

A Sheaf of Corn

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A SHEAF OF CORN

BY MARY E. MANN

"I WENT A PILGRIM THROUGH THE UNIVERSE,
AND COMMUNED OFT WITH STRANGERS AS I STRAYED,
IN EVERY CORNER SOME ADVANTAGE FOUND,
AND FROM EACH SHEAF OF CORN I DREW A BLADE."

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A SHEAF OF CORN

WOMEN O' DULDITCH

Dinah Brome stood in the village shop, watching, with eyes keen to detect the slightest discrepancy in the operation, the weighing of her weekly parcels of grocery.

She was a strong, wholesome-looking woman of three- or four-and-forty, with a clean, red skin, clear eyes, dark hair, crinkling crisply beneath her sober, respectable hat. All her clothes were sober and respectable, and her whole mien. No one would have guessed from it that she had not a shred of character to her back.

The knowledge of this incontrovertible fact did not influence the demeanour of the shop-woman towards her. There was not better pay in the village, nor a more constant customer than Dinah Brome. In such circumstances, Mrs Littleproud was not the woman to throw stones.

"They tell me as how Depper's wife ain't a-goin' to get over this here sickness she've got," she said, tucking in the edges of the whitey-brown paper upon the half-pound of moist sugar taken from

the scales. "The doctor, he ha'n't put a name to her illness, but 'tis one as'll carry her off, he say."

"A quarter pound o' butter," Dinah unmovedly said. "The best, please. I don't fancy none o' that that ha' got the taste o' the shop in it."

"Doctor, he put his hid in at the door this afternoon," Mrs Littleproud went on; "he'd got his monkey up, the old doctor had! 'Tis a rank shame,' he say, 'there ain't none o' these here lazy women o' Dulditch with heart enough to go to help that poor critter in her necessity,' he say."

"Ler'm help her hisself," said Mrs Brome, strong in her indifference. "A couple o' boxes o' matches, Mrs Littleproud; and you can gi' me the odd ha'penny in clo' balls for the disgestion."

"You should ha' heered 'm run on! 'Where be that Dinah Brome?' he say, 'that ha' showed herself helpful in other folks' houses. Wha's she a-doin' of, that she can't do a neighbour's part here?'"

"And you telled 'm she was a-mindin' of 'er own business, I hope?" Mrs Brome suggested, in calmest unconcern.

"I'll tell you what I did say, Dinah, bor," the shop-woman said, transferring the sticky clove-balls from their bottle to her own greasy palm. "'Dinah Brome, sir,' I say, 'is the most industrousest woman in Dulditch; arly and late,' I say, 'she's at wark; and as for her floors—you might eat off of 'em.'" She screwed the half-dozen hard red balls in their bit of paper, and stowed them lightly in the customer's basket. "That the lot this week, Dinah?"

Dinah removed her basket from counter to arm. "What'd he got to say for hisself, then?" she asked.

"'A woman like that can allust make time,' the old doctor he say. 'Tell her to make time to help this here pore sufferin' woman.' I'm a-sayin' it as he said it, Dinah. I ain't a-hintin' of it myself, bor."

"Ler'm tell me, hisself, an old interfarin' old fule, and he'll ha' the rough side o' my tongue," the customer said; and nodded an unsmiling good-afternoon, and went on her way.

Her way led her past the cottage of the woman of whom they had spoken. Depper's cottage, indeed, was the first in the row of which Dinah's was the last—a half-dozen two-roomed tenements, living-room below, bedroom above, standing with their backs to the road, from which they were divided by no garden, nor even so much as a narrow path. The lower window of the two allotted to each house was about four or five feet from the ground, and was of course the window of the living-room. Mrs Brome, as she passed that of the first house in the row, suddenly yielded to the impulse to stop and look within.

A small interior, with furniture much too big for it; a huge chest of drawers, of oak with brass fittings; a broken-down couch as big as a bed, covered with a dingy shawl, a man's greatcoat, a red flannel petticoat; a table cumbered with the remains of wretched meals never cleared away, and the poor cooking utensils of impoverished, shifty housekeeping.

The woman of whom they had been speaking stood with her back to the window. A stooping, drooping skeleton of a woman, who, with weak, shaking hands, kneaded some dough in which a few currants were stuck, before laying it on a black-looking baking tin.

"A fine time o' day to bake his fourses cake!" the woman outside commented, reaching on tiptoe, the better to look in at the window.

The tin having its complement of cakes, the sick woman essayed to carry it to the oven. But its weight was too much for her; it hung limply in her weak grasp; before the oven was reached the cakes were on the ragged carpet of the hearth.

"God in heaven!" ejaculated the woman looking in.

She watched while the poor woman within dropped on all-fours, feebly trying to gather up the cakes spreading themselves slowly over the dirty floor.

"If that don't make me sick!" said Dinah Brome to herself as she turned and went on her way.

The cottage of Dinah Brome, distant from that of Depper's wife by a score or so of yards, was, in its domestic economy, as removed from it as the North Pole from the South. Small wonder that Depper—his name was William Kittle, a fact of which the neighbourhood made no practical use, which he himself only recalled with an effort—preferred to the dirt, untidiness and squalor of his own abode the spick-and-span cleanliness of Dinah Brome's. Small wonder that in this atmosphere of wholesomeness and comfort, he chose to spend the hours of the Sabbath during which the public-house was closed; and other hours. Small wonder, looking at the fine, capable figure of the woman, now bustling about with teapot and cups, he should esteem Mrs Brome personally above the slatternly skeleton at his own hearth.

Having made a cup of tea and cut a couple of slices of bread-and-butter, the owner of the fresh-scrubbed bricks, the fresh polished furniture, the dazzlingly white hearth, turned her back on her household gods, and, plate and cup in hands, betook herself, by way of the uneven bricked passage separating the row of houses from their rows of gardens at the back, to the house of the wife of Depper.

"I swore I wouldn't," she said to herself as she went along; "but I'm dinged if the sight o' Depper's old woman a-crawlin' arter them mamucked up bits o' dough ha'n't tarned my stomach!"

She knocked at the door with the toe of her boot, her hands being full, and receiving no answer, opened it and went in.

Depper's old woman had fallen, a miserable heap of bones and dingy clothing, upon the broken-down couch, and had fainted there.

"I'd suner 'twas anyone in the world than you a-waitin' on me like this," she said, when, consciousness having returned during the ministrations of the other woman, her weary eyes opened upon the healthy face above her.

"And the las' time you telled me to walk out o' your house, I swore I'd never set fut in it again," Mrs Brome made answer. "But I ha' swallered worse things in my time than my own wards, I make no doubt; and you ha' come to a pass, Car'line Kittle, when you ha' got to take what you can git and be thankful."

"Pass? I ha' come to a pass, indeed!" the sick woman moaned. "You're wholly right there, bor; wholly right."

"So now you ha' got to drink this here cup o' hot tea I ha' brought ye; and let me help ye upstairs to yer bed as quick as may be."

"When I ha' baked Depper's fourses cake, and sent it off by 'Meelyer's little gal—she ha' lent her to me to go back and forth to the harvest-field, 'Meelyer have—I kin go," the wife said; "not afore,"

hiccupping loudly over the tea she tried to drink; "not afore—not afore! Oh, how I wish I could, bor; how I wish I could!"

"You're a-goin', this instant minute," the masterful Dinah declared.

The other had not the strength to resist. "I'm wholly done," she murmured, helplessly, "wholly done at last."

"My! How ha' you got up these here stairs alone?" Dinah, having half-dragged, half-carried the feeble creature to the top, demanded of her, wiping her own brow.

"Crawled, all-fours." Depper's wife panted out the explanation. "And to git down 'em i' the mornin's—oh, the Lord alone knows how I ha' got down 'em i' th' mornin's. Thankful I'd be to know I'd never ha' to come down 'em agin."

"You never will," said Mrs Brome.

"I don't want to trouble you, no fudder. I can fend for myself now," the poor woman said, when at length she lay at peace between the sheets; her face bathed, and the limp grimy fingers; the scant dry hair smoothed decently down the fallen temples. "I'd rather it'd ha' been another woman that had done me the sarvice, but I ain't above bein' thankful to you, for all that. All I'll ask of ye now, Dinah Brome, is that ye'll have an eye to Depper's fourses cake in th' oven, and see that 'Meelyer's gal take it and his home-brew, comf'table, to th' field for 'm."

Dinah, having folded the woman's clothes, spread them for additional warmth upon the poor bed-covering. "Don't you worrit no more about Depper," she said, "Strike me, you're the one that want seem' to now, Car'line."

The slow tears oozed beneath Car'line's closed lids. "I kin fend for myself if Depper ain't put about," she said.

When Depper returned, with the shades of night, from the harvest-field, he might hardly have known his own living-room. The dirty rags of carpet had disappeared, the bricks were scrubbed, the dangerous-looking heap of clothing had been removed from the sofa, and a support added to its broken leg; the fireside chairs, the big chest of drawers, redolent of the turpentine with which they had been rubbed, shone in the candlelight; the kettle sang on the bars by the side of a saucepan of potatoes boiling for the meal. It was the sight of Dinah Brome at the head of affairs, however, which drew his attention from these details.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" Depper said, and paused, door in hand, on his own freshly-washed step.

"You wipe your feet, afore you come in," said Mrs Brome, masterful as ever. "Here's yer supper ready. I ain't a-goin' to ate it along of you, Depper; but I ha' got a ward or two to say to you afore I go."

Depper entered, closed the door behind him, sat down, hat on head, in the freshly-polished chair by the hearth; he fixed his eyes, his mouth fallen open, on the fine form of Dinah standing before him, with hands on hips, arms akimbo, and the masterful gleam in her eyes.

"Depper, yer old woman's a-dyin'" Dinah said.

"Marcy on us! Ye don't tell me that! Kind o' piney, like, fer the las' six months, my missus ha' bin', but——"

"Now she's a-dyin'. D'ye think I ha'n't got the right use o' my senses, arter all these years? Wheer ha' yer own eyes been? Look at 'er! No better'n a skeercrow of a woman, under yer very nose! She's a-dyin', I tell ye. And, Depper, what du I come here to find? I find a bare cupboard and a bare board. Not a mite o' nouragement i' th' house, sech as a pore suff'rin' woman like Car'line's in need of."

"Car'line's a pore manager, as right well you know, Dinah. Ha'n't I telled ye——?"

"You ha' telled me—yes. But have you played th' husban's part? You ha' telled me—and I ha' put the fault o' yer poverty home on ter yer pore missus's shoulders. But since I been here, I ha' seen 'er crawlin' on 'er han's and knees to wait on you, wi' yer fourses i' th' harvest-field. I ha' heered her manderin' on, 'let things be comf'table for Depper,' and let her fend for herself. And I can see with half an eye the bute is on t'other fut, Depper. And this here is what I'm a-goin' ter say to you, and don't you make no mistake about it: I'm yer wife's woman while she want me, and none o' yours."

Depper was a small, well-made man, with a curling, grizzled head, and a well-featured face. It is possible that in his youth the word 'dapper' may have applied to him; a forgotten fact which perhaps accounted for his nickname. He gazed with an open mouth and puzzled, blear eyes at the woman before him.

"You and me," he said slowly, with an utterance suspiciously slow and thick—"you and me ha' kep' comp'ny, so to speak, fer a sight o' years, Dinah. We never had no fallin's out, this mander, afore, as I can call ter mind. I don't rightly onderstan' what you ha' got agin me—come ter put it into wards."

"I ha' got this agin ye," the valiant Dinah said: "that you ha' nouraged yer own inside and let your missus's go empty. You ha' got too much drink aboard ye, now, an' her fit ter die for the want of a drop o' sperrits. And I ha' got this ter say: that we ha' come to a pass when I ha' got to make ch'ice twixt you and yer old woman. Arter wha's come and gone, we t'ree can't hob an' nob, as ye may say, together. My ch'ice is made, then, and this is how I ha' fixed it up. When yer day's wark is done, and you come home, I go out o' your house. Sune as yer up an' away i' th' mornin', I come in and ridd up yer missus and wait on 'er, while the woman's in need of me."

Whether this plan met with Depper's approval or not, Dinah Brome did not wait to see. "For Car'line's peace o' mind, arter wha's come and gone, 'tis th' only way," she said to herself and to him; and by it he had to abide.

It was not for many weeks. The poor unlovely wife, lying in the dismantled four-poster in the only bedroom, was too far gone to benefit by the 'nouragement' Mrs Brome contrived to administer. The sixpenn'orths of brandy Depper, too late relenting, spared from the sum he had hitherto expended on his own beer—public-house brandy, poisonous stuff, but accredited by the labouring population of Dulditch with all but magical restorative powers—for once failed in its effect. Daily more of a skeleton, hourly feebler and feebler, grew Depper's old woman; clinging, for all that, desperately to life and the hope of recovery for the sake of Depper himself.

"Let go the things of this life, lay hold on those of Eternity," the clergyman said, solemnly reproving her for her worldly state of mind. "Remember that there is no one in this world whose life is indispensable to the scheme of it. Try to think more humbly of yourself, my poor friend, less regretfully of the world you are hurrying from. Fix your eyes on the heavenly prospect. Try to join with me more heartily in the prayers for the dying."

She listened to them, making no response, with slow tears falling from shut lids to the pillow.

"'Tain't for myself I'm a-pinin', 'tis for Depper," she said, the parson being gone.

"All the same, Car'line," Mrs Brome said, sharply admonishing, "I'd marmar a ward now and agin for myself, as the reverend ha' been advisin' of ye, if I was you. Depper he can look arter hisself; his time for prayin' ain't, so ter say, come yet. Yours is. I should like to hear a 'Lord help me,' now and agin from yer lips, when I tarn ye in the bed. I don't think but what yu'd be the better for it, pore critter. Your time's a-gettin' short, and 'tis best ter go resigned."

"I cud go resigned if 'tweren't for Depper," the dying woman made her moan.

"I can't think what he'll du all alone in th' house and me gone!" she often whimpered. "A man can't fend for 'isself, like a woman can. They ha'n't the know ter du it. Depper, he ain't no better'n a child about makin' the kettle bile, and sechlike. It'll go hard, me bein' put out o' th' way, wi' Depper."

"Sarve 'm right," Mrs Brome always stoically said. "He ha' been a bad man to you, Car'line. I don't know whu should speak to that if you and me don't, bor."

"He ha'n't so much as laid a finger on me since I was ill," Car'line said, making what defence for the absent man she could.

"All the same, when you're a-feelin' wholly low agin, jes' you say to yourself, 'Th' Lord help me!' 'Tis only dacent, you a dyin' woman, to do it. When ye ha'n't got the strength ter say it, I'll go on my knees and say it for ye, come to that, Car'line," the notorious wrongdoer promised.

They sent for Depper to the White Hart to come home and see his wife die.

"I ain't, so ter say, narvish, bein' alone with 'er, and would as lief see the pore sufferin' critter draw her las' breath as not, but I hold 'tis dacent for man and wife to be together, come to th' finish; an' so I ha' sent for ye," Mrs Brome told him.

Depper shed as many tears over his old woman as would have been expected from the best husband in the world; and Car'line let her dying gaze rest on him with as much affection, perhaps, as if he had indeed been that ideal person.

"There'll be money a-comin' in fro' th' club," were almost her last words to him. She was speaking of the burial-club, into which she had always contrived to pay the necessary weekly pence; she knew it to be the surest consolation she could offer him.

Depper had made arrangements already for the payment of the eleven pounds from the burial-club; he had drunk a pint or two extra, daily, for the last week, the innkeeper being willing to trust him, in consideration of the expected windfall. The excitement of this handling of sudden wealth, and the dying of his wife, and the extra drink combined, completely upset his mental equilibrium. In the first moments of his widower-hood he was prostrate with emotion.

Dragged downstairs by the strong arm of Dinah Brome, he subsided into the chair on the hearth, opposite that for ever empty one of his old woman's; and with elbows on knees and head on hand he hiccoughed and moaned and wept aloud.

Above, Dinah Brome and that old woman who had a reputation in Dulditch for the laying-out of corpses, decked the poor cold body in such warmth of white flannelette, and such garniture of snipped-out frilling as, alive, Car'line Kittle could never have hoped to attain to.

These last duties achieved, Dinah descended, her arms full of blankets and pillows, no longer necessary above. These, with much banging and shaking, she spread upon the downstairs couch, indicating to the still weeping Depper it was there he was expected to pass the night.

"Bor, you may well blubber!" she said to him, with a kind of comfortable scorn of him and his sorrow. "You 'ont ketch me a-dryin' yer tears for ye, and so I tell ye flat. A crule husban' yu ha' been as any woman ever had. If ever there was a wife who was kep' short, and used hard, that was yer wife, Depper, my man! Bad you ha' been to her that's gone to 'er account, in all ways; who should know that better'n me, I'll ask ye? An' if at las' 'tis come home to ye, sarve ye wholly right. Tha's all the comfort ye'll get from me, bor."

"Stop along of me!" Depper cried, as, her work being finished, she moved to the door. "'Taint right as I should be left here alone; and me feelin' that low, and a'most dazed with affliction."

"Tha's how you've a right to feel," the stern woman said, unmoved by his tears.

"I keep a-thinkin' of wha's layin' up above theer, Dinah."

"Pity you di'n't think on 'er more in 'er lifetime."

"'Taint nat'ral as I should be left wholly alone with a dead woman. 'Taint a nat'ral thing, I'm a-sayin', for me to du, Dinah, ter pass the night alone along o' my old missus's corp."

"Bor, 'taint the fust onnat'ral thing you ha' done i' your life," Mrs Brome said; and went out and shut the door.

An hour or so later Depper opened it, and going hurriedly past the intervening cottages, knocked stealthily upon the door of Dinah Brome.

She looked out upon him presently from her bedroom window, her dark, crinkled hair rough from the pillow, a shawl pulled over her nightgown.

"Whu's that a-distarbin' o' me, as ha'n't had a night's rest for a week, at this time o' night?" she demanded sharply.

"It's me; Depper," the man's voice answered, whisperingly. "Le' me in, Dinah. I daren't be alone along of 'er no longer. I ha' only got you, Dinah, now my old woman's gone! Le' me in!"

"You're a rum un ter call yerself a man and a husban'—you are!" Dinah Brome ejaculated; but she came downstairs and opened her door.

CLOMAYNE'S CLERK

Into the stinging sleet and rain-laden winds of the March morning there emerged from the door of a physician in Harley Street a boy of seventeen. He was slightly built, with stooping shoulders, and, meagre of proportions as he was, was protected from the cruel weather by an overcoat much too small. As he faced the biting wind, and "all the vapoury turbulence of heaven," the dusky pallor of his skin took on a bluey tinge, he shivered and trembled in the grim grasp of the storm.

A few yards from the door a child, dressed in a long, cheap mackintosh, and carrying within a strap slung over her shoulder a collection of school books and papers, awaited him.

Into the lustrous dark eyes of the youth she looked, asking with her anxious blue ones a question she did not put in words; for a minute he did not answer.

"Come under my umbrella," she said, as they walked on together. "And turn up the collar of your coat, Peter. Didn't he have a fire for you?" she asked, with a distrustful glance in the direction of that great physician whose portals the youth had just quitted.

"There was a roaring fire," Peter said. "It isn't the cold so much—it's the inside of me that's shivering. Cicely, it's going to be no use. He doesn't mean to pass me."

Cicely, a fairly well-grown girl of fourteen, with straight thin legs, straight, thick-hanging, dark hair, a straight, serious face, came to a stop on the wet pavement. Answering to a tug upon his coat-sleeve, the youth stopped too.

"He must!" she said. "You shouldn't have left him. You should have *made* him, Peter." The tears came into her eyes and her lip shook. "Oh, Peter, he will—he will!"

"He spotted that place on my throat," Peter said, with dejection.

"I told you to tie a handkerchief over it!"

"Handkerchief? I should think I did! He told me three times before I took it off. He wouldn't have so much as a rag on me. 'What's this?' says he. 'A little trouble I had a year or so ago, with a gland that swelled,' says I. 'It had to be cut, and has been as right as rain ever since.' Just in that offhand way, Cicely. Quite brisk and cheerful. 'Tubercular, eh?' says he, very soft and thoughtful-like. And I knew it was all up with me."

"You should have told him it wasn't!" Cicely said, tearfully impatient of him. "Oh, if I'd been there——!"

"Don't you be afraid! I told him fast enough, or tried to, but he stopped me. 'That'll do, thank you,' says he. 'I form my own opinion.' He wouldn't listen."

"Did you stand like that?" Cicely demanded, with a condemning glance at the stooping, shivering figure beneath the umbrella; "or did you hold your head up and throw your shoulders back, and push out your chest as I told you?"

"I stood up as brave as a lion," the young man assured her, his teeth chattering. "I yarned to him about how fond I was of athletics and swimming, how many miles I could walk at a stretch. Oh, I wasn't going to lose the berth for the want of a little gas. Only—" he stopped and sadly shook his head; "he'd made up his mind," he went on in a drooping tone. "He'd made it up as soon as he looked at me. 'Keep on with your walking; live in the open air,' he said. 'You're not fitted for the office-stool. Stooping all day over a desk would be about the worst thing you could do. Thank you. That's all. Good-morning.'"

"And you came away? You shouldn't have come away! You should have told him what it is to you. What you will have to put up with if you can't get the berth. You should have said, 'You're taking the bread out of my mouth, you're stealing the coat off my back. It's life and death to me.' You should have said that, and made him hear. And you came away!"

Peter looked back upon that action, sorrowfully considering it. "I thought it very affable of him to shake hands," he said, "but he had a very final way of doing it. And, besides, I didn't care to make a tale of my private affairs, and seem to cringe. I didn't want him to think——"

"What does it matter about *him*?" Cicely demanded, with scorn. "Do we care what *he* thinks? Oh, Peter, go back to him, dear; do—do go back. Tell him he *must* pass you. Tell him it's your chance, your only—only one. And how you've tried and tried—and this is the only one; and how cruel everyone is at home—just as if it was your fault that no one—no one will give you work to do. And tell him you'd rather be dead than go home and say you'd lost it. Oh, Peter, say that; it is true—it is true——!"

She was crying. The rain blown on her cheek by the angry wind mingled with the tears there. She held his wrist—that bony, flat wrist, which had had its own tale to tell to the examining physician—protruding from the shabby coat-sleeve, and led him, he nearly unresisting, back to the door. On the door-step he hesitated, looking at the child with beseeching dark eyes.

"He's awfully busy—his room's full—he isn't the sort to take liberties with—I don't want to bother him again."

But she kept a relentless hold upon the wrist, and herself rang the bell, and when the door opened, pushed him within with remorseless urgency. "Never mind cringing," she whispered. "Tell him everything. Tell him how they treat you at home. Don't mind what he thinks."

So, in Peter went, and Cicely, her school-books tucked away under her arm for the protection afforded by her mackintosh, the rain coming on faster and faster, walked the pavement, or waited on the doorstep, and now and again crossed the road in the baseless hope that she might not find the other side so wet, for a miserable two hours.

"Why, I thought I had finished with you, sir, more than an hour ago," the physician said, looking up, not too well pleased, when Peter, nervously smiling, his dark-curved head with its pale Jewish features pushed well forward, appeared in the consulting-room again.

The doctor, a fine-looking, red-faced man with keen blue eyes, looked a giant of health and strength and well-being beside the slight and meagre form. He was physician to the great firm of Clomayne, Company, Limited, who never appointed a clerk to their offices without a favourable report from him. Peter had already passed the educational test by which they weeded out the applicants to fill their vacancies. As a typist he had proved himself expert; in shorthand he had attained the highest speed. Nothing but the medical examination stood between him and the office-stool, which to him was as much an object of desire as is a throne to a prince.

"I think, sir," he said, his eyes, very dark and softly luminous, on the doctor's face,— "I'm afraid you didn't form a very high opinion of my physique. I wanted to ask you—I wanted to beg you, sir, to pass me. It would be the making of me, sir, to get to Clomayne's. I've been trying for more than a year to get a clerkship. The market is so very full, and I've been unfortunate. This is a great chance for me. I hope very much, sir, you won't let me lose it."

The doctor looked down from his goodly height upon the stooping shoulders of the suppliant. "I've got my duty to Clomayne's to perform, you know," he said. "They send their clerks abroad into all sorts of climates—very unhealthy, some of them. Climates where you, my poor fellow, could not live a month."

"I could take my chance," Peter said quickly. "I'm not afraid, sir. I shouldn't ask any favour. If I died, it would make no difference to Clomayne's. I mean the inconvenience would be mine."

"My dear fellow, you're a phthisical subject—not to mince matters. You told me your family history——"

"You asked me, sir," Peter interrupted, with a note of reproach in his softly thick voice.

"It was my duty to ask. Your father died a year ago of pneumonia, your mother ten years ago in a decline. Do you ask me to conceal these facts from Clomayne's?—to say that I consider you in strong health? Then, you ask what is absolutely impossible. I am sorry, but it is impossible. I think that is all I have to say on the subject, and—my time is very short."

"I am going almost at once, sir," Peter said, speaking with an effort of cheerfulness, but with a load of sorrow and disappointment lying, a physical weight, upon his heart. "I came because Cicely thought if I told you 'twas a matter of life and death, sir—. It is that to me, almost—it is. I'm very good at shorthand—hundred and twenty a minute; my arithmetic and book-keeping, too, are more than fair. My hand-writing's good, I might say. My hands don't always shake like this——"

"My dear boy," the doctor said, with an impatience at once angry and pitiful, "all that has less than nothing to do with me!"

"But if you'd give me a chance, sir!" His eyes were extraordinarily bright and pleading, his slight frame shook with eagerness; he made as though he swallowed something with difficulty. "After all, I shall have to cringe," he said to himself. "Since my father died, I have had to depend on my uncle, sir," he went on. "I owe everything to him. He's very good—but there are a lot of his own children; and there's my aunt—and she thinks—. My uncle doesn't grudge me anything, he often says so, but he naturally wants me to be getting my own living—and so does my aunt; and she doesn't quite understand how difficult it is, nowadays, to get in to anything—and my cousins don't understand it either, except Cicely, she's different. Of course, I can't at present contribute anything for my board and lodging and my clothes." He stopped, a minute, and looked down at his shabby overcoat, then lifted his eyes, alight with their soft, irresistible appeal, to the physician's face; his voice dropped in a kind of awe. "This berth carries a pound a week, sir. It would be all the world to me to get it."

"You want me to perjure myself?"

Peter did not shrink from the stern tone, nor blush at the imputation. "I want you not to take away my chance," he said.

He did not leave for some fifteen minutes longer, and when he did leave, it was with eyes lit almost to rapture, a glow of happiness on his pale face, and words of thanks bubbling forth from trembling lips. The doctor had consented not to conceal the state of the young man's predisposition to tubercular mischief, but to make the best of his chance of escaping the family taint. He had promised, too, to explain matters to one of the managers with whom he was on very friendly terms. Peter's position at Clomayne's was assured.

"I will never forget it, sir, never!" the boy said, stopping again at the door of the consulting-room to reiterate the fact. "It will be the making of me. I shall get on—you'll see I will. There's men that don't make the most of their chances—but I will. I've got a splendid one—thanks to your goodness—and I will. I feel it in me. You'll never regret it."

"Oh, that'll do—that'll do," the doctor said. He was a little ashamed of his weakness in the matter, knew it was a bad precedent, didn't wish to hear any more about it. "Haven't you got something warmer to put on?" he asked. "You're not going out into this pouring rain in that thin coat?"

"This is my great-coat, sir," Peter explained, with a glance at the sleeve that exposed the flat red wrist. "And Cicely is waiting outside for me with an umbrella."

The doctor was sufficiently interested to walk to that window in his consulting-room which looked upon the street in order to watch the youth who had taken what was in his experience the very unusual course of questioning his fiat. He saw the stooping figure of the lad join the upright one of the child, hurrying to meet him. He almost saw the glad words of the reversal of his doom upon the young man's lips; he saw the change on the straight-featured serious face of the child from an expression of unchildlike anxiety to one of almost womanly joy. The pair stood for three minutes in the drenching rain before the window, and even at that crisis Cicely did not forget to hoist her dripping umbrella over the head so eagerly thrust forward. Then Peter put a thin wrist through a mackintosh arm, and looking in each other's faces, and eagerly talking, unconscious of the eyes that watched them, the wet impatient people pushing past, the boy and girl walked slowly away.

The doctor touched the bell that would bring his next patient for inspection, then took one more look through the window. The pair had taken hands and were running now, running over the clean-washed, shiny pavement. Cicely turned her face so that he saw it once again, and it was a laughing face.

"It's something to be young," the doctor said to himself as he turned away. "Young—and to have the thing you wish for! Yes, even if you're never to know a day's health while you live, and have got to die a lingering, painful death in a year or so."

He only saw Peter once after he obtained his heart's desire and the proud position of a post as a junior clerk in Clomayne's office. It was on a platform of Liverpool Street Suburban line. He was going down to Enfield in his professional capacity, and while he waited for his train, walking up and down, his attention was caught by a figure which appeared in some way familiar to him standing at the book-stall. A minute, and he had recognised it as that of the youth who had been so bent on becoming Clomayne's clerk.

He was better dressed now, and wore a warmer over-coat (for the summer was over, by now, and winter coming on again), and a more fashionably shaped bowler. Cicely, in her waterproof still, although there was no rain, and with her straight, heavy hair upon her shoulders, was by his side.

The physician, having established in his own mind the identity of the pair, resumed his pacing to and fro of the platform, and forgot them. In a minute, a voice at his elbow spoke his name, and glancing down, he saw, taking off his hat to him, and accosting him with a very eager look on the duskily pale face, the youth whose name, even, he had forgotten. A light of triumphant gladness was in the mild darkness of the eyes.

"Excuse my speaking to you, sir," Peter said, "Cicely would have me come. She thought you'd be pleased to hear our very good news."

"I'm always glad to hear anyone's good news," the big doctor said. "Let's see—it's Mr——?"

"I'm the young man at Clomayne's," Peter explained. "You were so good——"

"I remember perfectly. And how are you getting on?"

"First class, sir. That's what I wanted to tell you. Cicely wanted it too."

"You like your work?"

"I enjoy my work, sir. I don't have a dull moment. And—" here his voice sank with the immensity of the tidings with which it was charged—"you'll be very glad to hear, sir, I'm promoted."

"I am indeed glad. Doubled your pay, have they?"

Peter smiled. "It doesn't affect my pay, sir. But pay isn't everything, I take it."

"Certainly not," the physician hastened to say. "To be chosen for an honourable position, for instance——"

"It's like this," Peter said, anxious to proclaim the good fortune which had befallen him. "Clomayne & Co. are starting another branch—you may have heard—and there's heavy work entailed. Clomayne's have had to put on several of their clerks to stop at the office over-hours. I'm one of those selected."

"I see," the doctor said, meeting with his penetrating blue eyes the mildly exultant gaze of the black ones.

"I've been at it now for a month," Peter went on. "Instead of getting home at seven, I'm at the office till nine, and sometimes ten o'clock. I enjoy it very much. The firm allows us something for our teas. My fellow-clerks and I have a rattling good time. If it hadn't been for your kindness, sir, I should never have got to Clomayne's; and I thought you'd be glad to hear how splendidly I'm doing there."

"And how's the health? Extra hours spent in bending over your desk aren't very good for you. You haven't yet lost your cough?"

Peter looked away, evidently not caring to be questioned on that theme. "I've been very fit, thank you, sir," he said. "The mist—it's been a bit misty in the evenings lately—has got on my chest rather. This, being Saturday," he further explained, "is a holiday. Cicely and I always have the Saturday afternoons."

Ah! And how did they spend them, he was asked. In the air, it was hoped.

Not always, it seemed. For Cicely was fond of pictures, and sometimes they went to the National Gallery. Cicely was fond of reading too; and once or twice they had been to Westminster Abbey because she had a fancy for Poets' Corner. But this afternoon they were going to their home at Edmonton, and if they could get away again, and if it didn't rain, they were going to the Chingford hills, for Cicely, of all things, loved a glorious walk.

"Cicely's a dear kiddie. She's my friend. I'm awfully fond of her," Peter said. He made the avowal without the slightest embarrassment—from his infancy, probably, he had not known what it was to feel shy. "Before I got that berth at Clomayne's, I should have had a rough time at home if it hadn't been for Cicely. My aunt and my cousins didn't believe in me, you see, sir. Cicely always did."

The physician looked across to the bookstall where the child still stood, watchful of him and Peter beneath the shadowing brim of her hat. Obeying a good-natured impulse, he crossed to her and laid a hand on her shoulder, and called her "Cicely," and said he had been hearing she was fond of reading.

"We both are," Cicely said, with a calm, middle-aged self-possession. "It is the thing Peter and I like best in the world."

"And what sort of reading?" the doctor asked; and learnt that Peter liked books of adventure and happy stories, but that Cicely loved poetry, and liked best stories that were sad.

"They make her cry, sir," Peter explained. "She cries, and cries—don't you, Cicely?—but she likes them too."

So a kind doctor, looking over the wares displayed, bought a volume of Longfellow's poems, which he gave the girl—he knew nothing of poetry, but was sure Longfellow must be safe, as his mother had liked him—and he got for the boy, Wells's *Sea Lady*.

"I don't read such things, myself," he said, "but I've gathered from the newspapers the man has a quite creditable acquaintance with science, and does not write sentimental rubbish."

Cicely, regarding the donor with an unsmiling face, said—"Thank you very much," in her staid, middle-aged way; but Peter, using his tongue volubly, overwhelmed him with thanks.

"It is kind of you!" he said fervently. "I shall always treasure the book, and so will Cicely hers. We go to the Library—we've got a splendid one, you know, in Edmonton, Passmore Edwards gave us. Before I got to Clomayne's—they didn't want me at home, and I had nowhere else to go—I spent most of my days in the Library. Of course I've read H. G. Wells, and I learnt a lot of him by heart to tell Cicely, but I love to have him for my own. I have very much to be grateful to you for, sir, and I shall be grateful while I live."

"For how long will that be, poor fellow, I wonder!" the doctor said to himself as he walked away. He had done the poor boy a kindness, and he let his mind dwell on him with a pitying pleasure. It was hard that Fate should grudge to this unfortunate that humble place in the world of men which he held with such a boyish pride, those poor pleasures in which he took such innocent delight! He thought of his own son, as the train bore him away to his consultation, good and fairly satisfactory, but guarded on every side, petted, pampered. How much would it cost to bring into his own boy's handsome face the glow of surprised delight which had overspread the pale features of this poor lad at the gift of the four-and-sixpenny book.

But even as the thought passed through his mind, his lips curved with a smile of proud tenderness. The absurdity of the comparison! His own handsome, well-grown lad, with his fair, frank face and proudly carried head, and the poor little city clerk—the pallor of ill-health and confinement on the dusky face; the meagre figure; the head, over-heavy with its brown curls, thrust forwards, as if in eagerness to reach the goal before his feet could carry him there.

"Ah, happiness is found in unexpected places, and is a matter of temperament only, and not of circumstance at all," the doctor told himself, when Clomayne's clerk and the girl he called Cicely, passed the door of his first-class carriage, their destination reached. Peter was holding the girl's sleeve and hurrying her along, his head pushed forward, and on his face that look of eager joyousness which to the eyes that watched and that *knew* was so full of pathos. The voluble tongue was wagging as the pair trotted past. He heard his own name mentioned. And so Clomayne's clerk passed from the eyes that watched, for ever.

"I'll keep an eye on that poor fellow. I'll speak about him to Ladell; and when he begins to go down-hill, I'll lend a helping hand," the doctor said, making one of those resolutions that testify surely to the spiritual part of us, and do honour to the hearts that record them, even when, as now, they are not kept.

The doctor fully meant to keep his when he made it, but he forgot.

He forgot it, until one sunshiny morning in the spring of the next year, when, as he sat at his solitary lunch, there was brought to him a letter. It was in a careful and childish hand, and he read it almost at a glance as he ate the biscuit and drank the glass of Burgundy which he allowed himself for his midday meal.

"Dear Sir," the letter ran—"Peter was coming to tell you he had been promoted again. A junior was wanted to help with some work through the Easter holidays. Peter offered and was accepted. He was coming to tell you, but he was drowned last night in the River Lea. So I thought I would let you know.—Yours affectly., Cicely.

"P.S. He was not to have had more pay, but it was the honour."

The physician, who had never time for anything but his profession, made time to go to the funeral of Clomayne's clerk, paying his poor remains a compliment he had refused to those of many a man of distinguished name and high estate whose fees he had taken. On a Saturday afternoon in the sweetest month of the spring-time, he travelled down to Finchley with Ladell, that manager of Clomayne's who was his friend.

"We asked his people to hurry the funeral by a couple of days, so that the clerks could come," the official said.

Peter had looked up to this man as to a king among men. A "good-morning" from him, and a nod in the street in response to an eagerly snatched-off bowler, left the junior clerk elated in spirits for the day.

"Mr Ladell asked me if I wouldn't like to change places with Jones who sits nearer the fire," he said once to Cicely, his eyes humid with gratification. "He'd noticed how cold my hands were when I passed him a pen. They shake, you know; I can't stop them. It's something to be noticed like this by him, Cicely! I shall do now!"

"He was only one of the youngsters, of course, and not of much account, but he'd made a lot of friends. They've got a wreath as big as a haystack for the poor little man. They've made him into a hero; and they're all here—good fellows!" Thus the manager to the physician, as the train bore them along.

"It was simply silly, chucking away a life like that, of course," he went on. "A little fellow that could barely swim, to fling himself in, after a casual suicide! A hulking, great beggar who had good reason, no doubt, for wanting to be rid of his life. He probably wouldn't have thanked the boy, even if he had saved him—which he didn't."

He had a goodly following, poor Peter! How his eyes would have glistened, could he have known! Quite a regiment of clerks from Clomayne's were there, walking two and two; to say nothing of the uncle who had grudgingly fed him, and the goodly array of cousins who "had not believed in him." He had been put in a burial-club by his not too-loving relations; so, although he had gone so long in shabby clothing, and had known the sorrow of broken boots and wrist-bands that must be hidden away, he rode in state to his resting-place, drawn by four horses, in a silver hearse, his coffin covered with flowers.

But his grave was a humble one—the money from the burial-club not being sufficient to secure him a decent privacy in decay—and very, very deep. The clerks, crowding forward when the service was over, could hardly read his name and the account of his few years, on the silver plate of

his coffin, so deep in the bowels of the earth they laid him—poor Peter! "the joys of all whose life were said and sung!" His was the first coffin in the grave destined to hold seven more.

The physician, waiting until the rest had turned away, stood for a few minutes alone, gazing into that profundity.

"Such a chucking away of life!" the admired gentleman who had been Peter's chief had said. But the physician had his own thought on that matter.

The poor boy—the foolish, enthusiastic, perhaps hysterical boy—enjoying the poor blessings that were his with the prophetic eagerness those doomed to an early death so often exhibit, had taken his seat upon his office-stool as upon a throne; had blessed God for his career of junior clerk as for a high imperial lot; then had flung away, his short race hardly begun, the life he prized. True; but in a blind belief in his own strength; and for the high purpose, suggested by the poetry and the books he and Cicely loved and talked over, of giving himself for another! The physician knew that in giving all he had but exchanged a year or two of failing power, of the pain and weakness of daily dying, the grief of finding himself a burden again upon unwilling shoulders for—what? For the moment of exultation when into the dark waters of greedy Lea he had flung his poor little body, clothed as it was in the new coat and trousers of which Cicely and he had been so proud; the moment of absolute belief in himself and his strength; the moment more, perhaps, of recognition that he had failed, but in a great cause. Peter had exhibited an effusive gratitude for the few favours Life had bestowed upon him; for this last favour of Death's according the physician knew he might well have been thankful.

That beautiful "floral tribute" for which Clomayne's clerks had contributed their shillings, had been lowered upon the coffin, together with one or two humbler, and obviously home-made, wreaths. As the physician turned away he noticed, lying almost at his feet, a little bunch of violets, dropped as the flowers had been removed from the coffin. Attached by a bit of white ribbon to their stalks was a tiny square of notepaper, and on this was written in the careful but unformed hand the doctor recognised, "From Cicely."

Holding them thoughtfully for a minute, the physician slowly opened his fingers; and through all that dismal space, soon to be filled with other coffins, Cicely's violets fell upon that which bore Peter's name. Upon the coffin of Clomayne's fortunate junior clerk; in luck's way still; promoted to the blessed company of those who die in what they believe to be a good cause.

IN A TEA-SHOP

The duties of the tea-shop were not particularly hard, but to Lucilla, whose head was filled with memories of a perfect holiday just over, a little irksome. The church clock, in the market-place upon which the windows looked, chimed the half-hour past five. The tea-room closed at six-thirty.

"At last it ringeth to evensong," Lucilla said.

At least, these were the words which repeated themselves in her brain; what she really said was—"Hot toast for two—sixpence; a pot of tea—sixpence; how many pieces of cake, sir? Thank you; cake—fourpence. One shilling and fourpence, if you please."

It had been a busy afternoon, but the couple who paid the one-and-fourpence, pushing some coppers towards the waitress, who, with a dignified motion and an aloof-voiced "We do not receive gratuities," pushed them back, would in all probability be the last customers. Lucilla having discovered the man's hat for him, restored to the woman the wrist-bag and pocket-handkerchief and parcel she would have left behind her, and watched the pair from the room, yawned aloud as she piled the soiled teacups, plates, and saucers on the little brown Japanese tray, and carried them to that screened-off angle of the room where china was washed and bread and butter cut all the day long.

She returned, yawning still, to dust the crumbs from the little bamboo table. Half-past five! What, in those delightful fourteen days which had composed her yearly holiday, had she been doing at that hour? So precious the memory of that fortnight, so treasured every incident, almost she could have accounted for each minute of the time.

As she set the chairs straight before the dozen bamboo tables, put each illustrated paper in its allotted place, her inward gaze was turned upon scenes she had left behind with the delightful luxuriousness of a life which, for that small, allotted space, she had been permitted to live.

She had driven, she had motored, she had paid visits, had danced. Yes—danced! She paused on that word, and her lips trembled to a smile.

She had read of such an existence, dreamed of it, perhaps; at last, she had lived it. Would it make her days in the tea-shop—and out of it—easier?

For one thing, she had returned a little ashamed of her work. "Don't mention about the tea-shop, even before your cousins, dear," her aunt had admonished her. Her aunt, being an old-fashioned person who did not realise that a lady can get her living by any honourable means, in the present day, and remain a lady still. Lucilla had, of course, obeyed her aunt's injunction, but had felt, for her own part, not the slightest repugnance to mention the means by which she gained her livelihood, until a couple of evenings before she had returned. That evening of the dance, whose memory brought the quiver of a smile to Lucilla's lips.

"Suppose I had told him!" she said to herself as she moved from table to table, mechanically putting all in order. "He asked me how I passed my time. What would have happened? Would he have gone on dancing with me, and gone on sitting out with me when I couldn't dance? I'm glad I didn't tell, even if it did deceive him—even if I am a snob. I'm glad I had my hour."

She looked out of one of the windows into the market square, around which the lamps were lighted now, and a pleasing vision rose before her eyes of herself in her cousin Alice's last year's ball-dress, looking so supremely happy, and as pretty—he had said that—as a dream. Yes; she was thankful he would never have to know. What would he think of her if he could see her now in her full-skirted brown merino frock, her brown muslin apron, the big white chrysanthemum, which was the emblem of the tea-shop, embroidered in its corner and on its bib, her high muslin cap with the stiff strings tied beneath her chin?

"He would never recognise me; but I'm glad he will never see me," Lucilla said.

Then she turned from the window at the sound of a step upon the stairs, and saw him coming into the room.

He was accompanied by a lady, young and pretty.

"Such a crush, and so badly managed, and so under-waited!" she was volubly declaring as she

came in. "Half a cup of cold tea, and a quarter of an inch of fishy sandwich was all I got hold of. It was a splendid thought of yours to turn in here for a feed, Captain Finch. I couldn't possibly get along on that till dinner-time. Bread and butter, please, for two, and a good lot of it. Two hungry people. And—oh, where is the young lady who usually waits?"

It was the attendant from behind the screen who was taking the order, a girl with a fine figure, a sharp-featured, high-coloured, alert face, and wearing the brown uniform of the establishment. The other young lady was engaged elsewhere, she said.

"Oh!" said the customer on a falling note, and repeated in a flatter tone her order. "I wanted you to see this other girl," she said to Captain Finch as the waitress moved away. "She is called a beauty. One or two men rave about her. Women can't judge of these things. I wanted to hear what you thought of her."

"My word—on such a subject—would be final," the man said.

Lucilla, cutting bread and butter behind the screen, quivered at the voice, the rather hesitating utterance which was characteristic, the little laugh at the finish. Ah, what a mercy she had had that minute in which to dash into the corner and to drive Miss Dawson forth to take her place! She remembered how beautifully, intoxicatingly deferential he had been to her in her charming ball-dress, niece to the lady who was wife of the most influential man in Workingham. Words could not express how he must despise her if he saw her now.

"They make you judge at all the beauty shows in India, I suppose?" the lively lady was saying.

"They'd like to. I couldn't stand the fag."

"Poor dear! You appear to be very much exhausted."

"That beastly wedding! I never was so bored in my life."

"That doesn't excuse your yawning in my face."

"Oh, I say! Did I do that, now? I beg your pardon."

"If only this pretty girl I was telling you about had been here!"

"Oh, come! Good-looking women aren't so rare, I know a dozen I can see any day, Mrs Eaton. But as we're here, can't she be produced?"

The lady tinkled the little bell with which her table was supplied. "Some walnut cake, please." As it was set on the table, "I hope the other young lady has not left?" she inquired.

"Oh no, madam."

"A little more hot water."

"An officer, I'll bet my eyes! And a fine-looking fellow! Did you say he was a pal of yours, miss?" Miss Dawson whispered to Lucilla as she replenished the jug.

"If they mention me again, say Miss Browne—you can call me that—is gone home, and isn't coming back any more for a month."

The bell tinkled again.

"I thought perhaps you had forgotten the hot water," the lady said sweetly.

"No, madam," replied Miss Dawson as she placed the jug on the tray; "Miss Browne, our other young lady, being gone home, we're a little short-handed, like. The young person who is taking her place is rather awkward at the work, and puts us backward," she raised her voice here that Lucilla might enjoy the joke.

"Ah. I thought things were not quite so nice," the customer said.

"No, madam," acquiesced Miss Dawson, and giggled, and pinched Lucilla as she retired behind the screen.

The lady at the tea-table was a vivacious creature; she rattled on with hardly a break in her stream of chatter through the half-hour, during which she ate all the bread and butter and drank nearly all the tea. Lucilla, behind her screen, listening for the pleasant tones of the man's halting speech, grew weary of the high-pitched, untiring voice.

"It is getting late," Captain Finch said at last. "I had better put you in a cab."

"You aren't going to take me back?"

"Sorry. I've got to buy some things."

When they had left the room and were going downstairs, the woman's tongue still volubly running, Lucilla came with a soft rush from behind the screen and looked from the window. The shops round the market place were brilliantly lighted now; the elegant backs of the couple emerging from the confectioner's beneath the tea-room were easily visible. The man raised his stick and hailed a hansom.

"How wonderfully things happen!" mused Lucilla. "He said, I remember, that he was going to the wedding of a friend; to think that it should have been here!"

"If you and him are friends, I can't think why you didn't show yourself," Miss Dawson called from behind her screen.

"I daresay you can't," said Lucilla to herself.

"Where'd you see him first?" Miss Dawson asked. "Did he come up and speak to you?"

The withering glance which Lucilla cast in the direction of the screen. "Come up and speak to me!" she repeated.

"And why not, pray? Rubbish!" laughed Miss Dawson, rattling the teacups she was washing. "What does it matter in the end? Comes to the same thing when you do know them."

"You and I look at such things from a different point of view."

"Heap of nonsense!" Miss Dawson shrilled. "Your father was a lawyer that failed and couldn't pay his debts; mine was a bankrupt greengrocer. Both of 'em's dead now, and one as good as another; and us, too."

It was not the first time Lucilla had heard the argument; she listened to it now with compressed lips, in silence. Then she went to the mantelpiece, made an entry in a memorandum book lying there, tore out the page, counted the money in the bag which hung at her side, piled it upon the loose leaf, which she folded around it, preparatory to carrying it to the desk in the shop below.

"If you don't want to know the man, say you've never met him before, and bounce it," Miss Dawson called after her in contemptuous tones as she disappeared.

Two short flights of stairs led from shop to tearoom, and these were divided by a small landing, where spare cups and saucers and teapots were stacked. From the upper flight the lower was invisible. Lucilla, descending, was unaware therefore of the gentleman coming up until she met him on the square of landing beneath the unshaded gaslight. He held a great, loose bunch of long-stalked violets in his hand; and he was, of course, Lucilla's partner at the heavenly dance, Captain Finch.

Lucilla's heart beat tumultuously, her face turned white. "Bounce it," said the practical Miss Dawson's voice in her ears. She kept her head up, therefore did not notice the proffered hand, would have passed the gentleman by.

"Miss Mavis, I have brought you some violets," he said.

"You are mistaken. My name is Miss Browne," said Lucilla. "I do not accept flowers from men I do not know."

He stared at her, his lips fallen apart beneath his moustache. "I—was under the impression we had met at the dance at Workingham Town Hall," he said.

She took courage from his hesitating manner, and smiled with great self-possession. "You are unfortunately mistaken. Will you allow me to pass?" she said.

Lifting his hat, he moved aside; then turned to watch her make her deliberate descent. The soft folds of her full brown skirt dropped from stair to stair; the light from the flaring gas-jet fell on the knot of brown hair massed between the high, stiff cap and the high, stiff collar.

"Is that you, miss?"

It was a voice from above which called the superfluous question; he turned from the contemplation of the young lady in brown, who had now reached the bottom stair, to that of the young lady in brown who stood at the top. Towards the latter he mounted with a lingering step, as if not quite aware that he did so, and followed her into the tea-room.

"That young lady who has just gone down——?" he said.

"Miss Browne, sir."

"Er—is that so—really?" He lost himself, apparently; for the moment had nothing more to say; until, with a happy inspiration, "and—your name?" he asked.

"I'm Miss Dawson, sir. Miss Nellie Dawson."

"Really? Pleased to have made your acquaintance. Er—I've—er—brought you some violets, Miss Nellie Dawson," he said.

He appeared again the next morning, and had lunch at the tea-shop; the only man among a bevy of women lunching off scones and tea. He was shy of his isolated position, perhaps, for he held the illustrated paper he took up rather persistently before his face. At that hour a servant stood behind the screen and washed the china; both the girls waited. Above the top of his paper and round its edges he watched the more elegant of the two moving with noiseless tread among the tables, standing with bent head in the attitude of dignified attentiveness to receive orders, carrying her light burden of brown tea tray and Satsuma china. It was Lucilla he watched, but it was Miss Dawson who waited on him.

He ordered two poached eggs—the most substantial item on the menu card. He had to wait a long while for them, and when they were eaten, and he had given himself time to read his *Punch* two or three times through, he apparently discovered himself to be still hungry, for he ordered two more. By the time these were consumed, and he had conscientiously looked through *The Ladies' Field*, with which Miss Dawson had thoughtfully supplied him, the room began to empty.

A couple of ladies, evidently from the country, strayed in. One, in a low and secret voice demanded stout, which could not be supplied. Lucilla, with her head at a charming incline, suggested as a substitute tea, coffee, or chocolate; finally took the order for chocolate, supplied it; then, there being no one else to wait on, sat down by the fire, drew a strip of knitting from her apron pocket, began to work on it.

Captain Finch, rising from his table, pulled down his waistcoat, picked up his hat and stick, crossed the room, and placed himself before her. In the hand held in the fall of his back he carried a book.

"I—er—will you allow me—to—pay?" he asked. "Four eggs—er—coffee—er."

Lucilla, without raising her eyes from the brown silk she was knitting into a narrow strip, slightly waved a hand in the direction of Miss Dawson. "The other young lady," she said.

But Miss Dawson, at that moment, was in spirited controversy with an elderly, handsomely-dressed customer, whose carriage and pair of horses awaited her at the pastry-cook's door, who could only remember to have eaten one slice of walnut cake, while Miss Dawson was of opinion that she had eaten two.

"Am I not permitted to pay Miss—er—Browne—if I prefer to do so?"

"It is the rule for each customer to pay the young lady who waits on him."

"Thank you. Miss—er—Browne, when I had the happiness to meet you at the Workingham Town Hall—at that delightful dance——"

"Pardon me. You did not meet me there. I do not dance."

"You spoke of a wish to read one of—er—Bernard Shaw's plays. I've got this for you." He produced the hand from the small of his back and tendered her the book.

She laid down her knitting and rose; a belated customer had appeared. "I am sorry," she said, without looking at man or book. "The lady you speak of would doubtless think it very kind of you. I have no wish to read the plays, and could not possibly take the book."

With the slightest inclination of the head she passed him, and, the menu card in hand, leant over the newcomer.

Left with the book, Captain Finch poised it in his hand, looking rather stupidly at it for a few minutes; then tossed it to the mantelpiece, and went from the room.

The clock had struck six when he came in for tea, that evening, and all the little tables were empty. Miss Dawson, who was second in command, was, as usual at that hour, behind the screen; he had come in so quietly that Lucilla had no chance to rush and take her place. Her face paled as she saw him. The man was persistent, her strength at the moment small; there was only her pride to carry her through.

The day had been a busy one, she was fagged, and read in his face that he saw her to be so. His face, although not a clever one, was so heavenly kind!

"I won't trouble you to fetch any tea," he said. "If I might be allowed to—er—stay here and talk to you for a few minutes——"

"Tea or coffee, sir?"

"Oh, well, tea, then—confound the stuff!"

He threw down his hat and stick, and stood while she placed the brown tray, the tiny teapot, the minute muffin-dish before him. "If you know how I hate to have you—er—wait on me——" he said; but she gave him no chance to enlarge on the theme.

He sat for a few minutes over the tea-tray, not touching its contents, and with his eyes on Lucilla's back as she stood at the mantelpiece making her entries, counting the money in her bag. When she moved to the door he got up and intercepted her.

"You are Miss Browne while you are in the—er—shop, I understand?" he said. "I don't care for her—for Miss—er—Browne. It is the girl I met at the dance I care for, and want to see again. I can't find her here. Can I—er—find her outside? If I wait at the door for an hour, say, will you—will she be there?"

Lucilla drew back, with hurt eyes and a reddening face. As if she were any Miss Dawson, with the pavement for a rendezvous!

"I can't possibly say where you may meet your friends," she told him. "I, for my part, do not make appointments to meet men who are strangers to me—in the streets."

She passed him then, and went downstairs, her head held high, although her heart was sore. She watched, hidden in the shop, for his departure. It seemed to her impatience a long time before he left.

Miss Dawson was warbling to herself, with rather shrill-throated gaiety, whisking her full skirt among the bamboo tables, when Lucilla returned to the tea-room.

"I like your friend, miss," she said. "He hung about for a good time, waiting for you; but as you didn't choose to come back he's gone."

Lucilla had come in with her arms full of great, bronze-coloured chrysanthemums, which had been sent in from the flower shop to deck the tables for the morrow. In silence she went about the work of replenishing the vases. Miss Dawson quavered some high notes of her song.

"Did he say that he wanted to see me again?" Lucilla, in spite of herself, was obliged to ask.

"Dear me, no, miss. He said he stayed to thank me for wearing his flowers."

Lucilla viciously snapped off the stalk of a giant chrysanthemum. The Princess violets in the other girl's bosom had been as thorns in her own, all the day. She glanced at the mantelpiece where she had seen him toss the book of plays.

"You've got his book as well, I suppose?" she asked.

Miss Dawson gave her high laugh. "Oh yes!" she acknowledged. "I know it's your leavings; I'm not proud."

She sang in her florid style for a minute or two, then descended to speech again.

"You wouldn't let your friend wait for you outside, miss," she said. "You're so mighty particular. I ain't. I told him I had no one to walk home with me to-night; so he's waiting for me."

Captain Finch brought his erect, handsome form, his kind, foolish face no more to the tea-room. Lucilla, longing as much as she dreaded to see him, felt her heart throb at the sound of each manly footstep on the stair, paled at the sight of coat and trousers of a certain shade, trembled at the sound of a voice that recalled his hesitating tones. But he came never again. The "bounce" which Miss Dawson had counselled had had its effect. Either he now disbelieved the evidence of his own eyes, or, more probably, he bowed, as a gentleman would, to her desire to disavow the acquaintanceship.

"A man in his position could not meet on equal ground a girl in mine; and—and I won't meet him on any other level," she said to herself. Aloud, she would not speak of him again. Neither did Miss Dawson any more allude to the gentleman who had presented the violets and the volume of plays, and with whom she had gone for a walk on the first evening of their acquaintanceship. Relations between the young women, never very friendly, had become strained since that evening.

"A girl who could do such a thing!" said Lucilla to herself; and held her head disdainfully, and curled her lip at the other girl.

But Miss Dawson, if she noticed that scornful attitude, was not at all impressed by it. She switched her brown skirt with more than her usual air of jaunty alertness around the chairs and tables, looked in the little glass behind the screen at which the pair adjusted their caps and aprons with a smirk of self-satisfaction, and always wore a bunch of Princess violets in the bosom of her dress. Soon, the string of amber beads at her throat was discarded in favour of a gold chain and pearl and turquoise pendant, which Lucilla despised as imitation, of course, but which, nevertheless, looked real.

Then, one day, at an hour when the tea-room was empty, arrived a letter, from her influential aunt at Workingham, for Lucilla.

A certain portion of this letter she read again and again; then, the need to a bursting heart of the outlet of speech being imperative, spake with her tongue.

"Your advice to me to—bounce it—wasn't very happy advice, Miss Dawson," she said, with bitterness. "Captain Finch knew all the time. He knew when he came to this place. He came to see me. He knew I served in a tea-shop. It made no difference. He went to my uncle the day after the dance, and spoke—spoke about me——" Her voice was not under control; she turned away.

Miss Dawson, energetically rubbing a bamboo table on which some coffee had been spilt, made

no answer.

"I wish—I wish—" said Lucilla, with her back turned, a world of regret in her eyes, "I wish I had not been so silly."

Miss Dawson looked up momentarily from her occupation. "You can put it all right with him, you know," she said; "Captain Finch is still hanging round."

"Here?" Lucilla cried. "He went three weeks ago!"

"Not he. Every night of the three weeks he's waited outside to walk home with me. For the first week he went to talk about you. For a fortnight he hasn't mentioned your name."

She ceased to rub the table, shook the cloth, folded it with nicety, the other girl speechlessly regarding her.

"He gives me these every day," Miss Dawson went on, and dashed a hand towards the violets in her breast. "He gave me this," she lightly fingered the turquoise and pearl pendant. "I don't wear his ring yet, our rules not allowing it."

She whisked off with her cloth to the screen, deposited it, reappeared. "His leave's up in six weeks," she said. "Him and me are to be married in a month; have a fortnight's fling, and off to India. I chuck this, at the end of the week. They know, downstairs. I hope you'll like your new pal when she turns up, miss."

Only once, during the few days that remained, did Lucilla and Miss Dawson speak of matters not strictly concerned with teas, scones, and girdle-cakes. It was on the last day of her service in the tea-shop that the latter brought with her, and flung upon the mantelpiece, the book of plays which Captain Finch, on his second visit, had deposited there for Lucilla.

"This was meant for you," she said, "and you may as well have it. Such stuff isn't in my line, thank goodness! and I can't make head or tail of it. But there's a word in it I happened upon, first time I opened the book; and it's stuck in my memory, for it happens to be holy sense, and not tommy-rot. This is it—or something like it—

"If you want a thing very badly, go straight for it, and—GRAB it!"

She put her common face close to Lucilla's disdainful one as, with an insolent emphasis, she made the quotation, then laughed as she turned away.

"That is what you should have done—you idiot!" she said.

A CHALK-MARK ON A GATE

PART I

She was junior music-mistress at the high school for girls, and he mathematical master at the boys' college hard by. On most afternoons of the week it happened that, their day's work being done, they encountered as they left the scene of their respective duties, and, their homes lying within a

few doors of each other, walked there together.

He was a tall man, loosely put together, with iron-grey hair, stooping shoulders, and a look on his long-featured face at once dreary and gentle. She was small and dark, alert and pretty, and, from the crown of her neatly-dressed head, in its plain straw hat, to the soles of her sensibly shod feet, wholesome-looking.

The day that was soon to melt into evening had been sultry, the class-rooms airless, their tasks fatiguing. The pavement beneath their feet was hot; both were glad to breathe what tiny breeze was astir; both were tired. They walked side by side in that best of all companionships which demands no effort at sprightliness, nor the utterance of one word not spontaneously spoken.

"Shall we see you down by the river to-night?" she asked him, at length.

If he could get away he would go there, he said.

"Do come!" she gently urged him. "It does you good to get away."

Then the man's house was reached. It was one in a street of £30-a-year houses, with large bow-windows, small gardens, red-and-white striped curtains to protect green-painted front doors. He made a motion of his hand, half-heartedly inviting her to enter.

She shook her head.

"I've been in once to-day," she said. "Mrs Kilbourne asked me to get her something in the town, and I took it in."

"So long as you remember the caution I gave you——"

"You may be quite sure I remember."

As she would have passed on he stopped her.

"One minute," he said. "The rose I told you of is out, to-day."

The tiny garden was fashioned into a square of grass-plot, a bed full of rose-trees in its midst. The Frau Karl Druschki, recently acquired, had only one half-unfolded bloom. He gathered it and gave to her as she stood beyond the iron rails.

"Only one! How could you pull it for me!" she reproached him.

"Absolutely pure white—quite flawless, you see," he said.

His touch lingered on the flower, for he loved roses; then he put it into her hand, and she went on her way.

In the bow-windowed front room of Horace Kilbourne's house his wife was lying on the sofa—semi-paralysed, a drunkard.

"That you, Horry dear?" she said, as, with a gloomy, hopeless face he looked in upon the unlovely sight.

She raised a frowsy head from its pillow, put a dirty hand to her eyes to shade them from the sun

entering the darkened room by the open door, smiled fatuously upon her husband.

"Come and haul wifey up, and make me comfy, and give me a cup of tea," she invited him.

One side of her was helpless. She was a tall and broadly-made woman, enormously fat. It required the exertion of all his strength to get her into the desired position. One leg was like a log, and was lifted as if it did not belong to her. All the cushions had to be shaken up and replaced, the coverlet respread on her ice-cold feet.

But Kilbourne was used to such services; if his face was lowering as he performed them, his fingers were deft.

Tea was set forth with no daintiness upon the untidy, coloured cloth of the centre-table. He poured out a cup and took it to her. She received it with a coaxing leer in her eyes, looking up at him.

"Just a drop!" she whispered, in a thickened whine. "Just a teeny drop, Horry!"

He turned his back on her, without a word in reply, and went to his own tea. Two of the three rounds set forth of unappetising bread-and-butter he ate, swallowed a great cup of lukewarm tea. His eyes were fixed drearily upon the dish of biscuits which also graced the meal. He counted them idly, wondering for how many afternoons the same six had done duty for the like occasion.

"One leetle, teeny drop!" his wife said again. "You know tea gives me indigestion without, Horry. One teeny, weeny one!"

She was allowed by the doctor a certain modicum of whisky in the day, and the dose, for safety's sake, Kilbourne always administered himself.

"You can have it half now and half when you go to bed at night, if you like," he said at length, and got up and poured the portion from a bottle, which he locked away again in the sideboard.

She sighed heavily with anticipation as he held it to her, and he felt her breath upon his face.

"You've been having brandy?" he said.

"No, Horry, no!"

She shook her head, which was already heavily tremulous, and, seeing fear lest the precious beverage with which she was now supplied should be filched from her, buried her face in the cup and gulped it down.

"Where'd you get the brandy?" he persisted; and she began feebly to cry.

"Naughty Horry, to speak to wifey so! Didn't I promise you and the doctor I wouldn't touch it? And me left without a penny to buy it with! And only water the whole day long has passed my lips. I'll take an oath! I wish I may die to-night, Horry, if I've had a drop!"

He turned from her and rang the bell.

"Where did your mistress get the brandy she has had to-day?" he asked of the pert, untidy-looking maid-of-all-work who appeared.

"Where'd she get it? Out of the bottle, of course. I fetched it for her away from the grocer's, right

enough," the servant said, with an impudent face and a tossed-up head.

"I thought I had given you orders never to fetch your mistress anything of the sort?"

"An' the missus she give me orders to fetch it," the girl said. "'Ow do I know which I'm to mind, between ye? An' me shut up with 'er all the day, an' 'er a-badgerin'——"

"Take the tea-things. That will do for the present. Go!" he said.

He walked to the foot of the sofa, and looked long at the huge, unlovely bulk, once the admired form of his handsome wife, that lay there.

"You disgrace!" he said.

She whimpered afresh, her mouth shaking, the tears running down her cheeks unrestrained, like those of a child.

"There's a way to speak to a poor, suffering wife!" she whined. "And my head like splitting open! You might feel for me a little, Horry. Look at my poor arm!" With her able hand she moved the disabled one towards him. "It's quite numb. Rub it, Horry," she pleaded, looking weepingly up at him. "It's numb, yet it aches right up into my throat. And my poor tongue—poor wifey's tongue—is like fire! Look at it, hubby."

She opened the tremulous mouth, the great, parched tongue lolled out.

He looked at her, not stirring, with hard eyes.

"You disgrace!" he said again.

"Aren't you a disgrace to say so, then?" she whimpered. "Who'd believe you were my husband, calling me disgraces, and things? No one would think there was any affection between us, going on like that. And me with one side of me useless, and a fatty heart, as the doctor told me plainly, and said I was to take the greatest care. And who should take care of me if my own husband doesn't? And you stand there glaring at me, and not a kind word to throw at me! And haven't I always been a true and loving wife to you?"

He looked at her deliberately, with loathing in his eyes.

"You have been the curse of my life!" he said.

Then he left her.

In half an hour the pert maid-of-all-work came in. She was in walking costume, a string of pearls about her bare throat, a hat-box in her hand.

"This 'ere's my luggige," she explained. "You can go through it, if you like, to make sure I 'aven't took none of your rubbige away with me! I'm a-going, I am! The master he come and give me notice to leave at the end o' the month, but I don't choose to stay in no sech a place so long. I've 'ad enough of a tipsy missus, and an' ouse without an atim o' comfit! I'm a-goin!"

The woman on the sofa, with the inflamed, red face, the bloodshot, painful-looking eyes, the loose

mouth, looked helplessly upon the maid-of-all-work.

"A little drop of something to quench my thirst before you go!" she implored. "I can't get up to fetch it for myself, as you know, Maria; and my throat's swelled up with being so parched."

"And if you die of it, so much the better!" Maria said frankly. But she went and pumped some water, all the same, and brought it to her, the glass dimmed in her red, bare hand. "For all I've had to demean myself to wait on sich as you, I'm a Christian!" she said.

"A leetle drop of the brandy left, Maria?" the woman asked.

"Trust you for that! Not a drop!"

"Drain the bottle and see, Maria."

"You are a one, you are!" the emancipated servant said. "I ha' seen a sight o' bad 'uns, but never one like you. And if I was th' master, I'd up and chuck you inter th' street, see if I wouldn't, and git a little peace in 'is 'ome with a diff'runt woman than you! 'E wouldn't have to go far, neither, before 'e found one to 'is mind, master wouldn't, an' so I tell you! An' as for me, I'm done with you, so there!"

The woman looked after her as she bounced to the door, hiccoughing, holding the now empty glass in her shaking hand. Her brows were knit; she seemed in her muddled brain to be considering something.

"The girl Grantley promised she'd come to-day," she said. "She promised she'd bring me something."

"And did so, right enough. But you 'aven't got no memory nor nothin'!"

"Where is it, then, Maria dear? For my poor head's splitting——"

"Why, in th' basket as stan' agin your sofy, where you put it yourself, for I see ye do it."

Left to herself, the woman put the glass to her lips, sucked from it the few drops that hung upon its sides, lay with it in her hand, alternately looking into it and looking into space, lifting it to her lips again and again.

The machinery of her mind was too far destroyed for it to work in any suggested groove. It strayed off the line continually into all sorts of hazy, dim byways.

A disgrace!

She had broken her word to him, often enough, but he had never before called her that. It was very cruel of him, and not like a husband to use such a word to his wife, that had ever a loving word for him when he came home, and was always waiting for him, so obliging and kind. Her mother would vouch for that—she had often said she had a loving nature.

Once she had walked unexpectedly into the little sitting-room at home, and she had heard her mother saying to Horace—"Julia has a very loving nature." Why didn't her mother come and say kind things to her now? She was all alone. If her mother came and sat by her side—

She would like, if she could walk there, to get off the sofa and go to look for her in that little

sitting-room, at home. It was so cool in there always, with the window open to the garden. There was a basket of violets on the table. She wondered if they were there now. She would like to put her lips, that were so hot and uncomfortable, down upon them—

With difficulty she half turned on the sofa with the idea of reaching them; but remembered as she did so that her mother had been dead for years and years, and that there were no violets now.

She cried afresh, and held the empty glass to her lips in the hope a forgotten drop might trickle down upon them.

Her mother had once scolded her—once when Horace had told tales—and had said that she had broken her heart. But, for all that, she would not have liked to hear her called a disgrace.

She wished her husband would come in and put her to bed. He would have to do it alone to-night, as Maria was gone. Or perhaps old Susan would come and help. Old Susan had carried her up to bed quite easily, last night—when she was a child. No sticks, nor bother of people pushing and dragging—had carried her up as light as a feather, and popped her into her cool, soft bed, and tucked her up—

"Susan!" she called. "Susan!" And opened her aching eyes to look for her; and cried again when she remembered why the old servant could not come, and that she was not a child again any more.

A disgrace!

It wasn't a nice thing to say to such a good wife, and she so afflicted! He had another name for her when she used to walk about like other people—like the girl Grantley, for instance, that her husband always came home from school with. She used to go to meet Horry, herself, in those days, and go down to the river in the evening with him, and sit on one of the chairs beneath the trees to watch the boats. To watch the boats! How they glided along—gently, gently! It made you sleepy to look at them. She was in one herself now, rocking, rocking; and the sun was going down behind the trees; and a lot more boats, more and more, all rocking; and the sound of the oars, and the water lapping at the sides. She would like to put her hand in the river. It looked so cool—so cool!

The hand dropped heavily at her side, the glass broke; and she was on her sofa still, not in a boat at all; and it was the girl Grantley who sat by the river with Horry.

The girl Grantley! Where was that she had brought? The basket into which she had dropped it was easily within her reach. Here was the parcel, fastened as chemists' parcels are fastened. She shook it, and a gleam came into her eyes. Liquid! Something to drink, to moisten her burning tongue and swollen throat. No matter what—

Down by the river, on the broad path beneath the trees, where half the population of the place repaired in the summer evenings, the girl Grantley walked with her brother, and by their side walked Horace Kilbourne.

Presently the brother stopped to speak to a friend, and the girl and the other man walked on—walked through the crowds of people to where the crowds grew less, and on still, till there was comparative solitude.

Only the girl talked, telling him of her day's work—of what it had brought her of pleasure, of what had gone amiss. She had the habit of talking out her heart to him, bringing him all her difficulties and distresses.

"It rests me as nothing else does," she told him, when he had listened to the end, and said what had to be said. "And you? Have you nothing to tell me?" she asked him.

"Nothing," he said.

She glanced sideways and upwards at him as he towered above her, walking with drooping head.

"Something has happened," she said softly. "Can't you tell me? It helps, to tell a friend."

"It is nothing to which I am not well used," he said. "The same old wretched story. I have never told it in so many words. I am too ashamed to tell. You know it, well enough. Who is there that does not know?"

She turned on him a face that startled him, who knew it well, and had learnt by heart, he thought, its many changes.

"Why do you not kill her?" she said.

"Sh-sh-sh!" he whispered, surprised and reproving.

Her vivid face was aflame with passion; almost, it seemed, with hate.

"It would be no crime," she said. "Do you think God wants His world so cumbered? Why should your life, other people's lives, be destroyed? Are you to bear a burden like that for ever?"

"Sh-sh-sh!" he whispered again.

He put a hand upon her arm, and gently turned her with him. They began to retrace their steps.

"I was right never to speak to you about it before," he said presently. "Mutual confidences are for happy people, Kate. Men burthened with great sorrows know them to be incommunicable. Forgive me that I for a moment forgot."

Her passion had died away as quickly as it had blazed forth. She heard him in silence, a sob in her throat.

Soon they were back in the perambulating crowd, chattering, laughing, listening to the band upon the river. The broad stream was filled with boats, in which charmingly-dressed women indolently reclined on bright-hued cushions. The occupants propelled themselves by means of lazy hands laid upon the sides of neighbouring boats. Be-flannelled men, and boys in their slim canoes, slipped here and there among them. The music mingled harmoniously with the light dip of the paddles, the soft lapping of the water, the murmuring voices. The sweet scent of hay, freshly cut in the meadows across the river, was in the air, the peace of the midsummer evening over all.

Such a happy, prosperous throng; such a concord of sweet sounds and scents and sights! One man and woman, at least, looked on, sorrowful-eyed, bitterness within their hearts.

"I am sorry if I shocked you," Kate Grantley said at length. "I thought if we two spoke

together—even of that—face to face——"

"It is impossible," he said. "There are troubles in which no friend can help, Kate. The friend that is dearest to me in life cannot help me in mine."

He looked at her steadily, holding her eyes with his own, for a space; then left her and went on his way.

He went into his house, the door of which stood open to the night.

In the airless, bow-windowed room, upon the untidy sofa where he had left her, his wife was lying dead.

PART II

No inquest was held on Horace Kilbourne's wife. The doctor had attended her almost daily. For years her husband had been warned her heart was in such a condition that she might die suddenly, at any moment. She had so died. Except that it was a happy release for herself, and for her husband—that over-tired, good, and patient man—one of Heaven's mercies, there was nothing to be said. Unless Kilbourne himself, in remembrance of other days, and in the tenderness of his heart, shed a tear for her, there was not a soul to weep for drunken Julia Kilbourne.

Although, to the best of his ability, he had lived retired from all society, and in his sensitiveness to his wife's shame had kept, as well as he could, her history to himself, it was well known in the town. There was none who knew who did not respect and pity him. Kind hands were eagerly put out to him. At last he, who had shrunk from going to other men's houses because he could not ask them to his own, was free to do so.

It was a little disappointing that he repulsed all such advances.

The only adverse criticism which had been passed on him had been that, a heavily burthened man, he had not known how to conceal his misfortune, but had carried about with him a face as miserable as his history. That his face would now bear witness to his new-found delight of liberty was confidently expected.

It was strange that, instead of the looked-for lightening of gloom, there was, if possible, in his bearing, his wife being safely dead and buried, an increase of melancholy.

Kate Grantley, who thought she knew him better than the rest, was not surprised that the little letter she wrote him on the first news of Mrs Kilbourne's death remained unanswered. The words her pen had written had come warm from a heart realising the shock, the bewilderment, from which it was inevitable that he must suffer. But it was a letter which it would have been painful to him to answer, perhaps. He had known that she would understand.

She would not be hurt that he ceased to linger for her at the hour they both came out of school.

Often she walked to the street which held her home and his, with his tall figure a dozen yards in front of her. She would not hurry a step to overtake him. All in good time. She no more doubted him—she no more doubted that in due time he would ask her to be his wife—than she doubted what her answer would be when he did so. Between them there had been no vulgar philandering; no word of what might have been, what yet might be, had passed their lips. Yet, deep in their hearts was guarded an unspoken compact which—she would have staked her life on it—neither would betray.

But she was unpleasantly startled, coming face to face with him one day, he walking down his garden path, which she was passing, to find that he did not even purpose to speak to her. Pretending to fumble at the lock of the gate, he hung back until she was well in front.

Later on, the pair had encountered in a shop. She had put out a hand to him, and he had taken it. But there had been hesitation, almost reluctance, on his part, and it seemed to her that he had looked at her with intolerable reproach in his eyes.

She was haunted by the remembrance. Was it possible that his wife's death could have been really a grief to him? Such a grief as that? Or was the lonely life he was leading, coming upon the shock of finding the woman dead, telling upon him physically and mentally?

"Go and ask Mr Kilbourne in to supper to-night!" she commanded her brother. She lived with him in another little bow-windowed house, with a purple clematis over the bow-window, a crimson rambler over the door, and about it the same air of sweetness, of neatness, of wholesomeness its mistress wore. "He is looking ill and wretched. Try to bring him in."

"I have asked him every day of my life. He won't come," the brother said. "He gets out of my way when he can," he added. "He does not seem to wish to be friendly any more."

She looked at him in silence, considering the statement. Kilbourne's punctiliousness was exaggerated, but she thought she understood it. It was delicacy carried to an extreme, perhaps, but she was proud to think it was characteristic of him.

"I don't see why he need be afraid of being civil to me, for all that," the brother said, almost as if she had spoken.

The next time Kate Grantley had an opportunity of looking in Kilbourne's face she was painfully struck by his appearance. The man was thinner, more worn, years older. His head seemed to droop beneath a heavier burthen than of yore; he walked as if his feet were shod with lead.

Several months, in which she had had no word with him, had gone by since his wife's death. At this rate, before he dared to stretch out a hand to gather for himself the happiness ready to bloom for him, he would be dead! She thought she saw that the man, lonely, sensitive, to a fault, was passing his days in brooding melancholy, in unmerited self-reproach. He had had more than enough of sadness in his life. For an idea, a stupid convention of other folks' manufacture, and not worth respecting, he should have no more. He should not be allowed to take his own path, to push her on one side again.

Once resolved on any course, she was a very practical young person, alert to take the opportunity the moment gave.

She overtook him determinedly, one afternoon, as he walked ahead of her from school, as usual. The holidays, during which neither had left home, were over; the summer was over, the winter term well begun.

"Mr Kilbourne, will you come into No. 6 for one minute to-day?" she said. "I particularly wish to speak to you."

He had been ready enough to go there in the old days, with or without pretext; now he had the look of a man called on to do a thing at which his soul sickened.

"If you will excuse me——" he said.

But Kate was resolute.

"I cannot excuse you. You must come at once," she said.

She had assumed the little air of authority over him which in her he had found to be so pleasant. With a look upon his face as if he were going to his execution, he obeyed.

For many weeks she had gone about, the words she meant to speak to him, of encouragement, of comradeship, upon her lips; the chance to use them had never come. Now she would not use them, but would speak to him as if there had been no hiatus in their communion, as if no tragedy had come between.

She faced him as they entered the bright little sitting-room, of exquisite neatness, and sweet with flowers, which had ever seemed such a haven of rest to him.

"Have you seen Alick?" she began. "Have you heard that they have promoted him, and that he is to be sent to the Paris branch?" (Alick was a clerk in one of the banks.)

He had not heard.

"He'll be pleased. It's what he wished for, isn't it?" he asked, not looking at her, gazing before him with lack-lustre eyes.

Her heart sank as, seeing him close at hand, she noted the change in him. Although, with his slouching gait and loose-hung limbs and hanging head, he had never been a smart-looking man, he had yet been one possessed of great personal nicety; in that matter—in the shipwreck of his life—being careful not to let himself go. But now there was about him a look of neglect, making to ache with pity the heart of the woman who observed it.

Alick was pleased, she admitted, with sinking spirit. "But it is about myself I want to ask your advice," she went on.

He glanced at her quickly with his deep, sad eyes, and glanced away again.

"Shall I throw up what I am doing here, and go with Alick? It is this I want to ask you. My brother could share lodgings with a friend he has there. He does not really want me; but I used to wish for Paris—long ago, before we met, you and I. I might meet with a good appointment there. It is a chance for me. Help me to make up my mind. Shall I go?"

There fell a complete silence between them.

She sat on the music-stool, her back to the open piano, a pretty, slight girl, with a dark and resolute little face. It confronted the gloomy one before it now with an expression progressing from expectation to surprise, to irritation, in its gaze. On her part, she determined not to say another word to bridge the pause; but it seemed that the silence would never be broken.

At length he slowly lifted his eyes to hers.

"I think, perhaps, it would be better for you to go," he said.

She sprang up from the stool, turned to the piano, began sorting, with quick, nervous fingers, the music there.

"You think so? Very well; I'll go, then," she said. "I only wanted to hear what you would think of it."

He had risen with an air of relief and picked up his hat. He looked in silence for a minute at her straight back in its trim Norfolk jacket, at her thick braids of black hair beneath the plain straw hat.

"Of course you know best what you wish," he said hesitatingly.

She placed the freshly arranged music with an air of decision on the piano.

"I know very well what I wish, thank you," she said.

There was another silence.

"Is that all?" he asked her.

"Quite all. Except"—she turned round upon him and showed him that the dark skin of her face had whitened, that her eyes were hurt and angry—"except that Alick has to go next week. I suppose I ought to give a term's notice; but also, if I don't, I suppose they'll do without it—I shall be ready to go with him. We shall be busy till we start. I may not see you to speak to again—this will be our good-bye."

"Is that so?" he said.

She could hardly believe her ears; she held her breath in the cruelty of the surprise, and set her teeth to help her to bear the pain.

"Ours has been a long friendship," she said, striving to steady her voice. "Two years—seeing each other every day. Strange, isn't it, how things come to an end?"

"Except some things which are endless," he said.

She took heart of grace at that.

"You mean Faith?" she asked; "Love?" She looked at him eagerly.

"I mean Pain," he corrected her, and held out his hand.

She would not put hers within it.

"If, after these long two years, you can go like that, your friendship is not what I thought it. It is not worth a hand-clasp. Good-bye," she said, and turned her back upon him, not deigning to watch him go.

"Do you go or stay?" her brother asked, when he came in from the bank that afternoon.

"I—go!" she said, but not with her usual bright promptness; and, looking at her face across their little tea-table, he saw that it had lost something of its usual serenity.

"Seen Kilbourne?" he asked.

She told him yes, with an air of careful unconcern; that he had come in that morning; that she had told him of their contemplated departure, and had said good-bye to him.

"I used to think——" the brother began, but she cut him short.

"I know. You often said so; don't say it any more," she said. "All that was a mistake—and absurd."

"You know what they are saying of him, Kate? They are saying he killed his wife."

Her dark face whitened, her dark eyes opened wide.

"They cannot!"

"They do. They say he couldn't look such a miserable, hangdog wretch for nothing. The worst is, the boys at the college have got hold of it. One of the little wretches wrote up on the white wall of his class-room the other day, 'Who killed his wife?' Bryant, the science master, told me Kilbourne took no notice, but his face was sea-green for the rest of the morning."

"He should have thrashed the whole class—thrashed them within an inch of their lives!"

"Well, he didn't. He did nothing." Alick dropped his voice. "Bryant told me he looked as if he were afraid," he said.

"What beasts people are to say such things!" she burst out. "And of such a man! The gentlest, the kindest——"

"I know, my dear. I'm sorry for poor old Kilbourne. I daresay he didn't kill his wife; but something's happened to him, and she did die uncommonly sudden. Anyhow, from what Bryant said, it's evident he's lost his nerve and his courage. At that rate, he'll precious soon lose his post."

Kate Grantley and Kilbourne, arriving from opposite directions, reached his gate at the same moment, the next morning. Rudely chalked upon the stone post was the question which had confronted Kilbourne on his class-room walls.

He pointed to the words with his stick which shook in his hand; his face was ashen white.

"Isn't it fitting that you and I should be confronted by that question?" he asked her.

She stared from the writing to him.

"I don't think it at all fitting!" she said. "Why don't you send for a policeman, and stop it?"

He pushed open the gate, and, taking no further notice of her, walked up the little path to his door.

Reaching it, he found her behind him.

With that air of girlish authority he had once found so pleasant, "I am coming in," she said.

He led the way into that bow-windowed room in which Mrs Kilbourne had died. The pervading aroma of alcohol had left it; airiness and a certain formal tidiness now reigned in place of stuffiness and neglect; but the room was perhaps more depressing than before to a sensitive mind.

The sofa was in the same place; the basket, which had held the things she liked to have at hand, still stood beside it. The over-large table at which the unfortunate Julia had so often watched her husband eat his unappetising meals, and where he still made a pretence of eating them in sight of the empty sofa, still occupied too much of the available space.

Kilbourne turned and confronted the girl, who had followed him in. His eyes shone now, and there was the working of excitement in his face.

"I thought we had said our last words," he began; "I thought that that, at least, was done with—and you were going away. You have no right to follow me, Kate, to overthrow me in this fashion. My strength is almost exhausted; I have tried too much—too much—and all alone——"

"I know," she said, with her fine air of decision. "That is why I have come. You mustn't be alone any more. You must come with us."

He had tossed away his hat, and thrust his hands which were shaking, into his coat-pockets. He turned with excitement upon her, but she went firmly on.

"With Alick and me. You are too good for the post you hold; with your degrees you can easily get a better one. Come to Paris. Turn your back upon all that has been depressing and worrying you; upon this melancholy room"—she gazed round upon the unlovely space—"upon this"—she waved a peremptory, small hand towards the vacant sofa.

He looked at her with his accusing eyes, with a scarcely controlled emotion; but she stopped him when he tried to speak.

"We have been good friends," she said. "If I have not helped you through these two years we have walked as comrades together, you, at least, have helped me. Helped me so much"—she paused a moment, and the level tone of her voice quavered musically—"that I cannot lose you; that I need you terribly still."

"And I!" he burst forth then. "And I! Can you ever picture to yourself the magnitude of my need of you?"

He clenched the hands in his coat-pockets, and turned his back on her, and she saw his shoulders heave.

"It is killing me," he said—"killing me—just that."

His voice, which had been raised, sank brokenly. She listened, when it was silent, to the beating of her heart.

In a minute she went to him and laid a hand upon his arm.

"Then, why?" she asked him, whisperingly. "Why?"

He flung round upon her, and she fell back from the vehement accusing of his eyes.

"Why?" he repeated. "Why?" He threw a hand at the empty sofa. "There!" he said. "There—where you ask me to turn my back—my dead wife lies there—always for me. And she is between you and me for ever."

It sounded to her but the utterance of morbidity. The strange words were only a token of that from which she had come to save him. She had the courage to be unmaidenly, to persist.

"I, at any rate, do not see it so," she said. "To have me for your friend is to do no wrong to your dead wife."

"How can we be friends—you and I?" he asked her; and she, who knew they could not now be merely that, did not speak.

"I, who for your sake cursed her in my heart," he went on, his shaken voice hushed to an awe-struck whisper. "You, who put into her hands the poison which killed her."

"I?" she breathed, and drew back, staring at him, wondering, for one dreadful moment, had his unhealthy brooding turned his brain. "Killed her? I?"

"You!" he said, wildly. He went across the room, and shut the door behind her they had left ajar. "If it had been I myself I could have borne it; but you—*you*—! I found the empty bottle, that night, dropped from her hand; the label—'Poison'—and your name——"

"The chloral bottle?" she asked him; and the cloud of fear and dismay lifted from her eyes, and they were alight with understanding and with hope. She went swiftly to him and caught his arm. "Horace, do you remember that you warned me never to give her any narcotic, however earnestly she might beg for it—that it would not be safe—that she would kill herself? Do you remember?"

"But you gave it, all the same. Your name was on the bottle——"

"On the bottle—of water," she said. "It never held anything else. I used to take it home and fill it every day. The doctor told me to do it—it was a harmless fraud we played on her. She used to drink it, never doubting, and fall asleep——"

"Kate!"

She held him tightly by his arm, and looked with eyes that were dimmed with tears of most blessed relief upon the working of his face.

As, later, they went together through the little garden, and passed again the rudely-chalked question upon the gate—"Shall I stay here with you, and face the music," Kate Grantley asked, "or will you come away with me to Paris?"

"AS 'T WAS TOLD TO ME"

Her husband had died suddenly in the third year of their marriage, and she had been left a young widow with their only child.

The husband had been dead a year—a year passed in close seclusion in her country home—when she went out on a bright morning of the early spring, taking her little daughter with her, to gather primroses in the plantation bordering one extremity of the park around her house.

She had remembered when she arose in the morning that the day was the anniversary of her husband's death.

A year only! It had seemed like twenty years. For she was very young, and fairly rich and much admired, and the life she had hitherto led had not prepared her to support loneliness and retirement profitably. The shock of the sudden death had been terrible. She had thought that she should die of it; but she did not even fall ill. And there was the child, whom she adored. And later there had arisen a new interest.

The new interest, in the form of Major Harold Walsh, was at her elbow on this kind morning of sweetest spring. He was a middle-aged man, with a handsome, hard face and a very tender manner, and he chose, as some may think inopportunistly, the anniversary of the husband's death to make the widow an offer of marriage.

The widow reminded him of what had happened on that day a year ago, pointed out that she could not possibly entertain such a proposition so soon, even cried a little when she spoke of her husband. But in no other way did she discourage the tender-mannered major with the hard face.

It would have been well-nigh impossible for a man to make an offer of marriage with a child of three years old clinging to her mother's skirts and incessantly babbling in her mother's ear; so the child with her nurse was sent into the interior of the plantation, in search of the lovely primroses said to flourish there, while the two elders wandered with slow steps and down-bent eyes upon the outskirts of the coppice.

So they would have been content to wander for hours, perhaps—he begging for assurances that she with an only half-feigned, pretty reluctance gave—but that their agreeable dalliance was cut short by a sufficiently alarming interruption.

She did not absolutely dislike him? Liked him—very much, even? That was well. Years hence, if he waited patiently—and he would try, he would try to wait—she might even get to love him a little? Was that asking too much? Well, not just yet, then; he would wait. But he was not to go away unhappy? Not utterly discouraged? He need not, for what had taken place between them, debar himself entirely of the delight of her society, he might—?

It was at that instant of the major's soft-voiced pleading and of the widow's low, monosyllabic replies, that a voice from out the plantation on their left smote sharply upon their ears. It called affrightedly upon Mrs Eddington's name.

The mother, whose mother-love was, and would always be, the strongest passion of her life, fled into the wood. Following the direction of the voice, in two minutes she came upon the kneeling form of the nurse; and the nurse's white and terrified face looked up at her across the unconscious form of the little child.

"I found her so," the woman got out through chattering teeth. "I sat reading, and she ran to the other side of the tree. She was talking to me, and then she didn't talk, and I went round and

found—this!"

With shaking fingers the mother tore asunder the broad muslin strings of the hat upon which the child lay, rent open the dainty dress at the throat—"Look at mother! Milly! Milly! Look at mother!" she called wildly, impatiently, fiercely even.

As if in answer to the passionate appeal, the child's dark lashes stirred for a moment on the transparent cheek; were still; stirred again; then the dark eyes, so like the dark eyes of the dead father, opened upon the mother's face.

"Only fainted," the gentleman who had been proposing to officiate as Milly's stepfather said. He was much relieved that the scene, at which he had looked on awkwardly enough, was over. That for a three-year-old child to faint was an unusual, an alarming occurrence, he did not, of course, understand. Certainly, if Mrs Eddington thought it necessary, he would go for the doctor. He could probably bring him quicker than a groom. Should he carry the little Milly home first?

But the mother must carry Milly herself. No; nurse should certainly not touch her. Never again should nurse, who had let the child for a minute out of her sight, touch Milly.

Nurse, surreptitiously grasping a frill of the child's muslin frock, wept, silent and remorseful, as she walked alongside.

Once, the child, who lay for the better part of the half-mile to her home in a kind of stupor, opened her eyes again beneath her mother's frightened gaze and was heard to mutter something about some flowers.

"She is asking for the primroses she had gathered!" Mrs Eddington whispered, in a tone of intensest relief. "Did you bring them, nurse?"

The unfortunate nurse, of course, had not brought them.

"Milly's po'r flo'rs is dead," Milly grieved in the little weak voice they heard then for the first time. "Milly's daddy took Milly's flo'rs, and they died."

To that astonishing statement the child adhered during the first days of her long illness, till she forgot, and spoke of it no more. For any questioning, she gave no explanation of her words. She never enlarged upon the first declaration in any way, nor did she even alter the form of the words in which she gave it expression. Always she alluded to the curious delusion with a grieving voice, often with tears.

"Dear daddy is dead, darling," the mother said to her in an awed whisper, kneeling at her side. "He could not come to Milly."

"Milly's daddy took Milly's flo'rs, and they died," the sad little voice protested; and the child softly whimpered upon the pillow.

"The child can't, of course, even remember her father," Major Walsh said, with impatience, being sick of the subject and the importance attached to it. "She was only two when he died."

"How can you tell what a child of two remembers?" Mrs Eddington asked. "She was very fond of Harry. I think she does remember."

Persistently, in her mind recurred an episode of the last day of her husband's life. He had carried

his little daughter, laughing and prattling to him, down from the nursery, and had put her in her mother's arms. The child, when he turned to go, had clung to him. "Don't leave Milly, daddy. Take Milly too," she cried. Laughing, he had kissed her. "Not now—not now," he had said—"but later I will come and take Milly."

Then he had gone out, with a smile still on his face, and had fallen dead as he walked across the park.

It was inevitable that in these days the memory of her husband should more fully occupy the young widow's mind. He had died of heart disease; his child, it was now discovered, had a certain weakness of the heart. A superstitious feeling that she had not remembered him enough, and that this was her punishment, took possession of Mrs Eddington's brain. She remembered with remorse what had been occurring at the moment her child had fallen insensible among the primroses. On the very anniversary of her poor Harry's death she had forgotten him so far! Never would she forget him again.

The words the child spoke had recorded a mere delusion, the doctor told her, of the little dazed brain in the moment preceding unconsciousness; but for all that rational view, they awed the mother, haunted her.

"Milly's p'or flo'rs is dead. Milly's daddy took Milly's flo'rs and they died," Milly had said.

Never would Mrs Eddington leave her child, or forget Milly's daddy again.

Yet, when the anniversary of poor Harry Eddington's death came round again, Milly had been for three-quarters of a year running about as of old; her mother had been for two months the wife of Major Walsh.

They had spent their honeymoon at Major Walsh's own place in Wiltshire, had stayed for another month in his London house, and they at last turned their steps in the direction of the home which had been Harry Eddington's, where his child had been left under the guardianship of the new Mrs Walsh's mother.

"You used to complain of the dulness of the place and of how buried alive you were there. You have been away for eight weeks, and you are mad to get back to it," the husband said, with a jealous eye upon his bride.

She subdued, judiciously, the joy which had been in her voice. "I am glad to see the old place again—yes," she said. "Won't it be delightful for us to be together there, where we first knew each other?"

"It is the child you want—not me," he said, with grudging reproach. She found it necessary to make some quite exaggerated statements to reassure him.

Her mother was in the carriage which met them at the station. "Milly is staying up, till you come," she told them. "I left her capering wildly about the nursery with delight."

"I hope she won't over-excite herself," the mother said, and the grandmother laughed at that anxiety. No child of hers had ever had a weakness of the heart, and she was inclined to ridicule the idea that Milly required more care than had been given to her own children.

Full of longing to see her child, Mrs Walsh sprang from the carriage, and ran up the broad steps to the wide-open doors of her home. Then, with a happy after-thought, turned on the mat, and held out her hands to the new husband.

"Welcome—welcome to our home, dear," she said.

He grasped the hands tightly. "After all, I suppose I am a little more to you than the child?" he asked.

She smiled a flattering affirmative; and at the instant there came a scream in a child's voice from a room above, followed by an ominous silence.

When the others reached the nursery from which as they knew, the sound had come, the mother was already standing there, holding in her arms the unconscious form of her little girl. From a tiny wound in the child's white forehead drops of blood were oozing.

"I left her for one minute to fetch the water for her bath," the nurse was saying, hurriedly excusing herself. "She was running up and down and round about, calling, 'Daddy, come to Milly! Come, daddy, come!'"

"She fell and struck her head against the sharp corner of this stool," Major Walsh said. "Look, it has sharp corners."

The child was only unconscious for a minute. She opened her eyes, smiled upon her mother, hid her face in her neck, and presently was whispering a question again and again in her ear.

Mrs Walsh looked up in a bewildered fashion from the little hidden face. "What does she say?" the grandmother asked.

"She says, 'Where is my daddy gone?'" the mother repeated, faltering a little over the words, and with scared eyes.

"He is here," said the practical grandmother, and took Major Walsh by the arm. "We have told her her daddy was coming with her mother," she explained. "She was more excited about him even than about you, Millicent. Look up! Here is your daddy, darling."

Slowly the child lifted her head from the mother's shoulder, and looked at the big man with the hard face now stooping over her—looked for half a second, shut her eyes again, and again hid her face.

"It isn't my daddy," she said, with a baby whimper, "Milly wants *my* daddy that came and danced with Milly. Where's my daddy gone?"

Later, when the child had been put to bed, the mother, having hurriedly dressed for dinner, knelt by the side of the crib to hold her daughter in her arms; kissing the tiny wound upon her forehead, she asked how it was she had managed so to hurt herself.

"My daddy came and danced. He whirled Milly round and round," the little one said, grievingly. She knew nothing more of the occurrence; it was the only explanation she ever gave.

The look of awe which had been there once before came back to Mrs Walsh's eyes. Only to the doctor did she ever repeat the child's words. He, being a man of good common sense, refused of course to be impressed with the coincidence.

"She made herself giddy by, as she says, whirling round and round. In the moment of losing consciousness—who can tell by what unintelligible mental process?—the figure of her dead father, undoubtedly impressed with unusual clearness on the child's memory, was present with her. A vision? yes, if you like to call it so; say, rather, a dream in the instant before unconsciousness. Such a babe as this knows no distinction between dreams and realities—between the momentarily disordered mental vision and the ordinary objects of optical seeing."

For the rest, the unsatisfactory condition of the heart was still existent. Nothing that with care might not be obviated. With the absence of all excitement, with entire rest of mind and body, the child would outgrow the evil.

Yet, in spite of this cheerful view of the case, it was long before Mrs Walsh could successfully conceal the uneasiness and unhappiness she felt. Her punishment again, she told herself with morbid iteration. She had turned her back on her child, had forgotten her dead husband; nay, even in the moment of the child's accident, had she not been in the act of welcoming another man to that dead husband's home?

So, with a new life just begun for her, and new interests arising on all hands she found her mind continually dwelling on the days of her earlier married life. Often, when bent on any expedition with Major Walsh, dining with their neighbours, receiving them in her home, walking, driving with him, talking over the details of the business of the little estate, she was thinking, thinking how she and that other man had gone here and there, said this and that to each other. How he had looked, the words he had said; his gestures, his laugh, came curiously back to her; and her heart sank beneath a constant sense of self-reproach. How could she not have remembered all this before, and been true to the claims he had on her—that poor young husband who was the father of her child?

Once, but that was months later, and she was weak in body as well as depressed in mind, she sat alone over her bedroom fire as the dark came on, too tired to dress, and longed for her husband to come in and cheer her. Then the memory came to her of how once before, a few weeks before Milly was born, she had so sat in that very room, and had longed inexpressibly for that other husband; of how she had felt that she would die of fright and of longing for his comforting presence if he did not come; of how he had come at last, bringing warmth and love and courage to her failing heart; of how he had laughed, and said he had felt she was wanting him, and so had put what he was doing on one side and hurried to her. And as she thought of this, lying with shut eyes in her armchair, a curious feeling that he was there again with her in the room, took possession of her. She was not afraid; she lay quite still, hardly breathing, feeling "Harry is here! If I open my eyes I shall see him."

And often, in the weeks that followed, she was haunted by that strange consciousness of her first husband's presence; the curious, forcible impression that there was between her and him but a slight veil she lacked the resolution to rend, but that, rending it one day, she should see him.

Then Harold Walsh's child was born, and these unhealthy fancies were naturally vanquished.

It was a son, and there was much rejoicing. Poor little Milly's nose, it was said, must indeed be put out of joint by this advent of an heir to his father's large estates.

The child was born at Royle, his father's place, and christened there, while Milly had stayed on in her own home with her grandmother; the home where she had been born, where her father and mother had passed their brief married life together. When the son and heir was two months old, he came with his father and mother to stay in that house also. Then her mother and the

neighbours who had known her through all her experiences of joy and of sorrow were glad to see that the Major's wife had got back her health and spirits and happiness.

The boy was a fine boy, and his mother idolised him; the father, contrary to general expectation, continued to be very much in love. They were a prosperous and happy trio, seeming to suffice to themselves. Little Milly, who had longed for her mother and the new brother, found herself of comparatively small importance, and decidedly on the outside of the completed circle.

Who can measure the bitterness, the desolation, which no after-experience of the unkind tricks of destiny can ever equal, of the little heart which feels it is not wanted where it longs to cling?

Then Milly's birthday came, and she was six years old; a delicately lovely child with dark, straight hair, dark eyes, and a complexion which was as a finger-post to her father's history and her own, and should have said "Beware!" Milly had always a birthday-party; this year also she must have one.

But it was not a party such as Milly had been promised; with the small drawing-room turned into a cave of delights, where a real, white-robed fairy with silver wings and a wand presided over presents to be given to Milly and all her little guests. The promise, in the pleasurable excitement of the Walshs' arrival, had been forgotten by all but Milly. When Milly demanded its fulfilment it was too late.

So the little guests could only dance—those that were big enough—or assisted by their elders, in the form of governess or elder sister, play at forfeits and twilight, and blindman's buff. These innocent gambols they carried on in the wide entrance hall. Some flags had been hung, to please Milly, against the heavy beams of the ceiling, and the gardener had filled every niche and corner with hothouse plants.

Bent, apparently, on spoiling his sister's pleasure, the heir of the house of Walsh must be taken with a colic on that day. His mother was anxious about him, fancying him feverish, and insisting on the doctor's presence. So it came to pass she was oftener sitting in the nursery, seeing her son jogged, howling lustily, on the nurse's lap, than making merry with Milly and her friends in the hall.

As the afternoon drew to a close, and carriages began to arrive for the children and their guardians, Mrs Walsh came out of the nursery, and standing in the comparative darkness of the corridor, looked down upon the bright and pretty scene. The children in their dainty white dresses, with their flushed faces and tossed curls, were as lovely as the flowers everywhere surrounding them; the music of the chattering voices, of the clear laughter, was more agreeable to the ear than that of the piano Milly's governess was playing.

The fun, as is apt to be the case when such a gathering is nearly over, waxed livelier as the time came for the children to part. "Just one more game!" Milly's little excited voice was heard pleading—"only one more!"

It was Kiss in the Ring, the old world favourite they chose, and they formed themselves into a circle, putting the littlest boy—boys were scarce among them, and very small—in the centre.

It was in the midst of much laughing and chatter and noise that the two little girls on either side of Milly Eddington felt her hands turn ice-cold in theirs, and slowly slip from their grasp. The next instant she had fallen to the floor between them.

The doctor, luckily on the spot, attending to the baby-brother, was with her in two minutes. There

was nothing to be done. She was dead.

She had been the loveliest and the gayest there, laughing her pretty, happy laugh, babbling with the rest. Several of the elder guests, it was afterwards found, had been looking at the child and listening to her, when all at once she had become silent, had sunk backwards, and died.

So much they who looked on had seen, but nothing more.

Her mother, standing above, in the shadow of the corridor, and looking down upon the brightly-lit hall below, had seen this—

She had seen the figure of her first husband—the smile upon his face with which he had left her and her little daughter on the last day of his life—come silently into the hall. She had seen him, moving softly, attracting no notice from them, pass the groups of ladies standing near the walls, and noiselessly thread his way through the ring of playing children, till he stood at the back of his own little girl. She had seen him, smiling still, and clasping his hands tenderly beneath the child's chin, pull her softly backwards, and lay her dead upon the floor.

FREDDY'S SHIP

"A day or two, and I must return these people's call," Mrs Macmichel said to herself as she passed the Rectory gate. "What a bore!"

Two or three days ago the rector and his wife, calling on their new parishioner at the Court, had found her just returned from lunch with the shooting party in the field.

"Bad luck, wasn't it?" she asked, later, of the half-dozen men to whom she was giving tea in the billiard-room. "If I'd stayed to watch you shoot for another five minutes, I should have escaped them! Not a bad, dowdy little woman—the man a worse stick in the drawing-room than the pulpit, if possible. Subjects: his—parish room he wants to build; hers—son at sea, or going to sea, or has been to sea, or something. What is it to me? If he is drowned fifty fathoms deep at the bottom of the sea, do I care?"

"Now, if I only have the good luck to pick on a day when they're out!" she said as she stepped briskly along; a tall, and handsome, and fashionable-looking woman, in her hat with the green twisted veil and the green cock's feathers, her short, workman-like skirt and belted coat.

Down the short path from the Rectory door to the gate the rector himself was coming. Mrs Macmichel bowed a condescending head as she passed on, receiving no form of salutation but a stare from a pair of vacant eyes in return.

"Well, really! Such people!" the lady said to herself, as she walked disdainfully on. "Even *here* you would expect a man would know he is always expected to take off his hat when a woman bows to him!"

"Mrs Macmichel!" a voice said at her back. A hand was laid upon her arm. She turned a look of astonished questioning upon the man who had ventured to touch her.

"Stop, please," he said; his voice was breathless as of one in great agitation. "Mrs Macmichel, I

think you owe my wife a call? I want you to pay it now—at once——"

"It is very kind of you; I——"

"You mustn't make excuses. You mustn't deny me. You must go; and you must—stay."

The thought that he might be mad was succeeded as she looked in his face by the thought that he must be ill. The healthy colour natural to them had left his large cheeks, their fatness was only flabbiness, the small eyes were filled with a strange, pleading, protesting misery as of a man in terrible bodily discomfort.

"Mr Jones, I am afraid you are not well?"

He stopped her with an impatiently thrown-up hand. "It's not that—I'm all right. It's worse—it's my son——"

"The sailor?"

"News has come that the *Doughty* has gone down. All lost."

"Your son was in that ship?"

He did not answer, but pressed his lips, which were piteously quivering, together, and looked at her in staring misery.

"I am going into the village to wire for—confirmation. Till I return you must keep with my wife."

"But, Mr Jones! I am deeply, deeply sorry; but you must let me telegraph, and you, yourself, stay with Mrs Jones."

"No. She would know as soon as she saw my face. I stole away—I dare not see her." He stayed a minute, biting at lips drawn inward over his teeth. "Our only one!" he said. "No other! When I know—when there is no hope—no hope—I must tell her. I could wish that she might die before—that we might both die."

Tears had gushed upon the flabby cheeks; he mumbled his lips for a minute, unable to speak.

"If there was anything else I could do—anything!" Mrs Macmichel said. "But this——!"

"You will watch over her till I come back," he said, not even noticing her remonstrance. "It is a service I ask of you by right of our common humanity. Go in to her at once, please."

With his hand on her arm he turned her to the gate, and opened it for her. "Let no one else come near her," he said. "The butcher delivering our meat gave me the news. He saw it on the newspaper board at the village shop. Everyone in the village who reads it will come up at once to tell my wife. Keep them away. She has a weak heart; told suddenly, she might—Don't let her stir out. Don't let her hold communication with anyone till I return."

He put up a trembling hand in the direction of his clerical hat, but lacked the spirit to lift it, and turned hurriedly away.

"But, Mr Jones!" she called. She made a step or two after him. "It will be so awkward—for her, I mean. She won't understand. You see, I hardly know your wife."

He raised his strengthless hand for a few inches, and let it fall with a gesture of hopeless wretchedness. "Oh, what do such things matter?" he groaned.

She was ashamed to persist. "I thought perhaps someone in the village—someone she knew——"

"They could do nothing with her," he explained. "If she wanted them to go, she would tell them to go; she can't tell you. If she wanted to go into the village, she would go——"

"How soon will you be back?"

"An hour. Two hours. I must wire to Portsmouth, and wait a reply." He began to walk on again. "When I come back I shall—know," he said, and shuffled forward, with drooping back, and legs that shook beneath him, on his way.

Once he turned, and, seeing her still at the gate, pointed a weakly imperative finger at the house without stopping in his progress.

Hardly crediting that it could be upon her, Flora Macmichel, accustomed to move in paths so carefully smoothed, to have all ugly things hidden from her sight, that this task of matchless unpleasantness had been thrust, she turned and walked slowly towards the Rectory door. There are so many women in the world, shrieking, gesticulating, ready to rush into any fray a-brewing; so many quiet and strong and helpful, aching to take other people's burdens upon their shoulders; she had never sought to identify herself with one or the other species, holding the comfortable doctrine that we cannot all be servers, that in the general scheme those who only stand to be waited on also hold a useful place.

Why need she do this thing? Three weeks ago she had not known these people existed; three days ago had not set eyes on them. For humanity's sake, he had said. Well!

But she thought of the mumbling lips, the look of anguish in the poor eyes, went on, and rang the bell.

Mrs Jones was in, of course. She was sitting over the dining-room fire, writing a letter. A short, rather fat, rather dumpy woman, with plain features, an ominous flush on her sallow cheeks, iron-grey hair, and very large, very luminous dark eyes.

"How very good of you to call so soon!" she said, and got up to welcome, rather effusively, the rich woman who had come to be a parishioner. "Let your master know at once that Mrs Macmichel is here, Mabel," she said to the servant, and gave Mabel a look which indicated tea was to make its appearance with as little delay as possible. "Are you walking or driving? Walking? Really? Now, would you rather sit near the fire or the open window? It is the kind of day—isn't it?—when either is agreeable."

She had a slightly nervous manner, or she was not quite at ease with the strange caller. She altered the position of the chairs, rattled the poker in the fire, pushed away the little table which held the writing things.

"I was just writing to my son," she said, and smiled, as if sure of her interest in the subject, at the woman, who, chill to the marrow with the discomfort of her errand, had taken a chair by the side of the fire. "I think I told you he is in the navy? He is commanding the *Doughty*, the new destroyer. Going trips in her every day or so. I suppose these destroyers are terrible-looking things? Ah! I have never seen one, but I imagined so. What a comfort to me to know they are, after all, so safe

as Freddy tells me they are."

"Such a mild day for the time of year, isn't it? And such a pretty stretch of road from the Court here!"

"We often say so!"

"And just the right length for a walk!"

"Exactly a mile and a quarter."

"Really?"

"Exactly! We always called it a mile; but the last time he was home on leave Freddy measured it with his new cyclometer. 'Now, mother,' he said, 'please to remember it's a mile and a quarter, and, don't let's have any dispute about it in future?'"

"It's so nice to know—to an inch or two!"

"Well, Freddy has a very accurate mind. He can't bear anything slipshod in the way of a statement. Now, you are sure, after your walk, you do not feel the fire too much? Then move into this chair. You have really taken the least comfortable in the room. Now, isn't that better?"

Mrs Macmichel said that it was delightfully cosy. She was inwardly shivering; the tips of her fingers felt like ice. She pulled off her loose gloves, and held a pair of white hands blazing with jewels to the flame. She must force herself to talk, and to keep the poor woman off the topic of her son; but she, who was considered ready-tongued and ready-witted, sat dumb, she had not a word to say.

"There is so much difference in chairs," she said, at length.

The banality did not affect Mrs Jones to laughter, as the speaker had a fear it might have done. She seized eagerly on the remark.

"Isn't there? Some are straight in the back, and some slope too much for comfort; some are too high in the seat for short legs, and some quite ridiculously low."

"But this is perfect."

"I am so glad you find it so! It is Freddy's. It was one he bought when he was in barracks. But he sent it to me. It was much too comfortable to be anywhere but in his own home, he said. Isn't it delightful that young men are so much attached to their homes, nowadays?"

It was indeed delightful, Mrs Macmichel answered; and added with an effort the original remark that home was a delightful place.

She supposed it was, the other lady agreed. "I never go away from mine, my health does not allow me," she said; "and so, perhaps, I can hardly judge."

She looked round the rather dismal, rather shabby room with a something critical in her gaze. Perhaps the presence of the fashionably-dressed woman seated there—a person so evidently out of harmony with her surroundings—helped her to see the familiar dowdiness with other eyes. She gave a quick sigh as she looked, then turned to her visitor with her nervous smile—

"It is a mercy Freddy does not see the old fashion, the shabbiness. He only sees—home," she said.

Always Freddy! Poor Freddy, who would never see home again!

Searching wildly in her, at this crisis, stagnant mind for anything to turn the poor woman from her subject, Mrs Macmichel remembered the Parish Room. Here should be a mine of conversational wealth. She would work it for all it was worth.

"My husband is so—interested in the scheme," she said, and gulped a little at the lie. "Tell me over again, please, all those details you gave me before. He would like to know how much you have in hand; what you want to complete the room; what the bazaar brought in, and how much you expect from the concert."

Mrs Jones rose easily to the bait. She rose, too, talking all the time, to fetch from her writing-case the type-written circular where the parish's need for such a room was stated, and the paper, in her husband's handwriting, on which the sums already collected, and their source, were set forth. A hundred and thirty pounds were still wanted. What was a sum like that to this millionaire at the Court? And what a lot of begging, writing, giving of jumble sales, supposing they were moved to give that sum, would be saved to the Joneses!

Mrs Macmichel took the papers, glanced at them, laid them on her lap, tried to say yes and no in the right places to the information now eagerly poured forth to her; tried to keep her eyes from that letter which the clergyman's wife had been interrupted in writing. It had fluttered to the floor as she had looked through her writing-case, and now lay, unheeded by her, at the visitor's feet.

"My own darling boy," it began.

"Such a poor parish." "So much indifference." "So disheartening," fell on Flora Macmichel's unreceptive ear.

"My own darling boy."

Something other than curiosity, stronger than her will, glued her eyes to the page.

"Your last dear letter reached me——"

Last! Yes, last indeed!

"Only five shillings and twopence in the bag; and of that, two shillings were contributed by Mr Jones and myself. Discouraging, is it not?"

"—This subject we will discuss more fully when you come home again," in spite of herself she read the words.

Come home again! Come home again! When the sea gives up its dead!

The servant came in, bringing tea; picked up the letter, returned it to the table.

"If you please, ma'am, Mrs Pyman have called, and wish to speak with you."

"Ask her to wait," the mistress said; then glanced at her visitor to deprecate the anticipated polite protest on her part. "Anne Pyman will like very much to sit down in the kitchen for a while," she

said. But as the maid withdrew she apparently altered her mind. "This good woman is the biggest gossip in the village," she explained. "She is always running up here to tell me this or that which she picks up. I think, after all, if you would excuse me for one minute——?"

"Of course!" the visitor said, mechanically; then awoke to the remembrance that she had undertaken to keep Mrs Jones from all outside intercourse. She turned an anxious look upon her hostess—"I think if we could have tea——?" she said.

Then she strangled a laugh in her throat—a laugh, sitting in Freddy's chair! What—what must Freddy's mother think of her!

"Oh, certainly!" Mrs Jones concurred. The large dark eyes, the only handsome feature she possessed, scanned with a fleeting gaze of inquiry the other woman's face. "I daresay, after your walk——"

"If you don't mind. Yes. Quite so. Tea is so very refreshing, don't you think?"

The temptation to say it was the cup which cheered but did not inebriate crossed her mind, but was combated.

The bread-and-butter handed to her with her tea was thick, the tea had not been creamed; but if food and drink had been fit for the entertainment of the gods, she did not think she could have swallowed. She lifted the bread-and-butter to her lips, then laid it, untasted, down again, she stirred her tea, and glanced at the clock upon the mantelpiece. For how long must she sit and talk inanities with this mother whose only child was lying fathoms deep beneath the sea? She had been there barely a quarter of an hour. For an hour and three-quarters, at least, she must sit there still, whatever the other woman thought of her, however she tried to rid herself of her company.

"You, too, have a son, I believe?" Mrs Jones was saying.

"Yes." She had an only son. His name was Connell. He was six years old.

"And very dear to you, I know!" The eyes of the woman whose only son was drowned shone with sympathy. They were speaking eyes, really beautiful with that light in them.

"Very dear to me," responded the woman in Freddy's chair. To her eyes came a sudden, unexpected rush of tears. Of her own child she felt she could not speak to this unconsciously bereaved mother.

"And six years old? Ah! Now I must show you what my dear boy was like at six."

She got up, and fetched from the mantelpiece a photograph of a tiny boy in a sailor's dress; a plain-featured, ordinary-looking little boy, with dark eyes too solemn for his age.

"Now, is your boy as big, do you think? We considered Freddy a fine boy. And whom do you think he takes after?"

"He is like you—about the eyes," Mrs Macmichel said. She gave the photograph hurriedly back. She could not endure to look upon the eyes closed now upon their "first dark day of nothingness."

Mrs Jones put the portrait tenderly in its place. "That big photograph standing above the clock was taken only the other day," she said. "When he was appointed to the *Doughty*, I wished so much to

have him in his uniform. But the trouble I had to get him to have it taken! For no inducement in the world but to please me would he appear in uniform when not on duty, he said."

And now he lay, like Nicanor, "dead in his harness."

Mrs Macmichel was seated directly in front of the enlarged photograph. Its eyes looked straight into hers as she lifted them, with, it seemed to her, an infinite sadness.

"Is it not strange that we should both be mothers of only sons?"

It was not, in fact, a very remarkable coincidence, but the visitor conceded that it was strange.

"It ought to be a bond of sympathy between us."

"Yes."

Mrs Macmichel's eyes were turned uneasily upon the door at which the servant had suddenly appeared.

"Mrs Pyman is afraid she can't wait any longer now, ma'am. She wouldn't keep you more'n a minute, if you could speak to her, she says."

Mrs Macmichel put out a hand and gripped the arm of her hostess as she rose from her seat—"Don't—" she said imploringly, "don't go! We are so—so comfortable."

She could not but be flattered, although she could not help being surprised. "Tell Anne Pyman, I am sorry," Mrs Jones said to the maid, who, however, stood her ground.

"And cook say, the butcher have been, and can she speak to you for a minute, ma'am?" she asked.

The butcher! He who had brought the terrible news. In her eagerness Mrs Macmichel turned to the servant standing at the door.

"No," she said, "certainly not! Your mistress cannot come."

The miserable, not to be repressed chuckle of laughter took her again as the girl withdrew. "You must think me strange," she said to the lady, gazing at her with astonished eyes. "But I *am* strange. We are getting on so well. I don't like to be interrupted. Go on. You were saying——?"

"About the bond of sympathy: our only children. I'm afraid the bread-and-butter is too substantial; will you try a bun instead?"

"It is delicious!" Flora Macmichel said, and put the slice again to her lips, and again placed it unbitten in the saucer.

"There is," said the clergyman's wife in a lowered tone, "something awful—I mean in the sense of being full of awe—in being entrusted by God with only one child. Don't you think that much more will be required of us, and of them—our dear children?"

Mrs Macmichel had not thought of it in that light.

"You see, we have no others to share our devotion, to distract our attention. Our only one should

be, as near as a mother can make him so, perfect."

"Wouldn't that make him a little—well—uninteresting?"

Mrs Jones's eyes blazed reproof as she answered: "Freddy is not uninteresting," she said.

Presently her voice dropped to a hushed whisper. "Then, there is the thought"—she said—"the haunting thought—should he die—should it please God to take him from us, we lose our all. All!" she repeated; and the word, spoken in that tone of heavy solemnity, dropped like lead upon Flora Macmichel's heart.

If she lost Connell there was still, in her case, her husband; but she thought of the husband of Mrs Jones, and was silent.

"I have a friend," she said, suddenly rousing herself to make one effort suitable to the occasion, "whose only little girl died last year. They thought her heart would break, but it did not. She—in a marvellous way she bore it. Never once did she seem to me to sorrow—painfully. The child, for long and long after she was dead, seemed with her, she told me." She leant forward in her chair; her voice, which was a rather harsh-speaking voice, grew low and earnest. Was it possible that she—she, Flora Macmichel—had joined the company of the preachers! "Don't you think that alleviations undreamed of are always sent?" she asked, smarting tears in her eyes, her voice breaking.

"Perhaps I ought not to say it," the other woman said, "it is my want of faith, of which I should be ashamed; but it seems to me that nothing—nothing—in this world, of course—could atone."

A bell clashed sharply.

By leaning back slightly in her chair, Mrs Jones could get, it seemed, a side view of the door.

"Dear me! It is the boy from the telegraph office," she said. "I never see him without the dreadful fear that something may be amiss. Isn't it old-fashioned of me?"

The flush which told of disease had deepened on her cheeks; she laid a hand upon her chest as she arose. "If you will excuse me for half a moment——?"

But Mrs Macmichel had sprung to her feet and was at the door before the other. "Let me!" she said hurriedly. "I—I have my hat on. You might take cold——"

"Excuse me!" Mrs Jones cried.

"You really must allow me!" said Mrs Macmichel.

There was quite a scuffle at the door as to which should go out first.

It was the younger and stronger woman who dashed across the hall and snatched the telegram from the boy upon the steps. She came back, crushing the orange envelope, unopened, in her hand. Full well she knew its contents. The authorities had not waited for the father's inquiry, but had wired the news.

"It was—was for me," she said, gasping out the intelligence.

The dark eyes of the elder woman questioned her sharply. "How strange—how very strange it

should have been sent on here!"

"My husband knew I was coming to make—a long call. He sent it on."

Mrs Jones sat down again before her tea-tray, and in the speaking eyes was a dawning of suspicion—"I hope nothing is the matter?" she said. "You will read your telegram, Mrs Macmichel?"

Mrs Macmichel thrust the envelope into the pocket of her coat, and kept her hand upon it there. "It is from my dressmaker; she is always bothering," she said.

"But are you sure, as you have not read it?"

"Quite sure. I always know when they come from her."

The hand which seized upon her cup again was shaking. The slice of bread-and-butter was sodden with the tea which had been spilt on it as she had put it so hurriedly down. "What were we talking of?" she asked. "I—it was so interesting. Please go on."

"It was about our dear children," said Mrs Jones slowly. She looked with a gaze of awakening distrust at her visitor. Her thoughts evidently turned to her husband. "I will hear if Mr Jones has returned," she said. "He would be so sorry to miss you——"

She put out her hand to the bell. Mrs Macmichel stopped her hurriedly. "Don't ring!" she said, in the loud voice of alarm. "Please! I will stay till Mr Jones comes back, however long he is away. I promise."

Ah, if he would only come! Only half an hour lived through of the two hours yet! Yet, for worlds she would not be present at the meeting of the wife and husband, who then would—know!

"I will stay, if you will let me go the very instant he comes," she added. "If you tell me when you see him coming up the garden path, I will run."

"He is here!" Mrs Jones said, with an air of relief. "I heard the garden-gate; I know his step——"

Oh, not for ten worlds would Flora, who had ever shunned the sight of pain, see that meeting! She almost flung her teacup from her. She seized the other's hand.

"Good-bye! oh, good-bye!" she said; "I cannot possibly stay another minute. I am so sorry! Oh, Mrs Jones, will you please remember, I am nearly dead with sorrow—but I must go."

"She is certainly mad," said the other woman to herself. She was so astonished that she forgot to rise from her chair, but sat looking after her vanishing guest with eyes wide with dismay.

On the doorstep the clergyman and the lady encountered. He was panting as one, all unaccustomed to such exercise, who had run. There was a look of famished eagerness in his eyes, the unhealthy pallor of his face was beaded with drops of sweat.

"They told me—at the office—a telegram had been sent," he said.

She snatched it from her pocket and put it in his hand. "I kept it from her," she said. "Take it, and let me go."

And yet she could not go.

His shaking fingers had torn open the envelope, had clutched the enclosure. It wavered so, that, standing behind him, she put her arms round his arms—tall woman as she was—her hands over his, and helped him to steady it.

"Read it," he said to her; "I can't—I can't see."

So she read aloud to him, in a voice that rose on a note of triumph and finished in a sob, the single line of the message!

"Not on board the *Doughty*. Tell mother all right."

Mrs Jones, coming to the dining-room door, looked out for one instant on her husband, apparently clutched in Mrs Macmichel's embrace. In the next, the lady was speeding with her long stride down the path to the gate; the clergyman had staggered into a hall chair, a succession of sounds, something between sobs and hiccoughs, issuing from his throat.

"My dear, has she hurt you?" his wife cried excitedly. "She is mad—quite mad, I am sure!"

Her husband, catching sight of Mrs Macmichel's face as she entered, followed her upstairs to her room. She was lying, dressed as she was, on her bed, with her face hidden.

"My dear, what is the matter? What have you been doing with yourself?" he asked.

She had been to the Rectory, to call on the Joneses, she told him.

"Well?"

"The *Doughty* has gone down. All on board lost."

"So I hear. Well?"

"It was their son's ship."

"Well?"

"Freddy's." She sat up and laughed across the sob in her throat. "You stupid! I am crying because Freddy did not go down in the *Doughty*," she said.

A NERVE CURE

"*Well*, what a place!" Julia cried.

I had come to it because of an urgent need of change, because it was by the sea, because it was cheap, because the advertisement had caught my eye at a moment when I was weary of vainly protesting that I wished to go nowhere except to bed.

"To Let, during the months of November and December, a six-roomed cottage; desirable; furnished; free of charge, with exception of caretaker's wage."

A couple of letters from me, a couple in reply from the owner, who was going for the winter months abroad, and the affair was settled.

Then my people who—although for ten years I have earned my own living, and helped to keep some of them who have not earned theirs, although I am five-and-thirty years of age and an absolutely dependable person—have never let me have my own way in any single matter, insisted that Julia should come with me. She is my youngest sister. I have not a word to say against her, of course; only I know that the things I am content to put up with are never good enough for Julia.

"Well, *what* a place!" Julia repeated; the shifting of the accent did not denote, I was sure, a more favourable view.

It certainly was not a pretty cottage. It was also quite out of the town, in which we had believed it to be situated, standing at the extremity of an unfinished road which led halfway across the sandy waste lying between the town of Starbay and the village of Starcliff.

"A garden, back and front," Miss Ferriman had promised me in one of her letters. There were the gardens, sure enough, but almost as unfinished as the road. "An airy situation and uninterrupted view of the sea," the description had continued, and was faithful as far as it went. The wind, which happened to be blowing a gale, without obstruction of any kind to break its force, buffeted us remorselessly as, having descended from the car which had brought us from the station, we struggled up the path to the door. Half a mile of blowing sand, with sparse, wiry grass sticking through, was between us and the breakers; yet the ocean, cold and lead-coloured, was beyond, and not so much as a finger-breadth of impediment to check the prospect.

"Well, what a *place*!" said Julia again. "Let's go back, Isabella. Don't let us go in."

But, once inside, we found the sitting-room which was to be ours comfortable and prettily furnished; our two bedrooms—there were but three—were also all that was necessary. Mine faced the sea beyond the melancholy, level Denes, Julia, to my great content, choosing the one looking out upon the back. The little back garden with its stunted shrubs, the unmade road beyond, made a melancholy outlook, but one that suited Julia better than the sea-view.

"The sight of the sea at this time of year gives me the most awful feeling," she declared. She rounded her shoulders, and pressed her hands upon a chest made hollow for the occasion, and her knees gave way under her, to prove how strongly she was affected.

"Then, why did you come to the sea?" I asked, for I was a little tired of Julia's grumbling.

"I came to look after you and your nerves, Isabella," she reminded me; "and how could I possibly know I shouldn't like the sea in November till I had seen it?"

We had ordered tea to be ready for us, and after our long railway journey we were more than ready for the meal.

"The woman of the house is a most miserable, frightened-looking creature," Julia remarked. "It is to be hoped that, at any rate, she will provide us with decently cooked food."

On this score I had no misgivings. Miss Ferriman, in one of her letters, had laid special stress upon the fact that Mrs Ragg, the caretaker, was an excellent cook.

She offered us no solacing specimen of her culinary art, however. The round table in the bay-window of our sitting-room was spread simply with the materials for brewing tea and for cutting bread-and-butter.

Julia's eyes blazed with hunger and indignation. "This is your fault, Isabella!" she declared. "What did you order, pray?"

"Something substantial. It is very annoying," I could not help confessing.

Julia angrily jingled the little bell. "We want something to eat," she said, as the caretaker appeared. "Cook us two chops, please; as quickly as possible."

Mrs Ragg looked at us from the doorway with the same gaze of fascinated terror with which a half-starved crow might regard two wild cats taking possession of its cage. With her garments of shabby black, her black untidy hair, her long beak and startled eyes, she had something of the appearance of a bedraggled, ill-used bird of that species. Her trembling, clawlike fingers played with the buttons of her dress; her chin, a very long and pointed feature, seemed to elongate itself immensely as her mouth fell; she sucked in the sides of her thin cheeks, and looked with a helpless imploring gaze from Julia to me.

"You have no chops, I suppose?" I interpreted the beseeching gaze.

She had no chops, she confessed.

"What have you, then?" the un pitying Julia persisted. "What have you got for our breakfast tomorrow? for our dinner? You have provided something, no doubt?"

The hollows in each meagre cheek of the caretaker deepened, the effect of the still further elongating of her chin, the starting eyes turned from my sister to me.

"Julia," I said, with severity, "it will be better not to have two Richmonds in the field. I, myself, will, with your permission, give Mrs Ragg what orders are necessary."

Then, in a tone of severity which should have been at once an encouragement to Mrs Ragg and a reproach to my sister, I asked to have some eggs boiled for tea.

There were no eggs.

"Go and fetch some," the irrepressible Julia cried.

"I understood the two ladies were to do their shopping themselves," the caretaker tremblingly explained.

I said of course we would. "Press not a falling man (or woman) too far," I quoted to Julia, as, the unhappy Mrs Ragg having left us to ourselves, we sat down to our bread-and-butter.

Julia, although protesting in the finish that hunger still gnawed her vitals, ate half the loaf. I, who should have been content to put up with what remained of it for our morning meal, was unable to control my sister's raging determination to forage that night for food.

"I refuse to starve," she said.

There was, luckily for us, a full moon, or we might easily have lost the faintly indicated road, lightly

strewn as it was with oyster-shells and broken bricks, and ploughed through the trackless waste of sandy desert all night. The outskirts of the town reached, there were several mean-looking streets to pass through, before we found a shop at which we thought it desirable to trade. As we walked, buffeted by the wind blowing in from the sea, Julia discoursed of the caretaker of Sea-Strand Cottage.

"That, mark my words, is a thoroughly bad woman," she declared. "She wouldn't be such a forbidding-looking creature unless she was wicked. It wouldn't be fair on the part of the Almighty to have made her so. I consider her aspect thoroughly sinister."

"Poor frightened, trembling old wretch!" I said.

"Exactly. Why does she tremble? What is she afraid of? In my opinion she is intending to murder us in our beds."

"You had better go home the first thing in the morning and leave me to my fate," I told her. To myself I said I did not believe the world contained another woman with the worrying capacity of Julia. It was because she was such a disturbing force in the family that they had been so eager for her to accompany me, I, not without bitterness, suspected.

At the shop where we bought our chops for breakfast and a chicken for dinner, I bethought me to enquire of the young woman at the entering desk if Mrs Ragg, the caretaker of Sea-Strand Cottage, was known to her. The reply was quite satisfactory. Their cart had always served the cottage; the woman in charge was a most respectable person; a couple of ladies who had taken the cottage in the summer had mentioned that she was also an excellent cook.

The chops were served to us the next morning charred black, uneatable. I pointed them out to Julia on her appearing, and, with a view to deprecating her inevitable wrath, frankly so described them. My sister regarded the lost hopes of our meal with a preoccupied stare; then turned upon me with the wide distending of her eyelids which I knew portended a new worry.

"What sort of a night had you?" she asked.

"Excellent. And you?"

"Frightful. My nerves are all on the stretch, in consequence. I give you warning, Isabella, if you drop your knife or chink your teacup and saucer I shall scream aloud."

"You didn't sleep?"

"Not a wink."

"Were there noises to disturb you?"

"Not a sound. That was it! Not a din, Isabella."

"That's all right, then."

"Is it? You know my room?—just a lath-and-plaster partition between it and hers—that woman's. I ought to have heard every movement, even if she turned in her bed."

"It was very thoughtful of Mrs Ragg to lie so still."

"She was not there, Isabella."

"Not there?"

"I'd stake my life on it. It worried me so at last—I *had* to listen, you know—that I got up and put my ear against the partition. The deadest stillness!"

"But even if she was not there, I don't see it is so very alarming."

"She says she was. I asked her just now if she was sleeping next to me, and she said yes."

"She was, then."

"She wasn't."

I poured out the tea with impatience. What a constant worry Julia was! Without appearing to cast a backward thought upon the chops, she buttered herself a piece of toast.

"Of course, at last, I did fall asleep," she admitted. "And that was the worst of all. Isabella, I dreamt of that horrible little room next to mine, and of the reason it was so still."

"Well?"

"I dreamt there was a dead woman in it."

I laughed at that, and Julia, pausing in the act of taking a bite from her toast, glared angrily at me.

"You are a nice, soothing sort of person to be sent away with one supposed to be in want of cheering influences!" I said. "You and your dream of a dead woman!"

"I dreamt one was there," Julia said, going on with her toast. "In my opinion one *was* there," she added, doggedly.

When she had finished her breakfast, and had withdrawn her thoughts from the engrossing subject of her dream sufficiently to grumble about the aching void where the chops should have been, she sprang up from the table and loudly tinkled the little bell.

"For Mrs Ragg to clear away," she explained to me. "While she is doing so, and you, Isabella, keep her attention engaged on things below, I am going upstairs to have a look at her bedroom."

"Absurd!" I ejaculated.

"Aren't you absurd?" Julia cried, and turned upon me with scorn. "To take up your abode in a little cut-throat hole like this and not to take the commonest precaution!"

She flew upstairs, then, and Mrs Ragg was in the room.

In order to obey my sister's injunction to keep the woman's attention I began to talk to her, asking her how long she had lived in Sea-Strand Cottage. I had just gathered from her grudging, mumbling speech that she had lived there since the cottage was built, when my sister was in the room again.

Julia watched the caretaker shovel the things on to the tray, and, sighing bitterly the while, drag wearily out of the room with them. She turned to me, then, with a nod eloquent.

"Locked," she enunciated. "The door was locked. Why—why should the woman want to lock her bedroom door when she is out of it?"

"She returns the compliment you have paid her, and thinks you not to be trusted," I suggested.

"If I have to climb on the roof and pull off the tiles, I'll see what is in that room before I go to bed tonight!" Julia declared.

Then Mrs Ragg came back for the tablecloth.

"I slept very badly last night, Mrs Ragg," said Julia.

Mrs Ragg sucked in her cheeks, sighed heavily, made no answer.

"And so did you, I'm afraid. You were very restless. You walked about half the night."

"Me, miss?" She had folded the cloth, but she dropped it from her shaking, awkward hands, stooped to recover it, dropped it again. "Begging your pardon, no, miss."

"Who, then?" Julia asked inflexibly.

The woman turned away with the cloth and shuffled hastily to the door.

"Wait," commanded Julia. "Who, then? There was no one else in your bedroom besides you, I suppose?"

Mrs Ragg hurriedly rejected the insinuation. She had had a pain in her chest, she remembered now, and had got up for remedies.

"Of course you heard me rapping on the wall and asking you to keep still? You heard that, at least, Mrs Ragg?"

"Yes," Mrs Ragg had heard that, certainly. She admitted the fact as if it had been a sin, with a look of actual horror upon her face.

"You heard?" asked Julia of me in a kind of triumph as we were alone. "There was not a sound through all the night. I never rapped upon the wall. Now, why is she lying? It may be nothing to you, but I mean to know."

Once more that morning, coming from our own rooms, dressed for walking, Julia tried the caretaker's door. Finding it fast, shook it, and turned from doing so to find Mrs Ragg, arrived on the scene in her felt shoes, standing behind her.

"Asking your pardon, miss, that is my room," the woman said; with a feeble kind of offence she went and put herself before the door.

"We have hired the cottage; I presume we have the right to look even into your room, if we deem it advisable," Julia said, with her haughtiest air. "So, you always keep your room locked, Mrs Ragg?"

"When strangers are about I do," Mrs Ragg replied; and although she was apparently afraid of us she gazed upon us with no goodwill.

As we left the house, Julia called my attention to the fact that the blind in the room next to her own was drawn. "All the same, I don't sleep again beneath your Mrs Ragg's roof till I've been into her bedroom," she declared.

I had come to Starbay for the benefit of the sea. Julia, however, would not allow me to make nearer acquaintance with it than that possible from my window, but dragged me into the town again. We put down our names at one of the circulating libraries, and, it coming on to rain, could think of no better than to go upstairs to the reading-room.

It happened to have only one other occupant. A man of early middle-age, who, with the marks of delicate health upon him, had a face which, like that of "my Uncle Toby's," invited confidence.

Julia, for a minute, as we settled to read, looked across the table at him with her direct, sea-green gaze; then turned to her paper and looked no more until she put the paper down and began to talk to him.

It was easy enough to begin with a question about a certain magazine. "Did they take it there?" and to follow on with half a dozen enquiries about the town, and the objects of interest in the neighbourhood. I listened for a minute or two, reflecting how to my young sister any human document, however casually picked up, exceeded in interest the finest book ever written, then went on with an article on Education in which I happened to be interested. I roused myself from my abstraction to hear Julia mentioning to the strange man the name of Sea-Strand Cottage as our abode, and describing in her exaggerated fashion its location and appearance.

"At the utmost end of Everywhere, and looking like secret assassination, nothing less, when you get there," my sister was saying.

The man, as it happened, knew the place well. "It was the advertisement of Sea-Strand Cottage which brought me to Starbay," he said. "But when I saw the place, I——"

"You didn't like it! No more did I!" Julia said.

"However, the caretaker seemed a comfortable sort of body, and I was assured an excellent cook," the man continued.

Julia, her hands in her coat-pockets, bent her supple body forward across the table, bringing her eager face nearer to the stranger's. "Did you see her?—Mrs Ragg?" she asked.

He had seen her.

"Well?"

"She seemed all right," he said; and Julia lay back, disappointed, in her chair again.

"To me she seems all wrong," she said.

When I thought the conversation had lasted long enough I took Julia away from the library. Mrs Ragg had declared herself unable to have our meal ready before three o'clock in the afternoon. We went into a pastry-cook's therefore, and Julia ate a fair supply of tarts and custards, and insisted on taking away with her a selection from the store. "You keep yourself in hand for the chicken cooked

by Mrs Ragg; I intend to be independent of it," she said, and walked home with her indigestible provender.

As we neared Sea-Strand Cottage we saw, coming towards it from the opposite direction, our new acquaintance of the reading-room. We met by the gate.

"I have to do a constitutional of so many prescribed miles every morning," he said. "After our conversation just now, I naturally bent my steps in this direction."

"Do walk this way sometimes," Julia said, flashing her smile upon him. "If, after a few days, you should see nothing of us, you might bring a policeman with you and search for our remains."

He smiled too, and said he would certainly do so. "I saw two or three men here as I went by, just now," he said; "they might have been the assassins you are expecting, but they looked uncommonly like every-day carpenters and workmen."

"Coming out of the house, do you mean? *Men?*" Julia asked, instantly on the alert.

"Not from the house—from the outhouse," he corrected and nodded in its direction.

Julia and I had inspected this empty outhouse that morning, and had decided to have our travelling-cases moved there. As our eyes turned towards it now, Mrs Ragg came out from it and softly closed the door behind her.

"This is the Mrs Ragg about whose desirability we disagree," Julia told the stranger, who, with his hand to his hat, was bowing to us and moving on. He stopped for a moment, looked at the caretaker, looked back to us with a smile.

"The mystery is solved. Your Mrs Ragg and mine are not the same person," he said.

Julia, who had been round to the back of the house to make inspection, came running to me with the news that the blind was up in the caretaker's bedroom, and the window open.

"There is a ladder against the outhouse," she said. "You must come and help me to fix it, Isabella, and stand on the bottom rung while I climb to the window."

There was no need for such extreme measures, however. Going upstairs to escape from my sister's importunity, I found the door of the hitherto locked room invitingly open. This intelligence being communicated to Julia, she came rushing upstairs, and dragged me unwillingly into Mrs Ragg's bedroom with her.

A most commonplace, mean-looking room, the wind blowing through it from open window to open door. The bed still unmade, but the square box of a place otherwise clean and tidy.

"What a home of mystery!" I said, with fine sarcasm, to Julia. "Where's your corpse, my dear?"

Julia gazed with great eyes round the little depressing place. "It really is exactly like," she said slowly. "The bed stood just there. But on it, you know, Isabella—on it——"

She shuddered, and gripped my arm. "My teeth chatter. Come away," she said.

She was generous enough to share her confectionery with me, and her forethought in bringing it was amply justified. Mrs Ragg had been so much occupied all the morning that she had forgotten to put the chicken in the oven until she saw us at the gate, she told us.

"Of course we can't put up with this. We will leave to-morrow," Julia declared. But I, who had paid the caretaker a week's salary in advance, was of opinion we should have a little more for our money.

"Put the chicken back in the oven, and I will see to the cooking of it," Julia said, when we had sufficiently contemplated the more than half-raw carcass of the fowl. "My sister is an invalid," she continued; "I am anxious that she should not be quite starved. I will cook the chicken therefore, and you will be responsible, perhaps, for the bread-sauce, Mrs Ragg."

The woman, looking alarmedly at her, murmured the word "bread-sauce?" and sucked in her cheeks.

"You know how to make bread-sauce, Mrs Ragg?"

Mrs Ragg had to confess she did not.

"But how can you possibly have had a reputation as a cook!" my sister demanded. Her eyes continued to blaze forth the inquiry long after there was any hope of the woman making a reply.

"I'm afraid you are a helpless creature," Julia told her, with the stern pitilessness that belongs to youth. "I also do not know how to make bread-sauce, but I will make it. In the meantime, will you go up to our rooms, fetch down the empty packing-cases—you will find them extremely light—and place them in that shed across the yard we saw empty this morning."

Undoubtedly Mrs Ragg was a helpless creature. She stood uncertainly before us, her skinny hands playing tremblingly with the buttons of her dress, and did not attempt to move.

"Do you not hear me? Go at once," Julia commanded.

But I saw that the woman got no nearer to our rooms than the bottom of the staircase. She stood there, clinging to the rail, and looking aimlessly upward.

Running upstairs I brought the two light cases down myself.

"There is room for them in the kitchen," Mrs Ragg said. But, carrying one myself, I told her to bring the other across to the empty shed. Arrived there, however, we found the door of the shed locked.

"Fetch the key," I ordered.

She stood and looked at me, but did not move.

"Tell me where the key is, and let me fetch it."

The key was lost.

"Why have you taken the trouble to lock an absolutely empty shed?"

She had no reason to give. She had locked it, and the key was lost.

"She has some reason for not wishing us to go into that shed," Julia said, oracularly, when the circumstance was mentioned to her.

"Absurd!" I said, but I did begin to experience an uncomfortable suspicion of the woman.

"She has got those men locked up there," Julia continued, with her air of assurance.

"Nonsense! What for?"

"Murder," said Julia, laconically; and energetically crumbled bread for the sauce.

"What were two men doing here this morning?" I asked, with assumed carelessness, of Mrs Ragg when next we encountered.

She mumbled the words "two men?" and stared at me by way of answer.

"We were told two men were here this morning. This is a very lonely situation, Mrs Ragg. I suppose you would admit no one you don't know all about?"

She was, she said, always most particular.

"Then, who were these two men, and what were they doing here?"

She did not know.

"Two men here, Mrs Ragg, and you not know it?"

"They weren't here," she said; and I had to leave it so.

I offered to change beds with Julia that night, but she would not hear of it. "Your room is the more comfortable; keep it," she said. "While you insist on staying here at the peril of our lives, I will sleep as well as I can with a dead woman laid forth on the bed next mine, and two murderers shut up in the shed across the way."

Julia's talk is ever more extravagant even than her notions, but it was of a disquieting kind. Many of the absurd things she had said in the day recurred to me in the night, assuming a quite different value. So that, although I had longed for bed, I found myself, arrived there, quite disinclined for sleep.

Surreptitiously I watched the caretaker up to bed. She came upstairs, clinging to the balusters for support, a tired, worn-looking, elderly woman, with a lank, frail body, and a care-lined, miserable face. How ridiculous were Julia's suspicions! She not only did not lock her door to-night, but left it ajar. At intervals I peeped through mine to see if her light was extinguished; she had not—so poorly dressed she was—the appearance of one who would indulge in the extravagance of a candle burning all night. Yet, long after I knew by the creaking of the spring mattress Mrs Ragg had lain down, I saw the streak of light shining through the unclosed door.

Fears of fire were added to my other disquietudes. Standing on the landing, I was hesitating if to knock at her door, and remind her she had not put out her light, when I was conscious of a movement behind me. Starting round with a muffled cry, I encountered a tall white figure, which, with an answering cry, grabbed me by both shoulders.

"What *are* you doing here, Isabella?"

"How *could* you frighten me so, Julia!"

We clung together and scolded each other for a minute, then each returned to her own room. But I not to sleep. Listening acutely for every sound, yet shrinking from every sound as it came, I tossed and turned with wide-open, feverish eyes. Suspicious circumstances at which I had been disposed to laugh in the day, took on a sinister complexion in the watches of the night. The loneliness of the place, its distance from every habitation—details to which I held no special distaste before—got hideously upon my nerves at last. Supposing anything happened, in what a position did we three women stand! What chance was there of help?

In my mind I surveyed the prospect from my window. The trackless Denes, the wild, unfriendly sea. Shuddering, I turned mentally to the outlook from Julia's room. What of reassuring was there in the rudiments of an unlighted road across a desert of ugly waste lands?

I was thinking of the road, I suppose, when at last I fell on sleep; for my dream was a nightmare of toiling over it with Julia, in a frantic attempt to escape from some horror, none the less terrible for being undefined, ever close upon our heels.

It was some disturbing but uncertain sound that wakened me from this dreaming to an inner dream. Just a vision, seen in a flash and gone, of two men standing in a light thrown from an upper window, and looking up to it.

From this apparition so vividly presented to my brain, I was awakened by a repetition of the disturbing sound, soft but distinct now. I flew up in bed with a beating heart and the certainty that someone, somewhere, had thrown a clod of earth at a window—not mine; at the back of the house; Julia's, or Mrs Ragg's.

A minute, and I was out of my bed and into Julia's room. I laid a hand on my sister's shoulder. "Julia," I whispered, "wake up. I've had such horrible dreams."

The candle I held in a shaking hand showed the glinting green of Julia's eyes within their half-opened lids. "I'm so comfy," she muttered; "I'm having such a lovely sleep. Go back to bed, Isabella."

But I crept into Julia's bed, instead, and clasped her close for the comfort of her presence.

"I dreamt two men were looking up at a window," I said, "—do keep awake, Julia. I don't know why it seemed so horrid—nothing has ever seemed so horrid before. And—you're going off to sleep again, Julia!—you must listen!—someone flung something at a window. That was not a dream. I heard it quite distinctly."

"It wasn't at this window," Julia declared, in muffled tones. "What a nuisance you are, Isabella."

Then in an instant she flung off her sleep and was out of bed. "It must have been at Mrs Ragg's," she said. "I am going to see."

Shivering, I followed to the landing. The light no longer showed from Mrs Ragg's door, but the door itself was still ajar. Julia rapped sharply upon it and called the caretaker's name. When no one answered, she pushed the door wide, and we saw, by the light of the candle I carried, that the room was empty.

I scarcely knew why the fact that it was so filled us both with such dismay. Our faces were white in the candlelight as we looked blankly at each other; then, seizing hands, we scurried back to Julia's

room. A rush of cold air met us on the landing and our light went out.

"An outer door is open," Julia said.

We shut and locked our own door and stood together in the darkness, gripping each other, intently listening.

Julia's senses are sharper than mine. "Someone is in the garden—at the back," she whispered. "I can hear footsteps—footsteps of more than one person. What shall we do, Isabella? I don't know yet what we ought to do."

Presently we were kneeling at the window. The moon had set, the night was quite dark. By degrees, straining our eyes in desperate anxiety, we made out the stunted form of a shrub or two planted opposite the house; we knew that the blackness of shadow at our left was the shed whose key had been lost.

As we looked, the shed door opened. We knew it by the light which suddenly streamed upon the night. It was the light from a lantern held high, a light flickering and uncertain. It blinked and trembled and swayed as if held in a shaking hand. We knew whose was the lean, lank figure, fitfully revealed, which held it.

"What can she be doing there?" we asked of each other, with chattering teeth, simultaneously.

Neither answered. There was no need. Too well we knew she was letting out the men whom, to have them handy for our murder at night, she had locked in, earlier in the day.

They came presently. The fluttering light gave us unsteady glimpses of them, and of some large and heavy burden they carried.

"*What* is it?" I demanded of Julia. My arm ached with her grip of it, but she did not answer. All her senses were merged in the sense of seeing. She could not hear, nor feel, nor speak.

Mrs Ragg, holding the lantern high, walked ahead of the obscure group, which slowly followed. The light illumined her stooping, meagre figure as she made her way down the path across the back garden to the gate. Only now and again, by the chance swaying of the lantern, a ray lit the heavy blackness of the mass moving in her wake.

She stopped with her lantern at the gate. For the minute it took for them to pass her we saw more plainly the figures of the men going heavily beneath their burden.

"*What* is it?" I found myself asking again, expecting no answer, needing none.

Very softly Julia pushed up the sash of the window, hung her head with its loose flowing hair into the night.

Presently, the form of Mrs Ragg came slowly back again, down the garden path. The lantern hung at her side now; its light streaming upward showed us her white and frightened face. Julia drew in her head, gently closed the window, turned to me.

"They have driven off—for the present," she said. "I heard the wheels. Before they return—perhaps—we shall have time to escape."

We had risen to our feet now, but we clung together still. "Julia, what *was* it?" I asked, for the third

time, quite senselessly. For my eyes are as good as Julia's, and our opportunities of sight and judgment had been the same.

"It was a coffin," Julia said, and I knew that through the darkness her eyes glared with hardly maintained courage upon my face, and that she shut down her lips firmly over chattering teeth.

Space fails to tell of the remainder of that night: of how we dressed in feverish haste to escape, and then were afraid to go; of how, having assured ourselves—by the sense of hearing only, for we thought it best not to light a candle—of Mrs Ragg's return, and of her retirement for the second time to bed, and this time to slumber—we depended on our hearing also for the establishment of the latter fact—we sat and watched, shivering with cold and apprehension, through the endless hours for the reappearance of Mrs Ragg's accomplices, straining our eyes to stare in the direction of the garden path down which we believed they would come. Of how with the first faint light of dawn courage came to us to escape. *

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