearly opposite St. James's Street, as any one might learn from his advertisement. The two rooms were separated by folding doors; the smaller of the two was a kind of waiting-room; the larger

room was the office of Mr. Machintosh himself; the place where "perfect secresy" was guaranteed. It was about mid-day when Forester presented himself as an applicant for money; to be paid to him, if possible, within one hour after application, without sureties, and at a rate of interest as near to four per cent. as practicable. He had availed himself of his dinner-hour for this private and personal business, and he had no time to lose.

The little waiting-room was almost crowded; behind a partition two clerks were at work; the walls of the room were nearly covered with auctioneers' placards, and large advertisements of insurance offices. Two men, who looked like brokers or sheriffs' officers, were talking to one of the clerks.

"Gone?" said the clerk.

"Gone, sure enough," said one of the men; "when we got to the house we saw no bills up, but the shutters closed and all the blinds down,

and of course we thought the master was dead."

"Well," said the clerk, "what then?"

"Why," said the other man, "we've got our feelings as well as other people; but of course feelings isn't business. So we made bold to knock at the door. We stood knocking a matter of a quarter of an hour or so, and went round into the garden to see if there was a window or back door open. Everything was as still as the grave; so my mate made bold to call next door and ask if Mr. Barker was in. 'In,' says the maid, 'why they've been gone these three weeks.' 'Gone,' says my mate, 'what do you mean?' 'Why, they've sold up,' she says, 'and gone abroad. Gone to Germany. Their housemaid told me her master wasn't well, and he's gone to try some baths over there.'"

"Well," said the clerk, "what then?"

"Why," said the man, "there was nothing else to do. When there isn't anything *in* a

house, you know, why of course you can't take possession of it. However, as the house was empty, we thought there could be no harm in just looking round it; so we managed to get in at one of the back windows, and, sure enough, there was nothing in it—not a shilling's worth. They'd left nothing behind them but a cat; and the beast was so starved and savage with being shut up that she flew at us like a tiger, so we just kicked her brains out and left her there."

"Why, that's a pretty business," said the clerk. "Come back again at five; we shall be sure to have something for you to do after business hours."

"Now really, ma'am," he said to a poor woman, pale and weeping, who stepped up to him as soon as the two men went away, "it's not the least use your teasing in this way. I've told you Mr. Machintosh is engaged, and will be for the next hour."

"Well sir," said the woman, "then I must go away without seeing him. My husband's dying."

Here she was so reckless of the many important engagements of Mr. Machintosh and his clerks that she wasted their time by a perfect storm of sobs and tears.

"Come, come," said the clerk, rather more gently; "why didn't you tell me so before?"

"I wouldn't have left him, sir, at all," she said, "but he implored me to come here. He said he couldn't die happy unless he knew that his life insurance matter was all right. His life was accepted the day before yesterday; and he says if the premium has not been paid I shall be left a beggar. He's just burst a blood-vessel, and he's been brought home to me more dead than alive. The doctors say that he can't possibly live above a day."

"Let me see, what's your name?" said the clerk. "Straker, isn't it?"

"Yes," said the woman. "Richard is my husband's name—Richard Straker."

The clerk opened a sort of day-book and looked back, or pretended to look, over some ten or fifteen entries.

"Oh yes, my good woman," he said, "it's all quite right. The premium has been paid all right."

The woman hurried away. The clerk went immediately into Mr. Machintosh's room. In a very few minutes he returned with money and a paper in his hand.

"Here, Tom," he said to the other clerk, "get a Hansom and drive off as fast as you can tear to the office with this money. Don't waste a minute, the man's as likely as not to be dead before you pay his premium."

These little preludes to his own tragedy were not very reassuring to Forester; but he had scarcely time to take in their full meaning, before the door of the inner room was opened,

and he was informed that Mr. Machintosh was now ready to see him. He went into the private room where "the strictest secresy was guaranteed," and stated his case. Mr. Machintosh made a great show of writing down the particulars, and also gave Forester himself a printed form of application to fill up.

"You're aware, Mr. Forester," he said, "that in a case of this sort, where there are no sureties, our rate of interest is *somewhat* above the average, to cover the unavoidable risk of such transactions. Not of course," he went on, smiling, "that there is any risk in your case, Mr. Forester; but still we are obliged to have general rules made to leave us a margin of profit, notwithstanding our numerous losses."

"Yes, of course," said Forester, "I can quite understand that."

"However," said Mr. Machintosh, still with a pleasant smile, "I shall be glad to do my best

for you. I always leave the little details of business of this sort to my solicitor; but I expect him every minute, if you can just wait a very short time longer."

There was a knock at the office door of the inner room, the door leading to the staircase, and a little page entered.

"Mr. Robertson would be glad to see you when you are alone, sir," he said.

"I shall be at liberty in a moment," said Mr. Machintosh; "when I ring the bell, ask Mr. Robertson to walk up."

"That *is* my solicitor, Mr. Forester," he said; "if you'll kindly wait in the next room for just a minute——"

"Certainly, sir," said Forester; "I quite understand that this application is in strictest confidence—no mere loan office, or connection with common money-lenders?"

"Most assuredly, sir," said Machintosh, ringing the bell.

Forester had waited about ten minutes, when the door opened, and Machintosh beckoned him in.

Mr. Robertson, the solicitor was there at the desk with Forester's application in his hand ;— and Mr. Robertson, the solicitor, *was*

Mr. Abrahams.

CHAPTER XI.

MET BY A BILL.

Forester did not wait to answer any questions that Mr. Machintosh's solicitor might have been disposed to ask him. He knew perfectly well that he had fallen into the power of a gang of swindlers, and that he had nothing whatever to expect from them but the very utmost severity that the law would allow. Uttering a savage curse upon both of them, he put on his hat and strode out of the room.

The more Forester thought of the circumstances in which he was placed, the more hopeless they appeared. He fancied, indeed he felt almost certain, that Abrahams had far exceeded his legal rights, and that he had been by no

means bound to acknowledge the whole of the claim that the Jew made upon him. But on the other hand he had almost run away from the old Hall. He had been living for months under a false name in a remote suburb of London; and in the actions that Abrahams brought against him he had entered no appearance, but had allowed the actions to proceed in their due course to judgment and execution. He thought it highly probable, if not certain, that this spiteful creditor of his had secured for himself some of the spoils of the old Hall, and to that extent reduced his debt. But matters had proceeded so far that, when he was recognized by the Jew and compelled to go with him to his office, he could make no immediate use whatever either of his suspicions or of his knowledge. At any rate, he was now once more bound by the tremendous liabilities of the bill which he had been persuaded to accept, and he knew that the bill

would not have been dishonoured five minutes before legal proceedings would be commenced once more against him.

Again and again he made up his mind that he would once more ask the assistance of Mr. Rodgers. Day after day, however, passed by, out of the few that yet remained to him, and he was still undecided. Indeed he was sure, the longer he thought about it, that his employer, however kind he might be, would be quite unwilling to assist him to anything like the extent that had now become necessary. And indeed he thought it highly probable that Mr. Rodgers would consider it unsafe to retain in a position of trust, a clerk who must necessarily be exposed to such terrible temptations to dishonesty, as are inseparable from the acceptance of heavy accommodation bills.

There are probably few criminals who could determine even for themselves at what moment they began to form the deliberate purpose of

committing a crime. They may have begun to think, as they have watched the unaccountable successes of unprincipled men, that whatever else honesty may be, it is not always the best policy. They may have recoiled with horror, at first, from that mere discontent with the hard fortunes of uprightness, which lies so near to the wish that conscience might die or go to sleep; and leave them, for a while at least, unhindered by weak scruples, to make their way to such brilliant successes as might render virtue for all time to come their easiest road. By degrees, however, and often by very slow degrees, they have come to wish that some opportunity might be afforded them of escaping from their difficulties even by crime, if only they might also escape detection. Unhappily no one ever wants to find a chance of doing wrong without very speedily finding one.

Forester's lot no doubt was hard. Little as he possessed of sterling principle, and reckless

as his selfishness had been, he had now for some months been fighting hard with pride, and doing honest work for the support of his wife and child. Ever since his old enemies had discovered him he had made yet further retrenchments, and he had done his very best to satisfy their claims. Moreover, he knew perfectly well, though he could not legally prove it, that the money-lending Jew was robbing him. He began to feel, as thousands have felt before and will feel again, that the laws brought no help or security to *him*, while they gave every advantage to his bitterest and most implacable enemies. He had been stunned by the repeated blows of calamity that had fallen upon him ; like some wild beast, he had been tamed for awhile by hunger and want. But his foes were once more awaking the brute ferocity which had been only slumbering in his bosom. In his kindling rage his mental power seemed restored to him ; his brain grew clearer than

ever. When once the only way of escape which now seemed possible opened up before him, and he had at last determined to take it, he felt himself a new man. He no longer roamed the streets in an agony of restlessness; nor sat stupidly dreaming by his fireside. His wife with half terrified surprise wondered what potent tonic could so have braced his whole being, and lifted him out of the imbecility of despair. The die was cast.

"I will not sit still," he said to himself, "till these hell-hounds tear me to pieces. Why should I be locked up for life in a miserable gaol by this swindling scoundrel of a Jew—not because I rob him, but because the law gives him a right to rob me? If the law can't protect me I must protect myself. Indeed the law has nothing to do with me. If I sit still for another fortnight I shall be ruined for ever, and not all the statutes and all the lawyers put together will be able to undo the

wrong that I shall have suffered. I must escape out of this hell of difficulties into which that brutal knave has plunged me, and if I can only make my escape by dragging some one else down, I am very sorry for it, but I must drag him down."

For the most part it must be confessed that Forester had begun to think of his wife only as a grievous drag upon him. Now that the shock of his little boy's death had passed away, he began to regard it as an unmixed good, a sort of first instalment of the ease and prosperity for which he had so deliberately sold himself to the evil spirit. So long as it was necessary to have a room at all, it was unquestionably desirable that useful Patty should keep it tidy, should light the fire, and sweep, and scrub, and clean her husband's boots, and cook her husband's food. But a domestic *multum in parvo* like the room in which he and his wife were now compelled to live, was no more to Forester's

real taste than a maid-of-all-work for his wife. He had long ceased to treat Patty with anything approaching to confidence or genuine affection; indeed, ever since he came to London his pride had been so wounded, he had been so broken down and stunned by his calamities, so dazed and bewildered by the uncertainties and dangers of his position, that he had been more like a child or a maniac than a man. From the dull routine of a merchant's counting-house he could bring no news that his wife would care to hear, and in his own frivolous soul there was no such well of living water as could make even a desert rejoice and blossom as the rose. So he had come home day by day to mope away the evening; sometimes even to scold, and to take vengeance upon patient Patty for all the miseries of his lot. Alas! those two were so wide apart from each other, so unlike in all that was deepest and most vital, that matrimony, a thousand times over, could never have brought

them near. They never confessed it in words, but they both knew it perfectly well, and had now for months in their different ways been accommodating themselves to their lot.

"Of course she won't like it," Forester said to himself, as now and then he recollected that theft or forgery, or any other felony he might find it necessary to commit, would leave her for months, or perhaps years, a beggar, even if he himself should escape detection. "I was a fool to marry her and she was a fool to marry me; we are perfectly miserable together, and so we can't possibly be more miserable when we are separated. On the other hand, if only the devil does me justice, I for my part may be much less miserable for the separation. I shall get away from these cursed Jews, and from the disgusting hole that I am expected to call my home; I shall be able to live more as I used to do, more as I have a right to live. She'll never know why it is that I've left London, for

even old Rodgers imagines that we are still in Lavender Street; she never sees a newspaper, and so, even if I'm taken and tried, and all the rest of it, she'll just take it for granted that I've run away out of the country to escape that precious Abrahams. Besides, I must take my chance, and scheme and work for myself; she's no more use to a man in my circumstances than a wax doll would be."

"Old Rodgers," indeed! The only harm that "Old Rodgers" had thus far done Forester was to give him a very good situation, and to advance him one hundred and fifty pounds without security. But now that his final resolve was taken, now that he had fairly enlisted in the army of the devil, he had come to regard all honest men, not indeed as private enemies, but as public foes. "Old Rodgers" might be a very amiable man in his way, but he was on the side of law; on the side, therefore, though he probably did not intend it, of

Abrahams and Machintosh, and the whole race of blood-suckers. No doubt Forester would execute the laws of war upon him with some faint regret, wishing that the devil had billeted him upon some Jew money-lender instead; but the first duty of a soldier is obedience.

So, in plain English, Forester was waiting for a chance to rob or swindle anybody; and he knew quite enough of "Old Rodgers'" affairs to find it exceedingly easy to rob *him*. He had been a most diligent clerk. He knew exactly how Mr. Rodgers' cheques were signed and numbered; he knew what bills he was in the habit of drawing or accepting. For mere amusement he had again and again made the most perfect copies of almost all the negotiable securities which had at all frequently passed through his hand. He knew where both "Old Rodgers" and "Old Rodgers'" best customers had their bills discounted, and he had so frequently been sent on his employer's

business to banks and brokers, that even if he went for once on his own business, they would never know the difference. And yet——

Yes, he might have hesitated for months; though when once he had made up his mind to sell his soul, he began to calculate how much enjoyment he could secure from the bargain; he began to feel that time was but short and life a burden. Still it was hard to begin the actual battle with "Old Rodgers" for the first victim. So the devil—the devil in the old shape—came to his aid. One morning he found the following letter waiting for him when he reached the office:—

"Maddox Street,
"*August 30th.*

"Sir,

"To prevent mistake I beg to inform you that your acceptance for five hundred and fifty pounds will become due to-morrow, and is payable at this house. We beg to assure you that

it will be quite impossible for us to renew the bill, or to make any arrangement with you whatever if the whole amount be not paid.

"I am, Sir,

"Your obedient servant,

"J. Abrahams.

"To E. M. Forester, Esq."

"Very well," said Forester; "then I must do it to-morrow. To-morrow I must descend from the temporary honours of the desk, and become a man of independent property. My 'obedient servant.' If my first stroke of work could only have been to knock out your brains, you accursed Jew, with what unmingled delight would I have set about it. *That* must wait till every other card is played. Just yet, just setting out in life, as it were, I can scarcely afford the costly luxury of revenge."

He carefully ascertained during the day what accounts would be falling due, what cheques or

bills would probably be drawn "to-morrow." He determined which of them, if the necessity arose, he could most skilfully imitate, and most readily convert into cash. He watched every payment that was made during the day; hoping that it might be possible by simple robbery to avoid forgery. And when Mr. Rodgers, who went home very early that afternoon, had left the office, Forester, feverish with impatience and anxiety, took the swift resolve that he would wait no longer; so good a chance might never occur again. It was now two o'clock. He knew the number of the last cheque signed by his employer that day, and what his method of numbering was. The last number was 999 L. Forester filled up three blank cheques which he had contrived to steal during the morning, numbering them 1000 L., 1 M., and 2 M., and sent one of the junior clerks to get them cashed. They amounted together to £2041 8*s.* 7*d.* The youth returned

in a few minutes with the cash, and it was plain there had been no difficulty or delay in obtaining the money. At about a quarter to four Forester went himself to the bank, paying into Mr. Rodgers' credit more than £1,000 in crossed cheques, and £98 in gold and notes. Coming back to the office he wrote a hurried note to Patty, telling her that it was necessary for him to go to Paris that night on business, for Mr. Rodgers, and he might not be home again for a week or ten days. It would be a very pleasant change for him after being so long confined to the desk, and he hoped she would not be very dull. Then, about an hour earlier than usual, he left the office for the day.

As he passed along St. Paul's Churchyard a strange dread came over him. He seemed almost to feel again the touch of Abrahams' hand upon his shoulder. He did not know, indeed, that the Jew had any power to arrest

him; but with the great guilt of his new crime on his conscience, and the proofs and fruits of it on his person, he knew that any kind of delay would be in the highest degree dangerous to him. Looking often back as he hurried along, the strange fear began to master him; he began to feel sick and giddy. The main streets were too noisy and crowded; he must find some quiet corner where he might rest for a while in safety and peace. So he walked back a few paces and turned for quietness into Dean's Court. Scarcely seeing where he went he stumbled against a young woman, who appeared herself also to be hiding for a moment under the archway.

Forester started back as if he had seen a spirit.

"You here, Meggy?" he exclaimed in utter amazement.

"Don't blame me, Edwin," she said, her cheeks glowing, her deep eyes beaming with

the love she could not conceal; "you shouldn't have come after me. I tried to hide from you. What's the matter, Edwin?" she asked; for his face was deadly pale and he seemed falling to the ground.

"Let me lean on you for a moment, Meggy; don't call anybody, I shall be better directly. Get a cab, will you?"

Bracing himself by a strong effort he stood erect, without her support; and she went into the street for a cab.

"Come with me, Meggy," said Forester; "I shall be well enough to talk in a few minutes."

For a moment—a moment only—she hesitated. Was he not the only man she had ever loved; was she not the only woman who had ever been loved by him? Alas! for those heroic resolutions with which she had quieted her conscience when she determined that she would seek a home in London, so dangerously

near to *him!* And how ill he seemed to be. It would be mere cruelty to leave him then until she knew that he was safe.

"Where to, sir?" asked the cabman.

"Oh, yes; Radley's Hotel, Bridge Street," said Forester. "It's close by, Meggy," he went on, when the driver was on his box; "a very quiet place; and then you can tell me all about your dear little self, and Freddy and Leigh, and every body and everything."

"Oh! I've so much to tell you," said Meggy; "haven't you heard? How's Mrs. Forester and baby?"

"No, I never heard any news from you, how should I? Have you been long in London? Whereabouts do you live? Why haven't you been to see us, Meggy?"

Why, indeed! But Bridge Street, Blackfriars, was close at hand; and so was Radley's Hotel. Forester ordered a private room, and

a very quiet, cozy little dinner for two. It was a perfectly respectable hotel, though dingy enough with London smoke and dust; and the little parlour, with its bright fire and the snug dining-table, covered with spotless linen and sparkling glass, seemed more like home than anything Forester had known for many months. He felt almost his old self again, giving orders to the obsequious waiter, lounging in the easy chair sipping wine, with Meggy—the one woman in all the world whose slightest word or touch could thrill his whole being—at his side. And at that very moment Patty was sitting with her husband's letter in her hand, in their one bed-room kitchen, with tea and dry bread on the table before her, and just one half-sovereign in her purse.

But Forester did not see her nor even think of her. The little dinner at Radley's was deliciously cooked, the wine was good, the fire was bright and warm, and Meggy was more

beautiful than ever. It seemed as if all the love and beauty that had for so many months been hidden from him were shining out at once in her face. In her presence all else was forgotten, the miserable past of debt and danger, the awful secret of that very hour. If she had bidden him stay by her side, he would have had no power to move from her, though Jews and officers of justice had been gathering in crowds to take him. Poor stricken hearts! Never had they so passionately, so desperately, loved each other as at that hour, when all love and truth, love true in its very falseness, had become powerless for them for evermore!

"Oh, Edwin," said Meggy—the dinner was over, the dessert was still on the table; they were alone talking together by the firelight—Meggy was sitting by Forester's side on a footstool, her too willing hand in his, his arm about her neck, as he stooped over her con-

tinually to kiss her brow, and look into the blue depths of her eyes. "Oh, Edwin, I am so happy and so *miserable*—so cruel and wicked. And I made so many promises to myself that I would never see you any more."

Her eyes were full of tears, as she hid her face on Forester's breast.

"Meggy, my darling, my own pet, don't cry," he said, tenderly; "*why* should you promise never to see me any more? We *do* love each other, and why should we try to help it? We *couldn't* help it if we were to try for ever."

"No, Edwin; *I* cannot help it, I only wish I could," said Meggy, sobbing.

"*Why, why,* dearest?" Edwin said, lifting up her face and kissing it; "and your dear face is all wet with tears. Does it make you unhappy to love me, and know how much I love you? But you never *can* know *how much.*"

"No, no, no," Meggy said; "it's not that. But you know—— Oh, yes, you know all, all, Edwin. Our love can never bring us anything but shame and grief."

"Meggy," said Forester; "Meggy, do you really love me? *really?* Come with me. I am going away to night—to France, to Paris. Come with me, Meggy, my own pet—my true little wife—my——"

"No, never!" said Meggy, rising up, and moving away from him; "never! I am *not* your wife; I never can be. Your wife! Cruel wretch that I am; and she so good, and pure, and true. Edwin, I must go; fool that I was to see you again!"

And she sat by the table, covering her face, almost convulsed by the violence of her passion, her love, and grief, and shame.

There was a loud knocking at the door, as if gentler knocks had been unheard.

"Come in," said Forester.

"A gentleman has called to see you, sir," said the waiter.

"To see *me?*" said Forester; "he's mistaken. What name did he give?"

"Why, you see, Mr. Forester," said Abrahams, following close behind the waiter into the room, "as you hadn't given your name to anybody here, I was obliged to give a description of your person. Of course I knew you were in the hotel."

"Well, and what is your business now?" said Forester, "intruding on my privacy in this ungentlemanly way."

"I think, waiter, you told me we could have the sitting-room at the other side of the passage for five minutes, didn't you?" said the Jew, utterly unmoved by the new-born independence of his victim.

"Certainly, sir," the waiter said, hurrying to open the door of the opposite parlour.

"You needn't mind us, waiter," said Abra-

hams; and then, in a whisper, "perhaps you'd better look to the lady."

"It's a nasty, raw night, Mr. Forester," he went on; "there's no fire in the other room—you'd better take your hat."

Now, really, Mr. Forester," said the Jew, as soon as they were alone together, "was it worth your while to try to trick *me?* Do you really think you're the first young man I've had to deal with, and——"

"Well, come, Mr. Abrahams, I don't owe you anything till to-morrow, do I?" said Forester, interrupting him. "I shall most likely, before to-morrow's over, be able to meet at least a good part of your bill."

"Yes, I daresay," said the Jew, "*if* we both happen to be in Paris, and *if* we happen to meet, and *if* we happen to be on very friendly terms. Look here, young man; you mean to abscond—never mind denying it; if you don't

want to leave the country you won't object to staying at home; but a friend of mine outside here will pay you every attention. Good evening, Mr. Forester; I'm sorry to have disturbed your very cosy little dinner."

The Jew retired, and an officer entered to arrest Forester. Abrahams had made the necessary affidavits of debt and of intention to abscond, and had obtained the needful warrant. Forester was far too bewildered and terrified even to ask any questions or read the warrant, a copy of which had been delivered to him. He had money enough in his pocket, at that very moment, to pay the Jew's bill three times over, but he dared not use it. He did not know what to do; and, more dead than alive, he was hurried off in a cab to prison.

So he had met his bill at last, as hundreds have met such bills, before and since.

CHAPTER XII.

INTEREST AND COSTS.

He had met the bill no doubt—but what of interest and costs? What of the long array of liabilities of which an accommodation bill is always the fruitful parent? Choosing his own method of meeting his engagements, defying the law which seemed his most relentless enemy, deliberately electing to be a sort of savage in the midst of a most complicated civilization, fighting his own battles, avenging his own wrongs, what mercy or help could he expect?

Abrahams had no suspicion that Forester had robbed his master. He fancied that the promise to pay the greater part of the bill the

next day was a mere pretence; and he had no sort of doubt that his only hold upon his unhappy victim was the Absconding Debtors' Arrest Act. His boy had been lurking about Mr. Rodgers' office since the little affair in Piccadilly quite constantly enough to know that Forester had been regularly at his post; and Abrahams knew the way to the one-roomed home of Mr. Rodgers' clerk as well as Forester himself. The spy had been instructed to watch with special care as the maturity of the bill approached; he had noticed that Forester left the office on the day of the robbery an hour before the usual time. He had followed him through St. Paul's Churchyard, seen his interview with Meggy, and heard the cabman directed to Radley's Hotel. For the rest, though the affidavits were a little in anticipation of the truth, the warrant had been two days already in the hands of the Jew. With playful irony, however, the devil

had cheated his faithful servant out of his fair share of the plunder of honest "old Rodgers."

And again, too, he cheated him—the playful old devil. Abrahams was perfectly certain that Forester had no lawful means of obtaining money, excepting by drawing his salary from Mr. Rodgers. He fancied that just possibly there might still be some trifle due. He could not legally attach it; but he thought it might be worth while to make the attempt, and induce Mr. Rodgers to retain it until the conclusion of such legal proceedings against his clerk as might then be pending. He sent a note, therefore, on the evening of Forester's arrest, to say that he much regretted any inconvenience that might result to Mr. Rodgers from the steps he had felt it necessary to take. He had, however, been compelled, for his own protection, to arrest that gentleman's confidential clerk. The young man's debts were

very large, and he (Abrahams) had too much reason to know that Mr. Rodgers' clerk had determined to abscond. As in any case he (Abrahams) could hope to recover but a very small portion of what Mr. Forester owed to him, he hoped that Mr. Rodgers would reserve whatever might be due from himself to Mr. Forester until the conclusion of such legal proceedings as were now pending.

Too late, sweet Jew! Mr. Rodgers was the last man in the world to help such a scoundrel as Abrahams; he would in any case have been proud to *spend* a hundred pounds in *ruining* a rascally Jew money-lender, but he didn't choose to be robbed and tricked; and as soon as he had read the Jew's letter, to which, of course, he deigned no reply—he sent his junior clerk to his bankers, for a complete account of the receipts and payments of the preceding day. Among the paid and cancelled cheques Forester's forged cheques were returned; and

within a couple of hours a detective had taken possession of almost every penny of the stolen money. The law took its usual course, and before evening the unhappy criminal was in a felon's cell, awaiting his trial for forgery. Abrahams was a bungling fool, and had lost *his* money after all.

Meggy sat for nearly an hour, in the dim firelight, waiting for Forester. In the rapture of being with him once more she had almost forgotten that she was a servant. Her time seemed her own. But now, with her anxiety about him, and the sudden mystery of his leaving her, all dull thoughts and sad forebodings came back to her mind. Her mistress, indeed, would not scold her for her unwonted lateness; but she had trespassed far beyond her usual bounds of time—and even still she could hear nothing of Forester. She rang the bell.

"Will you be kind enough to bring me a

light," she said to the waiter; "and tell the gentleman that if he could come to me for just a minute I shall be very glad. I am late already, and must get home at once."

"Yes, ma'am," said the waiter; "I'll bring a light directly."

He soon returned.

"The gentleman has gone away with a party, ma'am," he said; "and he didn't mention that he should come back again to-night. He went away in a cab, ma'am—but I—I can't say where he's gone, ma'am. I'll just ask the mistress to step in, ma'am, and see you."

The waiter, and every servant in the hotel, knew perfectly well what had become of Forester. But hotel servants are not ungenerous; and not one was hard enough to volunteer to break the news to Meggy. They only feared, as they looked into her sorrowful face, and saw how her poor eyes were swollen

with weeping, that she was even more injured and wronged than she was.

In a few minutes "the mistress" came to her room. "I don't think, Miss, that the gentleman will return to-night," she said to Meggy; "didn't you know that he had another appointment—to meet a party here?"

"No, indeed I didn't," Meggy said; "Mr. Forester and I were old friends in the country —years ago—when we were quite children; and I only just met him to-night by chance, the first time since I came to London."

"I'm very sorry, Miss, indeed I am. What would you prefer to do? If you'll have tea or coffee you're very welcome. At any rate you'll wash your face and eyes before you go— that will be sure to refresh you."

So the good-natured woman took Meggy up-stairs, and bathed her face and brow—for a deadly faintness came over her. She saw how little the poor girl knew, and she was glad to

avoid the misery of telling her what had really happened.

"Nay, Miss," she said, in answer to Meggy's oft-repeated inquiries; "I'm sure I don't know what it all means, no more than you do. But we see a many strange things in a house like ours, quiet as it is. You'd better ride home, Miss — you're sure to hear from him to-morrow."

Ten days passed by and Patty had received no letter from Paris. It had been hard enough to live on one shilling a day; but every penny she had was gone now; and a fortnight's rent for her room was due. She did not even know where her husband would be day by day, so that she could not write to him. Desolate as she was, she still almost hoped that he might be kept longer out of England—until that dreadful business of Abrahams' could be settled; and yet what could she do? No

ragged beggar in the street could be more utterly destitute than she was. Surely it could be no unpardonable intrusion to call at Mr. Rodgers' office to ask for her husband's address.

She was half frightened by the strange, cold expression of the old man's face. She had seen him but once before—when her only child was lying dead in her house. He seemed so different then!

"I'm afraid I'm intruding, sir," she began; "but I should be so much obliged if you would give me my husband's address. When he went for you to Paris he must have expected to return much sooner; and, to speak plainly, my very little stock of money is all gone, and I must write to him for some small remittance, unless he is already on his way home."

Mr. Rodgers looked at her with a strange inquiring eye—alas! too soon satisfied! He

turned away from her for a moment, for he was not quite the man to feel that business was nothing but business. How easy life would be if we could take it in separate portions, each quite complete in itself. Turning back again, and speaking very gently, he said—

"I'm very sorry you didn't come before, Mrs. Forester; our travellers move rapidly on from place to place, and we don't always know exactly where they are at any particular moment. Let me give you just a couple of sovereigns now—and—you'll very much oblige me if you'll come over this evening to my house—say about seven o'clock. I can, perhaps, find out by then where your husband is, and when he is likely to return."

Patty, with many thanks, accepted the money and the invitation; and hurried back to her lonely home. She paid her rent, and bought herself the food she so much needed, but she could scarcely eat. That strange dread was

upon her which is so sure an omen of approaching disaster. The hours moved on so slowly she almost thought the evening would never come. And yet she dreaded its coming; she somehow knew it would bring some fearful revelation. Mr. Rodgers' coldness had startled her less than his sudden tenderness.

However, time waits for nobody's feelings; our triumphs will come at their own speed, and even our ruin will not overwhelm us before its appointed hour. Patty arrived at Mr. Rodgers' house by seven o'clock. There was tea and such like, but her thoughts were so busy that she scarcely knew what was set before her, and whether she partook of it or not. Everybody knows the dreadful difficulty of conversation on general topics when there is some one subject which must be spoken of, and in comparison with which all other subjects are mere trifles. Mr. Rodgers talked about the weather, and about the dreadful bustle of the London

streets through which Patty must have passed to his office. Mrs. Rodgers sympathized with Patty in the loss of her only child, and all the trouble and poverty she had been compelled to suffer. But there was something to be said which seemed to make all other talking hypocritical, and yet Mr. Rodgers seemed to defer as long as possible the misery of giving pain to one who seemed to him so true and innocent. The time, however, soon came when it was impossible to delay any further; the tea things were cleared away, Mrs. Rodgers begged to be excused for a few minutes on some domestic business or other, and Patty and her husband's employer were left alone together.

"I'm afraid, Mrs. Forester," he said, "that you must have thought me very hard and unkind this morning when you called at my office, but I'm sure you'll forgive me when you know the real facts of the case."

So there was a mystery; the strange

ominous dread that Patty had felt was now going to be justified. With a palpitating heart she waited for what was to come.

"I think, Mrs. Forester," Mr. Rodgers said, "that I may regard you as one who will listen to what I've got to say calmly, and if I'm obliged to give you pain I implore you to believe that I will do my very best to comfort you."

The old man rose from his chair; he almost felt as if he were himself guilty of the suffering which his words would inflict upon Patty. Patty, on the other hand, was not one of those women who shriek or scream. Her deepest feelings made her not noisy, but silent; and so she waited with perfect self-mastery for the worst that might be coming.

"Please to tell me what you know, sir," she said; "I'm quite sure that whatever it may be I shall find that you have been kind and considerate."

"Thank you, Mrs. Forester," said Mr. Rodgers; "I am very, very sorry, but do you really not know?"

"Not know what, sir?" Patty asked as he hesitated.

"Well, do you not really know where your husband is?"

"Yes, sir, of course I do, in one sense; I know he's in France on your business, but I don't know his address. This is the letter I had from him about ten days ago, and I've heard nothing from him since."

She handed the letter to Mr. Rodgers, who read it and returned it to her.

"Ah, my dear lady!" he said. "But, first of all, let me tell you that I must and will myself be your guardian till all your trouble is over. Your husband is not in France at all; he is ——"

And then the poor old man himself broke down; what could he say for the comfort

and help of the poor lonely woman sitting at his own fireside, with the abomination of desolation before her for all time to come.

Patty could not speak; so much effort it needed to keep silent that it seemed as if her whole life were almost exhausted in the effort. Ghastly pale she waited and listened.

"Your husband is in prison, Mrs. Forester," Mr. Rodgers said.

Then Patty rose suddenly from her seat with her hand on her bosom, as if the sudden agony had stopped the very beating of her heart, and she had to gasp for life.

"Sit down, my dear lady," said the old gentleman, taking her very tenderly by the hand. "It was not I who put him there; though I do not know how I could have helped putting him there, even if the Jew money-lender had not been before me."

Still Patty could only look at him and say nothing.

"A Jew money-lender," said Mr. Rodgers, "to whom he owed more than five hundred pounds on a bill that was nearly due, seems to have suspected that he intended to abscond. He had him arrested, therefore, and he wrote to me asking me to stop any part of his salary that might still be due. I had not the faintest intention of accommodating the Jew, but unhappily I discovered that your husband had been robbing me of considerably more than a thousand pounds. I have recovered every penny of it, Mrs. Forester; but it was quite impossible for me to conceal the fact that my clerk had been guilty both of theft and forgery, and it is for those offences that he is now detained in prison."

Poor Patty could not speak; she did not know which way to look for comfort; not only was her own livelihood, so far as she could

see, destroyed, but she did not even understand what to do for the wretched man who had become her husband.

"Can I not see him, sir?" she said, as soon as she had self-command enough to speak. "Might I ask you as a kindness to take me to the place where he is?"

"Yes, my dear lady, certainly," said Mr. Rodgers; "I will take you anywhere, but you know it is too late to-night, and you must make your home here for awhile; there is a room ready for you, and I have sent a servant to your house to pay anything that may be due, and to bring here everything that belongs to you."

"Sir!" said Patty, "I cannot—and yet—may God reward you."

At last she was overcome. She fell heavily to the ground; she lay many hours unconscious, and it was almost morning before she had life enough to realize that she was indeed

in a quiet chamber in a good man's house, and watched over by that earthly tenderness which is the best symbol of the loving kindness of God.

CHAPTER XIII.

JUDGMENT.

THE next morning Mr. Rodgers accompanied Patty to the gaol where her husband was confined. There needs no description of the prison. No prison in London is worse than a common workhouse; and it is not the place, but the bondage and the shame, that make a prison intolerable to a true man. A drawing-room is a stifling dungeon if the doors and windows are locked and barred, and a policeman is on duty to prevent escape. Forester was miserable enough, but he had the strength of evil, the power of endurance which comes from a distinct purpose and a firm resolve. He had sold himself to the devil; the pay-

ment was delayed indeed, but he would wait.

When his visitors were announced he scarcely knew whether or not he would avail himself of the privilege of seeing them. If Patty had been alone he would most unquestionably have refused the interview, but Mr. Rodgers might do him some service. He did not love his wife, and the necessity for hypocrisy had come to an end; but his imprisonment, on the contrary, had only just begun, and his employer could do something to shorten it. So he came out, duly guarded, to meet his friends.

There was an iron railing across a narrow passage, then a space of about four feet, then another iron railing. On the inner prison side was Forester; on the other side were his friends; in the narrow space between was a warder, to hear all that might be said. This was not the sort of meeting that the wretched man had looked for.

He could not speak a word. Patty could not speak a word. "We have come to see you, Mr. Forester," said Rodgers; "and to ask if we can do you any service."

The clerk was ashamed and bewildered. "I can't talk to anybody," he muttered sulkily to the warder, "across a passage with a gaoler listening."

"Then you can easily go back to your cell," said the man; "you are not the civilest prisoner we've ever had to do with."

Forester took him at his word, and without a syllable of explanation to his visitors, stalked away out of their sight.

But Forester's visitors had not come without a distinct purpose. There could be no prospect whatever of obtaining for him an acquittal; indeed, if Mr. Rodgers had been a hard man it would have been most easy to obtain a very severe punishment. He had taken Forester as a clerk in the impulse of generosity; he had

rendered him most valuable service in his first difficulty with Abrahams, and he had been rewarded by robbery and an attempt to abscond. But, as a ground for recommendation to mercy, something could no doubt be made of the severe pressure that had been applied by the Jew money-lender; and Mr. Rodgers knew too well that the real sufferer would be Patty. Forester was plainly a hopeless scapegrace; one who, having begun life with the idle quiet vices, had been compelled to exchange them for active cruel vices. It would have been better for Patty if he could have been hanged, and the longer his imprisonment the longer would be her freedom from annoyance. But neither Mr. Rodgers nor Patty could quite regard business as business so completely as that. So, at any rate, they had an interview with the chaplain.

It was arranged ultimately that Forester should plead "guilty;" that his counsel should

make the most of the harshness of Abrahams, and the alarm and danger which had driven his client to so desperate a course as the robbery of his employer, and that he should throw himself on the mercy of the court. He steadily refused to see his wife, but he had several interviews with his late employer. He professed the greatest regret for the wrong he had done to Mr. Rodgers, and the deepest gratitude for that gentleman's kindness. But it was all too plain that he considered himself fairly beaten in a *fair* fight, and was only biding his time.

He was, indeed, most wretched, but no way penitent. He thought *the law* was wrong, not himself; and he thought all law against him—even the law of husband and wife. He had never loved Patty, for many months he had hated her; and his last interview with Meggy had waked the slumbering passion which was, in fact, the only true love he had ever known.

If he could have persuaded her to go with him to France he would have been a happy man, for his moral culture was not deep enough to torture him with the agonies of a troubled conscience. If he could have escaped from prison he would not have returned home; he would have gone all over London in search of Meggy till he had found her. He writhed in spirit as he thought that she would despise him, and more bitterly still as he thought how surely he would lose her.

And he did not know where she was; and if he had known, he dared not have written to her all he felt. He sent her a little note, however, under cover to the landlord of Radley's Hotel—beseeching him to find her, and to deliver the letter into her own hands.

"My Dearest Meggy,

"I dare scarcely tell you where I am. When I left you so suddenly that evening—

that evening so happy and so wretched—I was taken away to prison by the Jew money-lender who had ruined me at the old Hall. Very dreadful charges are made against me, and I am to be tried some day next week. If you are not hardened against your old *friend*, go to the Old Bailey and find out when my trial will be, and try to be in Court. It will perhaps be the last time you will ever see again in this world,

"Your own most true and affectionate,

"EDWIN."

The landlord had no great difficulty in finding Meggy, for she had been taken home from the hotel in a cab, and the driver was well known at Radley's. She had been preparing herself for some dreadful revelation; but had scarcely imagined that so awful a calamity could ever have befallen one by her so tenderly beloved. Still, she was once more mis-

tress of herself, so she thanked the bearer of the letter, and with no more outward show of emotion than the paleness of her cheek, she bade him farewell.

"In prison! and what can I do? Must I go, as he bids me, and see him *there*, at the dock, charged with dreadful crimes, sentenced perhaps to a long banishment, or banishment almost as dreadful as death?"

But, at any rate, she would find out when he was to be tried; and, with easily obtained leave of absence, she hurried away to the Old Bailey. Most probably, they told her, he would be tried in about four days, but she had better attend on the first day of the sessions, when she would be able to find out more nearly the exact time. She asked her mistress for a holiday for a fortnight, pleading ill-health, and the yet more dangerous illness of a dear friend.

She was in court at the very first trial, and everything she saw—the judge, the barristers,

the jury, the witnesses, the criminal—everything seemed to fascinate her.

The number of prisoners was very large, and an unusual number had been committed for very serious offences. It seemed to Meggy as if each case was a sort of omen of what the result of that trial would be for which she herself was waiting. An acquittal seemed to give her hope; the solemn verdict of guilty, and the heavy sentence of the judge, sickened her with despair. Moreover, there were crimes and sad histories brought out in detail in the evidence of the witnesses, which came so near to her own experience, and showed her so plainly the dark gulf on the edge of which she had herself so long been living, that she sat spell-bound in the court, as if the secrets of her own life were being wormed out, and she herself were waiting sentence for the hideous crimes which as yet she had been preserved from committing.

One man was tried for murder—for the double murder of his own wife and of a little child. They had been married about two years. The woman was very beautiful and accomplished, and he had had no reason to doubt her fidelity to himself. The little child was a girl, living with an old woman in a neighbouring cottage, in poor but by no means destitute circumstances. His wife had been a good friend to the old woman, and had petted the child with a somewhat unusual fondness. That, however, was no reason for suspicion. The wife had no children of her own, and the pretty winning girl might easily have found its way to a far less tender heart. If only the wife could have kept her own secret all might have been well; "for all slips of hers, one of Eve's family," she was still a true woman—alas! too fatally true. She fancied that the vows she had taken and the mutual confidence of man and wife demanded from her a complete

revelation of everything, not only in the present but in the past, which might in the least degree affect the happiness of her husband. So one fatal night she told her own secret.

"Tom," she said, "can you perfectly trust me?"

"Yes, my darling," he said, "I can trust you in everything."

"Can you? Could you trust me even if I have something very dreadful to tell you, even if——"

Surely her own beating heart and the trembling eagerness of her husband might have warned her that by every word she was speaking she was digging her own grave.

"What is it, Fanny?" the husband said. "You're ill, my darling, you can have no dreadful secrets from me. Don't trouble yourself; don't tell me what it is."

Alas! she *was* ill; but so gentle an answer

was by no means the treatment best fitted to cure her; she only felt the more bound to tell her secret.

"Tom," she said, "I have been very wicked and deceitful, very distrustful and cruel to you, but I thought it was for the best; I couldn't undo it now, and I fancied perhaps you would be the happier if you never knew of it."

"Fanny, Fanny," the husband said, "what is it? tell me all you know."

"Bessie Rivers is my own little girl, Tom; my own child." Without uttering a single word the husband rose from the table and left the house. He was away, she knew not where, for more than a week; and then, with no warning of his coming, about the same hour on which he had left it, he came back again to his home, bringing little Bessie with him.

"Fanny," he said, kissing her, "I've come home again, and brought your little girl with

me. Let Jane lay the cloth and we will all have supper together."

He was no way unkind or hard, though likely enough there was a wild look in his eyes, which may have checked the inquiries that his wife was eager to make. The servant was sent out of the house on some pretence or other; to fetch ale or brandy, or something of the sort. She was absent for perhaps ten minutes; she opened the front-door with a latch-key; and when she came into the sitting-room she found her master kneeling before the fire.

"How pretty they are, Jane," he said; "little children ought to go to sleep in their own mother's arms."

And there indeed they were, lying both together on the hearth-rug, the warm blood still gushing from the fatal wounds, his own hands crimson, and the carving-knife lying red on the table.

Of course it was impossible to deny that he

had actually done this deed, but his counsel urged that only in some temporary insanity could such a man have committed so dreadful a crime. Nevertheless he was found guilty of murder, and, with the usual dread formalities, was sentenced to be hanged.

Poor Meggy almost fainted with horror, and thinking how nearly this experience touched her own, she almost forgot for what purpose she was present in that court, and remembered it only to grow sick with despair as she reflected who it was who must so soon come forward in that same dock to be tried for forgery and theft.

The next criminal was also a murderer. Coroners tell us that hundreds of such murderers do their cruel work every year. She was tried for the murder of her own little boy. She was herself the daughter of honest parents, and she and her child had lived with them for some five years, no one even suspecting who the

mother of the child really was. But, somehow or other, her secret became known ; her honest friends fell off from her ; the curse and the punishment rested even upon her parents ; she began to fancy that every finger was pointing at her ; that every tongue was whispering about her. She could bear it no longer ; so one morning she took her little boy with her to see the London streets. "The sweetest little boy," said one of the witnesses, "that ever lived ; with fair, curling hair, and large blue eyes." They wandered about the streets till he was hungry and faint, all day long, till the sky grew black and the lamps in the shops and streets were lighted. She wandered away through Oxford Street, up Baker Street, on towards St. John's Wood, till she came to the bridge crossing the canal. She looked down into the dark water. Hundreds of human beings might have been struggling there for life, and not a human creature could have seen

them. She went back a little way, and entered the Regent's Park, and then turned to the water. She sat by the side of the canal with the child, which soon fell fast asleep in her arms; and then, when she knew that he was sleeping, she rose, and, looking up into the dark sky as if with her last prayer for forgiveness and pity, she sprang, with the child in her arms, into the water. Somebody or other, some bargeman, was coming on, and the unhappy mother was saved; but the fair-haired boy was gone. Only late the next day was his body recovered; and now the woman was waiting to know how soon her country's laws would send her to meet her child, where motherhood can have no sin.

But while the jury were considering their verdict, and as Meggy looked into the face of the woman who was waiting her sentence, the whole court swam round her, and she fell heavily to the ground.

She was carried away tenderly enough by two or three policemen. Of course they thought that she had some special interest in the case then before the court.

"Bear up, Miss," they said, as she began to recover; "she's got an easy sentence. Poor thing, she's punished herself enough already."

"Oh, thank you," Meggy said; "I'm very thankful for her, poor girl; but I didn't know her. I'm waiting for another case; but I'm not used to these places; and it seems so very dreadful."

They asked her what case she was waiting for, and when she told them, they assured her that it was not possible that it should be tried that day. It was plain, however, that she could not bear the mental strain of waiting perhaps two or three whole days longer in the court itself; so a good-natured policeman found her a quiet boarding-house in the Old Bailey, and promised that he would let her know when

Forester's case came on for trial, and reserve for her a seat where she might hear and see all that went forward—" quite comfortably."

It was almost as difficult to wait in the quiet boarding-house as it had been in the court itself. Thousands of footsteps seemed to linger as they passed under her window; hundreds of vehicles seemed to be stopping as they reached the door. Every moment she expected to be summoned by the policeman to the seat where she was to hear " quite comfortably" the sentence, perhaps, of long banishment from the only man in all the world she loved. One whole day passed in weary waiting, and then her hour had come. She was to be early at the court next morning, for Forester's case was almost the first on the list.

Yet again a very brief delay. A coarse brute was to be tried for nearly killing his wife in a drunken fury. The evidence was quite conclusive; the jury needed no time to deliberate

on their verdict; the sentence was the severest that the law permitted the judge to pass. But Meggy felt almost relieved. The coarse ruffian was so different from the man who was to follow him;—surely there must be also some wide difference in their fate.

At last he came—the prisoner—the felon—Edwin Marie Forester. Dressed exactly as she had seen him last, at their quiet little dinner at Radley's; somewhat care-worn, pale-faced, his lips pressed tight together, his hands grasping the rail against which he leant, that his tell-tale fingers might not have power to reveal the secrets of his soul. He looked all round the court, at judge, counsel, jury;—all round, till his eye fell on her. He showed no surprise; his lips just moved, as if he were saying, "My Meggy"—the expression of his face softened for a moment. He felt, she thought, that at least one friend was near him—helpless, alas! but full of love and truth.

There was no doubt of his guilt; but his best friend was the employer whom he had so basely wronged. Mr. Rodgers testified that he had entered his service with a perfectly candid statement of his real position. He had told the witness that he was living under an assumed name—the maiden name of his wife; he had explained why he was compelled to make use of so doubtful a protection and what his real name was. He had given references, which were in the highest degree satisfactory. He had been a most diligent and useful clerk, and had conducted himself in every respect with the strictest integrity, till the fatal day when he was induced to commit the crime which had brought him to the position in which he was placed. The witness went on to tell of Forester's pecuniary difficulties, of the harshness of the Jew, of the utter impossibility of satisfying so implacable a creditor. He spoke then of Patty—a lady—one who had spent the best of

her days in working for the good of others; who had borne poverty without a murmur; whose only child had died on the very day when her husband had been hunted home by his merciless foe. A shiver of horror passed through the whole court as he told how Abrahams, greedy and suspicious, had opened the very coffin of her dead boy, lest some treasure should have been hidden there. He urged that he had himself recovered every penny of what had been taken from him; and he implored the judge, with an emotion that he could no longer control, to grant such mercy as the law of the country would allow.

"Sir, I'm sincerely grateful to you," said Forester, as Mr. Rodgers left the witness-box.

But the case was utterly bad, and the very kindness of Mr. Rodgers only made the clerk's baseness more completely inexcusable. The judge could see nothing in the evidence to

induce him to mitigate the penalty, except the extreme generosity of Forester's master.

"You must yourself feel, young man," he said, "that every word your generous friend has spoken is in fact a reason why I should inflict upon you the severest punishment. If such a crime as yours is to be lightly punished, I do not know in what cases a severe sentence could be justified. You have been most deceitful and cruel; and if I show you any kind of leniency, it is only because I hope that the reward of your master's generosity may have more power to prevent crime than even the punishment of your own baseness. You are sentenced to penal servitude for seven years."

He received the sentence with perfect composure; no trace of emotion, excepting, perhaps, a slight quivering of the lips as he looked his last at Meggy.

As Mr. Rodgers was leaving the court, a gentleman touched his shoulder.

"Will you do me the favour," said the stranger, "of riding with me to my house? I fancy I know even more of this sad case than yourself; and I am sure we can help each other in doing service to her who is the greatest sufferer."

They stopped the first Hansom cab that met them; and, in a few minutes, Mr. Rodgers and Mr. Leighton were driving rapidly along to Islington.

END OF VOL. II.

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