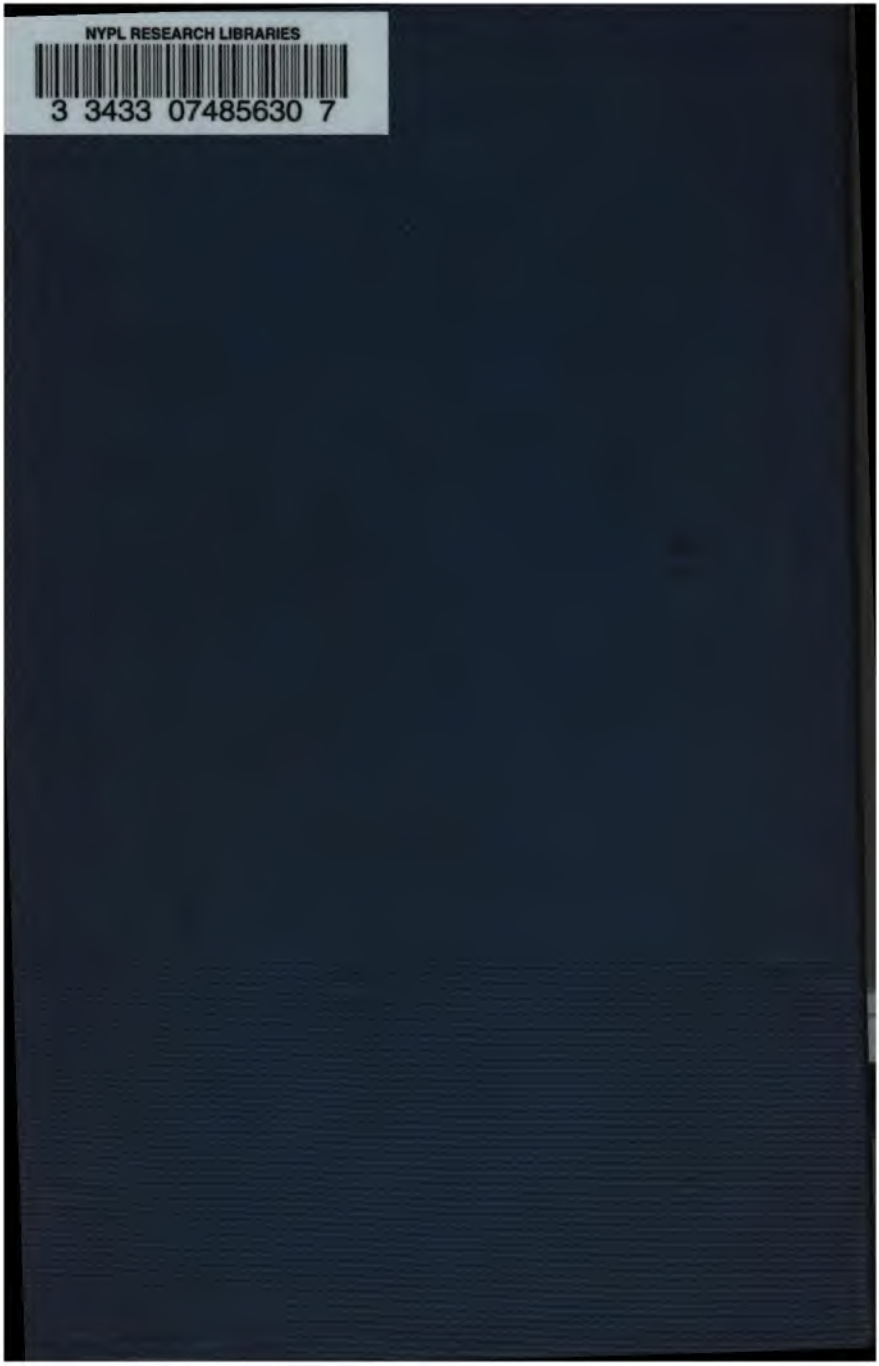
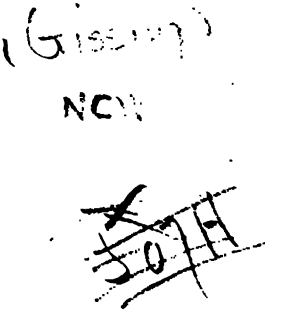




IN THE YEAR OF JUBILEE

VOL. II

IN THE YEAR OF JUBILEE

BY

GEORGE GISSING

AUTHOR OF "THE ODD WOMEN," "THE EMANCIPATED," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

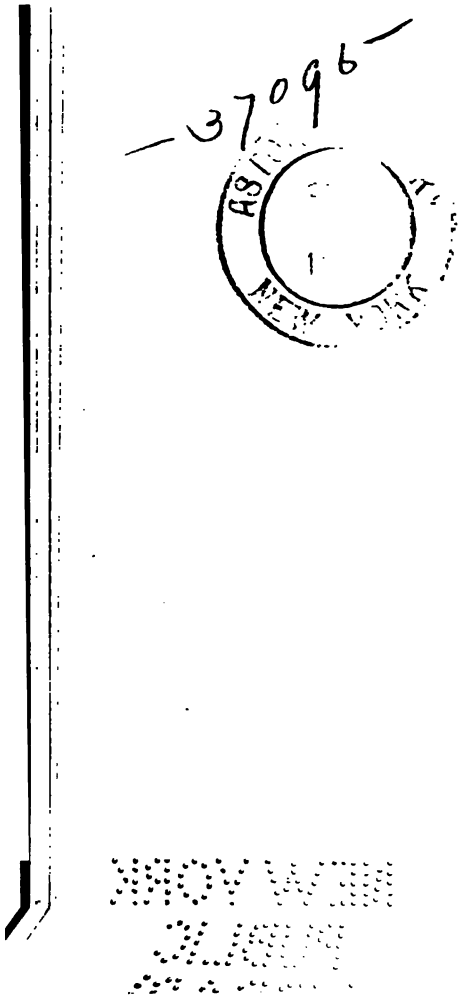
VOL. II

LONDON

LAWRENCE AND BULLEN

16 HENRIETTA STREET, COVENT GARDEN, W.C.

1894



Part the Third

INTO BONDAGE

IN THE YEAR OF JUBILEE

I

DURING his daughter's absence, Stephen Lord led a miserable life. The wasting disease had firm hold upon him; day by day it consumed his flesh, darkened his mind. The more need he had of nursing and restraint, the less could he tolerate interference with his habits, invasion of his gloomy solitude. The doctor's visits availed nothing; he listened to advice, or seemed to listen, but with a smile of obstinate suspicion on his furrowed face which conveyed too plain a meaning to the adviser.

On one point Mary had prevailed with him. After some days' resistance, he allowed her to transform the cabin-like arrangements of his room, and give it the appearance of a comfortable bed-chamber. But he would not take to his bed, and

the suggestion of professional nursing excited his wrath.

"Do you write to Nancy?" he asked one morning of his faithful attendant, with scowling suspicion.

"No."

"You are telling me the truth?"

"I never write to any one."

"Understand plainly that I won't have a word said to her about me."

This was when Horace had gone away to Scarborough, believing, on his father's assurance, that there was no ground whatever for anxiety. Sometimes Mr. Lord sat hour after hour in an unchanging position, his dull eyes scarcely moving from one point. At others he paced his room, or wandered about the house, or made an attempt at gardening—which soon ended in pain and exhaustion. Towards night he became feverish, his hollow cheeks glowing with an ominous tint. In the morning he occasionally prepared himself as if to start for his place of business; he left the house, and walked for perhaps a couple of hundred yards, then slackened his pace, stopped,

looked about him in an agony of indecision, and at length returned. After this futile endeavour, he had recourse to the bottles in his cupboard, and presently fell into a troubled sleep.

At the end of the second week, early one evening, three persons came to him by appointment: his partner Samuel Barmby, Mr. Barmby, senior, and a well-dressed gentleman whom Mary—she opened the door to them—had never seen before. They sat together in the drawing-room for more than an hour; then the well-dressed gentleman took his leave, the others remaining for some time longer.

The promoted servant, at Mr. Lord's bidding, had made a change in her dress; during the latter part of the day she presented the appearance of a gentlewoman, and sat, generally with needlework, sometimes with a book, alone in the dining-room. On a Sunday, whilst Nancy and her brother were away, the Barmby family—father, son, and two daughters—came to take tea and spend the evening, Mary doing the honours of the house; she bore herself without awkwardness, talked simply, and altogether justified Mr. Lord's opinion of her.

When the guests were gone, Stephen made no remark, but, in saying good-night to her, smiled for an instant—the first smile seen upon his face for many days.

Mary remained ignorant of the disease from which he was suffering; in the matter of his diet, she consulted and obeyed him, though often enough it seemed to her that his choice suited little with the state of an invalid. He ate at irregular times, and frequently like a starving man. Mary suspected that, on the occasions when he went out for half-an-hour after dark, he brought back food with him: she had seen him enter with something concealed beneath his coat. All his doings were to her a subject of ceaseless anxiety, of a profound distress which, in his presence, she was obliged to conceal. If she regarded him sadly, the sufferer grew petulant or irate. He would not endure a question concerning his health.

On the day which was understood to be Nancy's last at Teignmouth, he brightened a little, and talked with pleasure, as it seemed, of her return on the morrow. Horace had written that he would

be home this evening, but Mr. Lord spoke only of his daughter. At about six o'clock he was sitting in the garden, and Mary brought him a letter just delivered; he looked at the envelope with a smile.

"To tell us the train she's coming by, no doubt."

Mary waited. When Mr. Lord had read the brief note, his face darkened, first with disappointment, then with anger.

"Here, look at it," he said harshly. "What else was to be expected?"

"Dearest Father," wrote Nancy, "I am sorry that our return must be put off; we hope to get back on Friday evening. Of course this will make no difference to you.—With best love, dear father, and hoping I shall find you much better—"

"What does she mean by behaving in this way?" resumed the angry voice, before Mary had read to the end. "What does she mean by it? Who gave her leave to stay longer? Not a word of explanation. How does she know it will make no difference to me? What does she mean by it?"

"The fine weather has tempted them," replied Mary. "I daresay they want to go somewhere."

"What right has she to make the change at a moment's notice?" vociferated the father, his voice suddenly recovering its old power, his cheeks and neck suffused with red wrath. "And hopes she will find me better. What does *she* care whether she finds me alive or dead?"

"Oh, don't say that! You wouldn't let her know that you were worse."

"What does it mean? I hate this deceitful behaviour! She knew before, of course she knew; and she left it to the last moment, so that I couldn't write and prevent her from staying. As if I should have wished to! As if I cared a brass farthing how long she stays, or, for that matter, whether I ever see her again!"

He checked the course of his furious speech, and stood staring at the letter.

"What did you say?" He spoke now in a hoarse undertone. "You thought they were going somewhere?"

"Last year there used to be steamers that went to places on certain days——"

"Nonsense! She wouldn't alter all their plans

for that. It's something I am not to know—of course it is. She's deceitful—like all women."

He met Mary's eye, suddenly turned upon him. His own fell before it, and without speaking again he went into the house.

In half-an-hour's time his bell rang, and not Mary, but the young servant responded. According to her directions, she knocked at the door, and, without opening it, asked her master's pleasure. Mr. Lord said that he was going out, and would not require a meal till late in the evening.

It was nearly ten o'clock when he returned. Mary, sitting in the front room, rose at his entrance.

"I want nothing," he said. "I've been to the Barmbys'." Voice and movements proved how the effort had taxed him. In sitting down, he trembled; fever was in his eyes, and pain in every line of his countenance.

Mary handed him a letter; it came from Horace, and was an intimation that the young gentleman would not return to-night, but to-morrow. When Mr. Lord had read it, he jerked a contemptuous laugh, and threw the sheet of note-paper across the table.

"There you are. Not much to choose between daughter and son. He's due at business in the morning; but what does that matter? It doesn't suit his lordship to keep time."

He laughed again, his emphasis on "lordship" showing that he consciously played with the family name.

"But I was a fool to be angry. Let them come when they will."

For a few minutes he lay back in the chair, gazing at vacancy.

"Has the girl gone to bed?"

"I'll tell her she can go."

Mary soon returned, and took up the book with which she had been engaged. In a low voice, and as if speaking without much thought, Stephen asked her what she was reading. It was a volume of an old magazine, bought by Mr. Lord many years ago.

"Yes, yes. Nancy laughs at it—calls it old rubbish. These young people are so clever."

His companion made no remark. Unobserved, he scrutinised her face for a long time, and said at length:

"Don't let *us* fall out, Mary. You're not pleased with me, and I know why. I said all women were deceitful, and you took it too seriously. You ought to know me better. There's something comes on me every now and then, and makes me say the worst I can—no matter who it hurts. Could I be such a fool as to think ill of *you?*"

"It did hurt me," replied the other, still bent over her book. "But it was only the sound of it. I knew you said more than you meant."

"I'm a fool, and I've been a fool all my life. Is it likely I should have wise children? When I went off to the Barmbys', I thought of sending Samuel down to Teignmouth, to find out what they were at. But I altered my mind before I got there. What good would it have done? All I *can* do I've done already. I made my will the other day; it's signed and witnessed. I've made it as I told you I should. I'm not much longer for this world, but I've saved the girl from foolishness till she's six-and-twenty. After that she must take care of herself."

They sat silent whilst the clock on the mantel-

piece ticked away a few more minutes. Mr. Lord's features betrayed the working of turbid thought, a stern resentment their prevailing expression. When reverie released him, he again looked at his companion.

"Mary, did you ever ask yourself what sort of woman Nancy's mother may have been?"

The listener started, like one in whom a secret has been surprised. She tried to answer, but after all did not speak.

"I'll tell you," Stephen pursued. "Yes, I'll tell you. You must know it. Not a year after the boy's birth, she left me. And I made myself free of her—I divorced her."

Their eyes just met.

"You needn't think that it cost me any suffering. Not on her account; not because I had lost my wife. I never felt so glad, before or since, as on the day when it was all over, and I found myself a free man again. I suffered only in thinking how I had fooled away some of the best years of my life for a woman who despised me from the first, and was as heartless as the stones of the

street. I found her in beggary, or close upon it. I made myself her slave—it's only the worthless women who accept from a man, who expect from him, such slavish worship as she had from me. I gave her clothing; she scarcely thanked me, but I thought myself happy. I gave her a comfortable home, such as she hadn't known for years; for a reward she mocked at my plain tastes and quiet ways—but I thought no ill of it—could see nothing in it but a girlish, light-hearted sort of way that seemed one of her merits. As long as we lived together, she pretended to be an affectionate wife; I should think no one ever matched her in hypocrisy. But the first chance she had—husband, children, home, all flung aside in a moment. Then I saw her in the true light, and understood all at once what a blind fool I had been."

He breathed quickly and painfully. Mary sat without a movement.

"I thought I had done a great thing in marrying a wife that was born above me. Her father had been a country gentleman; horse-racing and

such things had brought him down, and from her twelfth year his daughter lived—I never quite knew how, but on charity of some kind. She grew up without trying to earn her own living; she thought herself too good for that, thought she had a claim to be supported, because as a child she was waited upon by servants. When I asked her once if she couldn't have done something, she stared at me and laughed in my face. For all that she was glad enough to marry a man of my sort—rough and uneducated as I was. She always reminded me of it, though—that I had no education; I believe she thought that she had a perfect right to throw over such a husband, whenever she chose. Afterwards, I saw very well that *her* education didn't amount to much. How could it, when she learnt nothing after she was twelve? She was living with very poor people who came from my part of the country—that's how I met her. The father led some sort of blackguard life in London, but had no money for her, nor yet for his other girl, who went into service, I was told, and perhaps made herself a useful,

honest woman. He died in a hospital, and he was buried at my expense—not three months before his daughter went off and left me."

"You will never tell your children," said Mary, when there had been a long pause.

"I've often thought it would only be right if I told them. I've often thought, the last year or two, that Nancy ought to know. It might make her think, and do her good."

"No, no," returned the other hurriedly. "Never let her know of it—never. It might do her much harm."

"You know now, Mary, why I look at the girl so anxiously. She's not like her mother; not much like her in face, and I can't think she's like her in heart. But you know what her faults are as well as I do. Whether I've been right or wrong in giving her a good education, I shall never know. Wrong, I fear—but I've told you all about that."

"You don't know whether she's alive or not?" asked Mary, when once more it was left to her to break silence.

"What do I care? How should I know?"

"Don't be tempted to tell them—either of them!" said the other earnestly.

"My friend Barmby knows. Whether he's told his son, I can't say; it's twenty years since we spoke about it. If he *did* ever mention it to Samuel, then it might somehow get known to Horace or the girl, when I'm gone.—I won't give up the hope that young Barmby may be her husband. She'll have time to think about it. But if ever she should come to you and ask questions—I mean, if she's been told what happened—you'll set me right in her eyes? You'll tell her what I've told you?"

"I hope it may never——"

"So do I," Stephen interrupted, his voice husky with fatigue. "But I count on you to make my girl think rightly of me, if ever there's occasion. I count on you. When I'm dead, I won't have her think that I was to blame for her mother's ill-doing. That's why I've told you. You believe me, don't you?"

And Mary, lifting her eyes, met his look of appeal with more than a friend's confidence.

II

FROM chambers in Staple Inn, Lionel Tarrant looked forth upon the laborious world with a dainty enjoyment of his own limitless leisure. The old gables fronting upon Holborn pleased his fancy; he liked to pass under the time-worn archway, and so, at a step, estrange himself from commercial tumult,—to be in the midst of modern life, yet breathe an atmosphere of ancient repose.

He belonged to an informal club of young men who called themselves, facetiously, the Hodiernals. *Vixi hodie!* The motto, suggested by some one or other after a fifth tumbler of whisky punch, might bear more than a single interpretation. Harvey Munden, the one member of this genial brotherhood who lived by the sweat of his brow, proposed as a more suitable title, Les Fainéants; that, however, was judged pedantic, not to say offensive. For these sons of the Day would not

confess to indolence; each deemed himself, after his own fashion, a pioneer in art, letters, civilisation. They had money of their own, or were supported by some one who could afford that privilege; most of them had, ostensibly, some profession in view; for the present, they contented themselves with living, and the weaker brethren read in their hodiernity an obligation to be "up to date."

Tarrant professed himself critical of To-day, apprehensive of To-morrow; he cast a backward eye. None the less, his avowed principle was to savour the passing hour. When night grew mellow, and the god of whisky inspired his soul, he shone in a lyrical egoism which had but slight correspondence with the sincerities of his solitude. His view of woman—the Hodiernals talked much of woman—differed considerably from his thoughts of the individual women with whom he associated; protesting oriental sympathies, he nourished in truth the chivalry appropriate to his years and to his education, and imaged an ideal of female excellence whereof the prime features were moral and intellectual.

He had no money of his own. What could be

saved for him from his father's squandered estate —the will established him sole inheritor—went in the costs of a liberal education, his grandmother giving him assurance that he should not go forth into the world penniless. This promise Mrs. Tarrant had kept, though not exactly in the manner her grandson desired. Instead of making him a fixed allowance, the old lady supplied him with funds at uncertain intervals; with the unpleasant result that it was sometimes necessary for him to call to her mind his dependent condition. The cheques he received varied greatly in amount,—from handsome remittances of a hundred pounds or so, down to minim gifts which made the young man feel uncomfortable when he received them. Still, he was provided for, and it could not be long before this dependency came to an end.

He believed in his own abilities. Should it ever be needful, he could turn to journalism, for which, undoubtedly, he had some aptitude. But why do anything at all, in the sense of working for money? Every year he felt less disposed for that kind of exertion, and had a greater relish of

his leisurely life. Mrs. Tarrant never rebuked him; indeed she had long since ceased to make inquiry about his professional views. Perhaps she felt it something of a dignity to have a grandson who lived as gentleman at large.

But now, in the latter days of August, the gentleman found himself, in one most important particular, at large no longer. On returning from Teignmouth to Staple Inn he entered his rooms with a confused, disagreeable sense that things were not as they had been, that his freedom had suffered a violation, that he could not sit down among his books with the old self-centred ease, that his prospects were completely, indescribably changed, perchance much for the worse. In brief, Tarrant had gone forth a bachelor, and came back a married man.

Could it be sober fact? Had he in very deed committed so gross an absurdity?

He had purposed no such thing. Miss Nancy Lord was not by any means the kind of person that entered his thoughts when they turned to marriage. He regarded her as in every respect his inferior. She belonged to the social rank only

just above that of wage-earners; her father had a small business in Camberwell; she dressed and talked rather above her station, but so, now-a-days, did every daughter of petty tradesfolk. From the first he had amused himself with her affectation of intellectual superiority. Miss Lord represented a type; to study her as a sample of the pretentious half-educated class was interesting; this sort of girl was turned out in thousands every year, from so-called High Schools; if they managed to pass some examination or other, their conceit grew boundless. Craftily, he had tested her knowledge; it seemed all sham. She would marry some hapless clerk, and bring him to bankruptcy by the exigencies of her "refinement."

So had he thought of Nancy till a few months ago. But in the spring-time, when his emotions blossomed with the blossoming year, he met the girl after a long interval, and saw her with changed eyes. She had something more than prettiness; her looks undeniably improved. It seemed, too, that she bore herself more gracefully, and even talked with, at times, an approximation

to the speech of a lady. These admissions signified much in a man of Tarrant's social prejudice—so strong that it exercised an appreciable effect upon his every-day morals. He began to muse about Miss Lord, and the upshot of his musing was that, having learnt of her departure for Teignmouth, he idly betook himself in the same direction.

But as for marriage, he would as soon have contemplated taking to wife a barmaid. Between Miss Lord and the young lady who dispenses refreshment there were distinctions, doubtless, but none of the first importance. Then arose the question, in what spirit, with what purpose, did he seek her intimacy? The answer he simply postponed.

And postponed it very late indeed. Until the choice was no longer between making love in idleness, and conscientiously holding aloof; but between acting like a frank blackguard, and making the amends of an honest man.

The girl's fault, to be sure. He had not credited himself with this power of fascination, and certainly not with the violence of passion which recklessly pursues indulgence. Still, the girl's fault; she

had behaved—well, as a half-educated girl of her class might be expected to behave. Ignorance she could not plead; that were preposterous. Utter subjugation by first love; that, perhaps; she affirmed it, and possibly with truth; a flattering assumption, at all events. But, all said and done, the issue had been of her own seeking. Why, then, accuse himself of blackguardly conduct, if he had turned a deaf ear to her pleading? Not one word of marriage had previously escaped his lips, nor anything that could imply a promise.

Well, there was the awkward and unaccountable fact that he *felt* himself obliged to marry her; that, when he seemed to be preparing resistance, downright shame rendered it impossible. Her face—her face when she looked at him and spoke! The truth was, that he had not hesitated at all; there was but one course open to him. He gave glances in the other direction; he wished to escape; he reviled himself for his folly; he saw the difficulties and discontents that lay before him; but choice he had none.

Love, in that sense of the word which Tarrant

respected, could not be said to influence him. He had uttered the word; yes, of course he had uttered it; as a man will who is goaded by his raging blood. But he was as far as ever from loving Nancy Lord. Her beauty, and a certain growing charm in her companionship, had lured him on; his habitual idleness, and the vagueness of his principles, made him guilty at last of what a moralist would call very deliberate rascality. He himself was inclined to see his behaviour in that light; yet why had Nancy so smoothed the path of temptation?

That *her* love was love indeed, he might take for granted. To a certain point, it excused her. But she seemed so thoroughly able to protect herself; the time of her green girlhood had so long gone by. For explanation, he must fall back again on the circumstances of her origin and training. Perhaps she illustrated a social peril, the outcome of modern follies. Yes, that was how he would look at it. A result of charlatan "education" operating upon crude character.

Who could say what the girl had been reading,

what cheap philosophies had unsettled her mind? Is not a little knowledge a dangerous thing?

Thus far had he progressed in the four and twenty hours which followed his—or Nancy's—conquest. Meanwhile he had visited the office of the registrar, had made his application for a marriage licence, a proceeding which did not tend to soothe him. Later, when he saw Nancy again, he experienced a revival of that humaner mood which accompanied his pledge to marry her, the mood of regret, but also of tenderness, of compassion. A tenderness that did not go very deep, a half-slighting compassion. His character, and the features of the case, at present allowed no more; but he preferred the kindlier attitude.

Of course he preferred it. Was he not essentially good-natured? Would he not, at any ordinary season, go out of his way to do a kindness? Did not his soul revolt against every form of injustice? Whom had he ever injured? For his humanity, no less than for his urbanity, he claimed a noteworthy distinction among young men of the time.

And there lay the pity of it. But for Nancy's

self-abandonment, he might have come to love her in good earnest. As it was, the growth of their intimacy had been marked with singular, unanticipated impulses on his side, impulses quite inconsistent with heartless scheming. In the compunctious visitings which interrupted his love-making at least twice, there was more than a revolt of mere honesty, as he recognised during his brief flight to London. Had she exercised but the common prudence of womanhood!

Why, that she did not, might tell both for and against her. Granting that she lacked true dignity, native refinement, might it not have been expected that artfulness would supply their place? Artful fencing would have stamped her of coarse nature. But coarseness she had never betrayed; he had never judged her worse than intellectually shallow. Her self-surrender might, then, indicate a trait worthy of admiration. Her subsequent behaviour undeniably pleaded for respect. She acquainted him with the circumstances of her home life, very modestly, perhaps pathetically. He learnt that her father was not ill to do, heard of her domestic

and social troubles, that her mother had been long dead, things weighing in her favour, to be sure.

If only she had loved him less!

It was all over; he was married. In acting honourably, it seemed probable that he had spoilt his life. He must be prepared for anything. Nancy said that she should not, could not, tell her father, yet awhile; but that resolution was of doubtful stability. For his own part, he thought it clearly advisable that the fact should not become known at Champion Hill; but could he believe Nancy's assurance that Miss Morgan remained in the dark? Upon one catastrophe, others might naturally follow.

Here, Saturday at noon, came a letter of Nancy's writing. A long letter, and by no means a bad one; superior, in fact, to anything he thought she could have written. It moved him somewhat, but would have moved him more, had he not been legally bound to the writer. On Sunday she could not come to see him; but on Monday, early in the afternoon—

Well, there were consolations. A wise man makes the best of the inevitable.

III

SINCE his return he had seen no one, and none of his friends knew where he had been. A call from some stray Hodiernal would be very unseasonable this Monday afternoon; but probably they were all enjoying their elegant leisure in regions remote from town. As the hour of Nancy's arrival drew near, he sat trying to compose himself—with indifferent success. At one moment his thoughts found utterance, and he murmured in a strange, bewildered tone—"My wife." Astonishing words! He laughed at their effect upon him, but unmirthfully. And his next murmur was—"The devil!" A mere ejaculation, betokening his state of mind.

He reached several times for his pipe, and remembered when he had touched it that the lips with which he greeted Nancy ought not to be redolent of tobacco. In outward respect, at all events, he would not fall short.

Just when his nervousness was becoming intolerable, there sounded a knock. The knock he had anticipated—timid, brief. He stepped hastily from the room, and opened. Nancy hardly looked at him, and neither of them spoke till the closing of two doors had assured their privacy.

"Well, you had no difficulty in finding the place?"

"No—none at all."

They stood apart, and spoke with constraint. Nancy's bosom heaved, as though she had been hastening overmuch; her face was deeply coloured; her eyes had an unwonted appearance, resembling those of a night-watcher at weary dawn. She cast quick glances about the room, but with the diffidence of an intruder. Her attitude was marked by the same characteristic; she seemed to shrink, to be ashamed.

"Come and sit down," said Tarrant cheerfully, as he wheeled a chair.

She obeyed him, and he, stooping beside her, offered his lips. Nancy kissed him, closing her eyes for the moment, then dropping them again.

"It seems a long time, Nancy—doesn't it?"

"Yes—a very long time."

"You couldn't come on Sunday?"

"I found my father very ill. I didn't like to leave home till to-day."

"Your father ill?—You said nothing of it in your letter."

"No—I didn't like to—with the other things."

A singular delicacy this; Tarrant understood it, and looked at her thoughtfully. Again she was examining the room with hurried glance; upon him her eyes did not turn. He asked questions about Mr. Lord. Nancy could not explain the nature of his illness; he had spoken of gout, but she feared it must be something worse; the change in him since she went away was incredible and most alarming. This she said in short, quick sentences, her voice low. Tarrant thought to himself that in her too, a very short time had made a very notable change; he tried to read its significance, but could reach no certainty.

"I'm sorry to hear all this—very sorry. You must tell me more about your father. Take off your hat, dear, and your gloves."

Her gloves she removed first, and laid them on her lap; Tarrant took them away. Then her hat; this too he placed on the table. Having done so, he softly touched the plaits of her hair. And, for the first time, Nancy looked up at him.

"Are you glad to see me?" she asked, in a voice that seemed subdued by doubt of the answer.

"I am—very glad."

His hand fell to her shoulder. With a quick movement, a stifled exclamation, the girl rose and flung her arms about him.

"Are you really glad?—Do you really love me?"

"Never doubt it, dear girl."

"Ah, but I can't help. I have hardly slept at night, in trying to get rid of the doubt. When you opened the door, I felt you didn't welcome me. Don't you think of me as a burden? I can't help wondering why I am here."

He took hold of her left hand, and looked at it, then said playfully:

"Of course you wonder. What business has a wife to come and see her husband without the ring on her finger?"

Nancy turned from him, opened the front of her dress, unknotted a string of silk, and showed her finger bright with the golden circlet.

"That's how I must wear it, except when I am with you. I keep touching—to make sure it's there."

Tarrant kissed her fingers.

"Dear,"—she had her face against him—"make me certain that you love me. Speak to me like you did before. Oh, I never knew in my life what it was to feel ashamed!"

"Ashamed? Because you are married, Nancy?"

"Am I really married? That seems impossible. It's like having dreamt that I was married to you. I can hardly remember a thing that happened."

"The registry at Teignmonth remembers," he answered with a laugh. "Those books have a long memory."

She raised her eyes.

"But wouldn't you undo it if you could?—No, no, I don't mean that. Only that if it had never happened—if we had said good-bye before those last days—wouldn't you have been glad now?"

"Why, that's a difficult question to answer," he returned gently. "It all depends on your own feeling."

For whatever reason, these words so overcame Nancy that she burst into tears. Tarrant, at once more lover-like, soothed and fondled her, and drew her to sit on his knee.

"You're not like your old self, dear girl. Of course, I can understand it. And your father's illness. But you mustn't think of it in this way. I do love you, Nancy. I couldn't unsay a word I said to you—I don't wish anything undone."

"Make me believe that. I think I should be quite happy then. It's the hateful thought that perhaps you never wanted me for your wife; it *will* come, again and again, and it makes me feel as if I would rather have died."

"Send such thoughts packing. Tell them your husband wants all your heart and mind for himself."

"But will you never think ill of me?"

She whispered the words, close-clinging.

"I should be a contemptible sort of brute."

"No. I ought to have——. If we had spoken of our love to each other, and waited."

"A very proper twelvemonth's engagement,—meetings at five o'clock tea,—fifty thousand love-letters,—and all that kind of thing. Oh, we chose a better way. Our wedding was among the leaves and flowers. You remember the glow of evening sunlight between the red pine and the silver birch? I hope that place may remain as it is all our lives; we will go there——"

"Never! Never ask me to go there. I want to forget——I hope some day I may forget."

"If you hope so, then I will hope the same."

"And you love me—with real, husband's love—love that will last?"

"Why should *I* answer all the questions?" He took her face between his hands. "What if the wife's love should fail first?"

"You can say that lightly, because you know——"

"What do I know?"

"You know that I am *all* love of you. As long as I am myself, I must love you. It was becau

I had no will of my own left, because I lived only in the thought of you day and night——"

Their lips met in a long silence.

"I mustn't stay past four o'clock," were Nancy's next words. "I don't like to be away long from the house. Father won't ask me anything, but he knows I'm away somewhere, and I'm afraid it makes him angry with me." She examined the room. "How comfortable you are here! what a delightful old place to live in!"

"Will you look at the other rooms?"

"Not to-day—when I come again. I must say good-bye very soon—oh, see how the time goes! What a large library you have! You must let me look at all the books, when I have time."

"Let you? They are yours as much as mine."

Her face brightened.

"I should like to live here; how I should enjoy it after that hateful Grove Lane! Shall I live here with you some day?"

"There wouldn't be room for two. Why, your dresses would fill the whole place."

She went and stood before the shelves.

"But how dusty you are! Who cleans for you?"

"No one. A very rickety old woman draws a certain number of shillings each week, on pretence of cleaning."

"What a shame! She neglects you disgracefully. You shall go away some afternoon, and leave me here with a great pile of dusters."

"You can do that kind of thing? It never occurred to me to ask you: are you a domestic person?"

She answered with something of the old confident air.

"That was an oversight, wasn't it? After all, how little you know about me!"

"Do you know much more of me?"

Her countenance fell.

"You are going to tell me—everything. How long have you lived here?"

"Two years and a half."

"And your friends come to see you here? Of course they do. I meant, have you many friends?"

"Friends, no. A good many acquaintances."

"Men, like yourself?'

"Mostly men, fellows who talk about art and literature."

"And women?" Nancy faltered, half turning away.

"Oh, magnificent creatures — Greek scholars— mathematicians—all that is most advanced!"

"That's the right answer to a silly question," said Nancy humbly.

Whereat, Tarrant fixed his gaze upon her.

"I begin to think that——"

He checked himself awkwardly. Nancy insisted on the completion of his thought.

"That of all the women I know, you have the most sense."

"I had rather hear you say that than have a great fortune." She blushed with joy. "Perhaps you will love me some day, as I wish to be loved."

"How?"

"I'll tell you another time. If it weren't for my father's illness, I think I could go home feeling almost happy. But how am I to know what you are doing?"

"What do you wish me to do?"

"Just tell me how you live. What shall you do now, when I'm gone?"

"Sit disconsolate,"—he came nearer—"thinking you were just a little unkind."

"No, don't say that." Nancy was flurried. "I have told you the real reason. Our housekeeper says that father was disappointed and angry because I put off my return from Teignmouth. He spoke to me very coldly, and I have hardly seen him since. He won't let me wait upon him; and I have thought, since I know how ill he really is, that I must seem heartless. I will come for longer next time."

To make amends for the reproach he had uttered in spite of himself, Tarrant began to relate in full the events of his ordinary day.

"I get my own breakfast—the only meal I have at home. Look, here's the kitchen, queer old place. And here's the dining-room. Cupboards everywhere, you see; we boast of our cupboards. The green paint is *de rigueur;* duck's egg colour; I've got to like it. That door leads into the bedroom. Well, after breakfast, about eleven o'clock

that's to say, I light up—look at my pipe-rack—and read newspapers. Then, if it's fine, I walk about the streets, and see what new follies men are perpetrating. And then——"

He told of his favourite restaurants, of his unfashionable club, of a few houses where, at long intervals, he called or dined, of the Hodiernals, of a dozen other small matters.

"What a life," sighed the listener, "compared with mine!"

"We'll remedy that, some day."

"When?" she asked absently.

"Wait just a little.—You don't wish to tell your father?"

"I daren't tell him. I doubt whether I shall ever dare to tell him face to face."

"Don't think about it. Leave it to me."

"I must have letters from you—but how? Perhaps, if you could promise always to send them for the first post—I generally go to the letter-box, and I could do so always—whilst father is ill."

This was agreed upon. Nancy, whilst they

were talking, took her hat from the table; at the same moment, Tarrant's hand moved towards it. Their eyes met, and the hand that would have checked her was drawn back. Quickly, secretly, she drew the ring from her finger, hid it somewhere, and took her gloves.

"Did you come by the back way?" Tarrant asked, when he had bitten his lips for a sulky minute.

"Yes, as you told me."

He said he would walk with her into Chancery Lane; there could be no risk in it.

"You shall go out first. Any one passing will suppose you had business with the solicitor underneath. I'll overtake you at Southampton Buildings."

Impatient to be gone, she lingered minute after minute, and broke hurriedly from his restraining arms at last. The second outer door, which Tarrant had closed on her entrance, surprised her by its prison-like massiveness. In the wooden staircase she stopped timidly, but at the exit her eyes turned to an inscription above, which she had just glanced at when arriving:

Surrexit e flammis, and a date. Nancy had no Latin, but guessed an interpretation from the last word. Through the little court, with its leafy plane-trees and white-worn cobble-stones, she walked with bent head, hearing the roar of Holborn through the front archway, and breathing more freely when she gained the quiet garden at the back of the Inn.

Tarrant's step sounded behind her. Looking up she asked the meaning of the inscription she had seen.

"You don't know Latin? Well, why should you? *Surrexit e flammis*, 'It rose again from the flames.'"

"I thought it might be something like that. You will be patient with my ignorance?"

A strange word upon Nancy's lips. No mortal ere this had heard her confess to ignorance.

"But you know the modern languages?" said Tarrant, smiling.

"Yes. That is, a little French and German—a very little German."

Tarrant mused, seemingly with no dissatisfaction.

IV

In her brother's looks and speech Nancy detected something mysterious. Undoubtedly he was keeping a secret from her, and there could be just as little doubt that he would not keep it long. Whenever she questioned him about the holiday at Scarborough, he put on a smile unlike any she had ever seen on his face, so profoundly thoughtful was it, so loftily reserved. On the subject of Mrs. Damerel he did not choose to be very communicative; Nancy gathered little more than she had learnt from his letter. But very plainly the young man held himself in higher esteem than hitherto; very plainly he had learnt to think of "the office" as a burden or degradation, from which he would soon escape. Prompted by her own tormenting conscience, his sister wondered whether Fanny French had anything to do with the mystery; but this seemed improbable. She mentioned Fanny's name one evening.

"Do you see much of her?"

"Not much," was the dreamy reply. "When are you going to call?"

"Oh, not at present," said Nancy.

"You've altered again, then?"

She vouchsafed no answer.

"There's something I think I ought to tell you," said Horace, speaking as though he were the elder and felt a responsibility. "People have been talking about you and Mr. Crewe."

"What!" She flashed into excessive anger. "Who has been talking?"

"The people over there. Of course I know it's all nonsense. At least"—he raised his eyebrows—"I suppose it is."

"*I* should suppose so," said Nancy, with vehement scorn.

Their father's illness imposed a restraint upon trifling conversation. Mary Woodruff, now attending upon Mr. Lord under the doctor's directions, had held grave talk with Nancy. The Barmbys, father and son, called frequently, and went away with gloomy faces. Nancy and her brother were

summoned, separately, to the invalid's room at uncertain times, but neither was allowed to perform any service for him; their sympathy, more often than not, excited irritation; the sufferer always seemed desirous of saying more than the few and insignificant words which actually passed his lips, and generally, after a long silence, he gave the young people an abrupt dismissal. With his daughter he spoke at length, in language which awed her by its solemnity; Nancy could only understand him as meaning that his end drew near. He had been reviewing, he said, the course of her life, and trying to forecast her future.

"I give you no more advice; it would only be repeating what I have said hundreds of times. All I can *do* for your good, I have done. You will understand me better if you live a few more years, and I think, in the end, you will be grateful to me."

Nancy, sitting by the bedside, laid a hand upon her father's and sobbed. She entreated him to believe that even now she understood how wisely he had guided her.

"Tried to, Nancy; tried to, my dear. Guidance

isn't for young people now-a-days. Don't let us shirk the truth. I have never been satisfied with you, but I have loved you——"

"And I you, dear father—I have! I have!—I know better now how good your advice was. I wish—far, far more sincerely than you think—that I had kept more control upon myself—thought less of myself in every way——"

Whilst she spoke through her tears, the yellow, wrinkled face upon the pillow, with its sunken eyes and wasted lips, kept sternly motionless.

"If you won't mock at me," Stephen pursued, "I will show you an example you would do well to imitate. It is our old servant, now my kindest, truest friend. If I could hope that you will let her be *your* friend, it would help to put my mind at rest. Don't look down upon her,—that's such a poor way of thinking. Of all the women I have known, she is the best. Don't be too proud to learn from her, Nancy. In all these twenty years that she has been in my house, whatever she undertook to do, she did well;—nothing too hard or too humble for her, if she thought it her duty.

I know what that means; I myself have been a poor, weak creature, compared with her. Don't be offended because I ask you to take pattern by her. I know her value now better than I ever knew it before. I owe her a debt I can't pay."

Nancy left the room burdened with strange and distressful thoughts. When she saw Mary she looked at her with new feelings, and spoke to her less familiarly than of wont. Mary was very silent in these days; her face had the dignity of a profound unspoken grief.

To his son, Mr. Lord talked only of practical things, urging sound advice, and refraining, now, from any mention of their differences. Horace, absorbed in preoccupations, had never dreamt that this illness might prove fatal; on finding Nancy in tears, he was astonished.

"Do you think it's dangerous?" he asked.

"I'm afraid he will never get well."

It was Sunday morning. The young man went apart and pondered. After the mid-day meal, having heard from Mary that his father was no worse, he left home without remark to any one, and

from Camberwell Green took a cab to Trafalgar Square. At the Hotel Métropole he inquired for Mrs. Damerel; her rooms were high up, and he ascended by the lift. Sunk in a deep chair, her feet extended upon a hassock, Mrs. Damerel was amusing herself with a comic paper; she rose briskly, though with the effort of a person who is no longer slim.

"Here I am, you see!—up in the clouds. Now, *did* you get my letter?"

"No letter, but a telegram."

"There, I thought so. Isn't that just like me? As soon as I had sent out the letter to post, I said to myself that I had written the wrong address. What address it *was*, I couldn't tell you, to save my life, but I shall see when it comes back from the post-office. I rather suspect it's gone to Gunnersbury; just then I was thinking about somebody at Gunnersbury—or somebody at Hampstead, I can't be sure which. What a good thing I wired! —Oh, now, Horace, I *don't* like that, I don't really!"

The young man looked at her in bewilderment.

"What don't you like?"

"Why, that tie. It won't do at all. Your taste is generally very good, but that tie! I'll choose one for you to-morrow, and let you have it the next time you come. Do you know, I've been thinking that it might be well if you parted your hair in the middle. I don't care for it as a rule; but in your case, with your soft, beautiful hair, I think it would look well. Shall we try? Wait a minute; I'll run for a comb."

"But suppose some one came——"

"Nobody will come, my dear boy. Hardly any one knows I'm here. I like to get away from people now and then; that's why I've taken refuge in this cock-loft."

She disappeared, and came back with a comb of tortoise-shell.

"Sit down there. Oh, what hair it is, to be sure! Almost as fine as my own. I think you'll have a delicious moustache."

Her personal appearance was quite in keeping with this vivacity. Rather short, and inclining—but as yet only inclining—to rotundity of figure, with a peculiarly soft and clear complexion, Mrs

Damerel made a gallant battle against the hostile years. Her bright eye, her moist lips, the admirable smoothness of brow and cheek and throat, bore witness to sound health; as did the rows of teeth, incontestably her own, which she exhibited in her frequent mirth. A handsome woman still, though not of the type that commands a reverent admiration. Her frivolity did not exclude a suggestion of shrewdness, nor yet of capacity for emotion, but it was difficult to imagine wise or elevated thought behind that narrow brow. She was elaborately dressed, with only the most fashionable symbols of widowhood; rings adorned her podgy little hand, and a bracelet her white wrist. Refinement she possessed only in the society-journal sense, but her intonation was that of the idle class, and her grammar did not limp.

"There—let me look. Oh, I think that's an improvement—more *distingué*. And now tell me the news. How is your father?"

"Very bad, I'm afraid," said Horace, when he had regarded himself in a mirror with something of doubtfulness. "Nancy says that she's afraid he won't get well."

"Oh, you don't say that! Oh, how very sad! But let us hope. I can't think it's so bad as that."

Horace sat in thought. Mrs. Damerel, her bright eyes subduing their gaiety to a keen reflectiveness, put several questions regarding the invalid, then for a moment meditated.

"Well, we must hope for the best. Let me know to-morrow how he gets on—be sure you let me know. And if anything *should* happen—oh, but that's too sad; we won't talk about it."

Again she meditated, tapping the floor, and, as it seemed, trying not to smile.

"Don't be downcast, my dear boy. Never meet sorrow half-way—if you knew how useful I have found it to remember that maxim. I have gone through sad, sad things—ah! But now tell me of your own affairs. Have you seen *la petite?*"

"I just saw her the other evening," he answered uneasily.

"Just? What does that mean, I wonder? Now you don't look anything like so well as when you were at Scarborough. You're worrying; yes, I know you are. It's your nervous constitution,

my poor boy. So you just saw her? No more imprudences?"

She examined his face attentively, her lips set with tolerable firmness.

"It's a very difficult position, you know," said Horace, wriggling in his chair. "I can't get out of it all at once. And the truth is, I'm not sure that I wish to."

Mrs. Damerel drew her eyebrows together, and gave a loud tap on the floor.

"Oh, that's weak—that's very weak! After promising me! Now listen; listen seriously." She raised a finger. "If it goes on, I have nothing —more—whatever to do with you. It would distress me very, very much; but I can't interest myself in a young man who makes love to a girl so very far beneath him. Be led by me, Horace, and your future will be brilliant. Prefer this young lady of Camberwell, and lose everything."

Horace leaned forward and drooped his head.

"I don't think you form anything like a right idea of her," he said.

The other moved impatiently.

"My dear boy, I know her as well as if I'd lived with her for years. Oh, how silly you are! But then you are so young, so very young."

With the vexation on her face there blended, as she looked at him, a tenderness unmistakably genuine.

"Now, I'll tell you what. I have really no objection to make Fanny's acquaintance. Suppose, after all, you bring her to see me one of these days. Not just yet. You must wait till I am in the mood for it. But before very long."

Horace looked up with pleasure and gratitude.

"Now, that's really kind of you!"

"Really? And all the rest is only pretended kindness? Silly boy! Some day you will know better. Now, think, Horace; suppose you were so unhappy as to lose your father. Could you, as soon as he was gone, do something that you know would have pained him deeply?"

The pathetic note was a little strained; putting her head aside, Mrs. Damerel looked rather like a sentimental picture in an advertisement. Horace did not reply.

"You surely wouldn't," pursued the lady, with emphasis, watching him closely; "you surely wouldn't and couldn't marry this girl as soon as your poor father was in his grave?"

"Oh, of course not."

Mrs. Damerel seemed relieved, but pursued her questioning.

"You couldn't think of marrying for at least half a year?"

"Fanny wouldn't wish it."

"No, of course not,—well now, I think I must make her acquaintance. But how weak you are, Horace! Oh, those nerves! All finely, delicately organised people, like you, make such blunders in life. Your sense of honour is such a tyrant over you. Now, mind, I don't say for a moment that Fanny isn't fond of you,—how could she help being, my dear boy? But I do insist that she will be very much happier if you let her marry some one of her own class. You, Horace, belong to a social sphere so far, far above her. If I could only impress that upon your modesty. You are made to associate with people of the highest refinement.

How deplorable to think that a place in society is waiting for you, and you keep longing for Camberwell!"

The listener's face wavered between pleasure in such flattery and the impulse of resistance.

"Remember, Horace, if anything *should* happen at home, you are your own master. I could introduce you freely to people of wealth and fashion. Of course you could give up the office at once. I shall be taking a house in the West-end, or a flat, at all events. I shall entertain a good deal—and think of your opportunities! My dear boy, I assure you that, with personal advantages such as yours, you might end by marrying an heiress. Nothing more probable! And you can talk of such a girl as Fanny French—for shame!"

"I mustn't propose any gaieties just now," she said, when they had been together for an hour. "And I shall wait so anxiously for news of your father. If anything *did* happen, what would your sister do, I wonder?"

"I'm sure I don't know—except that she'd get away from Camberwell. Nancy hates it."

"Who knows? I may be able to be of use to her. But, you say she is such a grave and learned young lady? I am afraid we should bore each other."

To this, Horace could venture only an uncertain reply. He had not much hope of mutual understanding between his sister and Mrs. Damerel.

At half-past five he was home again, and there followed a cheerless evening. Nancy was in her own room until nine o'clock. She came down for supper, but had no appetite; her eyes showed redness from weeping; Horace could say nothing for her comfort. After the meal, they went up together to the drawing-room, and sat unoccupied.

"If we lose father," said Nancy, in a dull voice very unlike her ordinary tones, "we shall have not a single relative left, that is anything to us."

Her brother kept silence.

"Has Mrs. Damerel," she continued, "ever said anything to you about mother's family?"

After hesitation, Horace answered, "Yes," and his countenance showed that the affirmative had

special meaning. Nancy waited with an inquiring look.

"I haven't told you," he added, "because—we have had other things to think about. But Mrs. Damerel is mother's sister, our aunt."

"How long have you known that?"

"She told me at Scarborough."

"But why didn't she tell you so at first?"

"That's what I can't understand. She says she was afraid I might mention it; but I don't believe that's the real reason."

Nancy's questioning elicited all that was to be learnt from her brother, little more than she had heard already; the same story of a disagreement between Mrs. Damerel and their father, of long absences from England, and a revival of interest in her relatives, following upon Mrs. Damerel's widowhood.

"She would be glad to see you, if you liked. But I doubt whether you would get on very well."

"Why?"

"She doesn't care about the same things that you do. She's a woman of society, you know."

"But if she's mother's sister. Yes, I should like to know her." Nancy spoke with increasing earnestness. "It makes everything quite different. I must see her."

"Well, as I said, she's quite willing. But you remember that I'm supposed not to have spoken about her at all. I should have to get her to send you a message, or something of that kind. Of course, we have often talked about you."

"I can't form an idea of her," said Nancy impatiently. "Is she good? Is she really kind? Couldn't you get her portrait to show me?"

"I should be afraid to ask, unless she had given me leave to speak to you."

"She really lives in good society?"

"Haven't I told you the sort of people she knows? She must be very well off; there can't be a doubt of it."

"I don't care so much about that," said Nancy in a brooding voice. "It's herself,—whether she's kind and good and wishes well to us."

The next day there was no change in Mr. Lord's condition; a deep silence possessed the house. In

the afternoon Nancy went to pass an hour with Jessica Morgan; on her return she met Samuel Barmby, who was just leaving after a visit to the sick man. Samuel bore himself with portentous gravity, but spoke only a few commonplaces, affecting hope; he bestowed upon Nancy's hand a fervent pressure, and strode away with the air of an undertaker who had called on business.

Two more days of deepening gloom, then a night through which Nancy sat with Mary Woodruff by her father's bed. Mr. Lord was unconscious, but from time to time a syllable or a phrase fell from his lips, meaningless to the watchers. At dawn, Nancy went to her chamber, pallid, exhausted. Mary, whose strength seemed proof against fatigue, moved about the room, preparing for a new day; every few minutes she stood with eyes fixed on the dying face, and the tears she had restrained in Nancy's presence flowed silently.

When the sun made a golden glimmer upon the wall, Mary withdrew, and was absent for a quarter of an hour. On returning, she bent at once over the bed; her eyes were met by a grave, wondering look.

"Do you know me?" she whispered.

The lips moved; she bent lower, but could distinguish no word. He was speaking; the murmur continued; but she gathered no sense.

"You can trust me, I will do all I can."

He seemed to understand her, and smiled. As the smile faded away, passing into an austere calm, Mary pressed her lips upon his forehead.

V

AFTER breakfast, and before Arthur Peachey's departure for business, there had been a scene of violent quarrel between him and his wife. It took place in the bed-room, where, as usual save on Sunday morning, Ada consumed her strong tea and heavily buttered toast; the state of her health —she had frequent ailments, more or less genuine, such as afflict the indolent and brainless type of woman—made it necessary for her to repose till a late hour. Peachey did not often lose self-control, though sorely tried; the one occasion that unchained his wrath was when Ada's heedlessness or ill-temper affected the wellbeing of his child. This morning it had been announced to him that the nurse-girl, Emma, could no longer be tolerated; she was making herself offensive to her mistress, had spoken insolently, disobeyed orders, and worst of all, defended herself by alleging orders from Mr.

Peachey. Hence the outbreak of strife, signalled by furious shrill voices, audible to Beatrice and Fanny as they sat in the room beneath.

Ada came down at half-past ten, and found Beatrice writing letters. She announced what any who did not know her would have taken for a final resolve.

"I'm going—I won't put up with that beast any longer. I shall go and live at Brighton."

Her sister paid not the slightest heed; she was intent upon a business letter of much moment.

"Do you hear what I say? I'm going by the first train this afternoon."

"All right," remarked Beatrice placidly. "Don't interrupt me just now."

The result of this was fury directed against Beatrice, who found herself accused of every domestic vice compatible with her position. She was a sordid creature, living at other people's expense,—a selfish, scheming, envious wretch——

"If I were your husband," remarked the other without looking up, "I should long since have turned you into the street—if I hadn't broken your neck first."

Exercise in quarrel only made Ada's voice the clearer and more shrill. It rose now to the highest points of a not inconsiderable compass. But Beatrice continued to write, and by resolute silence put a limit to her sister's railing. A pause had just come about, when the door was thrown open, and in rushed Fanny, hatted and gloved from a walk.

"He's dead!" she said excitedly. "He's dead!"

Beatrice turned with a look of interest. "Who? Mr. Lord?"

"Yes. The blinds are all down. He must have died in the night."

Her cheeks glowed and her eyes sparkled, as though she had brought the most exhilarating news.

"What do I care?" said Mrs. Peachey, to whom her sister had addressed the last remark.

"Just as much as I care about your affairs, no doubt," returned Fanny, with genial frankness.

"Don't be in too great a hurry," remarked Beatrice, who showed the calculating winkle at the corner of her eye. "Because he's dead, that doesn't say that your masher comes in for money."

"Who'll get it, then?"

"There may be nothing worth speaking of to get, for all we know."

Beatrice had not as yet gained Fanny's co-operation in the commercial scheme now being elaborated; though of far more amiable nature than Mrs. Peachey, she heartily hoped that the girl might be disappointed in her expectations from Mr. Lord's will. An hour later, she walked along Grove Lane, and saw for herself that Fanny's announcement was accurate; the close-drawn blinds could mean but one thing.

To-day there was little likelihood of learning particulars, but on the morrow Fanny might perchance hear something from Horace Lord. However, the evening brought a note, hand-delivered by some stranger. Horace wrote only a line or two, informing Fanny that his father had died about eight o'clock that morning, and adding: "Please be at home to-morrow at twelve."

At twelve next day Fanny received her lover alone in the drawing-room. He entered with the exaggerated solemnity of a very young man who

knows for the first time a grave bereavement, and feels the momentary importance it confers upon him. Fanny, trying to regard him without a smile, grimaced; decorous behaviour was at all times impossible to her, for she neither understood its nature nor felt its obligation. In a few minutes she smiled unrestrainedly, and spoke the things that rose to her lips.

"I've been keeping a secret from you," said Horace, in the low voice which had to express his sorrow,—for he could not preserve a gloomy countenance with Fanny before him. "But I can tell you now."

"A secret? And what business had you to keep secrets from me?"

"It's about Mrs. Damerel. When I was at the seaside she told me who she really is. She's my aunt—my mother's sister. Queer, isn't it? Of course that makes everything different. And she's going to ask you to come and see her. It'll have to be put off a little—now; but not very long, I dare say, as she's a relative. You'll have to do your best to please her."

"I'm sure I shan't put myself out of the way. People must take me as they find me."

"Now don't talk like that, Fanny. It isn't very kind—just now. I thought you'd be different to-day."

"All right.—Have you anything else to tell me?"

Horace understood her significant glance, and shook his head.

"I'll let you know everything as soon as I know myself."

Having learnt the day and hour of Mr. Lord's funeral, Ada and Fanny made a point of walking out to get a glimpse of it. The procession of vehicles in Grove Lane excited their contempt, so far was it from the splendour they had anticipated.

"There you are!" said Ada; "I shouldn't wonder if it's going to be a jolly good take in for you, after all. If he'd died worth much, they wouldn't have buried him like that."

Fanny's heart sank. She could conceive no other explanation of a simple burial save lack of

means, or resentment in the survivors at the disposition made of his property by the deceased. When, on the morrow, Horace told her that his father had strictly charged Mr. Barmby to have him buried in the simplest mode compatible with decency, she put it down to the old man's excessive meanness.

On this occasion she learnt the contents of Mr. Lord's will, and having learnt them, got rid of Horace as soon as possible that she might astonish her sisters with the report.

In the afternoon of that day, Beatrice had an appointment with Luckworth Crewe. She was to meet him at the office he had just taken in Farringdon Street, whence they would repair to a solicitor's in the same neighbourhood, for the discussion of legal business connected with Miss French's enterprise. She climbed the staircase of a big building, and was directed to the right door by the sound of Crewe's voice, loudly and jocularly discoursing. He stood with two men in the open doorway, and at the sight of Beatrice waved a hand to her.

"Take your hook, you fellows; I have an engagement." The men, glancing at Miss French facetiously, went their way. "How do, old chum? It's all in a mess yet; hold your skirts together. Come along this way."

Through glue-pots and shavings and an overpowering smell of paint, Beatrice followed to inspect the premises, which consisted of three rooms; one, very much the smallest, about ten feet square. Three workmen were busy, and one, fitting up shelves, whistled a melody with ear-piercing shrillness.

"Stop that damned noise!" shouted Crewe. "I've told you once already. Try it on again, my lad, and I'll drop you down the well of the staircase —you've too much breath, you have."

The other workmen laughed. It was evident that Crewe had made friends with them all.

"Won't be bad, when we get the decks cleared," he remarked to Beatrice. "Plenty of room to make twenty thousand a year or so."

He checked himself, and asked in a subdued voice, "Seen anything of the Lords?"

Beatrice nodded with a smile. "And heard about the will. Have you?"

"No, I haven't. Come into this little room."

He closed the door behind them, and looked at his companion with curiosity, but without show of eagerness.

"Well, it's a joke," said Miss French.

"Is it? How?"

"Fanny's that mad about it! She'd got it into her silly noddle that Horace Lord would drop in for a fortune at once. As it is, he gets nothing at all for two years, except what the Barmbys choose to give him. And if he marries before he's four-and-twenty, he loses everything—every cent!"

Crewe whistled a bar of a street-melody, then burst into laughter.

"That's how the old joker has done them, is it? Quite right too. The lad doesn't know his own mind yet. Let Fanny wait if she really wants him—and if she can keep hold of him. But what are the figures?"

"Nothing startling. Of course I don't know

all the ins and outs of it, but Horace Lord will get seven thousand pounds, and a sixth share in the piano business. Old Barmby and his son are trustees. They may let Horace have just what they think fit during the next two years. If he wants money to go into business with, they may advance what they like. But for two years he's simply in their hands, to be looked after. And if he marries—pop goes the weasel!"

"And Miss Lord?" asked Crewe carelessly.

Beatrice pointed a finger at him.

"You want to know badly, don't you? Well, it's pretty much the same as the other. To begin with, if she marries before the age of six-and-twenty, she gets nothing whatever. If she doesn't marry, there's two hundred a year to live on and to keep up the house.—Oh, I was forgetting; she must not only keep single to twenty-six, but continue to live where she does now, with that old servant of theirs for companion. At six-and-twenty she takes the same as her brother' about seven thousand, and a sixth share in Lord and Barmby."

Again Crewe whistled.

"That's about three years still to live in Grove Lane," he said thoughtfully. "Well, the old joker has pinned them, and no mistake. I thought he had more to leave."

"Of course you did," remarked Beatrice significantly.

"Look here, old fellow, don't talk to me like that," he replied good-humouredly, but with a reproof not to be mistaken. "I thought nothing about it in the way that *you* mean. But it isn't much, after living as he has done. I suppose you don't know how the money lies?"

"I have it all from Fanny, and it's a wonder she remembered as much as she did."

"Oh, Fanny's pretty smart in £. s. d. But did she say what becomes of the money if either of them break the terms?"

"Goes to a girl's orphanage, somewhere in the old man's country. But there's more than I've accounted for yet. Young Barmby's sisters get legacies—a hundred and fifty apiece. And, last of all, the old servant has an annuity of two hundred.

He made her a sort of housekeeper not long ago, H. L. says; thought no end of her."

"Don't know anything about her," said Crewe absently. "I should like to know the business details. What arrangement was made, I wonder, when he took Barmby into partnership?"

"I shouldn't be surprised if he simply gave him a share. Old Barmby and Lord were great chums. Then, you see, Samuel Barmby has a third of his profits to pay over, eventually."

Beatrice went on to speak of the mysterious Mrs. Damerel, concerning whom she had heard from Fanny. The man of business gave particular ear to this story, and asked many questions. Of a sudden, as if dismissing matters which hardly concerned him, he said mirthfully:

"You've heard about the row at Lillie Bridge yesterday?"

"I saw something about it in the paper."

"Well, I was there. Pure chance; haven't been at that kind of place for a year and more. It was a match for the Sprint Championship and a hundred pounds. Timed for six o'clock, but at a

quarter past the chaps hadn't come forward. I heard men talking, and guessed there was something wrong; they thought it a put-up job. When it got round that there'd be no race, the excitement broke out, and then—I'd have given something for you to see it! First of all there was a rush for the gate-money; a shilling a piece, you know, we'd all paid. There were a whole lot of North-of-England chaps, fellow countrymen of mine, and I heard some of them begin to send up a roar that sounded dangerous. I was tumbling along with the crowd, quite ready for a scrimmage—I rather enjoy a fight now and then,—and all at once some chap sang out just in front, 'Let's burst up the blooming show!'—only he used a stronger word. And a lot of us yelled hooray, and to it we went. I don't mean I had a hand in the pillaging and smashing,—it wouldn't have done for a man just starting in business to be up at the police-court,—but I looked on and laughed—laughed till I could hardly stand! They set to work on the refreshment place. It was a scene if you like! Fellows knocking off the heads of bottles, and

drinking all they could, then pouring the rest on the ground. Glasses and decanters flying right and left,—sandwiches and buns, and I don't know what, pelting about. They splintered all the small wood they could lay their hands on, and set fire to it, and before you could say Jack Robinson the whole place was blazing. The bobbies got it pretty warm—bottles and stones and logs of wood; I saw one poor chap with the side of his face cut clean open. It does one good, a real stirring-up like that; I feel better to-day than for the last month. And the swearing that went on! It's a long time since I heard such downright, hearty, solid swearing. There was one chap I kept near, and he swore for a full hour without stopping, except when he had a bottle at his mouth; he only stopped when he was speechless with liquor."

"I wish I'd been there," said Miss French gaily. "It must have been no end of fun."

"A right down good spree. And it wasn't over till about eight o'clock. I stayed till the police had cleared the grounds, and then came home, laughing all the way. It did me good, I tell you!"

"Well, shall we go and see the lawyer?" suggested Beatrice.

"Right you are.—Have a drink first? Nice quiet place round in Fleet Street—glass of wine. No? As you please, old chum.—Think this shop 'll do, don't you? You must come round when it's finished. But I daresay you'll be here many a time—on biz."

"Oh, I daresay."

And as they went down the stairs, Crewe laughed again at his recollections of yesterday's sport.

VI

USTS of an October evening swept about the quare of the old Inn, and made rushes at the indows; all the more cosy seemed it here in 'arrant's room, where a big fire, fed into smokeless lacidity, purred and crackled. Pipe in mouth, 'arrant lay back in his big chair, gracefully idolent as ever. Opposite him, lamp-light illumiating her face on one side, and fire-gloom on he other, Nancy turned over an illustrated volume, er husband's gift to-day. Many were the presents e had bestowed upon her, costly some of them, ll flattering the recipient by a presumption of aste and intelligence.

She had been here since early in the afternoon, ; was now near seven o'clock.

Nancy looked at the pictures, but inattentively, er brows slightly knitted, and her lips often on ie point of speech that concerned some other

matter. Since the summer holiday she had grown a trifle thinner in face; her beauty was no longer allied with perfect health; a heaviness appeared on her eyelids. Of course she wore the garb of mourning, and its effect was to emphasise the maturing change manifest in her features.

For several minutes there had passed no word; but Tarrant's face, no less than his companion's, signalled discussion in suspense. No unfriendly discussion, yet one that excited emotional activity in both of them. The young man, his pipe-hand falling to his knee, first broke silence.

"I look at it in this way. We ought to regard ourselves as married people living under exceptionally favourable circumstances. One has to bear in mind the brutal fact that man and wife, as a rule, see a great deal too much of each other —thence most of the ills of married life: squabblings, discontents, small or great disgusts, leading often enough to *alti guaï*. People get to think themselves victims of incompatibility, when they are merely suffering from a foolish custom—the habit of being perpetually together. In fact, it's

an immoral custom. What does immorality mean but anything that tends to kill love, to harden hearts? The common practice of man and wife occupying the same room is monstrous, gross; it's astounding that women of any sensitiveness endure it. In fact, their sensitiveness is destroyed. Even an ordinary honeymoon generally ends in quarrel—as it certainly ought to. You and I escape all that. Each of us lives a separate life, with the result that we like each other better as time goes on; I speak for myself, at all events. I look forward to our meetings. I open the door to you with as fresh a feeling of pleasure as when you came first. If we had been ceaselessly together day and night—well, you know the result as well as I do."

He spoke with indulgent gravity, in the tone of kindness to which his voice was naturally attuned. And Nancy's reply, though it expressed a stronger feeling, struck the same harmonious note.

"I can agree with all that. But it applies to people married in the ordinary way. I was speaking of ourselves, placed as we are."

"I don't pretend to like the concealment," said Tarrant. "For one thing, there's a suggestion of dishonour about it. We've gone over all that——"

"Oh, I don't mean that for a moment. It isn't really dishonourable. My father could never have objected to *you* for my husband. He only wanted to guard me—Mary says so, and he told her everything. He thought me a silly, flighty girl, and was afraid I should be trapped for the sake of my money. I wish—oh how I wish I had had the courage to tell him! He would have seen you, and liked and trusted you—how could he help?"

"It might have been better—but who knows whether he would have seen me with your eyes, Nancy?"

"Yes, yes. But I was going to say——"

She hesitated.

"Say on."

"There are so many difficulties before us, dear."

"Not if we continue to think of each other as we do now. Do you mean it might be discovered?"

"Yes, through no fault of ours."

She hesitated again.

"Quite sure you haven't told anybody?"

"No one."

Tarrant had a doubt on this point. He strongly suspected that Jessica Morgan knew the truth, but he shrank from pressing Nancy to an avowal of repeated falsehood.

"Then it's very unlikely we should be found out. Who would dream of tracking you here, for instance? And suppose we were seen together in the street or in the country, who would suspect anything more than love-making? and that is not forbidden you."

"No. But——"

"But?"

"But suppose I——"

She rose, crossed to him, seated herself on his knee and put an arm about his neck. Before she had spoken another word, Tarrant understood; the smile on his face lost its spontaneity; a bitter taste seemed to distort his lips.

"You think—you are afraid——"

He heard a monosyllable, and sat silent. This indeed had not entered into his calculations; but why not? He could hardly say; he had ignored the not unimportant detail, as it lurked among possibilities. Perhaps had willingly ignored it, as introducing a complication oppressive to his indolence, to his hodiernal philosophy. And now he arraigned mother-nature, the very divinity whom hitherto he had called upon to justify him. All at once he grew cold to Nancy. The lulled objections to matrimony awoke in him again; again he felt that he had made a fool of himself. Nancy was better than he had thought; he either loved her, or felt something towards her, not easily distinguishable from love. His inferior she remained, but not in the sense he had formerly attributed to the word. Her mind and heart excelled the idle conception he had formed of them. But Nancy was not his wife, as the world understands that relation; merely his mistress, and as a mistress he found her charming, lovable. What she now hinted at, would shatter the situation. Tarrant thought not of the peril to her material

rospects; on that score he was indifferent, save in o far as Mr. Lord's will helped to maintain their utual independence. But he feared for his liberty, n the first place, and in the second, abhorred the hange that must come over Nancy herself. Nancy mother—he repelled the image, as though it legraded her.

Delicacy, however, constrained him to a disguise f these emotions. He recognised the human entiments that should have weighed with him; ike a man of cultivated intelligence, he admitted heir force, their beauty. None the less, a syllable n Nancy's lips had arrested the current of his eelings, and made him wish again that he had been either more or less a man of honour down at Teignmouth.

"And yet," he said to himself, "could I have esisted an appeal for marriage *now?* That comes f being so confoundedly humane. It's a marvel hat I didn't find myself married to some sheer demirep long ago."

Nancy was speaking.

"Will it make you love me less?"

"I have always refused to prophesy about love," he answered, with forced playfulness.

"But you wouldn't—you wouldn't?"

"We should find ourselves in a very awkward position."

"I know," said Nancy hurriedly. "I can't see what would be done. But you seem colder to me all at once, Lionel. Surely it oughtn't to—to turn you away from me. Perhaps I am mistaken."

This referred to the alarming possibility, and Tarrant caught at hope. Yes, she might be mistaken; they wouldn't talk about it; he shook it away.

"Let me fill my pipe again. Yes, you can do it for me. That reminds me of a story Harvey Munden tells. A man he knew, a doctor, got married, and there was nothing his wife wouldn't do for him. As he sat with her one evening, smoking, a patient called him into the consulting-room. He had only just lighted a fresh pipe, and laid it down regretfully. 'I'll keep it in for you,' said his wife. And she did so, with dainty and fearful puffs, at long intervals. But the doctor

was detained, and when he came back—well, the poor wife had succumbed to her devotion. She never kept in his pipe again."

Nancy tried to laugh. She was in her own chair again, and sat resting her cheek upon her hand, gazing at the fire.

"How is it, Lionel, that no one ever knocks at your door when I'm here."

"Oh, very simple. I sport the oak—as you know."

"But don't you think some friend of yours might see a light in your window, and come up?"

"If so, *il respecte la consigne.*"

"No, no; I don't like you when you begin to use French words. I think it reminds me of once when you did it a long time ago,—and I thought you—never mind."

Tarrant laughed.

"Weren't they strange—those meetings of ours at Champion Hill? What did you think me? Arrogant? Insolent? That is my tendency with strangers, I admit."

"But I was asking you a question," said Nancy. "You mean that no one would knock, if he saw

your outer door closed. But what would they think?"

"No doubt—that I was working. I am supposed to be secretly engaged on some immortal composition."

Nancy pondered.

"I do hope no one that knows you will ever see me coming or going."

"What could it matter? They wouldn't know who you were."

"But to have such things thought. I should feel it just as if they knew me. I believe I could never come again."

"Why, what's the matter with you?" Tarrant asked. "You have tears in your eyes. You're not well to-day." He checked himself on an unwelcome thought, and proceeded more carelessly. "Do you suppose for a moment that any friend of mine is ass enough to think with condemnation of a girl who should come to my rooms—whatever the circumstances? You must get rid of that provincialism—let us call it Camberwellism."

"They wouldn't think it any harm—even if——?"

"My dear girl, we have outgrown those ancestral prejudices." Tarrant's humour never quite deserted him, least of all when he echoed the talk of his world; but his listener kept a grave face. "We have nothing to do with Mrs. Grundy's morals."

"But you believe in a morality of some kind?" she pursued with diffidence. "You used the word 'immoral' just now."

Nancy felt no consciousness of the gulf that yawned between herself as she spoke now and the old self which had claimed "superiority." Her mind was so completely unsettled that she never tried to connect its present state with its earlier phases. For the most part, her sensations and her reflections were concerned with the crude elements of life; the exceptional moments she spent in a world of vague joys and fears, wherein thought, properly speaking, had no share. Before she could outlive the shock of passion which seemed at once to destroy and to re-create her, she was confronted with the second supreme crisis of woman's existence,—its natural effects complicated with the trials of her peculiar position. Tarrant's

reception of her disclosure came as a new disturbance—she felt bewildered and helpless.

He, preoccupied with the anxiety he affected to dismiss, had no inclination to debate ethical problems. For a while he talked jestingly, and at length fell into a mood of silence. Nancy did not stay much longer; they parted without mention of the subject uppermost in their thoughts.

They had no stated times of meeting. Tarrant sent an invitation whenever it pleased him. When the next arrived, in about a week, Nancy made reply that she did not feel well enough to leave home. It was the briefest letter Tarrant had yet received from her, and the least affectionate. He kept silence for a few days, and wrote again. This time Nancy responded as usual, and came.

To the involuntary question in his eyes, hers answered unmistakably. For the first few minutes they said very little to each other. Tarrant was struggling with repulsions and solicitudes of which he felt more than half ashamed; Nancy, reticent for many reasons, not the least of them a resentful pride, which for the moment overcame her fondness,

endeavoured to speak of trivial things. They kept apart, and at length the embarrassment of the situation held them both mute.

With a nervous movement, the young man pushed forward the chair on which Nancy usually sat.

"I see that you don't look well."

Nancy turned to the window. She had unbuttoned her jacket, and taken off her gloves, but went no further in the process of preparing herself for the ordinary stay of some hours.

"Did something in my letter displease you?" inquired her husband.

"You mean—because I didn't come? No; I really didn't feel well enough."

Tarrant hesitated, but the softer feeling prevailed with him. He helped to remove her jacket, seated her by the fire, and led her to talk.

"So there's no doubt of it?"

Her silence made answer.

"Then of course there's just as little doubt as to what we must do."

His voice had not a convincing sincerity; he waited for the reply.

"You mean that we can't keep the secret?"

"How is it possible?"

"But you are vexed about it. You don't speak to me as you used to. I don't think you ever will again."

"It will make no change in *me*," said Tarrant, with resolute good humour. "All I want to be sure of is that you are quite prepared for the change in your prospects."

"Are *you*, dear?"

Her tone and look deprived the inquiry of unpleasant implication. He answered her with a laugh.

"You know exactly how I regard it. In one way I should feel relief. Of course I don't like the thought that I shall have caused you to suffer such a loss."

"I should never have that thought. But are you quite sure about the result to yourself? You remember saying that you couldn't be certain how——"

"How it will be taken at Champion Hill? I was going to tell you the latest report from there. It is very doubtful whether I should ever have to break the news."

They did not look at each other.

"Everything, in that quarter, must be long since settled. Pray remember that I have no vast expectations. Quite certainly, it won't be a large fortune; very likely not more than your own. But enough to live on, no doubt. I know the value of money—no man better. It would be pleasant enough to play with thousands a year. But I don't grumble so long as I have a competency."

Nancy meditated, and sighed.

"Oh, it's a pity. Father never meant me to be penniless if I married wisely."

"I suppose not."

"Of course not!"

They both meditated.

"It wouldn't be possible—would it?"

"Why," he answered with a laugh, "last time you were here you spoke in quite the other way. You were utterly miserable at the thought of living through it alone."

"Yes—I don't know whether I could—even if——"

"What are you thinking of?"

"I've been talking with Mary," she replied,

after an uneasy pause. "She has lived with us so long; and since father's death it seems quite natural to make a friend of her. No one could be more devoted to me than she is. I believe there's nothing she wouldn't do. I believe I might trust her with any secret."

The obvious suggestion demanded thought.

"By-the-bye," said Tarrant, looking up, "have you seen your aunt again?"

Nancy's face changed to a cold expression.

"No. And I don't think I shall."

"Probably you were as little sympathetic to her as she to you."

"I don't like her," was the brief reply.

"I've had curious thoughts about that lady," said Tarrant, smiling. "The mystery, it seems to me, is by no means solved. You think she really *is* your aunt?"

"Impossible to doubt it. Any one could see her likeness to Horace at once."

"Ah, you didn't mention that. I had a fear that she might be simply an adventuress, with an eye to your brother's money."

"She is what she says, I'm sure. But I shall never ask her to come and see me again, and I don't think she'll want to. That would be fortunate if—if we wished——"

Tarrant nodded. At the same moment they heard a sound that startled them.

"That's a knock at the door," said Nancy, rising as if to escape.

"So it is. Banging with a stick. Let him bang. It must be a stranger, or he'd respect the oak."

They sat listening. The knock sounded again, loud and prolonged. Tarrant joked about it; but a third time came the summons.

"I may as well go and see who it is."

"Oh—you won't let any one——"

"Of course not. Sit quietly."

He went out, closing the room-door behind him, and opened the heavy door which should have ensured his privacy. For five minutes he was absent, then returned with a face portending news.

"It was Vawdrey. He knew my habit of sporting the oak, and wouldn't go away till he had made sure. My grandmother is dying. They

telegraphed to Vawdrey in the City, and he came here at once to tell me. I must go. Perhaps I shall be too late."

"What did he think of your keeping him outside?"

"I made some sort of excuse. He's a good-natured fellow; it didn't matter. Stay a little after I'm gone; stay as long as you like, in fact. You can pull to the inner door when you go."

"What did the telegram say?"

"'Mrs. Tarrant sinking. Come immediately.' Of course we expected it. It's raining hard: wait and see if it stops; you must take care of yourself."

For this, Nancy was not slow in exhibiting her gratitude, which served as mask of the pleasure she could not decently betray. When her husband had hastened off, she sat for a few minutes in thought; then, alone here for the first time, she began to walk about the rooms, and to make herself more intimately acquainted with their contents.

VII

WHILST she was thus occupied, darkness came on. She did not care to light the lamp, so made herself ready, and stole forth.

The rain had ceased. Walking alone at night was a pleasure in which she now indulged herself pretty frequently; at such times Mary Woodruff believed her in the company of Miss Morgan. The marked sobriety of her demeanour since Mr. Lord's death, and the friendliness, even the affection, she evinced in their common life at home, had set Mary's mind at ease concerning her. No murmur at her father's will had escaped Nancy, in this respect very unlike her brother, who, when grief was forgotten, declared himself ill-used; she seemed perfectly content with the conditions laid upon her, and the sincerity of her mourning could not be doubted. Anxious to conciliate the girl in every honest way, Mary behaved to her with the

same external respect as ever, and without a hint of express guardianship. The two were on excellent terms. It seemed likely that before long they would have the house to themselves; already Horace had spoken of taking lodgings in a part of London more congruous with the social aspirations encouraged by his aunt, Mrs. Damerel.

From Chancery Lane she passed into Fleet Street, and sauntered along with observation of shop-windows. She was unspeakably relieved by the events of the afternoon; it would now depend upon her own choice whether she preserved her secret, or declared herself a married woman. Her husband had proved himself generous as well as loving; yes, she repeated to herself, generous and loving; her fears and suspicions had been baseless. Mrs. Tarrant's death freed them from all sordid considerations. A short time, perhaps a day or two, might put an end to irregularities, and enable her to hold up her head once more.

Feeling hungry, she entered a restaurant, and dined. Not carelessly, but with fastidious choice

of viands. This was enjoyable; she began to look more like herself of a few months ago.

She would return to Camberwell by train from Ludgate Hill. At the circus, crowding traffic held her back for a minute or two; just as she ran forward, a familiar voice caused her to stop again. She became flurried, lost her head, stood still amid a tumult of omnibuses, cabs and carts; but a hand grasped her by the arm, and led her safely to the opposite pavement.

"What do you mean by shouting at me in the street?" were her first words.

The person addressed was Luckworth Crewe; he had by no means anticipated such wrathful greeting, and stood in confusion.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Lord. I didn't think I shouted. I only meant to call your attention."

"Why should you call my attention?" Her cheeks were flushed with anger; she regarded him as though he were a stranger guilty of mere insolence. "I don't wish to speak to you."

With astonishment, Crewe found himself alone. But a rebuff such as this, so irrational as he

thought it, so entirely out of keeping with Miss Lord's behaviour, he could by no means accept. Nancy was walking towards the railway-station; he followed. He watched her as she took a ticket, then put himself in her way, with all the humility of countenance he could command.

"I'm so sorry I offended you. It wasn't the right thing to do; I ought to have waited till you were across. I'm a blundering sort of fellow in those things. Do let me beg your pardon, and forgive me."

She was calmer now, though still tremulous. But for the attack of nervousness, she would have met Crewe with nothing worse than a slight reserve, to mark a change in their relations. Very soon after her father's death he had written a becoming letter, though it smacked of commercial phraseology. To the hope expressed in it, that he might be allowed to call upon her in a few weeks' time, Nancy made no reply. A fortnight later he wrote again, this time reminding her, with modest propriety, of what had occurred between them before she left town in August. Nancy responded, and

in grave, friendly language, begged him to think of her no more; he must not base the slightest hope upon anything she might have said. To her surprise, Crewe held his peace, and she saw him now for the first time since their ascent of the Monument.

"I'm ashamed that I lost my temper, Mr. Crewe. I am in a hurry to get home."

In the booking-office at Ludgate Hill it is not easy to detain, by chivalrous discourse, a lady bent on escaping; but Crewe attempted it. He subdued his voice, spoke rapidly and with emotion, implored that he might be heard for a moment. Would she not permit him to call upon her? He had waited, respecting her seclusion. He asked for nothing whatever but permission to call, as any acquaintance might.

"Have you heard I have opened an office in Farringdon Street? I should so like to tell you all about it—what I'm doing——'

"No one calls to see me," said Nancy, with firmness. "I wish to live quite alone. I'm very sorry to seem unfriendly."

"Is it anything I've done?"

"No—nothing whatever. I assure you, nothing. Let us say good-bye; I can't stop another moment."

They shook hands and so parted.

"You're back early," said Mary, when Nancy entered the drawing-room.

"Yes. I left Jessica to her books sooner than usual. The examination draws near."

Quiet, sad, diligent ever, Mary kept unchanged the old domestic routine. There was the same perfect order, the same wholesome economy, as when she worked under the master's eyes. Nancy had nothing to do but enjoy the admirable care with which she was surrounded; she took it all as a matter of course, never having considered the difference between her own home and those of her acquaintances.

Horace had dined, and was gone out again. They talked of him; Mary said that he had spoken of moving into lodgings very soon.

"Of course he doesn't tell us everything," said Nancy. "I feel pretty sure that he's going to leave the office, but how he means to live I don't under-

stand. Perhaps Mrs. Damerel will give him money, or lend it him. I only hope she may break it off between him and Fanny."

"Hasn't he told you that Fanny is often with Mrs. Damerel?"

"With her?" Nancy exclaimed. "He never said a word of it to me."

"He said so to me this evening, and laughed when I looked surprised."

"Well then, I don't pretend to understand what's going on. We can't do anything."

About nine o'clock the servant entered the room, bringing Miss Lord a note, which had just been left by a cab-driver. Nancy, seeing that the address was in Tarrant's hand, opened it with a flutter of joy; such a proceeding as this, openly sending a note by a messenger, could only mean that her husband no longer cared to preserve secrecy. To her astonishment, the envelope contained but a hurried line.

"Not a word yet to any one. Without fail, come to-morrow afternoon, at four."

With what show of calmness she could command, she looked up at her companion.

"The idea of his sending in this way! It's that Mr. Crewe I've told you of. I met him as I was coming home, and had to speak to him rather sharply to get rid of him. Here comes his apology, foolish man!"

Living in perpetual falsehood, Nancy felt no shame at a fiction such as this. Mere truth-telling had never seemed to her a weighty matter of the law. And she was now grown expert in lies. But Tarrant's message disturbed her gravely. Something unforeseen must have happened—something, perhaps, calamitous. She passed a miserable night.

When she ascended the stairs at Staple Inn, next afternoon, it wanted ten minutes to four. As usual at her coming, the outer door stood open, exposing the door with the knocker. She had just raised her hand, when, with a sound of voices from inside, the door opened, and Tarrant appeared in company with a stranger. Terror-stricken, she stepped back. Tarrant, after a glance, paid no attention to her.

"All right," he was saying to his friend, "I shall see you in a day or two. Good-bye, old man."

The stranger had observed Nancy, but withheld his eyes from her, and quickly vanished down the stairs.

"Who was that?" she whispered.

"I told you four o'clock."

"It is four."

"No—ten minutes to at least. It doesn't matter, but if you had been punctual you wouldn't have had a fright."

Nancy had dropped into a chair, white and shaking. Tarrant's voice, abruptly reproachful, affected her scarcely less than the preceding shock. In the struggle to recover herself she sobbed and choked, and at length burst into tears. Tarrant spoke impatiently.

"What's the matter? Surely you are not so childish"——

She stood up, and went into the bedroom, where she remained for several minutes, returning at length without her jacket, but with her hat still on.

"I couldn't help it; and you shouldn't speak to me in that way. I have felt ill all the morning."

Looking at her, the young man said to himself, that love was one thing, wedded life another. He could make allowance for Nancy's weakness —but it was beyond his power to summon the old warmth and tenderness. If henceforth he loved her, it must be with husband's love—a phrase which signified to him something as distinct as possible from the ardour he had known; a moral attachment instead of a passionate desire.

And there was another reason for his intolerant mood.

"You hadn't spoken to any one before you got my note?"

"No.—Why are you treating me like this? Are you ashamed that your friend saw me?"

"Ashamed? not at all."

"Who did he think I was?"

"I don't know. He doesn't know anything about you, at all events. As you may guess, I have something not very pleasant to tell. I didn't mean to be unkind; it was only the surprise at seeing you when I opened the door. I had calculated the exact time. But never mind. You look

cold; warm yourself at the fire. You shall drink a glass of wine; it will put your nerves right again."

"No, I want nothing. Tell me at once what it is."

But Tarrant quietly brought a bottle and glass from his cupboard. Nancy again refused, pettishly.

"Until you have drunk," he said, with a smile of self-will, "I shall tell you nothing."

"I don't know what I've done to make you like this."

Her sobs and tears returned. After a moment of impatience, Tarrant went up to her with the glass, laid a hand upon her shoulder, and kissed her.

"Now, come, be reasonable. We have uncommonly serious things to talk about."

"What did your friend think of me?"

"That you were one of the prettiest girls he had ever been privileged to see, and that I was an enviable fellow to have such a visitor. There now, another sip, and let us have some colour back into your cheeks. There's bad news, Nancy; confoundedly bad news, dear girl. My grandmother was dead when I got there. Well, the foolish old woman has been muddling her affairs for a long

time, speculating here and there without taking any one's advice, and so on; and the result is that she leaves nothing at all."

Nancy was mute.

"Less than nothing, indeed. She owed a few hundreds that she had no means of paying. The joke of the thing is, that she has left an elaborate will, with legacies to half-a-dozen people, myself first of all. If she had been so good as to die two years ago, I should have come in for a thousand a year or so. No one suspected what was going on; she never allowed Vawdrey, the one man who could have been useful to her, to have an inkling of the affair. An advertising broker got her in his clutches. Vawdrey's lawyer has been going through her papers, and finds everything quite intelligible. The money has gone in lumps, good after bad. Swindling, of course, but perfectly legal swindling, nothing to be done about it. A minute or two before her death she gasped out some words of revelation to the nurse, enough to set Vawdrey on the track, when he was told."

Still the listener said nothing.

"Well, I had a talk with Vawdrey. He's a blackguard, but not a bad fellow. Wished he could help me, but didn't quite see how, unless I would go into business. However, he had a suggestion to make."

For Nancy, the pause was charged with apprehensions. She seemed to discover in her husband's face a purpose which he knew would excite her resistance.

"He and I have often talked about my friend Sutherland, in the Bahamas, and Vawdrey has an idea that there'll be a profitable opening in that quarter, before long. Sutherland has written to me lately that he thinks of bestirring himself in the projects I've told you about; he has got the old man's consent to borrow money on the property. Now Vawdrey, naturally enough, would like Sutherland to join him in starting a company; the thoughts of such men run only on companies. So he offers, if I will go out to the Bahamas for a month or two, and look about me, and put myself in a position to make some kind of report—he offers to pay my expenses. Of course if the idea came

to anything, and a company got floated, I should have shares."

Again he paused. The listener had wide, miserable eyes.

"Well, I told him at once that I would accept the proposal. I have no right to refuse. All I possess in the world, at this moment, is about sixty pounds. If I sold all my books and furniture, they might bring another sixty or so. What, then, is to become of me? I must set to work at something, and here's the first work that comes to hand. But," his voice softened, "this puts us face to face with a very grave question; doesn't it? Are we to relinquish *your* money, and be both of us penniless? Or is there any possibility of saving it?"

"How *can* we? How could the secret be kept?"

Voice and countenance joined in utter dismay.

"It doesn't seem to me," said Tarrant slowly, "a downright impossibility. It *might* be managed, with the help of your friend Mary, and granting that you yourself have the courage. But"—he made a large gesture—"of course I can't exact any such thing of you. It must seem practicable to you yourself."

"What are we to do if my money is lost?"

"Don't say *we*." He smiled generously, perhaps too generously. "A man must support his wife. I shall arrange it somehow, of course, so that *you* have no anxiety. But——"

His voice dropped.

"Lionel!" She sprang up and approached him as he stood by the fireplace. "You won't leave me, dear? How can you think of going so far away—for months—and leaving me as I am now? Oh, you won't leave me!"

He arched his eyebrows, and smiled gently.

"If that's how you look at it—well, I must stay."

"You can do something here," Nancy continued, with rapid pleading. "You can write for the papers. You always said you could—yes, you did say so. We don't need very much to live upon—at first. I shall be content——"

"A moment. You mean that the money must be abandoned."

She had meant it, but under his look her confused thoughts took a new direction.

"No. We needn't lose it. Only stay near me,

and I will keep the secret, through everything. You will only need, then, just to support yourself, and that is so easy. I will tell Mary how it is. She can be trusted, I am sure she can. She would do anything for me. She knows that father was not thinking of a man such as you. It would be cruelly wrong if I lost everything. I will tell her, and she will help me. Scarcely any one comes to the house, as it is; and I will pretend to have bad health, and shut myself up. And then, when the time comes, Mary will go away with me, and—and the child shall be taken care of by some people we can trust to be kind to it. Horace is going to live in lodgings; and Mrs. Damerel, I am sure, won't come to see me again; and I can get rid of other people. The Barmbys shall think I am sulking about the will; I'm sure they think already that I dislike them because of it. Let them think it; I will refuse, presently, to see them at all. It's only a few months. If I tell people I'm not well, nobody will feel surprised if I go away for a month or two—now—soon. Mary would go with me, of course. I might go for December and January.

Father didn't mean I was never to have change of air. Then there would be February and March at home. And then I might go away again till near the end of May. I'm sure we can manage it."

She stopped, breathless. Tarrant, who had listened with averted face, turned and spoke judicially.

"There's one thing you're forgetting, Nancy. Do you propose that we shall never acknowledge the child? Remember that even if you were bold enough, after our second marriage, to acknowledge it in the face of scandal—that wouldn't be safe. Any one, if suspicion is aroused, can find out when we were actually married."

"We can't think of that. The child may not live."

Tarrant moved, and the movement startled Nancy. It meant that she had pained him, perhaps made him think of her with repugnance.

"I hardly know what I am saying. You know I don't wish that. But all I can think of now is to keep you near me. I can't bear to be separated from you. I love you so much more than you love me."

"Let me just tell you what I had in mind, Nancy.

Supposing the secret can be kept, we must eventually live abroad, that is to say, if our child is not to grow up a stranger to us, which neither you nor I could wish. Now, at Nassau, the capital of the Bahamas, a lot of Americans always spend the winter. If I made acquaintances among them, it might be a very useful step, it would be preparing for the future."

To Nancy this sounded far from convincing. She argued against it in a perfectly natural way, and as any one else would have done who knew Tarrant. More than once he had declared to her, that he would rather die than drag out his life in one of the new countries, that he could not breathe in an atmosphere of commercialism unrelieved by historic associations. Nancy urged that it would be better to make a home on the continent, whither they could go, at any moment, without a sense of exile.

"So it comes to this," he interrupted, with an air of resignation. "I must refuse Vawdrey's offer, and, in doing so, refuse an excellent chance of providing for our future, *if*—what is by no means improbable—the secret should be discovered. I

must turn to journalism, or be a clerk. Well and good. My wife decrees it."

And he began to hum an air, as if the matter were dismissed. There was a long silence.

"How long would you be away?" murmured Nancy, at length.

"I suppose two months at most."

"November—December."

"The second of those months you might be spending, as you said, away from London. Down in Devon, perhaps. I can't blame your thoughts about it; but it seems—doesn't it?—a trifle inconsiderate, when you think what may result from my journey."

"Would you promise me to be back by the end of the year?"

"Not promise, Nancy. But do my best. Letters take fourteen days, that's all. You should hear by every mail."

"Why not promise?"

"Because I can't foresee how much I may have to do there, and how long it will take me. But you may be very sure that Vawdrey won't pay

expenses for longer than he can help. It has occurred to me that I might get materials for some magazine articles. That would help to float me with the editors, you know, if it's necessary."

Nancy sighed.

"If I consented—if I did my best not to stand in your way—would you love me better when you came back?"

The answer was a pleased laugh.

"Why, there," he cried, "you've given in a nutshell the whole duty of a wife who wishes to be loved!"

Nancy tried to laugh with him.

VIII

HE must be a strong man whom the sudden stare of Penury does not daunt and, in some measure, debase. Tarrant, whatever the possibilities of his nature, had fallen under a spell of indolent security, which declared its power only when he came face to face with the demand for vigorous action. The moment found him a sheer poltroon. "What! Is it possible that I—*I*—am henceforth penniless? I, to whom the gods were so gracious? I, without warning, flung from sheltered comfort on to the bare road side, where I must either toil or beg?" The thing seemed unintelligible. He had never imagined such ruin of his hopes.

For the first time, he turned anxious thoughts upon the money to which his wife was—would be—might be—entitled. He computed the chances of success in the deception he and she were practising, and knew with shame that he must henceforth be

party to a vulgar fraud. Could Nancy be trusted to carry through this elaborate imposition—difficult for the strongest-minded woman? Was it not a certainty that some negligence, or some accident, must disclose her secret? Then had he a wife and child upon his hands, to support even as common men support wife and child, by incessant labour. The prospect chilled him.

If he went to the West Indies, his absence would heighten the probability of Nancy's detection. Yet he desired to escape from her. Not to abandon her; of that thought he was incapable; but to escape the duty—repulsive to his imagination—of encouraging her through the various stages of their fraud. From the other side of the Atlantic he would write affectionate, consolatory letters; face to face with her, could he support the show of tenderness, go through an endless series of emotional interviews, always reminding himself that the end in view was hard cash? Not for love's sake; he loved her less than before she proved herself his wife in earnest. Veritable love—no man knew better—would have impelled him to save himself and her from a degrading position.

Was he committing himself to a criminality which the law would visit? Hardly that—until he entered into possession of money fraudulently obtained.

In miserable night-watchings, he fell to the most sordid calculations. Supposing their plot revealed, would Nancy in fact be left without resources? Surely not,—with her brother, her aunt, her life-long friends the Barmbys, to take thought for her. She could not suffer extremities. And upon this he blushed relief.

Better to make up his mind that the secret must inevitably out. For the moment, Nancy believed she had resigned herself to his departure, and that she had strength to go through with the long ordeal. But a woman in her situation cannot be depended upon to pursue a consistent course. It is Nature's ordinance that motherhood shall be attained through phases of mental disturbance, which leave the sufferer scarce a pretence of responsibility. Nancy would play strange pranks, by which, assuredly, he would be driven to exasperation if they passed under his eyes. He had no mind to be called father; perhaps

even his humanity might fail under the test to which, as a lover, he had given scarce a casual thought. By removing himself, and awaiting the issue afar off, he gained time and opportunity for reflection. Of course his wife could not come to want; that, after all, was the one clearly comforting thought. Her old servant would take good care of her, happen what might.

He must taste of liberty again before sinking into the humdrum of married life. The thought of an ocean voyage, of the new life amid tropic splendours, excited his imagination all the more because it blended with the thought of recovered freedom. Marriage had come upon him with unfair abruptness; for such a change as that, even the ordinary bachelor demands a season preparative; much more, then, the young man who revelled in a philosophic sense of detachment, who wrote his motto "vixi hodie!" For marriage he was simply unfit; forced together, he and his wife would soon be mutually detestable. A temporary parting might mature in the hearts of both that affection of which the seed

was undeniably planted. With passion they had done; the enduring tenderness of a reasonable love must now unite them, were they to be united at all. And to give such love a chance of growing in him, Tarrant felt that he must lose sight of Nancy until her child was born.

Yes, it had begun already, the trial he dreaded. A letter from Nancy, written and posted only an hour or two after her return home—a long, distracted letter. Would he forgive her for seeming to be an obstacle in the way of what he had proposed? Would he promise her to be faithful? Would he——

He had hardly patience to read it through.

The next evening, on returning home about ten o'clock, he was startled by the sight of Nancy's figure at the foot of his staircase.

"What has happened?"

"Nothing—don't be frightened. But I wanted to see you to-night."

She gripped his hand.

"How long have you waited? What! Hours? But this is downright madness—such a night as

this! Couldn't you put a note for me in the letter-box?"

"Don't—don't speak so! I wanted to see you." She hurried her words, as if afraid he would refuse to listen. "I have told Mary—I wanted you to know——"

"Come in. But there's no fire, and you're chilled through. Do you want to be ill? What outrageous silliness!"

Her vitality was indeed at a low ebb, and reproaches made her weep. Tarrant half carried her up to his room, made a light, and fell to his knees at fire-building.

"Let me do it," Nancy exclaimed. "Let me wait upon you——"

"If you don't sit still and keep quiet, you'll make me angry in earnest."

"Then you're not *really* angry with me? I couldn't help it."

"No, I'm afraid you couldn't," Tarrant muttered cheerlessly.

"I wanted to tell you that Mary will be our friend. She was speechless with astonishment; at

first I didn't know what she would say; she looked at me as she had never looked before—as if she were the mistress, and I the servant. But see what I have come to; all I felt was a dread lest she should think it her duty to cast me off. I haven't a bit of pride left. I could have fallen on my knees before her; I almost did. But she was very good and kind and gentle at last. She'll do everything she can for me."

The fire in a blaze, Tarrant stood up and regarded it gloomily.

"Well, did she think it possible?" he asked at length.

"Yes, she did. She said it would be very difficult, but the secret might be kept—if I were strong enough. And I *am* strong enough—I *will* be——"

"It doesn't look like it," said Tarrant, taking the edge off his words with a smile.

"I won't come again in this way. Where have you been to-night?"

"Oh, with friends."

"Which friends? where?"

He moved impatiently.

"People you don't know, Nancy, and wouldn't care about if you did. Do you know what time it is?"

"Do tell me where you have been. It isn't prying into your affairs. Your friends ought to be mine; at least, I mean, I ought to know their names, and something about them. Suppose I were to tell you I had been spending the evening with friends——"

"My dear girl, I shouldn't ask a question, unless you invited it. However, it's better to tell you that I have been making arrangements to sublet these chambers. I can't afford to keep them, even if there were any use in it. Harvey Munden has introduced me to a man who is likely to relieve me of the burden. I shall warehouse my books and furniture——"

"Then you are going? Really going to leave England?"

He affected astonishment; in truth, nothing now could surprise him.

"But wasn't it all decided between us? Didn't you repeat it in your letter?"

"Yes—I know—but I didn't think it would come so soon."

"We won't talk about it to-night," said Tarrant firmly. "For one thing, there's no time. Come closer to the fire, and get warm through; then I must see you home."

Nancy hung her head. When, in a few moments, she looked up again, it was to say drily:

"There's no need for you to see me home."

"I'm going to, at all events."

"Why? You don't care much about me. I might as well be run over—or anything——"

To this remark no sort of answer was vouchsafed. Nancy sat with her feet on the fender, and Tarrant kept up a great blaze with chips, which sputtered out their moisture before they began to crackle. He and she both seemed intent on this process of combustion.

"Now you're quite warm," said the young man, as if speaking to a child, "and it's time to go."

Nancy rose obediently, gazed at him with dreaming eyes, and suffered herself to be led away by the arm. In Chancery Lane, Tarrant hailed a crawling

hansom. When they were driving rapidly southward, Nancy began to question him about the date of his departure; she learnt that he might be gone in less than a week.

"If you could behave quietly and sensibly, we would have an evening to make final arrangements."

"I can," she answered, with a calm that surprised him. "If you go without letting me see you again, I don't know what I might do. But I can be as sensible as you are, if I'm treated fairly."

He grasped her hand.

"Remember, dear girl, that I have a good deal to worry me just now. Do you suppose I leave you with a light heart?"

"If you can persuade me that you care——"

"I care a good deal more than I can easily say. Your position is a very hard one,—harder than mine. But I'm going away to work for your future. I see clearly that it's the best thing I could do. Whether Vawdrey's ideas come to anything or not, I shall make profit out of the journey; I mean to write,—I think it's all I can do to any purpose,—and the material I shall get together over there will give me

a start. Don't think I am cold-hearted because I talk in this way; if I broke down, so much the worse for both of us. The time has come for serious work."

"But we shan't lose my money. I've made up my mind we shan't."

"It's impossible for you to guard against every danger. We must be prepared for the worst, and that responsibility rests on me. Try and keep your mind at ease; whatever happens, to protect you is my duty, and I shall not fail in it."

Speaking thus, Tarrant felt the glow of virtue. His words were perfectly sincere, but had reference to a future which his thoughts left comfortably vague.

They were to meet again, probably for the definite parting, three days hence. Tarrant, whose desire for escape had now become incontrollable, used the intervening time in a rush of preparations. He did not debate with himself as to the length of his sojourn in the West Indies; that must be determined by circumstances. Explicitly he had avoided a promise on the subject. What money

he possessed he would take with him; it might be to his interest, for Nancy's likewise, to exceed the term of absence provided for in his stipulations with Mr. Vawdrey. But all he deliberately thought of was the getting away. Impatient with Nancy, because of the vagaries resultant from her mental and physical state, he himself exhibited a flagrant triumph of instinct over reason. Once in enjoyment of liberty, he would reflect, like a practical man, on the details of his position, review and recognise his obligations, pay his debt to honour; but liberty first of all. Not his the nature to accept bondage; it demoralised him, made him do and say things of which he was ashamed. Only let him taste the breezes of ocean, and the healthful spirit which is one with rectitude would again inspire him.

Much to his surprise, he neither saw nor heard from Nancy until the hour appointed. She came very punctually. On opening the door to her, with an air of resolute cheerfulness, he saw something in her face that removed the necessity for playing a part. It was the look which had so charmed him in their love-days, the indescribable look, characteristic

of Nancy, and of her alone; a gleam between smile and laughter, a glance mingling pride with submission, a silent note of personality which thrilled the senses and touched the heart.

"What now?" he asked, holding her hand and gazing at her. "Some good news?"

"None that I know of. How hot your room is! Why, you look glad to see me!"

"Was I ever anything else?"

She answered him with a smile.

"It's a very pleasant surprise," he continued, watching her as she threw off her out-door things. "I expected a doleful visage, eyes red with weeping."

"Did you? See how much a man thinks of himself! If you choose to go away, I choose to think as little of you as possible. That's common sense—isn't it?"

"I don't want you to cry about it."

"Oh yes, you do. It flatters you, and you like flattery. But I've been too obliging. I feel myself again, and there's no more flattery for you—till you come back. I don't ask you when that will be. I ask you nothing at all. I am independent of you."

Tarrant grew uneasy. He feared that this mood of jest would change only too suddenly, and her collapse into feminine feebleness be the more complete.

"Be as independent as you like," he said; "only keep your love for me."

"Oh, indeed! It's your experience, is it, that the two things can go together? That's the difference between man and woman, I suppose. I shall love you just as little as possible—and how little that will be, perhaps I had better not tell you."

Still he stood gazing at her.

"You look very beautiful to-day."

"I know. I saw it for myself before I left home. But we won't talk about that. When do you go?"

"My goods will be warehoused to-morrow, and the next day I go to Liverpool."

"I'm glad it's so soon. We shan't need to see each other again. Smoke your pipe. I'm going to make a cup of tea."

"Kiss me first. You forgot when you came in."

"You get no kiss by ordering it. Beg for it prettily, and we'll see."

"What does it all mean, Nancy? How can you have altered like this?"

"You prefer me as I was last time?"

"Not I, indeed. You make me feel that it will be very hard to leave you. I shall carry away a picture of you quite different from the dreary face that I had got to be afraid of."

Nancy laughed, and of a sudden held out her hands to him.

"Haven't I thought of that? These were the very words I hoped to hear from you. Now beg for a kiss, and you shall have one."

Never, perhaps, had they spent together so harmonious an evening. Nancy's tenderness took at length a graver turn, but she remained herself, face and speech untroubled by morbid influence.

"I won't see you again," she said, "because I mightn't be able to behave as I can to-day. To-day I am myself; for a long time I have been living I don't know how."

Tarrant murmured something about her state of health.

"Yes, I know all about that. A strange thought

came to me last night. When my father was alive I fretted because I couldn't be independent; I wanted to be quite free, to live as I chose; I looked forward to it as the one thing desirable. Now, I look back on that as a time of liberty. I am in bondage, now—threefold bondage."

"How threefold?"

"To you, because I love you, and couldn't cease loving you, however I tried. Then, to my father's will, which makes me live in hiding, as if I were a criminal. And then——"

"What other tyranny?"

"You mustn't expect all my love. Before long some one else will rule over me.—What an exchange I have made! And I was going to be so independent."

To the listener, her speech seemed to come from a maturer mind than she had hitherto revealed. But he suffered from the thought that this might be merely a pathological phase. In reminding him of her motherhood, she checked the flow of his emotion.

"You'll remember," Nancy went on, "that I'm

not enjoying myself whilst you are away. I don't want you to be unhappy—only to think of me, and keep in mind what I'm going through. If you do that, you won't be away from me longer than you can help."

It was said with unforced pathos, and Tarrant's better part made generous reply.

"If you find it too hard, dear, write to me, and tell me, and there shall be an end of it."

"Never. You think me wretchedly weak, but you shall see——"

"It's of your own free will you undertake it?"

"Yes, of my own free will," she answered firmly. "I won't come to you penniless. It isn't right I should do so. My father didn't mean that. If I had had the sense and the courage to tell him, all this misery would have been spared. That money is mine by every right, and I won't lose it. Not only for your sake and my own—there is some one else to think of."

Tarrant gave her a kind look.

"Don't count upon it. Trust to me."

"I like to hear you say that, but I don't wish

you to be put to proof. You are not the kind of man to make money."

"How do you mean it?"

"As you like to take it. Silly boy, don't I love you just because you are *not* one of the money-making men? If you hadn't a penny in the world, I should love you just the same; and I couldn't love you more if you had millions."

The change which Tarrant expected did not come. To the end, she was brave and bright, her own best self. She said good-bye without a tear, refused to let him accompany her, and so, even as she had resolved, left in her husband's mind an image beckoning his return.

Part the Fourth

THE VEILED FIGURE

I

BEFORE his admission to a partnership in Mr. Lord's business, Samuel Barmby lived with his father and two sisters in Coldharbour Lane. Their house was small, old and crumbling for lack of repair; the landlord, his ground-lease having but a year or two to run, looked on with equanimity whilst the building decayed. Under any circumstances, the family must soon have sought a home elsewhere, and Samuel's good fortune enabled them to take a house in Dagmar Road, not far from Grove Lane; a new and most respectable house, with bay windows rising from the half-sunk basement to the second storey. Samuel, notwithstanding his breadth of mind, privately admitted the charm of such an address as "Dagmar Road," which looks well at the head of note-paper, and falls with sonority from the lips.

The Barmby sisters, Lucy and Amelia by name, were unpretentious young women, without personal

attractions, and soberly educated. They professed a form of Dissent; their reading was in certain religious and semi-religious periodicals, rarely in books; domestic occupations took up most of their time, and they seldom had any engagements. At appointed seasons, a festivity in connection with "the Chapel" called them forth; it kept them in a flutter for many days, and gave them a headache. In the strictest sense their life was provincial; nominally denizens of London, they dwelt as remote from everything metropolitan as though Camberwell were a village of the Midlands. If they suffered from discontent, no one heard of it; a confession by one or the other that she "felt dull" excited the sister's surprise, and invariably led to the suggestion of "a little medicine."

Their brother they regarded with admiration, tempered by anxiety. "Great talents," they knew by report, were often perilous to the possessor, and there was reason to fear that Samuel Bennett Barmby had not resisted all the temptations to which his intellect exposed him. At the age of one-and-twenty he made a startling announcement; "the Chapel" no longer satisfied the needs of his soul, and he found himself

summoned to join the Church of England as by law established. Religious intolerance not being a family characteristic, Mr. Barmby and his daughters, though they looked grave over the young man's apostasy, admitted his freedom in this matter; their respected friend Mr. Lord belonged to the Church, and it could not be thought that so earnest-minded a man walked in the way to perdition. At the same time, Samuel began to exhibit a liking for social pleasures, which were, it might be hoped, innocent, but, as they kept him from home of evenings, gave some ground for uneasiness. He had joined a society of young men who met for intellectual debate, and his success as an orator fostered the spiritual pride already discernible in him. His next step could not be regarded without concern, for he became a member of the National Sunday League. Deceptive name! At first the Miss Barmbys supposed this was a union for safe-guarding the Sabbath-day; it appalled them to discover that the League had quite an opposite tendency, that its adherents sallied forth together on "Sunday excursions," that they received tickets for Sunday admission to picture galleries, and in various

other ways offended orthodox feeling. But again the father and sisters gave patient ear to Samuel's elaborate arguments. They became convinced that he had no evil intentions. The elder girl, having caught up a pregnant phrase in some periodical she approved, began to remark that Samuel had "a modern mind;" and this eventually consoled them.

When it began to be observed that Samuel talked somewhat frequently of Miss Lord, the implied suggestion caused a tremor of confused feeling. To the Miss Barmbys, Nancy seemed an enigmatic person; they had tried to like her, but could not; they objected to her assumption of superiority, and were in grave doubt as to her opinions on cardinal points of faith and behaviour. Yet, when it appeared a possibility that their brother might woo Miss Lord and win her for a wife, the girls did their best to see her in a more favourable light. Not for a moment did it occur to them that Nancy could regard a proposal from Samuel as anything but an honour; to *them* she might behave slightingly, for they were of her own sex, and not clever; but a girl who prided herself on intellectual attainments must

of course look up to Samuel Bennett with reverence. In their unworldliness—of a truth they were good, simple creatures—the slight difference of social position seemed unimportant. And with Samuel's elevation to a partnership, even that one shadowy obstacle was removed. Henceforth they would meet Nancy in a conciliatory spirit, and, if she insisted upon it, bow down before her.

Mr. Barmby, senior, whose years drew nigh to three-score, had a great advantage in point of physical health over his old friend Stephen Lord, and his mind enjoyed a placidity which promised him length of days. Since the age of seventeen he had plied a pen in the office of a Life Assurance Company, where his salary, by small and slow increments, had grown at length to two hundred and fifty a year. Himself a small and slow person, he had every reason to be satisfied with this progress, and hoped for no further advance. He was of eminently sober mind, profoundly conscientious, and quite devoid of social ambition,—points of character which explained the long intimacy between him and Stephen Lord. Yet one habit he possessed which foreshadowed the

intellectual composition of his son,—he loved to write letters to the newspapers. At very long intervals one of these communications achieved the honour of type, and then Mr. Barmby was radiant with modest self-approval. He never signed such letters with his own name, but chose a pseudonym befitting the subject. Thus, if moved to civic indignation by pieces of orange-peel on the pavement, he styled himself "Urban Rambler;" if anxious to protest against the overcrowding of 'bus or railway-carriage, his signature was "Otium cum Dignitate." When he took a holiday at the seaside, unwonted leisure and novel circumstances prompted him to address local editors at considerable length. The preservation of decency by bathers was then his favourite topic, and he would sign "Pudor," or perchance "Paterfamilias." His public epistles, if collected, would have made an entertaining and instructive volume, so admirably did they represent one phase of the popular mind. "No, sir,"—this sentence frequently occurred,—"it was not thus that our fathers achieved national and civic greatness." And again: "All the feelings of an English parent

revolt," &c. Or: "And now, sir, where is this to end?"—a phrase applied at one moment to the prospects of religion and morality, at another to the multiplication of muffin-bells.

On a Sunday afternoon, Mr. Barmby often read aloud to his daughters, and in general his chosen book was "Paradise Lost." These performances had an indescribable solemnity, but it unfortunately happened that, as his fervour increased, the reader became regardless of aspirates. Thus, at the culmination of Satanic impiety, he would give forth with shaking voice—

> *"Ail, orrors, ail! and thou profoundest Ell,*
> *Receive thy new possessor!"*

This, though it did not distress the girls, was painful to Samuel Bennett, who had given no little care to the correction of similar lapses in his own speech.

Samuel conceived himself much ahead of his family. Quite uneducated, in any legitimate sense of the word, he had yet learnt that such a thing as education existed, and, by dint of busy perusal of penny popularities, had even become familiar with

names and phrases, with modes of thought and of ambition, appertaining to a world for ever closed against him. He spoke of Culture, and imagined himself far on the way to attain it. His mind was packed with the oddest jumble of incongruities; Herbert Spencer jostled with Charles Bradlaugh, Matthew Arnold with Samuel Smiles; in one breath he lauded George Eliot, in the next was enthusiastic over a novel by Mrs. Henry Wood; from puerile facetiæ he passed to speculations on the origin of being, and with equally light heart. Save for Pilgrim's Progress and Robinson Crusoe, he had read no English classic; since boyhood, indeed, he had probably read no book at all, for much diet of newspapers rendered him all but incapable of sustained attention. Whatever he seemed to know of serious authors came to him at second or third hand. Avowing his faith in Christianity when with orthodox people, in the society of sceptics he permitted himself to smile at the old faiths,—though he preferred to escape this temptation, the Nonconformist conscience still reigning within him. At home he posed as a broad-minded Anglican, and

having somewhere read that Tennyson's "In Memoriam" represented this attitude, he spoke of the poem as "one of the books that have made me what I am."

His circle of acquaintances lay apart from that in which the Lords moved; it consisted for the most part of young men humbly endowed in the matter of income, and making little pretence of social dignity. When others resorted to theatre or public-house, or places not so readily designated, Samuel and his friends met together to discourse on subjects of which they knew somewhat less than nothing. Some of them occasionally held audacious language, especially when topics such as the relations of the sexes invited their wisdom; they had read something somewhere which urged them to cast off the trammels of conventional thought; they "ventured to say" that in a very few years "surprising changes of opinion would come about." These revolutionaries, after startling the more sober of their hearers, went quietly home to mother or landlady, supped on cheese and cocoa, and next day plied the cleric pen with exemplary zeal.

Samuel believed himself in love. That he should conceive matrimonial intentions with regard to Stephen Lord's daughter was but the natural issue of circumstance; from that conception resulted an amorous mood, so much inflamed by Nancy's presence that a young man, whose thoughts did not often transgress decorum, had every reason to suppose himself her victim. When Nancy rejected his formal offer of devotion, the desire to wed her besieged him more vigorously; Samuel was piqued at the tone of lofty trifling in which the girl answered his proposal; for assuredly he esteemed himself no less remarkable a person than he appeared in the eyes of his sisters, and his vanity had been encouraged by Mr. Lord's favour. Of his qualities as a man of business there was no doubt; in one direction or another, he would have struck the road to fortune; why Nancy should regard him with condescension, and make him feel at once that his suit was hopeless, puzzled him for many a day. He tried flattery, affecting to regard her as his superior in things of the intellect, but only with the mortifying result that Miss Lord accepted his

humility as quite natural. Then he held apart in dignified reserve, and found no difficulty in maintaining this attitude until after Mr. Lord's death. Of course he did not let his relatives know of the repulse he had suffered, but, when speaking to them of what had happened on Jubilee night, he made it appear that his estimate of Miss Lord was undergoing modification. "She has lost him, all through her flightiness," said the sisters to each other. They were not sorry, and felt free again to criticise Nancy's ideas of maidenly modesty.

The provisions of Mr. Lord's will could not but trouble the intercourse between Grove Lane and Dagmar Road. Mr. Barmby, senior, undertook with characteristic seriousness the guardianship conferred upon him. He had long interviews with Horace and Nancy, in which he acquitted himself greatly to his own satisfaction. Samuel, equally a trustee, showed his delicacy by holding aloof save when civility dictated a call upon the young people. But his hopes had revived; he was quite willing to wait three years for Nancy, and it seemed to him more than probable that this period of reflection

would bring the young lady to a sense of his merits. In the meantime, he would pursue with energy the business now at his sole direction, and make it far more lucrative than when managed on Mr. Lord's old-fashioned principles.

As the weeks went on, it seemed more clear than at first that Nancy resented the authority held by Samuel and his father. They were not welcome at the house in Grove Lane; the Miss Barmbys called several times without being admitted, though they felt sure that Nancy was at home. Under these circumstances, it became desirable to discover some intermediary who would keep them acquainted with the details of Nancy's life and of her brother's. Such intermediary was at hand, in the person of Miss Jessica Morgan.

II

UNTIL of late there had existed a bare acquaintance between Jessica and the Barmby family. The two or three hours which she perforce spent in Samuel's company on Jubilee night caused Jessica no little embarrassment; as a natural result, their meetings after that had a colour of intimacy, and it was not long before Miss Morgan and the Miss Barmbys began to see more of each other. Nancy, on a motive correspondent with that which actuated her guardians, desired Jessica's familiarity with the household in Dagmar Road; her friend could thus learn and communicate sundry facts of importance, else hidden from her in the retirement to which she was now condemned. How did the Barmbys regard her behaviour to them? Did they, in their questioning, betray any suspicion fraught with danger? Jessica, enjoying the possession of a most important secret, which she had religiously guarded

even from her mother, made time to accept the Barmbys' invitations pretty frequently, and invited the girls to her own home as often as she could afford a little outlay on cakes and preserves.

It made a salutary distraction in her life. As December drew near, she exhibited alarming symptoms of over-work, and but for the romance which assured to her an occasional hour of idleness, she must have collapsed before the date of her examination. As it was, she frightened one of her pupils, at the end of a long lesson, by falling to the floor and lying there for ten minutes in unconsciousness. The warning passed unheeded; day and night she toiled at her insuperable tasks, at times half frenzied by the strangest lapses of memory, and feeling, the more she laboured, only the more convinced that at the last moment every fact she had acquired would ruthlessly desert her.

Her place of abode favoured neither health nor mental tranquillity. It was one of a row of new houses in a new quarter. A year or two ago the site had been an enclosed meadow, portion of the land attached to what was once a country mansion;

London, devourer of rural limits, of a sudden made hideous encroachment upon the old estate, now held by a speculative builder; of many streets to be constructed, three or four had already come into being, and others were mapped out, in mud and inchoate masonry, athwart the ravaged field. Great elms, the pride of generations passed away, fell before the speculative axe, or were left standing in mournful isolation to please a speculative architect; bits of wayside hedge still shivered in fog and wind, amid hoardings variegated with placards and scaffolding black against the sky. The very earth had lost its wholesome odour; trampled into mire, fouled with builders' refuse and the noisome drift from adjacent streets, it sent forth, under the sooty rain, a smell of corruption, of all the town's uncleanliness. On this rising locality had been bestowed the title of "Park." Mrs. Morgan was decided in her choice of a dwelling here by the euphonious address, Merton Avenue, Something-or-other Park.

The old mansion—not very old, and far from beautiful, but stoutly built—stood grim and desolate, long dismantled, and waiting only to be torn down

for the behoof of speculative dealers in old material. What aforetime was a tree-bordered drive, now curved between dead stumps, a mere slushy cart-way; the stone pillars, which had marked the entrance, damaged in the rending away of metal with a market value, drooped sideways, ready at a touch to bury themselves in slime.

Through summer months the Morgans had suffered sufficiently from the defects of their house; with the coming on of winter, they found themselves exposed to miseries barely endurable. At the first slight frost, cistern and water-pipes went to ruin; already so damp that unlovely vegetation had cropped up on cellar walls, the edifice was now drenched with torrents of water. Plaster fell from the ceilings; paper peeled away down the stair-case; stuccoed portions of the front began to crack and moulder. Not a door that would close as a door should; not a window that would open in the way expected of it; not a fireplace but discharged its smoke into the room, rather than by the approved channel. Everywhere piercing draughts, which often entered by orifices unexplained and unexplain-

able. From cellar floor to chimney-pot, no square inch of honest or trustworthy workmanship. So thin were the parti-walls that conversation not only might, but must, be distinctly heard from room to room, and from house to house; the Morgans learnt to subdue their voices, lest all they said should become common property of the neighbourhood. For the privilege of occupying such a residence, "the interior," said advertisement, "handsomely decorated," they were racked with an expenditure which, away in the sweet-scented country, would have housed them amid garden graces and orchard fruitfulness.

At this time, Mr. Morgan had joined an acquaintance in the establishment of a debt-collecting agency; his partner provided the modest capital needful for such an enterprise, and upon himself fell the disagreeable work. A man of mild temper and humane instincts, he spent his day in hunting people who would not or could not pay the money they owed, straining his wits to circumvent the fraudulent, and swooping relentlessly upon the victims of misfortune. The occupation revolted

him, but at present he saw no other way of supporting the genteel appearances which—he knew not why—were indispensable to his life. He subsisted like a bird of prey; he was ever on the look out for carrion which the law permitted him to seize. From the point of view forced upon him, society became a mere system of legalised rapine. "You are in debt; behold the bond. Behold, too, my authority for squeezing out of you the uttermost farthing. You must beg or starve? I deplore it, but I, for my part, have a genteel family to maintain on what I rend from your grip." He set his forehead against shame; he stooped to the basest chicanery; he exposed himself to insult, to curses, to threats of violence. Sometimes a whole day of inconceivably sordid toil resulted in the pouching of a few pence; sometimes his reward was a substantial sum. He knew himself despised by many of the creditors who employed him. "Bad debts? For how much will you sell them to me?" And as often as not he took away with his bargain a glance which was equivalent to a kick.

The genteel family knew nothing of these ex-

pedients. Mrs. Morgan talked dolorously to her friends of "commercial depression," and gave it to be vaguely understood that her husband had suffered great losses because he conducted his affairs in the spirit of a gentleman. Her son was "in an office;" her elder daughter was attempting the art of fiction, which did not promise to be lucrative; Jessica, more highly educated, would shortly matriculate at the University of London—a consoling prospect, but involving the payment of a fee that could with difficulty be afforded.

Every friend of the family held it a matter of course that Jessica would succeed in the examination. It seemed probable that she would have a place in Honours.

And, meanwhile, the poor girl herself was repenting of the indiscreet boastfulness with which she had made known her purpose. To come out in an inferior class would be painful enough; how support the possibility of absolute failure? Yet she knew only too well that in certain "subjects" she was worse than shaky. Her Greek — her Chemistry—her Algebra——

By way of propitiating the stern fates, she began to talk with Lucy and Amelia Barmby in a tone of diffidence. Half a year ago, she would have held her head very high in such company; now the simple goodness of the old-fashioned girls made an appeal to her aching heart, and their homely talk soothed her exhausted brain.

"It's fearfully difficult," she said to them one evening, as she sat in their parlour. "And I lose so much time with my pupils. Really, you know, I haven't a fair chance. I was showing Nancy Lord the Algebra paper set last summer, and she confessed she could hardly do a single question."

"She couldn't?" exclaimed one of the sisters in astonishment. "But we always thought she was so very clever."

"So she is—in many things. But she never dreamt of going in for such an examination as this."

"And do you really know more than she does?"

Jessica smiled with affected modesty.

"Oh, I have studied so much more."

It was sweet to gain this triumph over her friend, whose progress in the school of life she

watched with the jealousy of a girl condemned to sterile passions.

Their talk was interrupted by the entrance of Samuel Barmby, and his elder sister, addressing him without reflection, said wonderingly:

"Sam, did you know that Nancy Lord couldn't pass the examination that Miss Morgan is going in for?"

Jessica blushed, and hastened to extenuate this crude statement.

"Oh, I didn't say that. Only that she would have to study very hard if she went in for the matriculation."

"Of course she would," Samuel assented, largely, as he took his stand before the fireplace and beamed upon the female trio. "Miss Lord goes in for broad culture; that's quite a different thing from studying for examinations."

To the hearers, Jessica not excepted, this seemed to argue the spirit of broad culture in Samuel himself. Miss Morgan pursued nervously:

"Examinations are nothing. I believe very stupid people often do well in them, and clever people often fail."

Her voice sank on the last word, and she tried to read Barmby's face without meeting his look. Of late, a change had come about in her estimation of Samuel. Formerly she spoke of him with contemptuous amusement, in the tone set by Nancy; since she had become a friend of the family, his sisters' profound. respect had influenced her way of thinking, and in secret she was disposed rather to admire "the Prophet." He had always struck her as a comely man, and, her education notwithstanding, she never perceived in his remarks that downright imbecility which excited Nancy's derision. On Jubilee night he was anything but a tedious companion; apart from her critical friend, Jessica had listened without impatience to his jests, his instructive facts, his flowing rhetoric. Now-a-days, in her enfeebled state of body and mind, she began to look forward with distinct pleasure to her occasional meetings with Samuel, pleasure which perhaps was enhanced by the air of condescension wherewith he tempered his courtesy. Morbid miseries brought out the frailty of her character. Desiring to be highly esteemed by Mr. Barmby, she found herself

no less willing to join his sisters in a chorus of humbly feminine admiration, when he discoursed to them from an altitude. At moments, after gazing upon his eloquent countenance, she was beset by strange impulses which brought blood to her cheek, and made her dread the Miss Barmbys' scrutiny.

"I look upon examinations," Samuel was saying, "as a professional matter. I never went in for them myself, simply because I — I turned my energies in another direction."

"You *could* have passed them," remarked one of his sisters, "easily enough."

"In Miss Morgan's presence,"—he stroked his chin, and smiled with delicious fatuity—"I prefer to say nothing on that point."

"Oh but of course you could, Mr. Barmby," sounded Jessica's voice, in an unsteady falsetto, whilst her eyes were turned upon the floor. "You would have thought nothing of this matriculation, which seems to me so dreadful."

Profoundly flattered, Samuel addressed the girl in his suavest tones.

"I have a theory, Miss Morgan, that young ladies

ought not to undergo these ordeals. The delicacy of their nervous system unfits them for such a strain. I'm sure we shall all feel very glad when you are successfully through the trial. After it, you ought to have a long rest."

"Oh, you ought—indeed you ought," assented the girls.

"By the bye," said Samuel, "my father has heard from Miss Lord that she is going away for a month or two. She says her health requires it."

Jessica sat silent, still with downcast eyes.

"But it's a new thing, isn't it," remarked Amelia, "for Miss Lord to be in bad health?"

"She has suffered a good deal, I'm afraid," said Jessica, "since her father's death. The doctor tells her she oughtn't to live in that dull house through the winter."

"In that case," Samuel exclaimed, "of course she must go at once—of course!"

He never spoke of Nancy but with stress of unctuous generosity. This, if his hearers knew what he had suffered at her hands, must tell greatly to his credit; if they were not aware of the circum-

stances, such a tone would become him as the young lady's hopeful admirer.

"I fear her nerves are affected," pursued Jessica. "She can't bear society. So unlike her, isn't it? She goes out very little indeed,—sometimes not for days together. And really she sees nobody. I'm getting quite anxious about her."

The subject was an awkward one in this house, and it soon gave place to freer conversation. On her way home, though mechanically repeating dates and formulæ, Jessica could not resist the tendency of her thoughts, to dwell on Samuel's features and Samuel's eloquence. This was a new danger; she had now little more than a fortnight for her final "cram," and any serious distraction meant ruin.

In a day or two she took leave of Nancy, who had chosen for her winter retreat no less remote a spot than Falmouth. Horace having settled himself in lodgings, the house was to be shut up; Mary Woodruff of course went down into Cornwall. Nancy had written a letter to Mr. Barmby, senior, excusing hersel for not being able to see him before her departure; it was an amiable letter, but contained frank avowal

of pain and discontent at the prospect of her long pupilage. "Of course I submit to the burden my father chose to lay upon me, and before long, I hope, I shall be able to take things in a better spirit. All I ask of you, dear Mr. Barmby, is to have forbearance with me until I get back my health and feel more cheerful. You know that I could not be in better hands whilst Mary is with me. I shall write frequently, and give you an account of myself. Let me hear sometimes, and show me that you make allowance for my very trying position."

Jessica heard the letter discussed by its recipient and his family. Samuel spoke with his wonted magnanimity; his father took a liberal view of the matter. And in writing to her friend a few days later, Jessica was able to say: "I think you may safely stay at Falmouth for the whole winter. You will not be interfered with if you write nicely. I shouldn't wonder if they would let you keep out of their reach *as long as it is necessary.*"

The week of Jessica's ordeal was now at hand. She had had another fainting-fit; her sleep was broken every night with hideous dreams; she ate

scarce enough to keep herself alive; a perpetual fever parched her throat and burned at her temples.

On the last day of "cram," she sat from morning to night in her comfortless little bedroom, bending over the smoky fire, reading desperately through a pile of note-books. The motive of vanity no longer supported her; gladly she would have crept away into a life of insignificance; but the fee for the examination was paid, and she must face the terrors, the shame, that waited her at Burlington House. No hope of "passing." Perhaps at the last moment a stroke of mortal illness would come to her relief.

Not so. She found herself in the ghastly torture-hall, at a desk on which lay sheets of paper, not whiter than her face. Somebody gave her a scroll, stereotyped in imitation of manuscript—the questions to be answered. For a quarter of an hour she could not understand a word. She saw the face of Samuel Barmby, and heard his tones—"The delicacy of a young lady's nervous system unfits her for such a strain."

That evening she went home with a half-formed intention of poisoning herself.

But the morrow saw her seated again before another scroll of stereotype, still thinking of Samuel Barmby, still hearing his voice. The man was grown hateful to her; he seemed to haunt her brain malignantly, and to paralyse her hand.

Day after day in the room of torture, until all was done. Then upon her long despair followed a wild, unreasoning hope. Though it rained, she walked all the way home, singing, chattering to herself, and reached the house-door without consciousness of the distance she had traversed. Her mother and sister came out into the hall; they had been watching for her.

"I did a good paper to-day—I think I've passed after all—yes, I feel sure I've passed!"

"You look dreadful," exclaimed Mrs. Morgan. "And you're wet through——"

"I did a good paper to-day—I feel sure I've passed!"

She sat down to a meal, but could not swallow.

"I feel sure I've passed—I feel sure——"

And she fell from the chair, to all appearances stone-dead.

They took her upstairs, undressed her, sent for the doctor. When he came, she had been lying for half-an-hour conscious, but mute. She looked gravely at him, and said, as if repeating a lesson:

"The delicacy of a young lady's nervous system unfits her for such a strain."

"Undoubtedly," repeated the doctor, with equal gravity.

"But," she added eagerly, "let Mr. Barmby know at once that I have passed."

"He shall know at once," said the doctor.

III

A LADY who lived at Kilburn, and entertained largely in a house not designed for large entertainment, was "at home" this evening. At eleven o'clock the two drawing-rooms contained as many people as could sit and stand with semblance of comfort; around the hostess, on the landing, pressed a crowd, which grew constantly thicker by affluence from the staircase. In the hall below a "Hungarian band" discoursed very loud music. Among recent arrivals appeared a troupe of nigger minstrels, engaged to give their exhilarating entertainment—if space could be found for them. Bursts of laughter from the dining-room announced the success of an American joker, who, in return for a substantial cheque, provided amusement in fashionable gatherings. A brilliant scene. The air, which encouraged perspiration, was rich with many odours; voices endeavouring to make themselves audible in colloquy,

swelled to a tumultuous volume that vied with the Hungarian clangours.

In a corner of the staircase, squeezed behind two very fat women in very low dresses, stood Horace Lord. His heated countenance wore a look of fretful impatience; he kept rising upon his toes in an endeavour to distinguish faces down in the hall. At length his expression changed, and with eager eyes he began to force a way for himself between the fat women. Not unrewarded with glaring glances, and even with severe remarks, he succeeded in gaining the foot of the staircase, and came within reach of the persons for whom he had been waiting. These were Mrs. Damerel and Fanny French. The elder lady exhibited a toilet of opulence corresponding with her mature charms; the younger, as became a *débutante*, wore graceful white, symbol of her maiden modesty.

"You promised to be early," said Horace, addressing Mrs. Damerel, but regarding Fanny, who stood in conversation with a florid man of uncertain age.

"Couldn't get here before, my dear boy."

"Surely you haven't brought that fellow with you?"

"Hush! You mustn't talk in that way. We met at the door. Mrs. Dane knows him. What does it matter?"

Horace moved aside to Fanny. Flushed with excitement, her hair adorned with flowers, she looked very pretty.

"Come along," he said, gripping her hand more violently than he intended. "Let us get upstairs."

"Oh, you hurt me! Don't be so silly."

The man beside her gave Horace a friendly nod. His name was Mankelow. Horace had met him once or twice of late at Mrs. Damerel's, but did not like him, and felt still less disposed to do so now that Mankelow was acquainted with Fanny French. He suspected that the two were more familiar than Fanny pretended. With little ceremony, he interposed himself between the girl and this possible rival.

"Why didn't you make her come earlier?" he said to Fanny, as they began a slow upward struggle in the rear of Mrs. Damerel.

"It isn't fashionable to come early."

"Nonsense! Look at the people here already."

Fanny threw up her chin, and glanced back to

see that Mankelow was following. In his vexation, Horace was seized with a cough—a cough several times repeated before he could check it.

"Your cold's no better," said Fanny. "You oughtn't to have come out at night."

"It *is* better," he replied sharply. "That's the first time I've coughed to-day. Do you mean you would rather not have found me here?"

"How silly you are! People will hear what you're saying."

It was Fanny's "first season," but not her first "at home." Mrs. Damerel seemed to be taking an affectionate interest in her, and had introduced her to several people. Horace, gratified in the beginning, now suffered from jealousy; it tortured him to observe Fanny when she talked with men. That her breeding was defective, mattered nothing in this composite world of pseudo-elegance. Young Lord, who did not lack native intelligence, understood by this time that Mrs. Damerel and her friends were far from belonging to a high order of society; he saw vulgarity rampant in every drawing-room to which he was admitted, and occa-

sionally heard things which startled his suburban prejudices. But Fanny, in her wild enjoyment of these novel splendours, appeared to lose all self-control. She flirted outrageously, and before his very eyes. If he reproached her, she laughed at him; if he threatened to free himself, she returned a look which impudently bade him try. Horace had all her faults by heart, and no longer tried to think that he respected her, or that, if he married such a girl, his life could possibly be a happy one; but she still played upon his passions, and at her beck he followed like a dog.

The hostess, Mrs. Dane, a woman who looked as if she had once been superior to the kind of life she now led, welcomed him with peculiar warmth, and in a quick confidential voice bade him keep near her for a few minutes.

"There's some one I want to introduce you to—some one I'm sure you will like to know."

Obeying her, he soon lost sight of Fanny; but Mrs. Dane continued to talk, at intervals, in such a flattering tone, that his turbid emotions were soothed. He had heard of the Chittles? No?

They were very old friends of hers, said Mrs. Dane, and she particularly wanted him to know them. Ah, here they came; mother and daughter. Horace observed them. Mrs. Chittle was a frail, worn, nervous woman, who must once have been comely; her daughter, a girl of two-and-twenty, had a pale, thin face of much sweetness and gentleness. They seemed by no means at home in this company; but Mrs. Chittle, when she conversed, assumed a vivacious air; the daughter, trying to follow her example, strove vainly against an excessive bashfulness, and seldom raised her eyes. Why he should be expected to pay special attention to these people, Horace was at a loss to understand; but Mrs. Chittle attached herself to him, and soon led him into familiar dialogue. He learnt from her that they had lived for two or three years in a very quiet country place; they had come up for the season, but did not know many people. She spoke of her daughter, who stood just out of earshot,—her eyes cast down, on her face a sad fixed smile,—and said that it had been necessary almost to force her into society. "She loves the country, and is so fond

of books; but at her age it's really a shame to live like a nun—don't you think so, Mr. Lord?" Decidedly it was, said Horace. "I'm doing my best," pursued Mrs. Chittle, "to cure her of her shyness. She is really afraid of people—and it's such a pity. She says that the things people talk about don't interest her; but *all* people are not frivolous—are they, Mr. Lord?" Horace hoped not; and presently out of mere good-nature he tried to converse with the young lady in a way that should neither alarm her shyness nor prove distasteful to her intelligence. But with very little success. From time to time the girl glanced at him with strange timidity, yet seemed quite willing to listen as long as he chose to talk.

Fanny, being at a considerable distance from home, was to return to the boarding-house where her chaperon now lived, and have a room there for the night. Horace disliked this arrangement, for the objectionable Mankelow lived in the same house. When he was able to get speech with Fanny, he tried to persuade her to go with him all the way home to Camberwell in a cab. Miss French would not listen to the suggestion.

"Who ever heard of such a thing? It wouldn't be proper."

"Proper! Oh, I like that!" he replied, with scathing irony.

"You can either like it or not. Mrs. Damerel wouldn't dream of allowing it. I think she's quite as good a judge of propriety as you are."

They were in a corner of the dining-room. Fanny, having supped much to her satisfaction, had a high colour, and treated her lover with more than usual insolence. Horace had eaten little, but had not refrained from beverages; he was disposed to assert himself.

"It seems to me that we ought to have an understanding. You never do as I wish in a single thing. What do you mean by it?"

"Oh, if you're going to be nasty——"

She made the gesture of a servant-girl who quarrels with her young man at the street-corner.

"I can't stand the kind of treatment you've given me lately," said Horace, with muffled anger.

"I've told you I shall do just as I like."

"Very well. That's as much as to say that you care nothing about me. I'm not going to be the

slave of a girl who has no sense of honour—not even of decency. If you wish me to speak to you again you must speak first."

And he left her, Fanny laughing scornfully.

It drew towards one o'clock when, having exhausted the delights of the evening, and being in a decidedly limp condition, Mrs. Damerel and her protégée drove home. Fanny said nothing of what had passed between her and Horace. The elder lady, after keeping silence for half the drive, spoke at length in a tone of indulgent playfulness.

"So you talked a good deal with Mr. Mankelow?"

"Not for long. Now and then. He took me down to supper—the first time."

"I'm afraid somebody will be a little jealous. I shall get into trouble. I didn't foresee this."

"Somebody must treat me in a reasonable way," Fanny answered, with a dry laugh.

"I'm quite sure he will," said Mrs. Damerel suavely. "But I feel myself a little responsible, you know. Let me put you on your guard against Mr. Mankelow. I'm afraid he's rather a dangerous man. I have heard rather alarming stories about

him. You see he's very rich, and very rich men, if they're rather handsome as well, say and do things—you understand?"

"Is he really very rich?"

"Well, several thousands a year, and a prospect of more when relatives die. I don't mean to say that he is a bad man. He belongs to a very good family, and I believe him perfectly honourable. He would never do any one any harm—or, if he happened to, without meaning it, I'm quite sure he'd repair it in the honourable way."

"You said he was dangerous——"

"To a young lady who is already engaged. Confess that you think him rather good-looking."

Having inflamed the girl's imagination, Mrs. Damerel presently dropped the subject, and fell again into weary silence.

At noon of the next day she received a call from Horace, who found her over tea and toast in her private sitting-room. The young man looked bilious; he coughed, too, and said that he must have caught fresh cold last night.

"That house was like an oven. I won't go to any

more such places. That isn't my idea of enjoying myself."

Mrs. Damerel examined him with affectionate solicitude, and reflected before speaking.

"Haven't you been living rather fast lately?"

He avoided her eyes.

"Not at all."

"Quite sure? How much money have you spent this last month?"

"Not much."

By careful interrogation—the caressing notes of her voice seemed to convey genuine feeling—Mrs. Damerel elicited the fact that he had spent not less than fifty pounds in a few weeks. She looked very grave.

"What would our little Fanny say to this?"

"I don't care what she would say."

And he unburdened himself of his complaints against the frivolous charmer, Mrs. Damerel listening with a compassionate smile.

"I'm afraid it's all too true, dear boy. But didn't I warn you?"

"You have made her worse. And I more than half believe you have purposely put her in the way

of that fellow Mankelow. Now I tell you plainly "—his voice quivered—"if I lose her, I'll raise all the money I can and play the very devil."

"Hush! no naughty words! Let us talk about something else till you are quieter.—What did you think of Mrs. Chittle?"

"I thought nothing of her, good or bad."

"Of her daughter, then. Isn't she a sweet, quiet girl? Do you know that she is rich? It's perfectly true. Mrs. Chittle is the widow of a man who made a big fortune out of a kind of imitation velvet. It sold only for a few years, then something else drove it out of the market; but the money was made. I know all about it from Mrs. Dane."

"It's nothing to me," said Horace peevishly.

But Mrs. Damerel continued:

"The poor girl has been very unfortunate. In the last year of her father's life they lived in good style, town-house and country-house. And she fell in love with somebody who—who treated her badly; broke it off, in fact, just before the wedding. She had a bad illness, and since then she has lived as her mother told you."

"How do you know she told me?"

"I—oh, I took it for granted. She said you had had a long talk. You can see, of course, that they're not ordinary people. Didn't Winifred—her name is Winifred—strike you as very refined and lady-like?"

"She hardly spoke half-a-dozen words."

"That's her nervousness. She has quite got out of the habit of society. But she's very clever, and *so* good. I want you to see more of her. If she comes here to tea, will you—just to please me—look in for half-an-hour?"

She bent her head aside, wistfully. Horace vouchsafed no reply.

"Dear boy, I know very well what a disappointment you are suffering. Why not be quite open with me? Though I'm only a tiresome old aunt, I feel every bit as anxious for your happiness as if I were your mother—I do indeed, Horace. You believe me, don't you?"

"You have been very kind, in many ways. But you've done harm to Fanny——"

"No harm whatever, Horace—believe me. I have only given her an opportunity of showing what she

really is. You see now that she thinks of nothing at all but money and selfish pleasures. Compare her, my dear, with such a girl as Winifred Chittle. I only mean—just to show you the difference between a lady and such a girl as Fanny. She has treated you abominably, my poor boy. And what would she bring you? Not that I wish you to marry for money. I have seen too much of the world to be so foolish, so wicked. But when there *are* sweet, clever, lady-like girls, with large incomes—! And a handsome boy like you! You may blush, but there's no harm in telling the truth. You are far too modest. You don't know how you look in the eyes of an affectionate, thoughtful girl—like Winifred, for instance. It's dreadful to think of you throwing yourself away! My dear, it may sound shocking to you, but Fanny French isn't the sort of girl that men *marry*."

Horace showed himself startled.

"You are so young," pursued the mature lady, with an indulgent smile. "You need the advice of some one who knows the world. In years to come, you will feel very grateful to me. Now don't let

us talk any more of that, just now; but tell me something about Nancy. How much longer does she mean to stay in Cornwall?"

He answered absently.

"She talks of another month or two."

"But what have her guardians to say to that? Why, she has been away for nearly half a year. How can that be called living at the old house?"

"It's no business of mine."

"Nor of mine, you mean to say. Still, it does seem rather strange. I suppose she is quite to be trusted?"

"Trusted? What harm can come to her? She's keeping out of Sam Barmby's way, that's all. I believe he plagued her to marry him. A nice husband for Nancy!"

"I wish we had taken to each other," said Mrs. Damerel musingly. "I think she was a little jealous of the attention I had paid to *you*. But perhaps we shall do better some day. And I'm quite content so long as *you* care a little for me, dear boy. You'll never give me up, will you?"

It was asked with unusual show of feeling; she

leaned forward, her eyes fixed tenderly upon the boy's face.

"You would never let a Fanny French come between us, Horace dear?"

"I only wish you hadn't brought her among your friends."

"Some day you will be glad of what I did. Whatever happens, I am your best friend—the best and truest friend you will ever have. You will know it some day."

The voice impressed Horace, its emotion was so true. Several times through the day he recalled and thought of it. As yet he had felt nothing like affection for Mrs. Damerel, but before their next meeting an impulse he did not try to account for caused him to write her a letter—simply to assure her that he was not ungrateful for her kindness. The reply that came in a few hours surprised and touched him, for it repeated in yet warmer words all she had spoken. "Let me be in the place of a mother to you, dear Horace. Think of me as if I were your mother. If I were your mother indeed, I could not love you more." He mused over this,

and received from it a sense of comfort which was quite new to him.

All through the winter he had been living as a gentleman of assured independence. This was managed very simply. Acting on Mrs. Damerel's counsel he insured his life, and straightway used the policy as security for a loan of five hundred pounds from a friend of Mrs. Damerel's. The insurance itself was not effected without a disagreeable little episode. As a result of the medical examination, Horace learnt, greatly to his surprise, that he would have to pay a premium somewhat higher than the ordinary. Unpleasant questions were asked: Was he quite sure that he knew of no case of consumption in his family? Quite sure, he answered stoutly, and sincerely. Why? Did the doctor think *him* consumptive? Oh dear no, but—a slight constitutional weakness. In fine, the higher premium must be exacted. He paid it with the indifference of his years, but said nothing to Mrs. Damerel.

And thereupon began the sowing of wild oats. At two-and-twenty, after domestic restraint and occu-

pations that he detested, he was let loose upon life. Five hundred pounds seemed to him practically inexhaustible. He did not wish to indulge in great extravagance; merely to see and to taste the world.

Ah, the rapture of those first nights, when he revelled amid the tumult of London, pursuing joy with a pocket full of sovereigns! Theatres, music-halls, restaurants and public-houses—he had seen so little of these things, that they excited him as they do a lad fresh from the country. He drew the line nowhere. Love of a worthy woman tells for chastity even in the young and the sensual; love of a Fanny French merely debauches the mind and inflames the passions. Secure in his paganism, Horace followed where the lures of London beckoned him; he knew not reproach of conscience; shame offered but thin resistance to his boiling blood. By a miracle he had as yet escaped worse damage to health than a severe cold, caught one night after heroic drinking. That laid him by the heels for a time, and the cough still clung to him.

In less than two years he would command seven thousand pounds, and a share in the business now

conducted by Samuel Barmby. What need to stint himself whilst he felt able to enjoy life? If Fanny deceived him, were there not, after all, other and better Fanny's to be won by his money? For it was a result of this girl's worthlessness that Horace, in most things so ingenuous, had come to regard women with unconscious cynicism. He did not think he could be loved for his own sake, but he believed that, at any time, the show of love, perhaps its ultimate sincerity, might be won by display of cash.

Midway in the month of May he again caught a severe cold, and was confined to the house for nearly three weeks. Mrs. Damerel, who nursed him well and tenderly, proposed that he should go down for change of air to Falmouth. He wrote to Nancy, asking whether she would care to see him. A prompt reply informed him that his sister was on the point of returning to London, so that he had better choose some nearer seaside resort.

He went to Hastings for a few days, but wearied of the place, and came back to his London excitements. Nancy, however, had not yet returned; nor did she until the beginning of July.

IV

THIS winter saw the establishment of the South London Fashionable Dress Supply Association—the name finally selected by Beatrice French and her advisers. It was an undertaking shrewdly conceived, skilfully planned, and energetically set going. Beatrice knew the public to which her advertisements appealed; she understood exactly the baits that would prove irresistible to its folly and greed. In respect that it was a public of average mortals, it would believe that business might be conducted to the sole advantage of the customer. In respect that it consisted of women, it would give eager attention to a scheme that permitted each customer to spend her money, and yet to have it. In respect that it consisted of ignorant and pretentious women, this public could be counted upon to deceive itself in the service of its own vanity, and maintain against all opposition that the garments obtained on this

soothing system were supremely good and fashionable.

On a basis of assumptions such as these, there was every possibility of profitable commerce without any approach to technical fraud.

By means of the familiar "goose-club," licensed victuallers make themselves the bankers of people who are too weak-minded to save their own money until they wish to spend it, and who are quite content to receive in ultimate return goods worth something less than half the deposit. By means of the familiar teapot, grocers persuade their customers that an excellent trade can be done by giving away the whole profit on each transaction. Beatrice French, an observant young woman, with a head for figures, had often noted and reflected upon these two egregious illustrations of human absurdity. Her dressmaking enterprise assimilated the features of both, and added novel devices that sprang from her own fruitful brain. The "Fashion Club," a wheel within a wheel, was merely the goose-club; strictly a goose-club, for the licensed victualler addresses himself to the male of the species. The larger net, cast for

those who lacked money or a spirit of speculation, caught all who, in the realm of grocery, are lured by the teapot. Every sovereign spent with the Association carried a bonus, paid not in cash but in kind. These startling advantages were made known through the medium of hand-bills, leaflets, nicely printed little pamphlets, gorgeously designed placards; the publicity department, being in the hands of Mr. Luckworth Crewe, of Farringdon Street, was most ably and vigorously conducted.

Thanks also to Luckworth Crewe, Beatrice had allied herself with partners, who brought to the affair capital, experience, and activity. Before Christmas —an important point—the scene of operations was ready: a handsome shop, with the new and attractive appendages (so-called "club-room," refreshment-bar, &c.) which Crewe and Beatrice had visioned in their prophetic minds. Before the close of the year substantial business had been done, and 1888 opened with exhilarating prospects.

The ineptitude of uneducated English women in all that relates to their attire is a fact that it boots not to enlarge upon. Beatrice French could not be

regarded as an exception; for though she recognised monstrosities, she very reasonably distrusted her own taste in the choice of a garment. For her sisters, monstrosities had a distinct charm, and to this class of women belonged all customers of the Association who pretended to think for themselves as to wherewithal they should be clothed. But women in general came to the shop with confessed blankness of mind; beyond the desire to buy something that was modish, and to pay for it in a minus quantity, they knew, felt, thought nothing whatever. Green or violet, cerulean or magenta, all was one to them. In the matter of shape they sought merely a confident assurance from articulate man or woman—themselves being somewhat less articulate than jay or jackdaw —that this or that was "the feature of the season." They could not distinguish between a becoming garment and one that called for the consuming fires of Heaven. It is often assumed as a commonplace that women, whatever else they cannot do, may be trusted to make up their minds about habiliments. Nothing more false, as Beatrice French was abundantly aware. A very large proportion of the servant-

keeping females in Brixton, Camberwell, and Peckham could not, with any confidence, buy a chemise or a pair of stockings; and when it came to garments visible, they were lost indeed.

Fanny French began to regret that she had not realised her capital, and put it into the Association. Wishing at length to do so, she met with a scornful rebuff. Beatrice would have none of her money, but told her she might use the shop like any other customer, which of course Fanny did.

Mrs. Peachey, meanwhile, kept declaring to both her sisters that they must not expect to live henceforth in De Crespigny Park on the old nominal terms. Beatrice was on the way to wealth; Fanny moved in West End society, under the chaperonage of a rich woman; they ought to be ashamed of themselves for not volunteering handsome recognition of the benefits they had received beneath their sister's roof. But neither Beatrice nor Fanny appeared to see the matter in this light. The truth was, that they both had in view a change of domicile. The elder desired more comfort and more independence than De Crespigny Park could afford

her; the younger desired a great many things, and flattered herself that a very simple step would put her in possession of them.

The master of the house no longer took any interest in the fortunes of his sisters-in-law. He would not bid them depart, he would not bid them stay, least of all would he demand money from them. Of money he had no need, and he was the hapless possessor of a characteristic not to be found in any other member of his household—natural delicacy.

Arthur Peachey lived only for his child, the little boy, whose newly prattling tongue made the sole welcome he expected or cared for on his return from a hard day's work. Happily the child had good health, but he never left home without dread of perils that might befall it in his absence. On the mother he counted not at all; a good-tempered cow might with more confidence have been set to watch over the little one's safety. The nurse-girl Emma, retained in spite of her mistress's malice, still seemed to discharge her duties faithfully; but, being mortal, she demanded intervals of leisure from

time to time, and at such seasons, as Peachey too well knew, the child was uncared for. Had his heart been resolute as it was tender, he would long ago have carried out a project which haunted him at every moment of anger or fear. In the town of Canterbury lived a sister of his who for several years had been happily wedded, but remained childless. If the worst came to the worst, if his wife compelled him to the breaking-up of a home which was no home, this married sister would gladly take the little boy into her motherly care. He had never dared to propose the step; but Ada might perchance give ready assent to it, even now.

For motherhood she had no single qualification but the physical. Before her child's coming into the world, she snarled at the restraints it imposed upon her; at its birth, she clamoured against nature for the pains she had to undergo, and hated her husband because he was the intermediate cause of them. The helpless infant gave her no pleasure, touched no emotion in her heart, save when she saw it in the nurse's care, and received female compliments upon its beauty. She rejected it at night

because it broke her sleep; in the day, because she could not handle it without making it cry. When Peachey remonstrated with her, she stared in insolent surprise, and wished that *he* had had to suffer all her hardships of the past year.

Peachey could not be said to have any leisure. On returning from business he was involved forthwith in domestic troubles and broils, which consumed the dreary evening, and invaded even his sleep. Thus it happened that at long intervals he was tempted, instead of going home to dinner, to spend a couple of hours at a certain small eating-house, a resort of his bachelor days, where he could read the newspapers, have a well-cooked chop in quietude, and afterwards, if acquaintances were here, play a game of chess. Of course he had to shield this modest dissipation with a flat falsehood, alleging to his wife that business had kept him late. Thus on an evening of June, when the soft air and the mellow sunlight overcame him with a longing for rest, he despatched a telegram to De Crespigny Park, and strolled quietly about the streets until the hour and his appetite pointed him

tablewards. The pity of it was that he could not dismiss anxieties; he loathed the coward falsehood, and thought more of home than of his present freedom. But at least Ada's tongue was silent.

He seated himself in the familiar corner, and turned over illustrated papers, whilst his chop hissed on the grid. Ah, if he were but unmarried, what a life he might make for himself now that the day's labour brought its ample reward! He would have rooms in London, and a still, clean lodging somewhere among the lanes and fields. His ideals expressed the homeliness of the man. On intellect he could not pride himself; his education had been but of the "commercial" order; he liked to meditate rather than to read; questions of the day concerned him not at all. A weak man, but of clean and kindly instincts. In mercantile life he had succeeded by virtue of his intensely methodical habits—the characteristic which made him suffer so from his wife's indolence, incapacity, and vicious ill-humour.

Before his marriage he had thought of women as domestic beings. A wife was the genius of home. He knew men who thanked their wives for all the

prosperity and content that they enjoyed. Others he knew who told quite a different tale, but these surely were sorrowful exceptions. Nowadays he saw the matter in a light of fuller experience. In his rank of life married happiness was a rare thing, and the fault could generally be traced to wives who had no sense of responsibility, no understanding of household duties, no love of simple pleasures, no religion.

Yes, there was the point — no religion. Ada had grown up to regard church-going as a sign of respectability, but without a shadow of religious faith. Her incredible ignorance of the Bible story, of Christian dogmas, often amazed him. Himself a believer, though careless in the practice of forms, he was not disturbed by the modern tendency to look for morals apart from faith; he had not the trouble of reflecting that an ignorant woman is the last creature to be moralised by anything but the Christian code; he saw straight into the fact—that there was no hope of impressing Ada with ideas of goodness, truthfulness, purity, simply because she recognised no moral authority.

For such minds no moral authority—merely as a moral authority—is or can be valid. Such natures are ruled only by superstition—the representative of reasoned faith in nobler beings. Rob them of their superstition, and they perish amid all uncleanliness.

Thou shalt not lie—for God consumes a liar in the flames of hell! Ada Peachey could lend ear to no admonition short of that. And, living when she did, bred as she was, only a John Knox could have impressed her with this menace—to be forgotten when the echoes of his voice had failed.

He did not enjoy his chop this evening. In the game of chess that followed he played idly, with absent thoughts. And before the glow of sunset had died from the calm heaven he set out to walk homeward, anxious, melancholy.

On approaching the house he suffered, as always, from quickened pulse and heart constricted with fear. Until he knew that all was well, he looked like a man who anticipates dread calamity. This evening, on opening the door, he fell back terror-stricken. In the hall stood a police-constable, surrounded by a group of women: Mrs. Peachey,

her sisters, Emma the nurse-girl, and two other servants.

"Oh, here you are at last!" exclaimed his wife, in a voice exhausted with rage. "You're just in time to see this beast taken off to the lock-up. Perhaps you'll believe me now!"

"What is it? What has she done?"

"Stolen money, that's what she's done—your precious Emma! She's been at it for a long time; I've told you some one was robbing me. So I marked some coins in my purse, and left it in the bedroom whilst we were at dinner; and then, when I found half-a-crown gone—and it was her evening out, too—I sent for a policeman before she knew anything, and we made her turn out her pockets. And there's the half-crown! Perhaps you'll believe it this time!"

The girl's face declared her guilt; she had hardly attempted denial. Then, with a clamour of furious verbosity, Ada enlightened her husband on other points of Emma's behaviour. It was a long story, gathered, in the last few minutes, partly from the culprit herself, partly from her fellow-servants.

Emma had got into the clutches of a jewellery tallyman, one of the fellows who sell trinkets to servant-girls on the pay-by-instalment system. She had made several purchases of gewgaws, and had already paid three or four times their value, but was still in debt to the tallyman, who threatened all manner of impossible proceedings if she did not make up her arrears. Bottomless ignorance and imbecile vanity had been the girl's ruin, aided by a grave indiscretion on Peachey's part, of which he was to hear presently.

Some one must go to the police-station and make a formal charge. Ada would undertake this duty with pious eagerness, enjoying it all the more because of loud wailings and entreaties which the girl now addressed to her master. Peachey looked at his sisters-in-law, and in neither face perceived a compassionate softening. Fanny stood by as at a spectacle provided for her amusement, without rancour, but equally without pity. Beatrice was contemptuous. What right, said her countenance, had a servant-girl to covet jewellery? And how pitiable the spirit that prompted to a filching of

half-crowns! For the criminals of finance, who devastate a thousand homes, Miss French had no small admiration; crimes such as the present were mean and dirty.

Ada reappeard, hurriedly clad for going forth; but no one had fetched a cab. Incensed, she ordered her husband to do so.

"Who are you speaking to?" he replied wrathfully. "I am not your servant."

Fanny laughed. The policeman, professionally calm, averted a smiling face.

"It's nothing to me," said Mrs. Peachey. "I'm quite willing to walk. Come along, constable."

Her husband interposed.

"The girl doesn't go from my house until she's properly dressed." He turned to the other servants. "Please to blow the whistle at the door, or get a cab somehow. Emma, go upstairs and put your things on."

"It was about time you behaved like a man," fell quietly from Beatrice.

"You're right." He looked sternly at the speaker. "It *is* time, and that you shall all know."

The culprit, suddenly silent, obeyed his order. The constable went out at the front door, and there waited whilst a cab-summoning whistle shrilled along De Crespigny Park.

Ada had ascended to the first landing, to make sure that the culprit did not escape her. Beatrice and Fanny retired into the drawing-room. After a lapse of some ten minutes two cabs rattled up to the door from opposite directions, each driver lashing his horse to gain the advantage. So nearly were they matched, that with difficulty the vehicles avoided a collision. The man who had secured a place immediately in front of the doorsteps, waved his whip and uttered a shout of insulting triumph; his rival answered with volleys of abuse, and drove round as if meditating an assault; it was necessary for the policeman to interfere. Whereupon the defeated competitor vowed that it was sanguinary hard lines; that for the sanguinary whole of this sanguinary day had he waited vainly for a sanguinary fare, and but for a sanguinary stumble of his sanguinary horse——

Tired of waiting, and suspicious of the delay, Ada

went up to the room where the servant was supposed to be making ready. It was a little room, which served as night-nursery; by the girl's bed stood a cot occupied by the child. Ada, exclaiming "Now, come along!" opened the door violently. A candle was burning; the boy, awake but silent, sat up in his cot, and looked about with sleepy, yet frightened eyes.

"Where are you?"

Emma could not be seen. Astonished and enraged, Ada rushed forward; she found the girl lying on the floor, and after bending over her, started back with a cry half of alarm, half of disgust.

"Come up here at once!" she screamed down the staircase. "Come up! The wretch has cut her throat!"

There was a rush of feet. Peachey, the first to enter, saw a gash on the neck of the insensible girl; in her hand she held a pair of scissors.

"I hope you're satisfied," he said to his wife.

The police-officer, animated by a brisk succession of events such as he could not hope for every day, raised the prostrate figure, and speedily announced that the wound was not mortal.

"She's fainted, that's all. Tried to do for herself with them scissors, and didn't know the way to go about it. We'll get her off sharp to the surgeon."

"It'll be attempted suicide, now, as well as stealing," cried Ada.

Terrified by the crowd of noisy people, the child began to cry loudly. Peachey lifted him out of the cot, wrapped a blanket about him, and carried him down to his own bedroom. There, heedless of what was going on above, he tried to soothe the little fellow, lavishing caresses and tender words.

"My little boy will be good? He'll wait here, quietly, till father comes back? Only a few minutes, and father will come back, and sit by him. Yes—he shall sleep here, all night——"

Ada burst into the room.

"I should think you'd better go and look after your dear Emma. As if I didn't know what's been going on! It's all come out, so you needn't tell me any lies. You've been giving her money. The other servants knew of it; she confessed it herself. Oh, you're a nice sort of man, you are! Men of your sort are always good at preaching to other

people. You've given her money—what does *that* mean? I suspected it all along. You wouldn't have her sent away; oh no! She was so good to the child—and so good to somebody else! A dirty servant! I'd choose some one better than that, if I was a man. How much has she cost you? As much, no doubt, as one of the swell women in Piccadilly Circus——"

Peachey turned upon her, the sweat beading on his ghastly face.

"Go!—Out of this room—or by God I shall do something fearful!—Out!"

She backed before him. He seized her by the shoulders, and flung her forth, then locked the door. From without she railed at him in the language of the gutter and the brothel. Presently her shouts were mingled with piercing shrieks; they came from the would-be-suicide, who, restored to consciousness, was being carried down for removal in the cab. Peachey, looking and feeling like a man whom passion had brought within sight of murder, stopped his ears and huddled himself against the bedside. The child screamed in terror.

At length came silence. Peachey opened the door, and listened. Below, voices sounded in quiet conversation.

"Who is down there?" he called.

"All of us except Ada," replied Beatrice. "The policeman said she needn't go unless she liked, but she *did* like."

"Very well."

He ran up to the deserted bedroom, carefully gathered together his child's day-garments, and brought them down. Then, as well as he could, he dressed the boy.

"Is it time to get up?" inquired the little three-year-old, astonished at all that was happening, but soothed and amused by the thought that his father had turned nurse. "It isn't light yet."

"You are going somewhere with father, dear. Somewhere nice."

The dialogue between them, in sweet broken words such as the child had not yet outgrown, and the parent did not wish to abandon for common speech, went on until the dressing was completed.

"Now, will my boy show me where his clothes are for going out? His cap, and his coat——"

Oh yes, they were up in the nursery; boy would show father—and laughed merrily that he knew something father didn't. A few minutes more, and the equipment was completed.

"Now wait for me here—only a minute. My boy won't cry, if I leave him for a minute?"

"Cry! of course not!" Peachey descended to the drawing-room, closed the door behind him, and stood facing his sisters-in-law.

"I want to tell you that I am going away, and taking the child with me. Ada needn't expect me back to-night—nor ever. As long as I live I will never again be under the same roof with her. You, Beatrice, said it was about time I behaved like a man. You were right. I've put up long enough with things such as no man ought to endure for a day. Tell your sister that she may go on living here, if she chooses, for another six months, to the end of the year—not longer. She shall be supplied with sufficient money. After Christmas she may find a home for herself where she likes; money will

be paid to her through a lawyer, but from this day I will neither speak nor write to her. You two must make your own arrangements; you have means enough. You know very well, both of you, why I am taking this step; think and say about me what you like. I have no time to talk, and so I bid you good-bye."

They did not seek to detain him, but stood mute whilst he left the room.

The little boy, timid and impatient, was at the head of the stairs. His father enveloped him warmly in a shawl, and so they went forth. It was not long before they met with a vacant cab. Half-an-hour's drive brought them to the eating-house where Peachey had had his chop that evening, and here he obtained a bedroom for the night.

By eleven o'clock the child slept peacefully. The father, seated at a table, was engaged in writing to a solicitor.

At midnight he lay softly down by the child's side, and there, until dawn, listened to the low breathing of his innocent little bedfellow. Though he could not sleep, it was joy, rather than any pain-

ful excitement, that kept him wakeful. A great and loathsome burden had fallen from him, and in the same moment he had rescued his boy out of an atmosphere of hated impurity. At length he could respect himself, and for the first time in four long years he looked to the future with tranquil hope.

Careless of the frank curiosity with which the people of the house regarded him, he went down at seven o'clock, and asked for a railway time-table. Having found a convenient train to Canterbury, he ordered breakfast for himself and the child to be laid in a private room. It was a merry meal. Sunshine of midsummer fell warm and bright upon the table; the street below was so full of busy life that the little boy must needs have his breakfast by the window, where he could eat and look forth at the same time. No such delightful holiday had he ever enjoyed. Alone with father, and going away by train into wonderful new worlds.

"Is Emma coming?" he asked.

It was significant that he did not speak of his mother.

They drove to the railway station, Peachey no less

excited than the child. From here he despatched a telegram to his partners, saying that he should be absent for a day or two.

Then the train, struggling slowly out of London's welter, through the newest outposts of gloom and grime, bore them, hearts companioned in love and blamelessness, to the broad sunny meadows and the sweet hop-gardens of Kent.

V

"SERVES her jolly well right," said Beatrice.

"A lot *she'll* care," said Fanny. "I should think myself precious lucky. She gets rid of him, and of the kid too, and has as much as she wants to live on. It's better than she deserves.—Do you believe he's been carrying on with that girl?"

Miss French laughed contemptuously.

"Not he!"

"Well, there's been a jolly good row to-night, if we never see another. We shall all be in the papers!" The prospect had charms for Fanny. "What are you going to do? Live here till Christmas?"

Beatrice was quietly reviewing the situation. She kept silence, and her sister also became meditative. Suddenly Fanny inquired:

"What sort of a place is Brussels?"

"Brussels? Why? I know nothing about it.

Not much of a place, I think; sprouts come from there, don't they?"

"It's a big town," said the other, "and a lively sort of place, they say."

"Why do you ask me, if you know? What about it?"

As usual when performing the operation which, in her, answered to thought, Fanny shuffled with her hands on her waist. At a distance from Beatrice she stood still, and said:

"Some one I know is going there. I've a good mind to go too. I want to see abroad."

Her sister asked several searching questions, but Fanny would not make known whether the friend was male or female.

"I shouldn't be much surprised," remarked the woman of business, indifferently, "if you go and make a fool of yourself before long. That Mrs. Damerel is up to some game with you; any one could see it with half an eye. I suppose it isn't Lord that's going to Brussels?"

Fanny sputtered her disdain.

"If you had any common sense," pursued her

sister, "you'd stick to him; but you haven't. Oh yes, you think you can do better. Very well, we shall see. If you find yourself in a hole one of these days, don't expect *me* to pull you out. I wouldn't give you a penny to save you from the workhouse."

"Wait till you're asked. I know where all *your* money 'll go to. And that's into Crewe's pocket. He'll fool you out of all you have."

Beatrice reddened with wrath. But, unlike the other members of her family, she could command her tongue. Fanny found it impossible to draw another word from her.

On returning from the police-station, haggard and faint with excitement, but supported by the anticipation of fresh attacks upon her husband, Ada immediately learnt what had happened. For the first moment she could hardly believe it. She rushed upstairs, and saw that the child was really gone; then a blind frenzy took hold upon her. Alarming and inexplicable sounds drew her sisters from below; they found her, armed with something heavy, smashing every breakable object in her bed-

room—mirrors, toilet-ware, pictures, chimney-piece ornaments.

"She's gone mad!" shrieked Fanny. "She'll kill us!"

"That beast shall pay for it!" yelled Ada, with a frantic blow at the dressing-table.

Wanton destruction of property revolted all Beatrice's instincts. Courageous enough, she sprang upon the wild animal, and flung her down.

Now indeed the last trace of veneer was gone, the last rag of pseudo-civilisation was rent off these young women; in physical conflict, vilifying each other like the female spawn of Whitechapel, they revealed themselves as born—raw material which the mill of education is supposed to convert into middle-class ladyhood. As a result of being held still by superior strength Ada fell into convulsions, foamed at the mouth, her eyes starting from their sockets; then she lay as one dead.

"You've killed her," cried the terrified Fanny.

"No fear. Give me some water to pitch over her."

With a full jug from another bedroom, she

drenched the prostrate figure. When Ada came round she was powerless; even her rancorous lips could utter only a sound of moaning. The sisters stripped her stark naked on the floor, made a show of drying her with towels, and tumbled her into bed. Then Beatrice brewed a great jorum of hot whisky-punch, and after drinking freely to steady her shaken nerves, poured a pint or so down Mrs. Peachey's throat.

"There won't be a funeral just yet," she remarked, with a laugh. "Now we'll have supper; I feel hungry."

They went to bed at something after midnight. The servants, having stolen a bottle of spirits from the cupboard, which Beatrice left open, both got drunk, and slept till morning upon the kitchen-floor.

On the morrow, Miss French, attired as a walking advertisement of the South London Fashionable Dress Supply Association, betook herself to Farringdon Street for an interview with her commercial friend. Crewe was absent, but one of three clerks, who occupied his largest room, informed her that it could not be very long before he returned, and

being so familiar a figure here, she was permitted to wait in the agent's sanctum. When the door closed upon her, the three young men discussed her character with sprightly freedom. Beatrice, the while, splendidly indifferent to the remarks she could easily divine, made a rapid examination of loose papers lying on Crewe's desk, read several letters, opened several books, and found nothing that interested her until, on turning over a slip of paper with pencilled figures upon it, she discovered a hotel-bill, the heading: Royal Hotel, Falmouth. It was for a day and night's entertainment, the debtor "Mr. Crewe," the date less than a week gone by. This document she considered attentively, her brows knitted, her eyes wide. But a sound caused her to drop it upon the desk again. Another moment, and Crewe entered.

He looked keenly at her, and less good-humouredly than of wont. These persons never shook hands, and indeed dispensed, as a rule, with all forms of civility.

"What are you staring at?" asked Crewe bluffly.

"What are *you* staring at?"

"Nothing, that I know." He hung up his hat,

and sat down. "I've a note to write; wait a minute."

The note written, and given to a clerk, Crewe seemed to recover equanimity. His visitor told him all that happened in De Crespigny Park, even to the crudest details, and they laughed together uproariously.

"I'm going to take a flat," Beatrice then informed him. "Just find me something convenient and moderate, will you? A bachelor's flat."

"What about Fanny?"

"She has something on; I don't know what it is. Talks about going to Brussels—with a friend."

Crewe looked astonished.

"You ought to see after her. I know what the end 'll be. Brussels? I've heard of English girls going there, but they don't usually come back."

"What can I do? I'm pretty certain that Damerel woman has a game on hand. She doesn't want Fanny to marry her nephew—if Lord *is* her nephew. She wants his money, that's my idea."

"Mine, too," remarked the other quietly. "Look here, old chap, it's your duty to look after your

little damned fool of a sister; I tell you that plainly. I shan't think well of you if you don't."

Beatrice displayed eagerness to defend herself. She had done her best; Fanny scorned all advice, and could not be held against her will.

"Has she given up all thought of Lord?"

"I'm not sure, but I think so. And it looks as if he was going his own way, and didn't care much. He never writes to her now. Of course it's that woman's doing."

Crewe reflected.

"I shall have to look into Mrs. Damerel's affairs. Might be worth while. Where is she living?" He made a note of the information. "Well, anything else to tell me?"

Beatrice spoke of business matters, then asked him if he had been out of town lately. The question sounded rather abrupt, and caused Crewe to regard her with an expression she privately interpreted.

"A few short runs. Nowhere particular."

"Oh?—Not been down into Cornwall?"

He lost his temper.

"What are you after? What business is it of

yours? If you're going to spy on me, I'll soon let you know that I won't stand that kind of thing."

"Don't disturb yourself," said Beatrice, with a cold smile. "I haven't been spying, and you can go where you like for anything I care. I guessed you *had* been down there, that's all."

Crewe kept silence, his look betraying uneasiness as well as anger. Speaking at length, he fixed her with keen eyes.

"If it's any satisfaction to you, you're welcome to know that I have been into Cornwall—and to Falmouth."

Beatrice merely nodded, and still he searched her face.

"Just answer me a plain question, old chap. Come, there's no nonsense between us; we know each other —eh?"

"Oh yes, we know each other," Miss French answered, her lips puckering a little.

"What do you know about *her?* What has she been doing all this time?"

Beatrice laughed.

"I know just as little about her as I care."

"You care a good deal more than you'll confess. I wouldn't be up to women's tricks, if I were you."

She revolted.

"After all, I suppose I *am* a woman?"

"Well, I suppose so." Crewe grinned good-naturedly. "But that isn't in the terms of our partnership, you remember. You can be a reasonable fellow enough, when you like. Just tell me the truth. What do you know about Nancy Lord?"

Beatrice assumed an air of mystery.

"I'll tell you that, if you tell me what it is you want of her. Is it her money?"

"Her money be damned!"

"It's herself, then."

"And what if it is? What have *you* to say to it?"

Her eyes fell, and she muttered "Nothing."

"Just bear that in mind, then. And now that I've answered your question, answer mine. What have you heard about her? Or what have you found out?"

She raised her eyes again and again, but in a mocking voice said, "Nothing."

"You're telling me a lie."

"You're a brute to say so!"

They exchanged fierce glances, but could not meet each other's eyes steadily. Crewe, mastering his irritation, said with a careless laugh:

"All right, I believe you. Didn't mean to offend you, old chap."

"I won't be called that!" She was trembling with stormy emotions. "You shall treat me decently."

"Very well. Old girl, then."

"I'm a good deal younger than you are. And I'm a good deal better than you, in every way. I'm a lady, at all events, and you can't pretend to be a gentleman. You're a rough, common fellow——"

"Holloa! Holloa! Draw it mild."

He was startled, and in some degree abashed; his eyes, travelling to the door, indicated a fear that this singular business-colloquy might be overheard. But Beatrice went on, without subduing her voice, and, having delivered herself of much plain language, walked from the room, leaving the door open behind her.

As a rule, she returned from her day's occupations to dinner, in De Crespigny Park, at seven

o'clock. To-day her arrival at home was considerably later. About three o'clock she made a call at the boarding-house where Mrs. Damerel lived, but was disappointed in her wish to see that lady, who would not be in before the hour of dining. She called again at seven, and Mrs. Damerel received her very graciously. It was the first time they had met. Beatrice, in no mood for polite grimaces, at once disclosed the object of her visit; she wanted to talk about Fanny; did Mrs. Damerel know anything of a proposed journey to Brussels? The lady professed utter ignorance of any such intention on Fanny's part. She had not seen Fanny for at least a fortnight.

"How can that be? She told me she dined here last Sunday."

"That's very strange," answered Mrs. Damerel, with suave concern. "She certainly did not dine here."

"And the Sunday before?"

"Your sister has dined here only once, Miss French, and that was three months ago."

"Then I don't understand it. Haven't you been

taking her to theatres, and parties, and that kind of thing?"

"I have taken her once to a theatre, and twice to evening 'at homes.' The last time we were together anywhere was at Mrs. Dane's, about the middle of May. Since then I have seen her hardly at all. I'm very much afraid you are under some misconception. Thinking your sister was engaged to marry my nephew, Mr. Lord, I naturally desired to offer her a few friendly attentions. But it came out, at length, that she did not regard the engagement as serious. I was obliged to speak gravely to my young nephew, and beg him to consider his position. There is the second dinner-bell, but I am quite at your service, Miss French, if you wish to question me further."

Beatrice was much inclined to resent this tone, and to use her vernacular. But it seemed only too probable that Fanny had been deceiving her, and, as she really feared for the girl's safety, prudence bade her be civil with Mrs. Damerel.

"Can't you help me to find out what Fanny has really been doing?"

"I'm afraid it's quite out of my power. She never confided in me, and it is so long since I have seen anything of her at all."

"It's best to speak plainly," said Beatrice, in her business tone. "Can't you think of any man, in the society you introduced her to, who may be trying to lead her astray?"

"Really, Miss French! The society in which I move is not what you seem to suppose. If your sister is in any danger of *that* kind, you must make your inquiries elsewhere—in an inferior rank of life."

Beatrice no longer contained herself.

"Perhaps I know rather more than you think about your kind of society. There's not much to choose between the men and the women."

"Miss French, I believe you reside in a part of London called Camberwell. And I believe you are engaged in some kind of millinery business. This excuses you for ill-manners. All the same, I must beg you to relieve me of your presence." She rang the bell. "Good evening."

"I dare say we shall see each other again," replied Beatrice, with an insulting laugh. "I heard

some one say to-day that it might be as well to find out *who you really are.* And if any harm comes to Fanny, I shall take a little trouble about that inquiry myself."

Mrs. Damerel changed colour, but no movement betrayed anxiety. In the attitude of dignified disdain, she kept her eyes on a point above Miss French's head, and stood so until the plebeian adversary had withdrawn.

Then she sat down, and for a few minutes communed with herself. In the end, instead of going to dinner, she rang her bell again. A servant appeared.

"Is Mr. Mankelow in the dining-room?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Ask him to be kind enough to come here for a moment."

With little delay, Mr. Mankelow answered the summons which called him from his soup. He wore evening dress; his thin hair was parted down the middle; his smooth-shaven and rather florid face expressed the annoyance of a hungry man at so unseasonable an interruption.

"Do forgive me," began Mrs. Damerel, in a

pathetic falsetto. "I have been so upset, I felt obliged to seek advice immediately, and no one seemed so likely to be of help to me as you—a man of the world. Would you believe that a sister of that silly little Miss French has just been here—a downright virago—declaring that the girl has been led astray, and that I am responsible for it? Can you imagine such impertinence? She has fibbed shockingly to the people at home—told them she was constantly here with me in the evenings, when she must have been—who knows where. It will teach me to meddle again with girls of that class."

Mankelow stood with his hands behind him, and legs apart, regarding the speaker with a comically puzzled air.

"My dear Mrs. Damerel,"—he had a thick, military sort of voice,—"why in the world should this interpose between us and dinner? Afterwards, we might——"

"But I am really anxious about the silly little creature. It would be extremely disagreeable if my name got mixed up in a scandal of any kind. You remember my telling you that she didn't belong

exactly to the working-class. She has even a little property of her own; and I shouldn't wonder if she has friends who might make a disturbance if her—her vagaries could be in any way connected with me and my circle. Something was mentioned about Brussels. She has been chattering about some one who wanted to take her to Brussels——"

The listener arched his eyebrows more and more.

"What *can* it matter to you?"

"To be sure, I have no acquaintance with any one who could do such things——"

"Why, of course not. And even if you had, I understand that the girl is long out of her teens——"

"Long since."

"Then it's her own affair—and that of the man who cares to purchase such amusement. By-the-bye, it happens rather oddly that I myself have to run over to Brussels on business; but I trust"—he laughed—"that my years and my character——"

"Oh, Mr. Mankelow, absurd! It's probably some commercial traveller, or man of that sort, don't you think? The one thing I *do* hope is, that, if anything like this happens, the girl will somehow make

it clear to her friends that *I* had no knowledge whatever of what was going on. But that can hardly be hoped, I fear!——"

Their eyes crossed; they stood for a moment perusing vacancy.

"Yes, I think it might be hoped," said Mankelow airily. "She seemed to me a rather reckless sort of young person. It's highly probable she will write letters which release every one but herself from responsibility. In fact"—he gazed at her with a cynical smile—"my knowledge of human nature disposes me to assure you that she certainly will. She might even, I should say, write a letter to *you*—perhaps a cheeky sort of letter, which would at once set your mind at ease."

"Oh, if you really take that view——"

"I do indeed. Don't you think we might dismiss the matter, and dine?"

They did so.

Until noon of to-day, Mrs. Peachey had kept her bed, lying amid the wreck wrought by last night's madness. She then felt well enough to rise, and after refreshment betook herself by cab to the offices

of Messrs. Ducker, Blunt & Co., manufacturers of disinfectants, where she conversed with one of the partners, and learnt that her husband had telegraphed his intention to be absent for a day or two. Having, with the self-respect which distinguished her, related her story from the most calumnious point of view, she went home again to nurse her headache and quarrel with Fanny. But Fanny had in the meantime left home, and, unaccountable fact, had taken with her a large tin box and a dress-basket; heavily packed, said the servants. Her direction to the cabman was merely Westminster Bridge, which conveyed to Mrs. Peachey no sort of suggestion.

When Beatrice came back, and learnt this event, she went apart in wrathful gloom. Ada could not engage her in a quarrel. It was a wretchedly dull evening.

They talked next morning, and Beatrice announced her purpose of going to live by herself as soon as possible. But she would not quarrel. Left alone, Ada prepared to visit certain of their relatives in different parts of London, to spread among them the news of her husband's infamy.

VI

WHEN Mary Woodruff unlocked the house-door and entered the little hall, it smelt and felt as though the damp and sooty fogs of winter still lingered here, untouched by the July warmth. She came alone, and straightway spent several hours in characteristic activity—airing, cleaning, brightening. For a few days there would be no servant; Mary, after her long leisure down in Cornwall, enjoyed the prospect of doing all the work herself. They had reached London last evening, and had slept at a family hotel, where Nancy remained until the house was in order for her.

Unhappily, their arrival timed with a change of weather, which brought clouds and rain. The glories of an unshadowed sky would have little more than availed to support Nancy's courage as she passed the creaking little gate and touched the threshold of a home to which she returned only on compulsion; gloom overhead, and puddles underfoot, tried

her spirit sorely. She had a pale face, and thin cheeks, and moved with languid step.

Her first glance was at the letter-box.

"Nothing?"

Mary shook her head. During their absence letters had been re-addressed by the post-office, and since the notice of return nothing had come.

"I'm quite sure a letter has been lost."

"Yes, it may have been. But there'll be an answer to your last very soon."

"I don't think so. Most likely I shall never hear again."

And Nancy sat by the window of the front room, looking, as she had looked so many a time, at the lime tree opposite and the house visible through wet branches. A view unchanged since she could remember; recalling all her old ambitions, revolts, pretences, and ignorances; recalling her father, who from his grave still oppressed her living heart.

Somewhere near sounded the wailing shout of a dustman. It was like the voice of a soul condemned to purge itself in filth.

"Mary!" She rose up and went to the kitchen.

"I can't live here! It will kill me if I have to live in this dreadful place. Why, even you have been crying; I can see you have. If *you* give way, think what it must be to me!"

"It's only for a day or two, dear," answered Mary. "We shall feel at home again very soon. Miss Morgan will come this evening, and perhaps your brother."

"I must do something. Give me some work."

Mary could not but regard this as a healthy symptom, and she suggested tasks that called for moderate effort. Sick of reading—she had read through a whole circulating library in the past six months—Nancy bestirred herself about the house; but she avoided her father's room.

Horace did not come to-day; a note arrived from him, saying that he would call early to-morrow morning. But at tea-time Jessica presented herself. She looked less ghostly than half a year ago; the grave illness through which she had passed seemed to have been helpful to her constitution. Yet she was noticeably changed. In her letters Nancy had remarked an excessive simplicity, a sort

of childishness, very unlike Jessica's previous way of writing; and the same peculiarity now appeared in her conversation. By turns she was mawkish and sprightly, tearful and giggling. Her dress, formerly neglected to the point of untidiness, betrayed a new-born taste for fashionable equipment; she suddenly drew attention to it in the midst of serious talk, asking with a bashful smirk whether Nancy thought it suited her.

"I got it at Miss French's place—the Association, you know. It's really wonderful how cheap things are there. And the very best cut, by dressmakers from Paris."

Nancy wondered, and felt that her diminishing regard for Miss Morgan had suffered a fresh blow.

There was much news to receive and impart. In writing from Falmouth, Nancy had referred to the details of her own life with studied ambiguity. She regretted having taken Jessica into her confidence, and avoided penning a word which, if read by any one but her correspondent, would betray the perilous secret. Jessica, after her illness, was inclined to resent this extreme caution, which irritated her

curiosity; but in vain she assured Nancy that there was not the least fear of her letters falling into wrong hands. For weeks at a time she heard nothing, and then would come a letter, long indeed, but without a syllable of the information she desired. Near the end of May she received a line or two, "I have been really ill, but am now much better. I shall stay here only a few weeks more. Don't be anxious; I am well cared for, and the worst is over."

She heard the interpretation from Nancy's lips, and laughed and cried over it.

"What you must have suffered, my poor dear! And to be separated from the little darling! Oh, it's too cruel! You are sure they will be kind to it?"

"Mary has every confidence in the woman. And I like the look of her; I don't feel uneasy. I shall go there very often, of course."

"And when is *he* coming back? He oughtn't to have kept away all this time. How unkind!"

"Not at all," Nancy replied, with sudden reserve. "He is acting for the best. You mustn't ask me about that; you shall know more some day."

Jessica, whose face made legible presentment of her every thought, looked disappointed and peevish.

"And you are really going in for the examination again?" Nancy asked.

"Oh, of course I am!" answered the other perkily; "but not till summer of next year. I'm not allowed to study much yet; the doctor says I might do my brain a serious injury. I read a great deal; books that rest the mind—poetry and fiction; of course only the very best fiction. I shall soon be able to begin teaching again; but I must be very careful. Only an hour or two a day at first, and perhaps quite young children."

Evidently the girl felt a certain pride in what she had undergone. Her failure to matriculate was forgotten in the sense that she offered a most interesting case of breakdown from undue mental exertion. The doctor had declared his astonishment that she held up until the examination was over.

"He simply wouldn't believe me when I told him the hours I worked. He said I ought to be on my trial for attempted suicide!"

And she laughed with extravagant conceit.

"You have quite made friends with the Barmbys," said Nancy, eyeing her curiously.

"They are very nice people. Of course the girls quite understand what a difference there is between themselves and me. I like them because they are so modest; they would never think of contradicting my opinion about anything."

"And what about the Prophet?"

"I don't think you ever quite understood him," Jessica replied, with an obvious confusion which perplexed her friend. "He isn't at all the kind of man you thought."

"No doubt I was wrong," Nancy hastened to say. "It was prejudice. And you remember that I never had any fault to find with his—his character."

"You disliked him," said the other sharply. "And you still dislike him. I'm sure you do."

So plainly did Jessica desire a confirmation of this statement, that Nancy allowed herself to be drawn into half avowing a positive dislike for Samuel. Whereupon Jessica looked pleased, and tossed her head in a singular way.

"I needn't remind you," fell from Nancy, after a

moment of troubled reflection, "how careful you must be in talking about me to the Barmbys."

"Oh, don't have the slightest fear."

"Weren't you delirious in your illness?"

"I should think I was indeed! For a long time."

"I hope you said nothing——"

"About you? Oh, not a word; I'm quite sure. I talked all the time about my studies. The doctor heard me one day repeating a long bit of Virgil. And I kept calling for bits of paper to work out problems in Geometrical Progression. Just fancy! I don't think most girls are delirious in that way. If I had said anything about you that sounded queer, of course mother would have told me afterwards. Oh, it was quite an intellectual delirium."

Had Jessica, since her illness, become an insufferable simpleton? or—Nancy wondered—was it she herself who, through experience and sorrows, was grown wiser, and saw her friend in a new light? It troubled her gravely that the preservation of a secret more than ever momentous should depend upon a person with so little sense. The girl's de-

parture was a relief; but in the silence that followed upon silly talk, she had leisure to contemplate this risk, hitherto scarce taken into account. She spoke of it with Mary, the one friend to whom her heart went out in absolute trust, from whom she concealed but few of her thoughts, and whose moral worth, only understood since circumstances compelled her reliance upon it, had set before her a new ideal of life. Mary, she well knew, abhorred the deceit they were practising, and thought hard things of the man who made it a necessity; so it did not surprise her that the devoted woman showed no deep concern at a new danger.

"It's more the shame than anything else, that I fear now," said Nancy. "If I have to support myself and my child, I shall do it. How, I don't know; but other women find a way, and I should. If he deserts me, I am not such a poor creature as to grieve on that account; I should despise him too much even to hate him. But the shame of it would be terrible. It's common, vulgar cheating—such as you read of in the newspapers—such as people are punished for. I never thought of it in that way

when he was here. Yet *he* felt it. He spoke of it like that, but I wouldn't listen."

Mary heard this with interest.

"Did he wish you to give it up?" she asked. "You never told me that."

"He said he would rather we did. But that was when he had never thought of being in want himself. Afterwards—yes, even then he spoke in the same way; but what could we do?"

"Don't fear that he will forsake you," said Mary. "You will hear from him very soon. He knows the right and the wrong, and right will be stronger with him in the end."

"If only I were sure that he has heard of his child's birth. If he *has*, and won't even write to me, then he is no man, and it's better we should never see each other again."

She knew the hours of postal delivery, and listened with throbbing heart to the double knocks at neighbouring houses. When the last postman was gone by, she sat down, sick with disappointment.

At bedtime she said to Mary, "My little baby

is asleep; oh, if I could but see it for a moment!" And tears choked her as she turned away.

It was more than two months since she had heard from her husband.

At first Tarrant wrote as frequently as he had promised. She learnt speedily of his arrival at New York, then that he had reached Nassau, the capital of the Bahamas, then that he was with his friend Sutherland on the little island amid the coral reefs. Subsequent letters, written in buoyant spirits, contained long descriptions of the scenery about him, and of the life he led. He expressed a firm confidence in Sutherland's enterprises; beyond a doubt, there was no end of money to be made by an energetic man; he should report most favourably to Mr. Vawdrey, whose co-operation would of course be invaluable. For his own part, whether he profited or not from these commercial schemes, he had not been mistaken in foreseeing material for journalism, even for a book. Yes, he should certainly write a book on the Bahamas, if only to expose the monstrous system of misgovernment which accounted for the sterility into which these

islands had fallen. The climate, in winter at all events, was superb. Sutherland and he lay about in delicious sunshine, under a marvellous sky, smoking excellent cigars, and talking over old Oxford days. He quoted Tennyson: "Larger constellations burning," &c.

At the end of December, when Nancy, according to their agreement, began to hope for his return, a letter in a very different tone burdened her with dismal doubts. Tarrant had quarrelled with his friend. He had discovered that Sutherland was little better than a swindler. "I see that the fellow's professed energy was all sham. He is the laziest scamp imaginable; lazier even than his boozing old father. He schemes only to get money out of people; and his disappointment on finding that *I* have no money to lose, has shown itself at length in very gross forms. I find he is a gambler; there has just been a tremendous row between him and an American, whom he is said to have cheated at cards. Last year he was for several weeks in Mexico City, a place notorious for gambling, and there lost a large sum of money that didn't belong

to him." The upshot was that he could no longer advise Mr. Vawdrey to have anything to do with Sutherland. But he must not leave the Bahamas yet; that would be most unwise, as he was daily gathering most valuable information. Vawdrey might be induced to lend him a hundred pounds or so. But he would write again very soon.

It was the close of January when he dated his next letter. Vawdrey had sent him fifty pounds; this, however, was to include the cost of his return to England. "See, then, what I have decided. I shall make a hurried tour through the West Indian Islands, then cross to the States, and travel by land to New York or Boston, seeing all I can afford to on the way. If I have to come home as a steerage passenger, never mind; that, too, will be valuable experience." There followed many affectionate phrases, but Nancy's heart remained cold.

He wrote next from Washington, after six weeks' silence. Difficulties of which he would speak at length in another letter had caused him to postpone answering the two letters he had received. Nancy must never lose faith in him; his love was un-

shaken; before the birth of her child he would assuredly be back in England. Let her address to New York. He was well, but could not pretend to be very cheerful. However, courage! He had plans and hopes, of which she should soon hear.

After that, Nancy knew nothing of him, save that he was living in New York. He wrote two or three times, but briefly, always promising details in the next epistle. Then he ceased to correspond. Not even the announcement of the child's birth elicited a word from him. One subsequent letter had Nancy despatched; this unanswered, she would write no more.

She was herself surprised at the calmness with which she faced so dreadful a possibility as desertion by the man she had loved and married, the father of her baby. It meant, perhaps, that she could not believe such fate had really befallen her. Even in Tarrant's last short letter sounded a note of kindness, of truthfulness, incompatible, it seemed to her, with base cruelty. "I dreamt of you last night, dearest, and woke up with a heart that ached for your suffering." How could a man pen those

words, and be meditating dastardly behaviour to the woman he addressed? Was he ill, then? or had fatal accident befallen him? She feared such explanation only in her weakest moments. If, long ago, he could keep silence for six weeks at a time, why not now for months? As for the news she had sent him—does a man think it important that a little child has been born into the world? Likely enough that again he merely "postponed" writing. Of course he no longer loved her, say what he might; at most he thought of her with a feeling of compassion—not strong enough to overcome his dislike of exertion. He would come back—when it pleased him.

Nancy would not sully her mind by thinking that he might only return when her position made it worth his while. He was not a man of that stamp. Simply, he had ceased to care for her; and having no means of his own, whilst she was abundantly provided, he yielded to the temptation to hold aloof from a woman whose claim upon him grew burdensome. Her thoughts admitted no worse accusation than this. Did any grave ill befall her; if, for

instance, the fact of her marriage became known, and she were left helpless; her letter to New York would not be disregarded. To reflect thus signified a mental balance rare in women, and remarkable in one situated as Nancy was. She talked with her companion far less consistently, for talk served to relieve the oppression of her heart and mind.

When, next morning, Horace entered the sitting-room, brother and sister viewed each other with surprise. Neither was prepared for the outward change wrought in both by the past half-year. Nancy looked what she in truth had become, a matronly young woman, in uncertain health, and possessed by a view of life too grave for her years; Horace, no longer a mere lad, exhibited in sunken cheeks and eyes bright with an unhappy recklessness, the acquisition of experience which corrupts before it can mature. Moving to offer her lips, Nancy was checked by the young man's exclamation.

"What on earth has been the matter with you? I never saw any one so altered."

His voice, with its deepened note, and the modification of his very accent, due to novel circumstances,

checked the hearer's affectionate impulse. If not unfeeling, the utterance had nothing fraternal. Deeply pained, and no less alarmed by this warning of the curiosity her appearance would excite in all who knew her, Nancy made a faltering reply.

"Why should you seem astonished? You know very well I have had an illness."

"But what sort of illness? What caused it? You used always to be well enough."

"You had better go and talk to my medical attendant," said Nancy, in a cold, offended voice.

Horace resumed with irritability.

"Isn't it natural for me to ask such questions? You're not a bit like yourself. And what did you mean by telling me you were coming back at once, when I wanted to join you at Falmouth?"

"I meant to. But after all, I had to stay longer."

"Oh well, it's nothing to me."

They had not even shaken hands, and now felt no desire to correct the omission, which was at first involuntary. Horace seemed to have lost all the amiability of his nature; he looked about him with restless, excited eyes.

"Are you in a hurry?" asked his sister, head erect.

"No hurry that I know of.—You haven't heard what's been going on?"

"Where?"

"Of course it won't interest you. There's something about you I can't understand. Is it father's will that has spoilt your temper, and made you behave so strangely?"

"It is not *my* temper that's spoilt. And as for behaving strangely——." She made an effort to command herself. "Sit down, Horace, and let me know what is the matter with you. Why we should be unfriendly, I really can't imagine. I have suffered from ill health, that's all. I'm sorry I behaved in that way when you talked of coming to Falmouth; it wasn't meant as you seem to think. Tell me what you have to tell."

He could not take a reposeful attitude, but, after struggling with some reluctance, began to explain the agitation that beset him.

"Mrs. Damerel has done something I didn't think any woman would be capable of. For months she has been trying to ruin Fanny, and now it has

come—she has succeeded. She made no secret of wanting to break things off between her and me, but I never thought her plotting could go as far as this. Fanny has run away—gone to the Continent with a man Mrs. Damerel introduced to her."

"Perhaps they are married," said Nancy, with singular impulsiveness.

"Of course they're not. It's a fellow I knew to be a scoundrel the first time I set eyes on him. I warned Fanny against him, and I told Mrs. Damerel that I should hold her responsible if any harm came of the acquaintance she was encouraging between him and Fanny. She did encourage it, though she pretended not to. Her aim was to separate me and Fanny—she didn't care how."

He spoke in a high, vehement note; his cheeks flushed violently, his clenched fist quivered at his side.

"How do you know where she is gone?" Nancy asked.

"She as good as told her sister that she was going to Brussels with some one. Then one day she disappeared, with her luggage. And that fellow—

Mankelow 's his name—has gone too. He lived in the same boarding-house with Mrs. Damerel."

"That is all the evidence you have?"

"Quite enough," he replied bitterly.

"It doesn't seem so to me. But suppose you're right, what proof have you that Mrs. Damerel had anything to do with it? If she is our mother's sister —and you say there can be no doubt of it—I won't believe that she could carry out such a hateful plot as this."

"What does it matter who she is? I would swear fifty times that she has done it. You know very well, when you saw her, you disliked her at once You were right in that, and I was wrong."

"I can't be sure. Perhaps it was she that disliked me, more than I did her. For one thing, I don't believe that people make such plots. And what plotting was needed? Couldn't any one have told you what a girl like Fanny French would do if she lost her head among people of a higher class?"

"Then Mrs. Damerel must have foreseen it. That's just what I say. She pretended to be a friend to the girl, on purpose to ruin her."

"Have you accused her of it?"

"Yes, I have." His eyes flashed. Nancy marvelled at this fire, drawn from a gentle nature by what seemed to her so inadequate, so contemptible a cause. "Of course she denied it, and got angry with me; but any one could see she was glad of what had happened. There's an end between us, at all events. I shall never go to see her again; she's a woman who thinks of nothing but money and fashion. I dislike her friends, every one of them I've met. I told her that what she had done ought to be a punishable crime."

Nancy reflected, then said quietly:

"Whether you are right or wrong, I don't think you would have got any good from her. But will you tell me what you are going to do? I told you that I thought borrowing money only to live on it in idleness was very foolish."

Her brother stiffened his neck.

"You must allow me to judge for myself."

"But have you judged for yourself? Wasn't it by Mrs. Damerel's advice that you gave up business?"

"Partly. But I should have done it in any case."

"Have you any plans?"

"No, I haven't," he answered. "You can't expect a man to have plans whose life has been thoroughly upset."

Nancy, reminded of his youthfulness by the tone in which he called himself a "man," experienced a revival of natural feeling. Though revolting against the suggestion that a woman akin to them had been guilty of what her brother believed, she was glad to think that Fanny French had relinquished all legitimate claim upon him, and that his connection with "smart" society had come to an end. Obvious enough were the perils of his situation, and she, as elder sister, recognised a duty towards him; she softened her voice, and endeavoured to re-establish the confidence of old time. Impossible at once, though with resolution she might ultimately succeed. Horace, at present, was a mere compound of agitated and inflamed senses. The life he had been leading appeared in a vicious development of his previously harmless conceit and egoism. All his characteristics had turned out, as it were, the seamy side; and Nancy with difficulty preserved her

patience as he showed point after point of perverted disposition. The result of their talk was a careless promise from Horace that he would come to Grove Lane not seldomer than once a week.

He stayed only an hour, resisting Nancy's endeavour to detain him at least for the mid-day meal. To Mary he spoke formally, awkwardly, as though unable to accept her position in the house, and then made his escape like one driven by an evil spirit.

VII

With the clearing of the sky, Nancy's spirit grew lighter. She went about London, and enjoyed it after her long seclusion in the little Cornish town; enjoyed, too, her release from manifold restraints and perils. Her mental suffering had made the physical harder to bear; she was now recovering health of mind and body, and found with surprise that life had a new savour, independent of the timorous joy born with her child. Strangely, as it seemed to her, she grew conscious of a personal freedom not unlike what she had vainly desired in the days of petulant girlhood; the sense came only at moments, but was real and precious; under its influence she forgot everything abnormal in her situation, and—though without recognising this significance—knew the exultation of a woman who has justified her being.

A day or two of roaming at large gave her an

appetite for activity. Satisfied that her child was safe and well cared for, she turned her eyes upon the life of the world, and wished to take some part in it—not the part she had been wont to picture for herself before reality supplanted dreams. Horace's example on the one hand, and that of Jessica Morgan on the other, helped her to contemn mere social excitement and the idle vanity which formerly she styled pursuit of culture. Must there not be discoverable, in the world to which she had, or could obtain, access, some honest, strenuous occupation, which would hold in check her unprofitable thoughts and soothe her self-respect?

That her fraud, up to and beyond the crucial point, had escaped detection, must be held so wonderful, that she felt justified in an assurance of impunity. The narrowest escape of which she was aware had befallen only a few weeks ago. On the sixth day after the birth of the child, there was brought to her lodgings at Falmouth a note addressed to "Miss Lord." Letters bearing this address had arrived frequently, and by the people of the house were supposed to be for Mary Wood-

ruff, who went by the name of "Miss Lord," Nancy having disguised herself as "Mrs. Woodruff;" but they had always come by post, and the present missive must be from some acquaintance actually in the town. Nancy could not remember the handwriting. Breaking open the envelope as she lay in bed, she saw with alarm the signature "Luckworth Crewe." He was at Falmouth on business, Crewe wrote, and, before leaving London, he had ventured to ask Miss Lord's address from her brother, whom he casually met somewhere. Would Nancy allow him to see her, were it but for a minute or two? Earnestly he besought this favour. He desired nothing more than to see Miss Lord, and to speak with her in the way of an ordinary acquaintance. After all this time, she had, he felt sure, forgiven his behaviour at their last meeting. Only five minutes of conversation——

All seemed lost. Nancy was silent in despair. But Mary faced the perilous juncture, and, to all appearances, averted catastrophe. She dressed herself, and went straight to the hotel where Crewe had put up, and where he awaited an answer.

Having made known who she was, she delivered a verbal message: Miss Lord was not well enough to see any one to-day, and, in any case, she could not have received Mr. Crewe; she begged him to pardon her; before long, they might perhaps meet in London, but, for her own part, she wished Mr. Crewe would learn to regard her as a stranger. Of course there followed a dialogue; and Mary, seeming to speak with all freedom, convinced Crewe that his attempt to gain an interview was quite hopeless. She gave him much information concerning her mistress—none of it false, but all misleading—and in the end had to resist an offer of gold coins, pressed upon her as a bribe for her good word with Nancy.

The question was—had Crewe been content to leave Falmouth without making inquiries of other people? To a man of his experience, nothing was easier than such investigation. But, with other grounds of anxiety, this had ceased to disturb Nancy's mind. Practically, she lived as though all danger were at an end. The task immediately before her seemed very simple; she had only to

resume the old habits, and guard against thoughtless self-betrayal in her everyday talk. The chance that any one would discover her habit of visiting a certain house at the distance of several miles from Camberwell, was too slight for consideration.

She wrote to Mr. Barmby, senior, informing him of her return, in improved health, to Grove Lane, and thanking him once more for his allowing her to make so long a stay in Cornwall. If he wished to see her, she would be at home at any time convenient to him. In a few days the old gentleman called, and for an hour or two discoursed well-meaning commonplace. He was sorry to observe that she looked a trifle pale; in the autumn she must go away again, and to a more bracing locality—he would suggest Broadstairs, which had always exercised the most beneficial effect upon his own health. Above all, he begged her to refrain from excessive study, most deleterious to a female constitution. Then he asked questions about Horace, and agreed with Nancy that the young man ought to decide upon some new pursuit, if he had definitely abandoned the old; lack of steady occupation was most

deleterious at his age. In short, Mr. Barmby rather apologised for his guardianship than sought to make assertion of it; and Nancy, by a few feminine devices, won a better opinion than she had hitherto enjoyed. On the day following, Samuel Barmby and his sisters waited upon Miss Lord; all three were surprisingly solemn, and Samuel talked for the most part of a "paragraph" he had recently read, which stated that the smoke of London, if properly utilised, would be worth a vast sum of money. "The English are a wasteful people," was his conclusion; to which Nancy assented with a face as grave as his own.

Not a little to her astonishment, the next day brought her a long letter in Samuel's fair commercial hand. It began by assuring her that the writer had no intention whatever of troubling her with the renewal of a suit so firmly rejected on more than one occasion; he wished only to take this opportunity of her return from a long absence to express the abiding nature of his devotion, which years hence would be unbroken as to-day. He would never distress her by unwelcome demon-

strations; possibly she might never again hear from his lips what he now committed to paper. Enough for him, Samuel, to cherish a love which could not but exalt and purify him, which was indeed, "in the words of Shakespeare, 'a liberal education.'" In recompense of his self-command, he only besought that Miss Lord would allow him, from time to time, to look upon her face, and to converse with her of intellectual subjects. "A paper," he added, "which I read last week at our Society, is now being printed—solely at the request of friends. The subject is one that may interest you, 'The Influence of Culture on Morality.' I beg that you will accept the copy I shall have the pleasure of sending you, and that, at some future date, you will honour me with your remarks thereon."

Which epistle Nancy cruelly read aloud to Mary, with a sprightliness and sarcastic humour not excelled by her criticisms of "the Prophet" in days gone by. Mary did not quite understand, but she saw in this behaviour a proof of the wonderful courage with which Nancy faced her troubles.

A week had passed, and no news from America.

"I don't care," said Nancy. "Really and truly, I don't care. Yesterday I never once thought of it —never once looked for the postman. The worst is over now, and he may write or not, as he likes."

Mary felt sure there would be an explanation of such strange silence.

"Only illness or death would explain it so as to make me forgive him. But he isn't ill. He is alive, and enjoying himself."

There was no bitterness in her voice. She seemed to have outlived all sorrows and anxieties relative to her husband.

Mary suggested that it was always possible to call at Mr. Vawdrey's house and make inquiries of Mrs. Baker.

"No, I won't do that. Other women would do it, but I won't. So long as I mayn't tell the truth, I should only set them talking about me; you know how. I see the use, now, of having a good deal of pride. I'm only sorry for those letters I wrote when I wasn't in my senses. If he writes now, I shall not answer. He shall know that I am as independent

as he is. What a blessed thing it is for a woman to have money of her own! It's because most women haven't, that they're such poor, wretched slaves."

"If he knew you were in want," said her companion, "he would never have behaved like this."

"Who can say?—No, I won't pretend to think worse of him than I do. You're quite right. He wouldn't leave his wife to starve. It's certain that he hears about me from some one. If I were found out, and lost everything, some one would let him know. But I wouldn't accept support from him, now. He might provide for his child, but he shall never provide for me, come what may—never!"

It was in the evening, after dinner. Nancy had a newspaper, and was reading the advertisements that offered miscellaneous employment.

"What do you think this can be?" she asked, looking up after a long silence. "'To ladies with leisure. Ladies desiring to add to their income by easy and pleasant work should write'"—&c. &c.

"I've no faith in those kind of advertisements," said Mary.

"No; of course it's rubbish. There's no easy and pleasant way of earning money; only silly people expect it. And I don't want anything easy or pleasant. I want honest hard work. Not work with my hands—I'm not suited for that, but real work, such as lots of educated girls are doing. I'm quite willing to pay for learning it; most likely I shall have to. Who could I write to for advice?"

They were sitting upstairs, and so did not hear a visitor's knock that sounded at the front door. The servant came and announced that Miss French wished to see Miss Lord.

"Miss French? Is it the younger Miss French?"

The girl could not say; she had repeated the name given to her. Nancy spoke to her friend in a low voice.

"It may be Fanny. I don't think Beatrice would call, unless it's to say something about her sister. She had better come up here, I suppose?"

Mary retired, and in a few moments there entered, not Fanny, but Beatrice. She was civilly, not cordially, welcomed. Her eye, as she spoke the

words natural at such a meeting, dwelt with singular persistency on Nancy's face.

"You are quite well again?"

"Quite, thank you."

"It has been a troublesome illness, I'm afraid."

Nancy hesitated, detecting a peculiarity of look and tone which caused her uneasiness.

"I had a sort of low fever—was altogether out of sorts—'below par,' the doctor said. Are you all well?"

Settling herself comfortably, as if for a long chat, Beatrice sketched with some humour the course of recent events in De Crespigny Park.

"I'm out of it all, thank goodness. I prefer a quiet life. Then there's Fanny. You know all about *her*, I dare say?"

"Nothing at all," Nancy replied distantly.

"But your brother does. Hasn't he been to see you yet?"

Nancy was in no mood to submit to examination.

"Whatever I may have heard, I know nothing about Fanny's affairs, and, really, they don't concern me."

"I should have thought they might," rejoined the other, smiling absently. "She has run away from her friends"—a pause—"and is living somewhere rather mysteriously"—another pause—"and I think it more than likely that she's *married*."

The listener preserved a face of indifference, though the lines were decidedly tense.

"Doesn't that interest you?" asked Beatrice, in the most genial tone.

"If it's true," was the blunt reply.

"You mean, you are glad if she has married somebody else, and not your brother?"

"Yes, I am glad of that."

Beatrice mused, with wrinkles at the corner of her eye. Then, fixing Nancy with a very keen look, she said quietly:

"I'm not sure that she's married. But if she isn't, no doubt she ought to be."

On Nancy's part there was a nervous movement, but she said nothing. Her face grew rigid.

"I have an idea who the man is," Miss French pursued; "but I can't be quite certain. One has heard of similar cases. Even *you* have, no doubt?"

"I don't care to talk about it," fell mechanically from Nancy's lips, which had lost their colour.

"But I've come just for that purpose."

The eyes of mocking scrutiny would not be resisted. They drew a gaze from Nancy, and then a haughty exclamation.

"I don't understand you. Please say whatever you have to say in plain words."

"Don't be angry with me. You were always too ready at taking offence. I mean it in quite a friendly way; you can trust me; I'm not one of the women that chatter. Don't you think you ought to sympathise a little with Fanny? She has gone to Brussels, or somewhere about there. But she *might* have gone down into Cornwall—to a place like Falmouth. It was quite far enough off—don't you think?"

Nancy was stricken mute, and her countenance would no longer disguise what she suffered.

"No need to upset yourself," pursued the other in smiling confidence. "I mean no harm. I'm curious, that's all; just want to know one or two

things. We're old friends, and whatever you tell me will go no further, depend upon that."

"What do you mean?"

The words came from lips that moved with difficulty. Beatrice, still smiling, bent forward.

"Is it any one that I know?"

"Any one—? Who—?"

"That made it necessary for you to go down into Cornwall, my dear."

Nancy heaved a sigh, the result of holding her breath too long. She half rose, and sat down again. In a torture of flashing thoughts, she tried to determine whether Beatrice had any information, or spoke conjecturally. Yet she was able to discern that either case meant disaster; to have excited the suspicions of such a person, was the same as being unmasked; an inquiry at Falmouth, and all would at once be known.

No, not all. Not the fact of her marriage; not the name of her husband.

Driven to bay by such an opponent, she assumed an air wholly unnatural to her—one of cynical effrontery.

"You had better say what you know."

"All right. Who was the father of the child born not long ago?"

"That's asking a question."

"And telling what I know at the same time. It saves breath."

Beatrice laughed; and Nancy, become a mere automaton, laughed too.

"That's more like it," said Miss French cheerfully. "Now we shall get on together. It's very shocking, my dear. A person of my strict morality hardly knows how to look you in the face. Perhaps you had rather I didn't try. Very well. Now tell me all about it, comfortably. I have a guess, you know."

"What is it?"

"Wait a little. I don't want to be laughed at. Is it any one I know?"

"You have never seen him, and I dare say never heard of him."

Beatrice stared incredulously.

"I wouldn't tell fibs, Nancy."

"I'm telling the truth."

"It's very queer, then."

"Who did you think——?"

The speaking automaton, as though by defect of mechanism, stopped short.

"Look straight at me. I shouldn't have been surprised to hear that it was Luckworth Crewe."

Nancy's defiant gaze, shame in anguish shielding itself with the front of audacity, changed to utter astonishment. The blood rushed back into her cheeks; she voiced a smothered exclamation of scorn.

"The father of my child? Luckworth Crewe?"

"I thought it not impossible," said Beatrice, plainly baffled.

"It was like you." Nancy gave a hard laugh. "You judged me by yourself. Have another guess!"

Surprised both at the denial, so obviously true, and at the unexpected tone with which Nancy was meeting her attack, Miss French sat meditative.

"It's no use guessing," she said at length, with complete good-humour. "I don't know of any one else."

"Very well. You can't expect me to tell you."

"As you please. It's a queer thing; I felt pretty sure. But if you're telling the truth, I don't care a rap who the man is."

"You can rest in peace," said Nancy, with careless scorn.

"Any way of convincing me, except by saying it?"

"Yes. Wait here a moment."

She left the room, and returned with the note which Crewe had addressed to her from the hotel at Falmouth.

"Read that, and look at the date."

Beatrice studied the document, and in silence canvassed the possibilities of trickery. No; it was genuine evidence. She remembered the date of Crewe's journey to Falmouth, and, in this new light, could interpret his quarrelsome behaviour after he had returned. Only the discovery she had since made inflamed her with a suspicion which till then had never entered her mind.

"Of course, you didn't let him see you?"

"Of course not."

"All right. Don't suppose I wanted to insult you. I took it for granted you were married. Of

course it happened before your father's death, and his awkward will obliged you to keep it dark?"

Again Nancy was smitten with fear. Deeming Miss French an unscrupulous enemy, she felt that to confess marriage was to abandon every hope. Pride appealed to her courage, bade her, here and now, have done with the ignoble fraud; but fear proved stronger. She could not face exposure, and all that must follow.

She spoke coldly, but with down-dropt eyes.

"I am not married."

The words cost her little effort. Practically, she had uttered them before; her overbold replies were an admission of what, from the first, she supposed Beatrice to charge her with—not secret wedlock, but secret shame. Beatrice, however, had adopted that line of suggestion merely from policy, hoping to sting the proud girl into avowal of a legitimate union; she heard the contrary declaration with fresh surprise.

"I should never have believed it of Miss Lord," was her half ingenuous, half sly comment.

Nancy, beginning to realise what she had done, sat with head bent, speechless.

"Don't distress yourself," continued the other.

"Not a soul will hear of it from me. If you like to tell me more, you can do it quite safely; I'm no blabber, and I'm not a rascal. I should never have troubled to make inquiries about you, down yonder, if it hadn't been that I suspected Crewe. That's a confession, you know; take it in return for yours."

Nancy was tongue-tied. A full sense of her humiliation had burst upon her. She, who always condescended to Miss French, now lay smirched before her feet, an object of vulgar contempt.

"What does it matter?" went on Beatrice genially. "You've got over the worst, and very cleverly. Are you going to marry him when you come in for your money?"

"Perhaps—I don't know——"

She faltered, no longer able to mask in impudence, and hardly restraining tears. Beatrice ceased to doubt, and could only wonder with amusement.

"Why shouldn't we be good friends, Nancy? I tell you, I am no rascal. I never thought of making anything out of your secret—not I. If it had been Crewe, marriage or no marriage—well, I might have shown my temper. I believe I have a pretty rough

side to my tongue; but I'm a good enough sort if you take me in the right way. Of course I shall never rest for wondering who it can be——"

She paused, but Nancy did not look up, did not stir.

"Perhaps you'll tell me some other time. But there's one thing I should like to ask about, and it's for your own good that I should know it. When Crewe was down there, don't you think he tumbled to anything?"

Perplexed by unfamiliar slang, Nancy raised her eyes.

"Found out anything, you mean? I don't know."

"But you must have been in a jolly fright about it?"

"I gave it very little thought," replied Nancy, able now to command a steady voice, and retiring behind a manner of frigid indifference.

"No? Well, of course I understand that better now I know that you can't lose anything. Still, it is to be hoped he didn't go asking questions. By-the-bye, you may as well just tell me: he has asked you to marry him, hasn't he?"

"Yes."

Beatrice nodded.

"Doesn't matter. You needn't be afraid, even if he got hold of anything. He isn't the kind of man to injure you out of spite."

"I fear him as little as I fear you."

"Well, as I've told you, you needn't fear me at all. I like you better for this—a good deal better than I used to. If you want any help, you know where to turn; I'll do whatever I can for you; and I'm in the way of being useful to my friends. You're cut up just now; it's natural. I won't bother you any longer. But just remember what I've said. If I can be of any service, don't be above making use of me."

Nancy heard without heeding; for an anguish of shame and misery once more fell upon her, and seemed to lay waste her soul.

END OF VOL. II.

Printed by BALLANTYNE, HANSON & Co.
Edinburgh and London