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LESSER DESTINIES

SAMUEL GORDON

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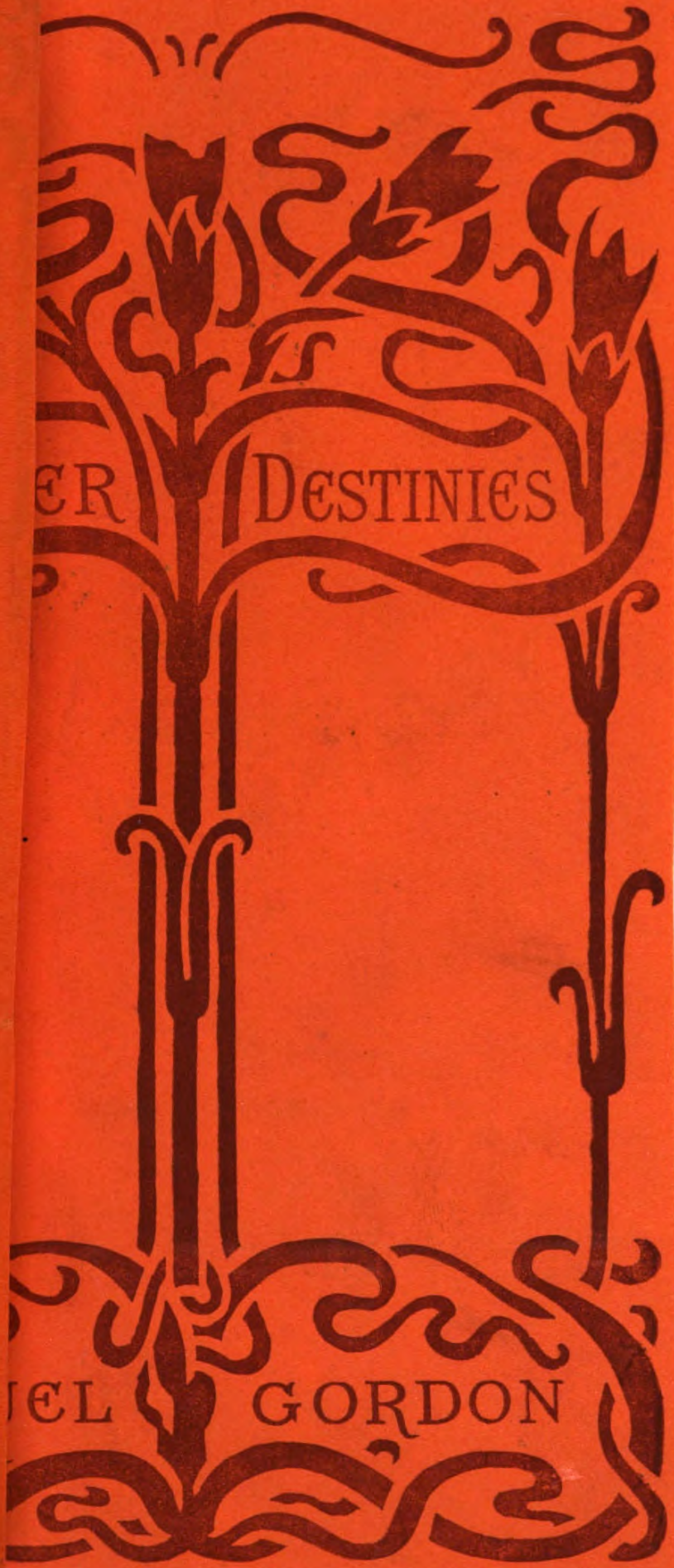


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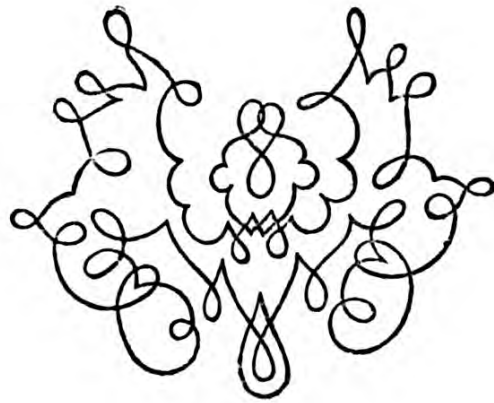
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LESSER DESTINIES

BY

SAMUEL GORDON



LONDON

JOHN MURRAY, ALBEMARLE STREET

1899



LESSER DESTINIES



CHAPTER I

EIGHT o'clock, the vespers of proletariat London. The streets became flooded with the human tide pouring from its reservoirs—the workshops and factories which had cooped it up during the many-houred working day. At first glance one would take the crowd for an improvised carnival, not for what it was—a slave-gang of drudges, with the yoke of toiling still recent upon their shoulders. The precociously hot June twilight was resonant with laughter and quick-worded talk; the jaded air had become astir with the breath of joy, and fluttered with fanning pinions about throbbing temples and eyes that ached, achieving miracles of healing. The giant Labour was let out to play; and now he swept on with the hysterical gladness of the sleeper who dreamed he was buried alive, and waked to find the bountiful skies stretching in azure serenity overhead, and the myriad machinery of life clanging upon his ear.

A brace of the homeward-bound toilers accentuated rather than discounted the general animation by their

reserve in gait and speech. One of them seemed suddenly to be struck by their anomalous silence.

"Penny for your thoughts, Maudie," she said, with the touch of jocularly wherewith tradition requires the offer to be associated.

"I was thinking it's only Monday night, Tabitha," was the sober reply; "the week's quite young like."

"Still in knickerbockers, as you might say," remarked Tabitha, "what of it, though?"

"I'm tired of it, that's all."

"You're a goose, Maud Marshall," said Tabitha—Tabitha Jupp altogether—in severe accents; "do you want to have it Sunday all the year round? Try it. You'll find it's like making your dinner off poundcake."

"Never heard of geese feeding on poundcake, Sundays or week-days," said the other reflectively.

Tabitha laughed. "All right, turn me upside down, if that suits your fancy," she said, "but you know all the same what I mean."

"I ought to, you've said it often enough."

"And I'll say it again, Maudie—don't care if you do get chippy over it. What is it you want? Your breakfast in bed every morning? Somebody to tie up your bootlaces? Shopping up Regent Street in the afternoons? It sounds pretty, my word—no need to put it to music; but I tell you it isn't the tune that should set the likes of you and me kicking up their heels. Grumbling at fate, some people call it. I say it's sulking with God. Maudie, there's a bit of Christ inside all of us, whether we know it or don't. Let's make a lump of it."

“Amen, Hallelujah!” responded Maud with mock reverence; “you’ve been listening to the poke-bonnets, and they’ve got on to your nerves, or whatever else it is that makes you talk such stuff. I tell you whoever it was that invented grumbling knew what he was about. The other day I saw a man playing football with a live dog that had bit him, and the dog didn’t say a word. Because why? Because the man had tied a strap round his jaws. Now that dog would have given a cartload of cat’s meat for one tiny little squeal. Tabby, I’d wear a gag all day long if I knew the grumbling wouldn’t go on inside.”

“I’m sure it never enters my head to complain,” said Tabitha slowly and pensively. She was reviewing the past to see whether she spoke the truth. Yes, it was so long since she had left off repining, that she had fairly earned her right to the boast. Maud received it in silence; there was no necessity to make answer. The pair were approaching a hair-dressing emporium, in the doorway of which a tall slab of looking-glass stood sentry. Now of all inanimate objects looking-glasses are most given to habits of meditation, being notoriously endowed with a capacity for reflection. This mirror in particular became, for the time being, a great logician, for it showed up at a glance the *non-sequitur* in Tabitha Jupp’s argument. She had confused her premises. In her own case these were a face that told the tale of her thirty-two years without any attempt at circumlocution; it was a plain, wasted face, with concave cheeks, in which perpetual shadows had made their home. The thin lips had, with constant pursing, tapered off into a point,

as though the taste of vinegar were on the palate behind them. There was the angular chin which completed the staccato effect. Nor did her eyes redeem her. They were commonplace, business-like eyes, fit for doing their appointed task and nothing more.

Maud Marshall's were different; sight was not their only attribute. They had a moist shimmering brightness, like dew, upon them, and they laughed of their own accord without troubling the remaining features to perform their share in the process. But it was not these laughter-lit eyes which had given her, among unprejudiced observers, the repute of being the Venus of Walworth. Some of the credit was due to the flawless contour of profile and to the fresh alabaster and red of its colouring, upon which the spirit of youth incarnate, had he passed that unsavoury way, might have cast envying looks. And in fact it was hardly more than a year or so since Maud had discarded short frocks and attained to the dignity of back-hair.

All this, as well as the six inches of height by which Maud out-reached her companion, the said mirror felt itself in duty bound to set forth conscientiously and manifestly. The effect, however, was wasted on Tabitha, who, as usual, walked along studying the flagstones at her feet. In Maud it produced the above-mentioned silence born of the Samaritan pity with which most stepchildren of Providence regard one another.

"I didn't know you found things so bad, though," resumed Tabitha after the pause; "you can't be lonely. I've heard of one or two fellows that liked your company better than their mother's."

"Yes, they do come hanging round somehow," said Maud scornfully, "but there isn't one of them I'd care to speak to twice. Bank-holiday-in-the-brake sort of chaps; play the concertina, and talk of 'walking out' till their governor'll give them a rise. Good company or none, that's my motto."

"Quite right, too; time enough for you to settle down. You've a comfortable home, I'm told," remarked Tabitha.

"Scrumptious," said Maud curtly.

"And your stepfather's very fond of you."

"Too fond."

"How's that?" asked Tabitha, struck by her tone.

"Promise not to tell any one? Well, then, I don't like the way he looks at me when we're alone."

Tabitha pondered for a moment. "The brute!" she said, as she caught Maud's drift.

"And that's why I've got to strike out for myself," went on Maud hurriedly; "I want to get away before there's more mischief. He said something to me yesterday—I wouldn't like mother to know what."

"Strike out for yourself?" harped Tabitha; "what do you mean?"

"Earn more money, and go away to live on my own," explained Maud.

"What! work overtime? You can't do it."

"Ain't going to, neither. There's more ways than one of killing a cat."

"Maud, is yours a straight way?" asked Tabitha, looking at her steadily.

"About as straight as any that don't take you direct

to the devil. But it's no good your pumping me; I won't let out to anybody. It may not come off after all, and then I'd look a fool."

"Just as you like," said Tabitha indifferently.

Her indifference was not counterfeit; it did not interest her an atom by what means Maud intended to bring about a revolution in her fortunes. She was quite accustomed to see her associates drift away from her as they stepped out of the narrow groove in which her own life dragged itself on, a formless, shapeless thing, that seemed to have no beginning and no end. On either side of her the world thundered past tumultuously, drawn by the steeds of time and thought and desire; but it left her blood unstirred, and the lead in her feet did not turn to mercury. Once, long ago, she, too, had tried to join in the mad chase; she had hung on to the stirrup-straps, clasping them desperately, because she knew that once she let go she would never regain her hold. But she soon found out that it is not merely the will that keeps one in the running for happiness; and beyond her will she had nothing in the matter of equipment, whether of body or soul. And then, broken in breath, her shoulders tingling with the indiscriminate lashings of the charioteer, she had fallen away to one side, but not before the suspicion had crossed her mind that perhaps her truer goal and destination lay under those thundering hoofs and those Juggernaut wheels.

Well, she had recovered from the effects of her wild venture. Her recovery expressed itself in a stubborn petrification of feeling, a colourless stagnation of every-

thing save the more domestic emotions, and an utter resignation that made of itself a footstool for Fate. And so whenever she heard of others entering upon the attempt which to her had meant failure, her gaze did not follow them further than their first corner. Let them—what mattered it to her? She was content to feel that in her own bosom the aching temptation was numbed in death, and the only boon she craved of God was to refuse it resurrection.

“I’m going to leave you here,” said Maud, stopping at the next turning; “good-night. You might have wished me luck, though. I’m going to get my chance one day this week.”

“Don’t ask me to wish you luck if you want to do yourself any good,” said Tabitha, smiling feebly; “good-night, Maudie.”

“Good-night, Tabitha.”

Leisurely Tabitha accomplished the remainder of the distance which separated her from her home. The last thirty yards were of a perpendicular nature, and necessitated the assent of a seemingly unlimited staircase, whereby one approached the topmost story of Montague Dwellings, in which Tabitha’s household gods found their shrine. She took her time in the ascent; she had to. At the end of the hard day’s toil even the penny novelette she carried became luggage. Half-way up, the long-drawn whine of a dog welcomed her.

“Good old Towzer.” She thought the words, not having energy enough to utter them. Then she gathered herself up for a final spurt, and presently her hand turned the door-knob,

For a moment or so the interior darkness resolved itself into furious gambolings and ear-splitting yelps of delight, until there broke into the din another voice demanding and exacting incontinent silence.

"How are you to-night, Jimmy?" asked Tabitha of the owner of the voice.

"First-rate, Tabby," replied Jimmy; "pins and needles gone to Jericho and lost their return tickets."

"I hope so, Jimmy," said Tabitha earnestly, but not in a tone of utter conviction. "I shan't be a minute lighting the lamp."

"Hold 'ard there!" cried Jimmy, and then after a moment's pause he continued: "All right—get along; it's quite gone."

"What's gone, Jimmy?"

"The colour show up the sky. It was as good as the transformation scene at the panto—better, because there was nothing to pay. Me and Towzer—that's to say, Towzer and I, had a stage-box. First of all there was a curtain of indigo blue, with the sun, bold as brass, makin' a big red smudge on it; then by-and-by 'e begins to spread 'imself out more generally, trickling away sort of, jist as if 'e was a paint-pot with a 'ole at the bottom, till 'e turns all the blue into crushed strawberry. And presently some of the angels, what must 'ave been church-goin' charwomen in their time, comes out and tries to scrub it clean again. And just then my back starts achin' a bit, and I 'ad to lay down."

"Yes, it must have been a pretty sunset," said Tabitha, who by this time had arranged her lamp; "but, Jimmy, what if Phoebe had heard you talk? You've made

several mistakes in grammar and dropped some of your h's."

"Poor things—hope nobody'll tread on 'em," said Jimmy with affected solicitude; "it wasn't me, though, —touch of asthma jist came on while I was talkin'."

Tabitha smiled at the explanation. "Are you ready for supper?" she asked.

"Nothing more for me to-night; been gorgin'. Phœbe looked in for jist a tick to make my beef-tea and cut some bread and butter. How about you, though?"

"Don't particularly care for anything myself."

"That's a pity," said Jimmy.

"Why?"

"Because I told Towzer you were goin' to have kipper, and promised him the skeleton."

"That makes a difference," said Tabitha, getting up. "I can't let you break your promise."

And forthwith she set about her preparations of the repast whereby her brother's *bona fides* was to be vindicated in the eyes and stomach of their quadruped room-mate. Solemnly, and with a repressed sense of optimism, lest his anticipations should end in disappointment, Towzer accompanied her movements by his gaze.

"Is Phœbe coming back to-night?" queried Tabitha, as she held her, and Towzer's, prospective supper over the spirit-lamp.

"Scarcely; she made a good find this mornin', and she's goin' to treat herself to a regular wallow on a fourpenny shakedown. That is," continued Jimmy

reflectively, "if she gets as far. There may be a pub or two in between."

Tabitha only answered with a little sigh, and redoubled her attentions to the kipper. The latter had, in the process of attaining palatability, arrived at that dangerous stage of defiance when he turns up his tail against the world at large, and prefers immediate immolation on the altar of Moloch to the prospect of lingering digestion. But Tabitha had him well in hand, and a few minutes later he was safely landed on a plate, and a wood-handled fork was making havoc of his goodly proportions. Towzer sat by, counting the morsels.

The diminutive paraffin lamp strove gallantly to make the most of itself; but it only succeeded in burning a hole through the darkness that formed its immediate environment. The rest of the chamber was full of shadows. But these same shadows, these muffled echoes of light, were mischievous gossips. They took delight in recounting to Tabitha the story of her past. As a rule, they began sixteen years back with the death of her father; he had been a decent hard-working man, this father of hers, and had kept his family in tolerable comfort by driving engines, until a collision whisked him off into the next world at express speed. In view of the fact that he stuck to his post, and thereby broke the back of the calamity and his own neck into the bargain, a benevolent Board of Directors allowed his widow a pension of twelve shillings a week. But luck is something of a snob, and would rather bask in the Director's smile than get soaked by the widow's tear, and after running for two months, the pension lapsed, owing to

Mrs Jupp following the lead of her husband while ushering into the world what was thereafter to become Jimmy.

At this point Tabitha's memory gave a jump measuring fourteen and a half years, and carrying her to the day when Jimmy was brought home on a stretcher. He had made a precipitate and unpremeditated descent from a ladder on which, in the course of his duties, he had been varnishing a sign-board, and the fall had unfitted a part of his spine for performing its congenial functions. He had improved a little since then; but to call him anything but an invalid would be to flatter him. And though he made light of the so-called pins and needles, Tabitha knew that she must not presume too much on the laughter that came from between hard-set teeth.

These, then, were the landmarks in her history; the intervals were at best empty stretches of time, chronological ciphers. True, there was another figure which periodically relieved her life from being utterly void of sensation; but it was a painful, melancholy relief which she would gladly have dispensed with. She was reminded of it just now by a sudden howl from Towzer and his hasty retreat under Jimmy's bedstead. His appetite had made him reckless, and so he had mistaken a fugitive piece of mustard pickle for a toothsome tit-bit. But Tabitha did not know the true cause of his discomfiture, and sat up quickly, listening with strained ears.

"I thought it was Josh," she remarked, after a while.

"So did I, goin' by Towzer," came from Jimmy. "Lor',

he does make him sing out when he catches him, don't he? D'you know the first thing I'm goin' to do so soon as I get a bit of starch into my back again? Guess!"

"Go for a soldier?"

"Go for brother Joshua's head and make it hum."

Tabitha laughed mirthlessly. "And what do you think he would have to say?" she asked.

"Don't care what. I wouldn't be alive to hear it."

"Don't talk like that, Jimmy; sometimes I feel there's a lot of good in him."

"Maybe, but it must have stuck fast somewhere and can't get out."

Joshua was the only other scion of the house of Jupp, and in order of precedence stood midway between Tabitha and Jimmy. He had, however, sundered his ways from theirs long ago, and only made spasmodic appearances, which, to judge from the foregoing, were neither pleasurable in the anticipation nor grateful in the recollection.

"Sure you won't have anything?" asked Tabitha.

"Fetch down the Bible or the rent-book or anything sacred, and I'll swear."

Then Tabitha, having fulfilled all her responsibilities to the working day, pulled her chair to the window, to pay a brief tribute to art, which had invaded the quadrangle below in the disguise of a barrel-organ. When the patient machine had begun its *repertoire* for the fifth time, she got up and with deft hands converted a certain contrivance, which all day masqueraded as a chiffonnier, into her night accommodation. After that she bade Jimmy good-night, and halved, or rather doubled, the

tenement by drawing across it the faded print curtain running on a string from wall to wall.

Three minutes later her breath was rhythmic in slumber, and Jimmy, as he lay listening to her, wondered how it must feel to go to sleep by the mere shutting of one's eyes.

CHAPTER II

“WHO’S goin’ to play skippin’-rope?”

“Me!” and “Me!” and “Me!” came in answer from several of those addressed.

“All right,” continued the first speaker, “we’ve jist got a quarter of an hour. I’ll take one end.”

“And I’ll ’ave the other, Jenny Fly.”

“No you won’t, Arfer Page; we know your tricks, pullin’ the rope tight and all.”

“What’s the odds? Every blessed kid knows gals wears petticoats.”

“You git out, or I’ll smack you, ugly mug! Come on there, gals!”

Then the romp began amid much shrieking and dust and flapping of skirts. The nymphs thus uproariously disporting themselves were in the employ of Brunner, Fleet & Co., manufacturers of fur-wear in a rather large way of business; and the proceedings took place at the fag-end of the dinner hour in the yard to the rear of the warehouse.

“Stand away, all o’ you,” sang out Jenny Fly suddenly; “I’m goin’ to give Tabitha a double-dutch. Up with your stumps, Tabby.”

The summons produced an outbreak of sniggering

which Tabitha, being absorbed in the last page of her novelette, did not notice; as a matter of fact and as a general principle, she was not good at noticing things happening around her.

"No, thank you, Jenny," she said quite soberly, and thought the more pronounced merriment following her refusal was due to some fresh antic of frolicsome Arthur Page, the boy-of-all-work.

"You'll be gettin' as fat as a butter-keg if you don't take more eggsercise," remarked the latter.

The sarcasm did not err on the side of subtlety, but Tabitha ignored it, and having at that moment seen the much-suffering heroine safe in the arms of her paragon of a lover, she arose with much dignity from an inverted washing-tub, and wended her way towards the staircase leading to the work-rooms. Just as she reached the top, the neighbouring church clock began striking the hour, and she made a dart for her place to avoid being overtaken by the stampede impending from below. The three matrons among the "hands" had not stirred down, but, propped up on numerous goat-rugs, had indulged in a sonorous siesta. For a moment it struck Tabitha that it would soon be time for her to take rank amongst them by virtue of her over-ripe spinsterhood.

The entrance of Miss Short, the forewoman, at once gave things a business-like aspect. Raspingly the needles stitched through the leather, and the wire-like thread followed with a singing noise. It was not cleanly work. The component strips of fur, as they left the cutter's hand, were provisionally fastened with fly-paper, which had a tenacious habit of clinging to

the fingers while being removed and dabbed on to the table-edge; and, indeed, one could form a fair idea of the respective industry of the workers by comparing the various paper-stacks piled up in front of each. Then there was the odour of the raw hide combining with the questionable aroma of the stale gum, to which might have been added the sour effluvium of decomposing tea-leaves. An alliterative inspector had once suggested as a fit name for the place, "The School for Scavengers."

"Does anybody know why Maud Marshall hasn't turned up to-day?" asked Miss Short.

"Daresay she's out for the day with a bloke," suggested Jenny Fly.

"'Old yer saucy tongue!" broke in her mother, who was called "Mrs" Fly by a sinister kind of courtesy.

"Shan't! If I 'ad a face like her'n, I'd 'ave another bloke every day and two for Sundays."

"Thank Gawd, you know where yer shoe pinches," observed Arthur Page. He was furiously in love with Jenny, and employed badinage as a cloak to hide his feelings.

"Leastways I wear my own, be it ever so tight, rather than come in my father's," said Jenny.

"Shut up yer rowin'!" interposed Mrs Fly, who foresaw an opportunity for an embarrassing retort; "never knew sich a chatterbox!"

"He ain't goin' to consult me, and me say nothing," replied Jenny.

"Get on with your work, all of you," said the forewoman severely.

A few minutes' silence followed the rebuke; then one of the girls who was afflicted with an almost chronic cold, remarked: "Oh, my poor nose!"

The piteous appeal evoked a chorus of sympathy and sundry recipes for safe cures, all of which were gratefully promised a trial by the sufferer, except Arthur's, who suggested summary punishment of the offending member by amputation. Then, the ice being broken, Jenny, who had an uncomfortable feeling that speech-idleness made her tongue grow too long for her mouth, became once more articulate.

"Lor', love a duck! wonnerful what a lot o' sickness seems about. There's Dolly Frew 'ere with 'er cold, and Fanny Pritchard on our landin' 's got the colly-wobbles, and a man up the court's got the typhoon fever, not to mention my Aunt Florrie what's down with 'er seventh."

"Eighth," corrected her mother.

"I mean eighth; she keeps gettin' 'em so quick one can't keep up countin'. Remember the almighty fine spree we 'ad last christenin', mother? I shouted myself that 'oarse, I could 'ardly drag myself 'ome I was so tired; lucky Jack Tweezer was goin' our way, so 'e 'eld me up most o' the time."

This last was intended to plant scorpions in Arthur Page's bosom. Arthur made a heroic attempt at indifference.

"I can unnerstand now why 'e walks lop-sided," he commented.

"And it ain't for the same reason that you're straight as a poker," replied Jenny sweetly.

Arthur was pulling out the nails whereby the wet skins were fastened to the drying-boards; one, driven very hard, proved recalcitrant, until he imagined it to be one of Jack Tweezer's molars, and then it came quite easily. After that he felt at liberty to make answer:

"Seems you don't read the p'lice notices, Jenny."

"What, a reward out for catchin' you?"

"No; muzzlin' order's in force again."

"Well, I can't 'elp you. Speak to the man what pays for yer license; which sort would you 'ave rather, wire or leather?"

Arthur, finding himself the object of general amusement, took refuge in vituperation.

"Some people 'as their 'eads that thick you could forge a 'orse shoe on 'em," he delivered himself wrathfully.

Again the resourceful Jenny turned the tables. "Then why don't you go and earn yer livin' as a hanvil?"

But it is difficult to conjecture into what depths of discomfiture Arthur's recklessness might still have plunged him if the tournament of words had not received an abrupt check by the appearance of Maud Marshall. There was a suppressed eagerness in her manner; her face was flushed, and she met Tabitha's gaze with a smile of self-conscious triumph.

"What nonsense! you can't start work any more to-day," said Miss Short; "and in future, if you can't be here at nine sharp——"

"Who said anything about work, Miss Short?" asked Maud, with a little shake in her voice. "I only came to fetch an alpaca apron of mine I left here."

"Goin' to another shop?" asked Jenny quickly.

"In a sort of way," smiled Maud; "I signed the contract this morning."

"What contract?" asked several astonished voices.

"For doing a turn at the Syndicate Halls."

"Fifty quid a week, I s'pose," said Mrs Fly ironically.

"No, only ten, to start with."

"Who are you kiddin' of?" sneered the girl with the cold.

Maud shrugged her shoulders. "Just polish up your spelling, and then you'll be able to read my name on the bills the week after next."

Maud's assurance was crushing. A long silence followed it.

"How did you get it, though, dear?" enquired Miss Short.

The "dear" was Maud's hitherto greatest achievement in life, but she took it quietly.

"Through Mr Algernon Dacre," she answered.

"I suppose he's what you call an agent?" asked Miss Short, professing ignorance in the matter as became a young lady respectably engaged to be married for the last five years.

"Lawks, Miss!" exclaimed Jenny reproachfully; "never 'eard of Algy Dacre? Why, he's the biggest pot in the line."

"Then you're in good hands, it seems, Maud, dear," observed Miss Short; "surely you're not going already?"

"I must, Miss Short; I've got to see about my dresses and three new songs to practise."

"But you'll come next Sunday and have a cup of tea

with us, won't you? My brother Jack is something in the stage business—he does sleight-of-hand tricks at Children's Happy Evenings, and that sort of thing."

"Thanks; I'll come if I can. But I won't promise. Good-bye, girls."

Her farewell evoked but scanty response; half-scared looks of surprise followed her as far as they could reach. A moment after Jenny jumped up with a sudden thought, and followed her down hastily. Throwing her arm round Maud, she kissed her resonantly.

"That's for luck, Maudie," she said; "I ain't jealous if all the others is. Tell you what I'll do. I'll patch it up with Arfer for the day, and make 'im take me to the Oxford on your first night. You know he's got a whistle like a steam-tug, and I'm goin' to put on hob-nail boots for the purpose. Ta-ta, bless you!"

"Next time you will please ask permission to leave the room," Miss Short greeted her disagreeably on her return.

"This ain't no bloomin' hinfant school," muttered Jenny under her breath; but as her mother covered the indiscretion with a tactful fit of coughing, it bore no further consequences.

"Well, I never!" the girl with the cold was understood to say.

"What a surprise!" echoed Mrs Fly.

"Ain't she kep' it dark, though?" chimed in Arthur; "never thought she could be that artful."

"She hinted at it to me last Monday," put in Tabitha quietly; "but I couldn't get her to say what she was after."

"She'll make 'er mark, you bet!" prophesied Jenny. "I dunno about 'er voice, but she's got plenty o' dash and style, and that'll pull 'er through."

"I wonder on what terms she got this Dacre or Baker to work for her," remarked Miss Short with a three-volume wink at the matrons.

"You might ask 'er when she comes to 'ave tea with you next Sunday," replied Jenny, who had intercepted the wink in its evil course.

Upon this Miss Short thought it wise to have business on the next floor, where the cutters and nailers worked.

The afternoon was pressing upon the ill-ventilated workshop with all its bulk. Through the skylight of streaked frost-glass the sunshine filtered in drops, and trembled upon the tables like globules of living gold, making the atmosphere more dead and stagnant by contrast. Indolent, full-bellied blue-bottles balanced themselves motionless in space, as though the air were compact enough to furnish them with a foothold, and their buzz was hushed to a sullen boom that laid itself on the listener's ear in irritating films of sound. A parched and panting breathlessness overhung everything, and the heart of the world seemed throbbing with dull palpitations of which each threatened to be its last. With their attention engrossed by conversation, the women had not so much noticed the dizzying heat, but stealthily it had insinuated itself through the interstices of silence, till it had taken possession of them and held them in a vice.

"For Gawd's sake, talk, somebody, or I'll choke!" gasped Jenny.

"It's near tea-time," said her mother.

"Hot tea on top of it?"

"They says it cools."

"Don't care if it does, I'm goin' to hold my head under the tap for ten minutes so soon as we gets out," said Jenny. A moment later an animated look came into her face. "Strike me lucky! why didn't I think on it before? Give us a song, Tabitha; that'll wake us up."

"The idea, Jenny," said Tabitha, with a flush on her white, distressed cheeks.

"Don't be shy; 'twouldn't be the first time, you know that. Tootle up; what's it goin' to be—'The Last Rose o' Summer,' or 'By Killarney's Lakes and Fells'?"

Jenny spoke truth; Tabitha was occasionally prevailed upon to favour the workshop with her gift of melody. The fact evinced a considerable lack of humour in her, but seeing that, as has already been stated, she did most things with downcast eyes, the quizzical glances of her audience whizzed by without taking effect on her. Nor did she feel averse to singing now, as the sound of her voice would at least convince her she was still alive. And, therefore, after a little more demur as a concession to appearances, she lifted up her voice and sang about the rose which had out-bloomed all its lovely companions.

Tabitha's voice resembled her body in at least one respect—it was thin and shrivelled. But on the other hand, it was endowed with heroic courage. It boldly tackled vocal effects which lay outside its compass, and managed to attain them, if only in the shape

of a squeak. It did not fight shy of a single trill, even if the result were but an abortive gurgle, of which Arthur Page habitually constituted himself the echo, though he was careful, on remonstrance, to ascribe the said echo to the acoustic peculiarities of the room. The more normal notes had an awkward fondness for encroaching on each other's domain, much to their individual detriment. And the result was, that by the time Tabitha had finished with the historic flower, it regretted with more bitterness than ever its imprudence in surviving.

With becoming modesty Tabitha accepted the suspiciously effusive acknowledgments of her audience, but relegated the demanded encore to a future occasion.

"You'll get your tea before any one else to-day—you've deserved it," said Mrs Fly.

"You know what, Tabitha," remarked Jenny, staring meditatively in front of her, as though she were following a glimmering idea to its most far-off issues; "you know what—but no, you won't believe me."

"Go on," said Tabitha encouragingly.

"Well, I don't care what any one else says—but I contains as there's millions in that voice o' your'n."

"I'd sell it for thousands," jested Tabitha, exhilarated by the tribute.

"You've been and wasted yourself all these years," continued Jenny, keeping a tight rein on the corners of her mouth; "it's time you started. Look at Maudie Marshall."

"You mean I should go on the stage?" asked Tabitha aghast.

"How quick you are at catchin' a thing; that's jist what I do mean."

Jenny's mother kicked her under the table, murmuring: "Stow yer rot!"

"What! at my time of life?" smiled Tabitha.

"That's exac'ly what my grandmother said when I asked her to go on the roundabout," replied the imperturbable Jenny; "but she went. Here, gals, why don't you put in yer spoke?"

The female contingent being appealed to, Arthur Page straightway gave testimony to the feasibility of the plan; the stress of circumstances, however, saved him from Jenny's castigation. Then the girl with the cold, whom her affliction rendered incapable of laughter, spoke in glowing, if husky, periods of Tabitha's prospects. In her wake followed one or two others, who could trust themselves to keep the brake on their risible muscles.

Tabitha sat quiet through it all, listening to them with a fatuous air of indulgence. Then, summing up, as it were, she shook her head, and opened her mouth to answer, when the tea-bell very rudely interrupted her. In the bustle that ensued the topic got mislaid and did not again come on for discussion; true, it suggested itself once more to Jenny later on, but the hoax had lost its zest, and so she let it slip.

The heat had lifted, and the day, feeling the relief, hurried light-footed to its close. Tabitha made a hasty toilette, in which lemon-juice for the dye-blackened hands played a prominent part, and started for home. She knew not how it was, but her heart had a buoyancy to which it had been a stranger for many a day.

She did not care to analyse it, because she had a suspicion it might resolve itself into mere gratification at the praise her singing had harvested. It was all nonsense, of course, yet such as it was it pleased her. But who would have thought it of young Maudie Marshall?

"Is that you, Phœbe?" she asked the dim outline of a figure by Jimmy's bedside.

"What a question, Tabitha! I should have thought you would know me in the most Cimmerian darkness," laughed the figure.

"What—'ow much—which particular sort o' darkness?" enquired Jimmy.

"Cimmerian; it means the darkness you can cut with a knife—it's out of Milton, I believe."

"What a lot of big words you do know, Phœbe!" said Jimmy awed.

"Yes, they've managed to stick to me, whatever else hasn't," was the answer, accompanied by a laugh rather far-fetched.

"You've had a stroke of luck, Jim told me," said Tabitha.

"I thought I had, but I hadn't, after all; picked a gold brooch out of a dust-bin—that's what it looked like. When I came with it to the station, the Inspector asked whom I was having a lark with. But I sold it for sixpence. Since then I've helped at the laundry. To-day I'm a lady at large, and so I came to worry Jimmy."

"Worry me?" said Jimmy, taking her literally; "don't care if you do. I'll love you all the same."

"And that before witnesses, too! Almost amounts to an offer of marriage, doesn't it, Tabitha?"

Tabitha laughed—she was surprised how easily.

“You are spoiling that boy, Phœbe,” she said.

“Serves me right,” remarked Jimmy.

“Anyway, leave me to answer for it,” said Phœbe ;
“no, sit still—I’ll do the lamp.”

But Tabitha refused her help, because the lamp needed fresh ammunition, and Phœbe’s hand was not very steady, partly from premature old age, and partly from something else. The light struck Phœbe full in the face—a wrecked and wrinkled face, a caricature of itself, and yet wonderfully suggestive of what the original must have been. The eyes were blurred, yet the glint of sapphires seemed only waiting the behest of the soul to flash forth. But the mouth—the shape of it, for the lips were livid, the mouth was still there. It was a history in itself ; one had only to look at it to know that its owner was one of those whom God, in a mood of anger, had made lode-stones of attack without giving them weapons of self-defence.

Over supper Tabitha related the astonishing event of the day.

“That’s the girl you once brought up to see me, eh ?” demanded Jimmy. “Jingo ! wasn’t she a stunner ?”

“You mean she was extremely handsome,” translated Phœbe.

“All right, have it your way ; but you’ll have hard work, Phœbe, to make a scholar of me. I ain’t like Tabby, what learnt ’erself through all the seven standards, and might ’ave been a teacher if father ’ad lived.”

“Still you mustn’t mind my trying ; you see it’s the only way I have of repaying your kindness.”

"You talk altogether too much of this kindness of ours," said Tabitha quietly. "I'm beginning to think it's a bit of a joke with you."

"Tabitha!"

"Well, then, have done with it; ours is what you would call a mutual arrangement. You stand by us, and we stand by you. If you happen to get more out of us—which is a question—than we get out of you, we're not going to ask you for the change. Now that's plain talk from a plain woman."

"Plain, Tabby?" remonstrated Jimmy. "My word, you looked a reg'lar picture while you was sayin' that, didn't she, Phœbe?"

The latter swallowed something before she replied. "She looked like an angel, and why not? Didn't she talk like one?"

"That's coming it rather strong," laughed Tabitha, half to break the tension, half out of pleasure. It seemed the whole world had conspired to-day to make her vanity rear itself on its hind-legs, and Tabitha began to consider whether she was quite justified in having let it walk on all fours so long.

Phœbe had to make shift that night with a couch extemporised out of a couple of wooden chairs and sundry articles of clothing; but of all the three occupants of the room—Towzer, of course, could not be counted—she was the only one who offered up a night prayer. She had formulated it years ago, and it went:

"God preserve me from thinking what I was, what I am, and what I might have been."

CHAPTER III

NOISE and naphtha, cocoa-nut ranges and roundabouts, open-air shooting-saloons and all the jollities of the fair—the whole hedged in by gargantuan hoardings, sturdy iron-clamped barricades, against which the sorrows of life were bidden to dash out their brains. Inside the primitive emotions were running riot, clothed in corduroys, and decked with genuine ostrich feathers ; and reason reeled giddily through this revel of irresponsibility, this pageant of self-oblivion.

Yet the scene was not without its moral advantages. For instance, to a man, nursed on the neurotic artificialities of conventions, it would have served for a healthy stimulant to breathe once more the breath of animal instinct, the original and unadulterated article—even at the risk of swallowing some incidental coal-tar fumes in the process. But unfortunately for him he was not there, being engaged in squandering his fortune in Continental Casinos, or battenning his discontent at Mayfair "At Homes" on strawberries and cream. To the student of sociology it might definitely have proved the superiority of the masses over the classes, of matter over mind.

These reflections, however, did not trouble the mighty intellect of Joshua Jupp. His long, loose-knit frame propped against an odd pole, he was watching with ill-disguised interest a daughter of the people, who, in turn, kept her gaze fixedly upon the entrance. The expression of disappointment on her face told clearly the story of a one-sided rendezvous. The more Joshua watched her, the more he commended himself on his capacity for appreciating female beauty. Around him the sounds of broken bottles, hit to the heart by amateur sharpshooters, mingled ineffectually with the crash of stricken cocoa-nuts, and for all he cared, the roundabout attendant might shout till he burst: "No sittin' astride, ladies; the p'lice won't 'ave it."

The girl in the plush jacket and coquettish ruff, was absorbing his full attention. A quarter of an hour passed ere he could make up his mind as to the initiative. Hands in pockets he sauntered up, and then with a quick movement, caught her round the waist.

"What cher, Liza," he accosted her; "it's no good yer waitin', 'e won't come. 'E sent me to tell yer."

A thud in the chest sent him staggering back good three yards, but the blazing eyes seemed to hit even harder than her fist.

"Don't you come it," she said calmly, "unless you wants some thunder acrost yer jaw."

Joshua had not bargained for the warmth of his reception; when next he addressed her it was from a discreet distance.

"Ho! ain't we bad-tempered? No larks, Liza; tip us yer flipper and be friends."

Her back answered him. Slowly he described a semi-circle till he fronted her again.

"Where did you get them manners from?" he resumed.

"I don't speak to strangers," she snapped.

"Is that all? We'll soon put that right. Joshua Jupp, at yer service, Miss. Come and 'ave a drink."

Her glance took stock of him from foot to head; he bore the scrutiny without flinching, though he felt a little nervous when she came to the face. Evidently he passed muster, for she said:

"All right, I'm agreeable."

Proudly Josh took possession of his prize; the humiliation of his first rebuff, which he knew had not gone unwitnessed, was triumphantly effaced.

"Let's get somewheres else," she said.

"Wherever you like."

At the entrance she paused a moment, and hurriedly looked down the road left and right; Josh carefully avoided remarking on the action. They crossed over to the other side.

"I s'pose yer name ain't no secret?" asked Josh.

"No, I'm Nancy Bunker."

"Nancy, Nancy — strikes my bloomin' fancy," improvised Josh; "that's po'try."

"Stop it, or I'll strike yer bloomin' something else."

Josh, wise through experience, took the hint.

"What d'you work at?" she asked presently.

"Anything—mostly down at the docks."

"Ah! Come acrost Bill Pretty?"

Then Joshua knew into whose discarded shoes he had stepped.

"Pretty Bill? Slightly; worked in the same gang with 'im once or twice. What about 'im?"

"Oh, nothing," she said carelessly.

"Can't say, though, as I'm fond of 'im," continued Josh, improving the occasion; "what I dislikes in 'im is 'is views about womenfolk."

She did not ask him to proceed, so he did without.

"'E sez, sez Pretty Bill, as 'ow no woman, not even the best of 'em, is born with more nor three weeks' *spice* about 'er; and even the wust of 'em doesn't believe it when she's told of it. Now a chap what 'as them sort o' sentiments—well, I wouldn't like 'im for a brother-in-law; I'd be called round three times a day to knock 'im down. What I looks for in a man fust go is shivilry; open 'and comes second, and the rest of the vartues can toss for it."

"You don't say so," observed Nancy absently.

"Yes, it's a queer thing with me, but I can't 'elp it. Couldn't 'urt a woman's feelin's if I was to swing over it. Many a time I've gone out o' my way to do 'em a good turn."

"P'r'aps you'd 'ave done 'em a better by goin' out o' their's."

Josh laughed artificially. "That's rough, Nancy; but I was sayin', I'm that soft-'earted—no one would think it by the look o' me."

"No," assented Nancy promptly; "shouldn't 'ave thought it of 'im, though."

"Of who?"

"Bill, and 'is three weeks. I knowed a gal what 'e kep' on with six months and over."

Josh cursed Bill, while making pretence of meditating.

"Now that I come to think of it, 'e did say something about a gal what 'e couldn't get rid of; p'r'aps it's the one you means. Won't you come in 'ere for a tiddley?"

"No, there's a tripe shop farther down. I feels a bit peckish."

Joshua's face grew long. Retribution for his calumny had come upon him quickly. Would his pocket be able to stand the strain of her appetite? He looked at her again, very hard; yes, decidedly, her face was worth the experiment.

The place Nancy referred to was a popular—in more senses than one—supper resort. In the matter of style it betokened certain aspirations to elegance, which, however, aborted in tasteless gaudiness; but as its purposes were utilitarian rather than æsthetic, this was not considered a serious drawback. As Josh and Nancy entered they found most of the tables already occupied. The largest was appropriated by the members of a German band, who were tenderly nurturing their reminiscence of their native land by means of sausages. At another table a blind man and a hopeless paralytic were dividing between them the loot of the charitable. The blind man, at least so the card round his neck designated him, was critically examining a threepenny bit, while the hopeless paralytic hung upon his verdict, trembling with excitement in every limb.

Joshua, looking round for corner seats, gave a sudden start. In accordance with the inexorable law of coincidence, which Nancy's intuition had possibly jogged by the elbow, he found that Pretty Bill had forestalled

him. Nancy made the same discovery a moment later ; it did not disconcert her visibly, but it killed the last little flicker of hope in her heart that there had been a mistake, or that something unforeseen had prevented Bill from keeping the appointment. Nor did it pour balm on her lacerated feelings to see that the red-haired young lady at his side had, for the last two months, been her professedly dearest friend.

"This'll do all right, sweet'art," she called to Josh, plumping into a seat in their immediate vicinity.

Josh lumbered up, and, with a sheepish nod at Pretty Bill, followed suit.

"I s'pose you and Bill met by haccident, Peg," said Nancy, with a scathing smile.

"No bloomin' fear! 'E asked me to come, and so I come," replied Peg.

"Seems you didn't 'ave to be asked twice—wanted to save 'is breath—didn't you?" continued Nancy pleasantly.

"Well, as we're goin' to get married soon, I thought as I'd better get 'im in the way o' savin'."

"Married! That's a good 'un; but you always was a bit of a kidder, wasn't you, Bill?"

Bill was doing penance, not only for the sins he had committed, but also for those he was about to commit during the rest of his lifetime.

"I must say as Peg's a bit previous," he began lamely tugging at his tawny, well-trimmed moustache. "I jist asked 'er in for a bit of a bite and a friendly talk in the way I might ask yerself."

"Eh?" broke in Nancy sharply. The nudge to Peg by which he had prefaced his remarks had not escaped

her. "Ask myself? Try it! Peg'll stand by and pump the wind into you while you do the askin'. Friendly talk hindeed!"

"There's a good boy, Bill, don't 'urt 'er feelin's," begged Peg earnestly. "Look at the flurry she's in only thinkin' about it."

For a moment Nancy considered whether to make reply with a table-knife or in a less demonstrative fashion; she chose the latter.

"That's all right, Peg—'e ain't a bad sort; and I wouldn't jump at sayin' 'e was a moke jist because 'e's took a sudden fancy to carrots."

"It's the last fancy 'e's goin' to take any'ow," said Peg without flinching.

"Don't say that; you don't want him to die suddent?"

"What'll you 'ave, dear?" interrupted Josh, who had been listening, his emotions into a chaos.

"Peg's bleed," said Nancy to herself, and then went on to give elaborate instructions as to the bill of fare to the by-standing waiter.

Joshua's hair rose on end; his pocket contained fifteenpence in copper, and the stout alone came to sixpence. He surmised that any admission of impecuniosity under the present embarrassing circumstances would lead to his immediate dismissal, and that was a thing to which he had taken a decided objection. He had watched the heightened colour in Nancy's face, and the sparkle that had come to her eyes during the altercation, and with a vague misgiving felt he had met his fate. Well, hard as it was, the watch he had won in the

sweepstake the day before, would, for the time being, have to pass as coin of the realm.

However, he was considerably chagrined to find that, when it came to the test, Nancy's appetite entirely refused to justify expectations. She toyed with the dainties amateurishly, and he derived only a hollow satisfaction from the fact that after finishing her own bottle, she generously helped him with his own. But after that came his reward. She moved her chair alongside of his, and ostentatiously pillowed her head on his shoulder. Josh sat in blissful trepidation, hardly knowing how much to presume on his good fortune; then his arm strayed feebly round her waist.

"Cuddle us, you silly jossler!" whispered Nancy.

Josh did as he was told, but only with half a heart; the whisper was not a love-lorn sigh—it was more of a hiss. It made him feel he had no right to be himself; he ought to have been Pretty Bill. And in default of that he was to be the cat's-paw whereby Pretty Bill's heart was to be clawed to tatters.

If that was Nancy's intention, it went wide of the mark, for presently Bill got up with a ringing laugh which bespoke his normal condition.

"Feel a bit top-'eavy? It's the stout, I daresay," remarked Peg, stopping on her way out to contemplate the reclining Nancy; "or p'raps you're practisin' for livin' pictchers."

Nancy returned her glance from half-open eyelids.

"I'll talk to you private one o' these days, Peggy Jones, and then I'll tell you," she replied.

"Well, let it be soon—I'm dyin' to know."

"And when you do know you'll be dead," Nancy was about to say, but was interrupted by the clatter accompanying the departure of the German band; and before she could make herself heard, Peg had followed Bill, rejoicing in having delivered the final shaft.

Josh sat waiting the test of the cat's-paw theory; nor was he disappointed. A second or two afterwards, Nancy jerked herself up.

"I'm off!" she announced.

"What's the 'urry? It's only 'alf-past nine, and they don't shut 'ere till eleven."

"What's that got to do with me? If I says I wants to be off, it's enough, ain't it?"

"Certainly," Josh hastened to admit; "I'll jist settle and be with you in a jiffy."

Nancy strolled towards the door, whilst Josh went to interview the proprietor, not without some uneasiness. The bill came to three shillings and a penny. He took out the watch and explained.

"Can't take it in pledge," said the proprietor, examining it, "but I'll give you half a dollar over, and we'll cry quits."

"Why, the ticker's worth ten bob to a blind 'orse!" exclaimed Josh.

"What! you won't have it? Well, then, young man, I must let you find out what the law says about obtaining goods under false pretences. John!"

The obsequious waiter darted towards the door.

"Damn you! give us yer money," said Josh sullenly.

He grabbed the coin and made his way out quickly, but there was no Nancy waiting for him. In blank

amazement he looked right and left; people were passing both ways, and he was rather short-sighted.

“Bunked after the bloke, as I’m alive!” he muttered. With sudden desperation he hurried off in the direction from which they had come before. A minute’s quick walk, and he lighted upon her sauntering along pensively.

“Couldn’t you wait?” he said, joy and reproach mingling in his voice; “what if I’d gone the other way and missed you?”

“Lawks, that ’ud ’ave been misfortunate! I’d ’ave ’ad to ask a copper to show me ’ome.”

“Look ’ere, Nancy, no blarney. I won’t say nothing about standin’ you treat—any bloke with eyes in ’is ’ead and a bit o’ brass in ’is pocket ’ud do as much; but I’ve got offul fond o’ you, so ’elp me sallivation, and if I ’adn’t come acrost you agin, I’d ’ave gone about tearin’ the place up.”

“Well?” queried Nancy complacently.

“I want you to take to me a bit more kindly.”

“Didn’t I ask you to cuddle me? What more d’you want?”

“Don’t believe you meant it; you was only showin’ off before——”

“Before who?” she asked, facing him with blazing eyes.

“Peg,” said Josh, acting on a happy inspiration.

She laughed shrilly. “Fat lot o’ good that ’ud do me—showin’ off to a bit o’ dirt like that.”

“Then why didn’t you wait-for me while I was settlin’?”

"You're enough to drive a feller crazy, but I'll tell you. It's jist as the fit takes me; sometimes I'm soft as butter and sometimes I'm jist stone."

"Well, I'll risk it—stone or butter."

"My part—'ope you'll be satisfied."

"You don't seem very keen."

"There you are; I've got the stone fit, that's all."

"But you'll stick to me, eh?"

"That's a thing I can't tell."

"Can't tell?" echoed Josh aghast. "Why not?"

"At it agin, badgerin' me; 'ow do I know what's goin' to 'appen?"

What she meant was, of course, whether she would succeed in winning Pretty Bill back to his allegiance.

"Jist so," conceded Josh feebly; "is this where you live?"

Nancy had stopped outside a house down a dingy court.

"Yes; can't ask you in, though, because I'm goin' straight to by-bye."

"When are you comin' out agin?"

"Bring a moke and barrer round on Sunday—that's the day after to-morrer, and we'll take a spin down to Hepping. Good-night."

She held out her cheek, and Josh was not bold enough to trespass on her lips.

"I say, Nancy," he called after her.

"What now?"

"Promise us one thing; if it's butter, let it be butter, and not margerine."

He waited a little for an answer, and when none came, he turned away. For one reason he was almost

glad to be alone again; he could now review the situation at his leisure, and draw his conclusions. The evening had not been a profitable investment. Financially it had left him poorer by seven-and-sixpence, and emotionally it had left him minus a heart. Yes, there was no doubt of it, however much he might wonder at himself. He, Joshua Jupp—the impregnable, the invincible—had been laid by the heels and trailed in the dust, all by a mere slip of a girl. And the astonishing part of it was that she did not seem at all elate over her victory, but looked at it in the light of—yes, the word must be spoken—a nuisance. So much was clear even to Josh, however biassed he was as to his self-importance. Still he was not discouraged; it was merely a matter of time before the magnetism of his personality would filter into her system, and then—well, it would be seen who was to do the dust-trailing business. Meanwhile a little patience and indulgence of whim—the lady had expensive tastes; they wanted cheapening.

Ah! under that heading came the donkey-chaise for Sunday; presumably there was no getting out of that, although it entailed once more a violent wrench on his resources. Josh possessed one or two ways of augmenting his capital; like the wise man he was, he determined to economise his energy, and to choose the easiest. Accordingly he was ten minutes later mounting the staircase of N. Block, Montague Dwellings, bestowing customary anathemas on its long-windedness.

“If she ain’t up I’ll make ’er open or batter the door in,” he reflected as he tried the handle.

The door yielded easily.

"'Ello, Tabitha! 'ello, Phœbe! evenin', ladies. The nipper any better?" he exclaimed with affected cheeriness, stepping in.

"Hush, he's asleep, I think," whispered Tabitha.

"No, I ain't, Josh," sang out Jim; "come to 'ave a family party?"

"No, can't stop long; only jist dropped in 'ere to see 'ow you all was gin'rally."

"Is that all? Well, why didn't you 'oller up, and we'd 'ave called down to you through the winder."

"None o' yer tongue, young Jim, or I'll forget as you're a cripple. Proper kind o' welcome this. Plenty o' cheek from Jim, and Tabitha sittin' there mum and glum——"

"I'm sure I'm pleased to see you, Josh," protested the latter.

"And that's why I've got to drag every word out o' you. Ain't even asked me to sit down."

"You know you're at home here," said Tabitha.

"Now I reckernise you, Tabby, gal. You always was a good sister to me. Maybe I ain't always been a dootiful brother, and a bit sharp-like at whiles in my manner o' talkin'; but, lor' lumme, you gals got no hidea what a man's got to go through when 'e's tryin' to work 'is way up. Well, thank Gawd, I've turned the corner at last; next week I've been promised a permanent job at the docks, that'll bring me two quid easy as wipin' yer mouth. Only, the trouble is that jist at present I'm in a temp'rary predickiment—what d'you think o' that for grammar, Phœbe?—and so——"

"It's no use your coming to me," said Tabitha firmly. She had heard that story before.

"That's right, Tabby; you do the refusin' before you're asked, because I'm sure you won't after."

"Before and after, Josh. I can't spare anything."

"You talk jist as like I was a beggar," said Josh haughtily; "mind you, I don't want it this very minute. You get paid to-morrer, don't you?"

"My wages are mortgaged for two weeks ahead."

"Now, 'ere's yer chance, Josh," cried Jim; "you jist shove the world a fortnit for'ard and that'll put us straight nicely."

"I ain't come 'ere to play the fool," said Josh, getting red in the face. "You jist look about you, Tabby; I knows yer tricks. Fetch out that old stockin' o' your'n."

With a sigh, Tabitha dived in her pocket and brought out a few coppers.

"May I drop dead, Josh, but that's all I can offer you."

Josh jumped up with a crimson-coloured oath.

"Fivepence!" he shouted, hoarse with rage; "and you've got the darned imperence to offer a big able-bodied chap like me fivepence! Now I'll tell you what I thinks o' you, Tabitha Jupp. You're a blither-in' houtsider; I know what you does with yer money. It's to keep that beer-swillin' old cow over there, what ain't no concern o' your'n, in liquor all the year round. And when yer own flesh-and-blood brother wants you to 'elp 'im out of a fix—strike me dead, I've a good mind to scrag yer skinny neck for you." And with one

more withering look, the advocate of chivalry to women slammed the door behind him.

And while Towzer, who had lain torpid with fright under the bed, was thawing back into life, Joshua wended his way to a greengrocer of his acquaintance, and hired his throat out for extolling in vociferous terms the various excellences of cabbages and cauliflowers on the following day. In consideration of this his employer was to allow him the use of his donkey equipage on the Sunday for the length of eight hours, with the proviso of two hours' grace for possible accidents on the road. Joshua, however, was required to furnish his own cudgels.

CHAPTER IV

THE young man with the white tie and the little black valise stopped in his saunter, and looked curiously at the name painted boldly across the door.

“Bless me! I wonder if——” he said to himself at last. Then he rang and asked if Mr Dacre was in. Yes, there he was, just coming down the stairs.

“In the flesh!” exclaimed the young man with the white tie.

“Hullo, Charley, by all that’s holy, is that you?” cried Mr Dacre in his turn. “Come in here, don’t stand scraping the soles off your boots. How the dev—— beg your cloth’s pardon—how did you find me?”

“Pure accident, old man. Have been staying a week with Potter of Barts, and am just going back to my sheepfold in the Isle of Wight. I am too early for my train at Waterloo, and so took a stroll round to add to my store of London topography. I saw the name on the door, and thought I’d have a shot; result—bull’s eye.”

“Good man; how long is it since I saw you last?”

“Five years last May.”

“Of course, you were one of the mourners who escorted my defunct ‘Varsity career to the railway-station.”

"Awful shame, that, to send a fellow down just for cheeking the Dean."

"Yes, if it had been at least for setting fire to King's Chapel or blowing up the Senate in full assembly; but you know it was the last straw—I wasn't in good odour."

"I heard you broke with your governor over it."

"Correct; he wanted me to apologise to the old beasts, and I said—something you can't quote in your sermons. Yes, you may look at them—I won't tell your churchwarden," Dacre went on with a laugh, as he saw his visitor casting curious glances round the room.

"Have these ladies any connection with the 'Variety Agent' outside?"

"Purely business connections." The curate blushed mentally at the possibility of any other interpretation. "My clients," continued Dacre, with a wave of introduction at his gallery of photographs.

"Clients? Then you are really——"

"Quite right—a music-hall impresario, an elevator of stars into the firmament of the 'illegitimate' stage. Incidentally, I make my living out of it."

"Shades of Aristotle, Tacitus, and a few others!"

"As many as you like," replied Dacre good-humouredly; "why not? At all events, it's a profession, and you don't think anything less than a profession would have suited a man who might have got a third-class in the Classical Tripos, and whose uncle is a peer of the realm."

"What made you take to it, though?"

"I forget the exact psychological process. I believe it was my name gave me the idea. You may have noticed there is a fine melodramatic twang about it; it's

the sort of name which, if it weren't your own, you would like for an *alias*. But as I haven't a particle of histrionic talent in my constitution, I made it serve me in a kindred department."

The curate laughed. "That's honest, at any rate; especially, too, when the public simply begs to be gulled by incompetence. However, how did you set about it? One of these days I may turn violently heterodox, and then——"

"It's easy enough. A couple of hundred pounds, unlimited bounce—there's the bag of tricks."

"And does it pay?"

"My dear boy, bounce pays in every walk of life. Personally speaking, I have found it most profitable. You don't know, probably, that I have become the arbiter of many destinies; a word of mine has made or marred, and—well, I get my percentage on the destinies."

"Oh, I recollect now. Saw something about it in the papers some time ago. Seems that one or two things transpired—no offence, old man—that brought the profession into disrepute."

"Same old Philistine, Charley," said Dacre, with a laugh; "my dear boy, there are blackguards everywhere. I am certain that even in the short time you've been at it, you've preached one or two into heaven. I've settled the affair with my conscience."

"And your pride?"

"The one includes the other. The man with proper self-respect will never accuse himself of doing wrong; that may not stand analysis, but as a general principle it will hold good."

"I suppose you have severed connection with——"

“My connections? Thank God! I’m a thorough pariah.”

“That’s a pity,” said the curate, musing.

Dacre looked at him with a smile that had a tinge of scorn in it, as he thought to himself: “There speaks the disappointed vicar; he knows Uncle Branbrook has one or two livings in his gift.” Then his thoughts took voice: “No, old chap, I don’t think so. I’ve never felt happier than I’ve done since I dropped caste. I tell you it’s a heart-breaking business to be the younger son to the extent of two generations; I know what it means—hanging on to the coat-tails of the swell mob, and eventually joining in the scramble for middle-aged heiresses. I prefer my percentages. They enable me to smoke these choice cigars—which, by-the-way, I ought to have offered you before. No? Whiskey, then? No? Sorry, tea’s out of the question. Well, then, to go on. I’m wound up, and there’s something of the father confessor about you. I tell you it’s all bunkum, this gabble about the pitiable lot of the gentleman-ranker—of the Queen’s shilling, or the civilian sort. The more imaginative of them are perhaps troubled now and then by qualms of the might-have-been; but the average failure quickly takes root in his new surroundings, and closes accounts with the past. In return he gets the future, which is a blank cheque, and which his luck may fill in to any conceivable amount; and that is my philosophy—accommodation to circumstances. If you ask me for a definition of the blessedest man, I should say it’s the one whose ambitions are on a par with his opportunities. I don’t mind admitting to you that when

I'm taking the chair at a 'Free-and-easy' I derive as much satisfaction from arranging the number of the turns—I mean the order in which the performers are to appear—as I could from adjudicating on the fate of empires. Perhaps the strongest argument for the existence of Providence is the chameleon."

"Yes, argued from that point of view. However, so much for the moral acclimatisation; how about the local? You may laugh, but I am certain I should not survive twenty-four hours in this toil-in-the-sweat-of-your-brow atmosphere."

"Prig!" Dacre was about to say, but remarked instead: "You always were a sensitive plant; but I agree with you. These things are matters of constitution. I believe I could afford a flat off Charing Cross; still I prefer this. Do you know why?"

"No; I should like to, though."

"Well, because I enjoy standing in the engine-room and watching the machinery—the physical machinery—which makes the world go round. It fascinates me. I may say I have developed an insatiable passion for observation. You may not understand me, but you know it is a matter of history that even Belgravia makes spasmodic descents into the stokeholes—with smelling-bottles to its nose, of course—and elevates a morbid curiosity into a fashion. With me it isn't a pastime—it's a study."

"By Jove! this is interesting; out with your note-book."

"Hang it! I haven't been as cold-blooded about it as all that. Detail is death to me, so I just confined myself to the general aspects."

“Don't apologise — go ahead. I've got another twenty minutes.”

“Well, the most curious feature that has struck me is—permit me to use two words I have used before—is, I say, caste among the pariahs. Our social and political economist tars them all with the same brush, labels them ‘working classes,’ and there you are. But it would be healthier for his conclusions if he were a little more analytical in his classification—a little more cognisant of the gradations, the shades of distinction, moral and intellectual, by which they descend the scale.”

“Bravo, John Stuart Mill!” said his listener.

Dacre shrugged his shoulders. “Not at all—I'm just an amateur. Well, as I said ‘descend’ the scale, we must start at the top. Of course, for the time I'm only dealing with town population. To begin with, there is the intelligent mechanic—technically, the skilled labourer. He is a man who earns a fair living wage, sports a parlour with antimacassars and cheap pictures, and can tell you without scratching his ear whether the government in office is liberal or conservative. His sons sometimes win County Council Scholarships, and occasionally drift into the professions.”

“Apparently a very presentable specimen.”

“He is. After him, I should say, comes the small shopkeeper. His income fluctuates according to the state of the labour markets; but, taken in the average, he manages to have a dinner every day all the year round, and will put by enough to pay the premium for apprenticing his children to a trade. His life, however,

especially after he has reached middle-age, is clouded by the shadow of the workhouse."

The visitor nodded intelligently.

"Next we arrive at the coster, the itinerant salesman ; in him we take leave of the customary proprieties, exchanging them for a strenuous disregard of appearances. But although he will sometimes jump on his mother and call it sport, he is very often a fellow with his heart in the right place. His standard of morality rarely falls lower than 'ten shillings fine, or in default, seven days.' Then there is the casual jobman, a somewhat nondescript quantity, for his variety is legion. His trades are victims to seasons, but as his digestive organs desire to be operative at all times, he balances his deficits the best way he can—the best way being the worst. Hence he figures most prominently in the police court records, and generally keeps up the prestige of his country for devilry."

The Established Churchman wrinkled his brows at this last ; it sounded unpatriotic. Dacre continued unperturbed.

"Finally, there is the unattached or gutter population, the 'submerged tenth,' to wit. They have only one resource in life, and that is to die quickly. Here's your table, arbitrary perhaps, for to some extent the divisions overlap each other, but in the main it will stand."

"A monument of reproach to the unconscientious statistician, eh?" smiled the curate ; "but—you mustn't mind my asking—what is your table good for?"

"For nothing—except perhaps for passing your time while you wait for your train."

“But seriously?”

“You forget the premises from which I started—to describe the complex nature of the amalgam jumbled together under the denomination of ‘the masses.’ Properly elaborated, it might assist in directing the floundering attempts of would-be panaceists to the seat of the disease. Even if it does nothing more than tell them where they are making fools of themselves, and where nuisances, it will have justified its existence.”

“Then why not elaborate it?”

“For the benefit of the panaceists? Confound them! let them rack their own brains; but I make you a present of the idea. Work it up into a ‘Fortnightly’ article—I’ll give you all the necessary data.”

“Heaven forbid! I’m going to be married next Christmas, and can’t afford to damage my prospects from the very outset. Your present would be a robe of Nessus.”

“I wonder you have the courage for a mythological allusion,” laughed Dacre; “isn’t that contraband in your sheepfold?”

“Yes, but I rely on your discretion,” laughed back the other, rising and picking up his belongings; “I wish I could stay longer, but—hullo, who’s this? And why is she favoured with a stand on your writing-desk, when the others must content themselves with mantelpiece and wall? Dear me, what a pretty face—bears a faint resemblance to my Lucy; but there’s no soul in it—sort of egg-without-salt affair. ‘Yours truly, Maud Marshall.’ Well, anyhow, I wish her every success, whoever she is, and the same to you, and much of it, old boy. When

I'm in town again I shall be sure to look you up. But take my advice—you'll find it pay in the long run."

"What advice?"

"Get your commission."

"You bet I will—ten per cent. on all engagements."

"Not that kind of commission. You called yourself a gentleman-ranker; I'm keeping up the metaphor."

"Thanks, old chap, I will—when it's the choice between that and the 'submerged tenth.' But that's a far cry, I hope."

The curate shrugged his shoulders and departed. Thoughtfully Mr Algernon Dacre walked back to his sanctum. The first thing he did was to re-arrange the photo on his writing-desk, which the visitor, in replacing it, had set awry. He took the opportunity of giving it a careful scrutiny.

"No soul, eh?" he monologued; "never mind—we'll soon put one into you; I know a patent way of doing it."

He might perhaps have proceeded to give away the secret, when the door-bell tinkled timidly through the house. A minute after one of the two clerks from the back office popped his head in.

"Young woman to see you, sir; are you in?"

"A client?"

"She won't say, but it's hardly likely; looks more as if she's come for a washing job."

"All right, I'll see her."

When Dacre did see her, he accorded a silent tribute of praise to his clerk's powers of concise summarisation; but being a gentleman, he remembered she was a woman, and offered her a chair.

"I should like you to put me on your books," she replied to his enquiry as to her business.

"What on earth for?" he could not help exclaiming.

"Well, for the same thing as you did Maud Marshall. I'm a friend of hers."

"Oh, are you?" His face lit up with interest.

"She said she would mention me to you. My name's Tabitha Jupp; we worked in the same shop for three years, and you've done so well for her. . . ."

"Blessed ingenuousness," murmured Dacre, looking at her dubiously; "what is your line, pray?"

"Singing songs," answered Tabitha promptly.

"Let me hear you; never mind the accompaniment."

Tabitha obeyed eagerly. Out came the "Last Rose of Summer," and again her rendering of it became a rendering.

Dacre listened, struggling between amusement and pity. There was something ludicrous in this utter incompetence so unconscious of itself; and the pathos lay in her desperate anxiety to please. All through the song her eyes hung on his face in earnest deprecation, till Dacre knew perfectly well how it felt to be an eel. Distinctly, the situation was embarrassing. Every day in the week he was called upon by at least one irredeemable "crock," one foregone failure. With these he there and then dealt summarily; he told them a few home-truths, and sent them on their way repenting. But face to face with such impotence of success he felt himself powerless. The effort of so much helpless, hopeless limitation fell little short of heroism; and the girl seemed rational enough.

Tabitha had finished, and wistfully was awaiting judgment. In the adjoining clerks' office some commotion seemed taking place, prominent in which was an uncouth noise resembling the clucking of fowls. Dacre continued for some little time to adorn the blotting paper with hieroglyphics ; he was gathering gentleness into his voice. When he thought he had enough, he said :

“Would you be much disappointed if I told you you didn't suit?”

“I would, Mr Dacre—oh, ever so much.”

“I can't hold out hope to you of going very far ; and unless you can do that, it's not worth while starting.”

“I don't mind”—Tabitha's hands were clasped—“as long as I earn a little money by it,” she said, as though with a sudden inspiration, and by way of an afterthought.

“Oh, that is your idea,” said Dacre with a stare.

“Yes, Maud Marshall earns——”

She saw the smile that curled his lips, and stopped disconcerted.

“My dear girl,” he said, “in this world we get paid by results, not by intentions. I hope you understand me.”

“I think I do—you mean I'm not good enough ; but,” she continued, as she saw him nod assent, “I'm sure I would improve. You see, I haven't had any practice, and, indeed, Mr Dacre, I have set my whole heart on it. Give me a trial.” Her voice trembled on the brink of tears.

Dacre began to call himself names for having invoked the predicament on himself. Of course, it all came

from her bringing him credentials. She knew Maud Marshall—had some claims to her friendship, as Maud had told him ; and for that her father deserved considerate treatment. He stroked his chin ; luckily he had opportunity of indulging her, and at the same time letting her wake up to her unfitness without too much of a shock ; and the compromise would please Maud.

“ I could give you a trial, as you say, if that is all you want ; the rest depends on you.”

Tabitha became radiant.

“ Do you know the ‘ Falstaff,’ City Road ? ” he asked.

“ I shall find it.”

“ Come there Saturday night—what’s to-day ? Saturday. Well, this day week. It isn’t anything of a place, and you must work for nothing. That’s where Maud served her ‘prenticeship. If they ask any questions, here’s my card ; you’ll find me there.”

Tabitha attempted to express her gratitude, but failed. She stood with parted lips, gazing at Dacre.

“ There’s another thing,” continued the latter, “ you had better come there with a stage name ; your own is, pardon me, a little commonplace. Let’s see.” He turned to the window and mused. “ Charley—Isle of Wight—Charley’s girl, Lucy—yes, that was it.” He faced Tabitha. “ How would you like Lucinda Ventnor ? ” he asked.

“ It’s beautiful,” she murmured ; “ you’re very good to me, Mr Dacre.”

“ All right, that settles our business. Next Saturday night. Don’t forget.”

He expected her to go, but Tabitha did not move.

She stood and looked at him as though she seemed unconscious that he had caught her glance and was returning it.

"And I wish you very much luck," he said to fill up the awkward pause.

"I'm sure you're very good to me, Mr Dacre," she replied mechanically.

"You've said that before," laughed Dacre, a little impatiently; "you needn't insist on it."

But still Tabitha stood and looked.

"Is there anything else?" he asked, quite sharply this time.

"Oh no," quavered Tabitha, turning slowly to the door, "except that you're very good to me, Mr Dacre."

"A queer fish—a deuced queer fish," remarked Dacre, once he had seen her safely out of the room. "I swear I was on the verge of blushing, the way she eyed me. Algy, you naughty boy, I almost believe you've added another victim—only this time it isn't your fault. However, if any one comes to me and says that events don't move eccentrically here below, I shall make no bones, and call him a liar. Algernon Dacre wants to put a soul into Maud Marshall, and the result is—Lucinda Ventnor. Really I had given Providence credit for a trifle more method."

CHAPTER V

THAT same evening Tabitha's attic rose—as far as its loftiness could still permit it to rise—to the dignity of a council chamber. The subject under discussion was a green silk dress, which, spread out on the table, was listening with conflicting emotions to the various observations it evoked.

“A little faded, perhaps,” commented Phœbe.

“So would you be if you had been packed and poked away in brown paper for five years,” thought the green dress indignantly, drawing, however, some consolation from the qualifying ‘perhaps.’

“Still it has stood its time very well, and besides it will pass all right if you don't look at it too close,” Tabitha, the owner of the dress, was saying loyally.

And then Phœbe, with a ruthless disregard for the feelings of the unfortunate garment, went on to remark that in point of shape it was hopelessly behind the times.

“That's exactly what we've got to see to,” replied Tabitha, undaunted, “and that's why I bought these.”

And Tabitha produced half a dozen fashion-plates, from the variety of which one could draw tolerable inference as to the fickleness of the feminine taste.

"It all depends what you want it for," said Phœbe, glancing at them critically.

"Hooray!" came from Jimmy at the further end, "it's for a wedding-dress. Well done, Tabby, old gal; what a lucky chance to get rid o' my old slippers—I 'ate the sight of 'em. Oh, you sly thing!"

"Don't listen to the silly boy," said Tabitha, flushing a little; "it's for evening wear. The fact is I'm going to a sort of party this day week."

"That's right," said Phœbe, smiling; "it's time you turned over a new leaf, and became a bit of a rake. I should be glad to think that my bullying had something to do with it. You don't know how it grieved me to see you divide your time between workshop and bed; I always felt I had to remember for you that you were alive."

"Dear old Phœbe!" murmured Tabitha.

"Some people think it's good to live by clockwork," continued Phœbe thoughtfully; "if they do, they ought to make sure first that they are going to die young. Later on, when the wheels begin to run slowly, and one feels more inclined for thinking than for doing, then it's just as well that one should have something to think of."

"Even when it isn't anything pleasant?" asked Tabitha.

Phœbe recollected the formula of her night-prayer, and knew she was going to be inconsistent; but the turn of the argument demanded it.

"Yes, if it tortures you in the retrospect," she said quietly; "the worst is better than sheer, drear nothingness. You look back, and your eyes don't go drifting

aimlessly for want of something to anchor on. Sometimes you sail back to the islands, where you lay in the sweet grass and drank sunshine out of the tulips. And again you find yourself crashing against the rocks on which your life made shipwreck. And sometimes it happens—God help me!—that you dwell more gladly on the rocks than on the islands, though you had a whole Archipelago to choose from. But at all events, let your map of life, the east of it, the orient years, not remain entirely unmarked. Yes, Tabitha, fashion your remembrances while you are young enough to feel the difference between the rocks and the islands.”

Tabitha was silent, not from want of comprehension nor from astonishment. This was not her first experience of Phœbe’s reflective moods. Even Jimmy knew them, and idiomatically referred to them as “Phœbe chewin’ the rag.” To-night Tabitha felt even more receptive for them than she usually did, but somehow Jimmy’s waking presence seemed a disturbing element; and so for the time being she deflected the current of talk into a shallower channel.

“While I’m young!” she echoed, with a laugh; “dear me, Phœbe, what’s the matter with your eyesight? Anybody can see I am—but no, I shan’t give myself away, not even to you, Phœbe.”

“Now, then, Phœbe, say something nasty—she’s fishin’ for compliments; serve ’er right if she catches a crab,” broke in Jimmy with a fine confusion of metaphor.

“If I do say anything, it will be to remark that we are not doing any business,” answered Phœbe, conscious that the fault of that was hers.

And now the fashion-plates came into requisition in good earnest. The air was full of sartorial technicalities. Some of the designs were descanted upon in terms of exuberant praise; others found occasion to regret that they were ever created. And, meantime, the green dress was eating its heart out in agonies of uncertainty, while waiting to be informed of the nature of its metamorphosis. At last the verdict fell. It reflected adversely on the intrinsic genius of the separate patterns, not one of which was suited full length to the requirements of the case; but in several had been marked some individual point of merit, and from these was to be constructed a composite fabric, which triumphantly consummated their various excellences. It also gave Tabitha the pleasurable knowledge, that, inasmuch as each one of the plates had been laid under contribution, she could regard their purchase as a full-value investment.

And now the green silk dress came in for severe handling. It was horribly dismembered; the fastenings of the seam yielded to the onslaught of a merciless penknife, and, where the sleeves had gracefully depended, there now yawned two unsightly gaps. Then Tabitha produced a packet of material in which the mutilated robe, to its unspeakable joy, recognised its own kith and kin—colour of its own colouring, and woof of its own weaving. Tabitha's next words, too, reassured it more fully.

“Excellent! twice as much as we shall want, and there won't be the bother of matching. And, besides, we can start at once. I don't feel sleepy a bit,” said Tabitha; “do you?”

“I’m good for as long as you are, to say the least.” And Phœbe clapped the thimble on her finger with a determination which would have made Morpheus in person shrink back aghast. Silently the two women worked on amid the ever-deepening stillness. Lazily, hazily the heat-waves floated through the chamber, breaking against the walls and turning back on their own tide. Through them, like a beacon-light, flared the lamp, looking sullen and distressed; it seemed to resent its very use and existence.

The quiet suddenly struck on Tabitha’s ear with the full volume of its silence. She lifted her head almost startled, and called, “Jimmy!”

Jimmy answered with a snore, which in the middle broke off into a sob.

“Poor little fellow!” sighed Phœbe, with a side-long glance over at the sleeper.

“Yes, poor little fellow,” echoed Tabitha, her lip trembling; “you say my life is joyless: what then would you say to his?”

“He is luckier than you; he has forgotten what joy is, and the world never flaunts it in his face for challenge, as it does to you every day in the year.”

Apparently Tabitha did not hear her, for she went on:

“And I have the heart for the green silk.”

“Don’t be stupid, girl,” came from Phœbe in gentle censure; “if you draped all your feelings in black, if you moped your heart out of yourself, would that lighten his cross by a grain’s weight? This is his own passion-play—I have explained to you what that is—

and not even his good angel could act understudy to his part. You will do him much better service by getting what happiness the world will give you, and sharing it with him."

"Do you think the world has any to give me?" asked Tabitha wistfully.

"If it does not give, take—by force or by stealth, and the end will justify the means."

Phœbe's voice had a hard ring as she spoke. Tabitha's head drooped low over her work. Several times her lips opened and shut as if she were drilling them to their task.

"Phœbe, I am thirty-two," she said at last.

"What if you are?"

"I was wondering—but perhaps you will be able to tell me—is it possible for people to fall in love at thirty-two?"

Phœbe looked at her with a start; then she answered slowly:

"It is, Tabitha; by the anger of God, it is. Why do you ask?"

"Because I saw a man to-day—promise you won't laugh at me."

"Laugh? I am not mad."

"I spoke to a man to-day for ten minutes—I mean he spoke to me; and I felt I could listen to him like that for years, and not once think of eating or drinking. I only wanted to look at him."

Phœbe nodded silently.

"And ever since," Tabitha went on dreamily, "ever since I've felt at peace with the whole world. If I had

anywhere an enemy—thank God, I haven't—who had done me mortal harm, I should ask him to forgive me, because the fault was mine. I scarcely recognise myself, Phœbe; I seem to be all changed—that is, not outside, but inside. It's like as though my old useless heart had been taken out of me, and a clean new one put there instead."

"Yes, that's how it feels—at first," said Phœbe.

"Why at first?"

"Because the thing has several stages."

Tabitha looked at her anxiously.

"And that's where the trickery of it comes in," said Phœbe dispassionately. "At the beginning it makes you good and forgiving and full of self-sacrifice—just to cheat you into the belief that it comes straight from heaven. But once it has taken you in its grip——" Phœbe paused with a little laugh.

"Tell me," urged Tabitha.

"Once it holds you captive, it throws off the mask, and you see what devil's work it does."

"Why, what does it do?" Tabitha gazed in growing wonder at the older woman's face, which had taken to itself an expression of grim vindictiveness.

"We will pass over the intermediate grades, and come to the ultimate effects," resumed Phœbe, and it seemed her teeth did most of the talking; "what was your peace of soul has turned to a ferment and a fever. Your power of thought is broken in efforts to conjure up before you an absent face; and then there is a struggle against the heart-longing that drives you to the frenzy of revolt—revolt against your better destiny, that does not

count the cost of defeat or victory. Forgiveness? Self-sacrifice? If you were offered the choice between the salvation of the world and a single clasp of his hand or touch of his lips, you would not hesitate one instant. Look, Tabitha; you say you have no enemy—you may not have possessed one before to-day. But take care: what of the man you learned to love in ten minutes?"

Tabitha gazed at her in painful bewilderment; then she said quietly: "It isn't fair, Phœbe. You promised not to laugh at me; you've kept your word—by frightening me."

Phœbe took her hand affectionately; the kind, placid look had settled back on the wrinkled features, and her eyes had melted into the softness of tears.

"I could not help it," she said finally; "too many old chords were struck to-night, and the past rang out in response irresistibly. I was just thirty-two when it happened, and he used to tell me he liked me best in green silk."

Tabitha, for all her agitation, sat without moving a muscle; at last she seemed on the very threshold of obtaining a long-cherished desire—Phœbe's secret. It was, of course, common talk in the neighbourhood that she had been born under a brighter star than that which glimmered into the twilight of her life. But as to any details of her antecedents, she had hitherto been sphinx-like.

"I was thirty-two when I met my mortal enemy—the man who, I knew as soon as I saw him, was going to do me deadly harm; and to be sure—I hardly thought I had so much of the Christian in me—I loved him. I

had no business to love him; I had a husband, had had him for ten years—time enough to have become reconciled even to him. I thought I had done so. But then came this enemy of mine, and told me otherwise. I believed him—oh, how gladly I believed him. He also said that, having discovered the evil, I must apply the remedy; he was the remedy. But he was terribly expensive. He cost me honour, home, my high place in the world—so high it was, Tabitha, that I had plenty of space to fall, and get stunned when I reached the bottom. I paid his price, and we went away—he, and I, and my retribution—I ought to mention the last first, because it became the principal agent in what happened afterwards. We had a lively time together, *it* and I, especially when he left me, to play remedy to others, no doubt; and the *it* promptly appropriated his room, and had better scope for its manœuvrings. That's how I began; of course, there were further developments, but these were purely accidental, and I don't take any responsibility for them. And now, Tabitha, you asked me not to laugh; I ask you not to pity. Pity is horribly infectious, and, once I started to pity myself, I should make holes in the sky with my blasphemies. But you are welcome to the moral of my story if you think you have any use for it."

Gingerly she placed on the table the ruff she had been tacking, and rose to her feet a little stiffly. By then Tabitha had found words:

"No, I won't pity you, but I would die if that would take your life back to where ——"

"Where I began to play skittles with it? No good,

Tabitha; I should only knock it all of a heap again, even knowing what I know. Good-night; somehow I don't feel as wide-awake as I thought."

Tabitha did not ask her to stay—first, because she was aware Phœbe's lodging had been paid for that week; and, secondly, because she knew that to a soul in pain a pair of stranger eyes sear like the sun-glass focussed on a recrudescient wound. And, what also counted, she wished to be alone for her own part, so as more comfortably to set in order the household of her heart, into which latterly she had imported much new furniture. Among this the first item that deserved consideration was the remembrance of the man which had insinuated itself there but a few hours ago, and already had become such a predominant factor in her economy. Her intuition had taught her to put the right value upon it, had even suggested to her the accurate phrase for it; she had fallen in love. So far she was very clear on the point; but what she could not understand was why Phœbe, who knew of these things by experience, should make it the peg for a homily. She had listened to the grey-haired woman's words with gasping eagerness. As the recital of her life-story, they had come home to Tabitha deeply enough; but they had not merely been meant to satisfy curiosity. They had been intended for a warning, a danger-light—perhaps with some reference to the rocks on which one could make shipwreck, and of which Phœbe had spoken. Tabitha was inclined to feel mutinous, to resent the other's raven's-croak. There was no analogy between them; she herself had nothing to lose, and everything to gain. She had gained a great

deal already: a sunnier outlook on the world, a buoyant hope for the future, and—she had said it once before—a new heart, in proper working trim. And having all this, she was to show herself ungrateful to her good fortune by making provisos as to developments; what right had she to demand guarantee for value of which she had become possessor by the veriest accident?

Yes, the man, the “man of ten minutes,” was an accident. She had gone to him that afternoon without the slightest presentiment that he would react on her life, except by means of the business which had been her errand to him. That business also had been much in the nature of an accident, the outcome of unquestioning, uncounselled impulse. Well she remembered what had set it astir. The day that Maud Marshall had electrified her workmates with the great news of her success, Tabitha, as was expected of her, had shown herself the only one incapable of emotion. She had gone on stitching away imperturbably, as though her ears were made for anything save listening. But her eyes had shot one swift glance at the girl, and with that glance her mind had taken an impress, not of her late associate, but of something whereof Maud seemed the symbol—of the joy of life, of the gladness of heart’s desires achieved. This was Tabitha’s first reminder—the first since many years—that such things still existed beneath the heavens. And then, by mysterious workings, her consciousness of them had turned to an insidious greed for their possession. What exactly she wished to possess was to herself undefined. Out of the nether-world of the bygone

there came back to her the phantoms of aspirations she had long thought dead, and gladly she welcomed them back, these offsprings of her girlhood's dreams; but in her gladness she forgot that it was not through her own infanticide hand that they had died—the merciless sword of circumstance had slain them, and that same sword was ever lifted to slay again. She forgot all that; she only knew that her youth had risen up in her re-incarnate, palpable and palpitating, quick with all its pristine attributes. It did not affect her that for years and years she had spent her soul in prayers against this resurrection; had they been uttered under the auspices of her fate, they would not have gone so totally astray of their mark. At first she thought the whim of a moment had made her its plaything, and was hurrying her headlong and headstrong against the current of her will; but soon she found that her own hand was on the tiller, had set its course, and was steering her steadily towards uncharted destinations. Then the rapture of this new strength entered her blood, galvanised its sluggish circuit, and sent it eddying in warm, exultant leaps through pulse and artery.

Such had been her awakening of soul and body. She felt no tinge of regret, no sense of irretrievable loss, in that it had come so late. It was not a matter of time at all; she did not look back how far her life lay behind her already. She was only just born, and could make of herself what she would, untrammelled by retrospect into failure. There were no graves in her rear, no trailing shadows of cypresses. She started from where she stood, with the sun in front.

And now she must fashion for herself a larger scope, in proportion to her wider outlook and deeper insight. She must not cramp her new-born energies, for fear they might succumb in their infancy; life meant light and space. Away and afield, therefore, where there would be no fence-walls to butt against, no barriers to cry halt—away to new haunts, peopled with new shapes, and loud with new voices.

Away—ay, but whither? Time after time she had put herself the question, until she almost despaired of answering it. Then her very resourcelessness came to her aid. If she could not invent, she would imitate—imitate Maud Marshall, who, as it was, had become the pivot of her destiny. And so she had asked Maud to guide her to those unknown regions, of which she herself had already become a prosperous denizen. She did not notice how much Maud looked askance at the request; and in the end Maud, partly to escape the trouble of diplomatic refusal, and partly from sheer surprise at the request, had promised. She had kept that promise in the spirit in which it was made.

So it was that Tabitha had come to Algernon Dacre. Her answer to his discouraging comments on her abilities—or want of them—was no prevaricating makeshift. Any money she might earn by her new occupation was welcome; it would enable her to provide more luxuries for poor crippled Jimmy, and bribe a curse or two from off her brother Joshua's lips. But, after all, the money was only a side-issue; her direct aim was a little happiness, and that desire she could not confide to the smiling man, with the cold, clear eyes. She

wondered if he guessed at all how much he had already contributed to the result; she wondered if it would ever betide that he should know. Ah! it must be a grand thing to go about the world affording happiness to others. As far as she knew, no one had ever noted the gift in her. And then came a query that frightened rather than pained her. Had that gift, perhaps, been withheld from her utterly? And was it not true that those who give not, receive not in return?

With a start she sat up and looked round her; it was only then she remarked that her work had lain idly in her lap, while her brain had been busy handling the affairs of her soul. She saw, too, that the lamp was no longer to be credited for the light which made the objects round her visible. Through the windows drifted a rosy effulgence she knew to be the dawn. It affected her strangely. It seemed almost as though the happiness she was grasping at had stolen in upon her over-night, and there remained nothing for her but to begin fruition of it. Yet she was not pleased, for surely what was worth having would not come with so little effort.

Something was stirring at her feet; she glanced down with a little shiver, and met Towzer's eyes, with a patient, loving look in them, uplifted to hers. She almost burst into tears—tears, because the animal's silent caress seemed remotely the heaven-sent answer to the query she had just asked herself: Had it at all been given to her to impart happiness to others?

CHAPTER VI

FROM Walworth to Clerkenwell is more than a stone's throw—in fact, than a good many stone throws ; and when, at the other end of the journey, a crisis in your private concerns is supposed to await you, the distance will appear to you inordinately long. So, indeed, it appeared to Tabitha as she huddled in the furthest corner of the tram, hugging to herself the wickerwork basket wherein were contained her accoutrements. But at the same time she thought of the distance with some satisfaction ; it lessened the chances of her acquaintances from “over the water” drifting that evening as far as the “Falstaff,” City Road. For, on the whole, she preferred making her *début* before an audience of utter strangers. She did not know why she preferred it, not being much of an expert at discovering the hidden causes of things ; but, vaguely, she guessed it was because before strangers there need be no implied apology in what she was doing, while those who knew her might think themselves entitled to at least an explanation.

Yes, to-night was to bring her to the threshold of the new life. The week, heavy with the weight of anticipation, had dragged on tediously : from it she became finally convinced that all her past had been lived in vain, as it had not even taught her how to conquer time by patience.

And that, surely, was a study to which she had applied herself with painful diligence. But she was glad of it—it all helped to justify her new desires in her own eyes, and there were occasions when she needed self-reassurance. This was not one of them ; just then she had her courage well in hand ; to let it slip now was to surrender herself once for always to the opiate torpor from which, as it were, a miracle had roused her. Such miracles did not happen twice.

The tram stopped. The conductor was calling to her : “ This is where you get out, Miss. That’s the ‘ Falstaff ’ over there.”

Clumsily, despite his assistance, Tabitha alighted. For a moment she envied the passengers who were continuing their journey ; they had two horses and the driver to relieve them of immediate self-responsibility ; but she must take action for herself. The very thought braced her. Resolutely she stepped across the road. The rapid beat of her heart was an exhilarating drum-call.

She paused in front of the “ Falstaff ” just long enough to notice it was a gin-palace, with an *annexe*, over which flamed, in bold, red letters, the inscription, “ Theatre of Varieties.” She entered the doorway, which acted as mouth to a long, narrow corridor. Tabitha made haste to traverse it, for its stone-pavement rang with disconcerting sonorousness under her step. She pushed open a baize-covered folding-door at the other extremity, and found herself confronted by a hard-featured janitor. He stretched out his arm to stop her.

“ Who’s the basket for, Polly ? ” he asked at the same time.

"It's my basket, and my name isn't Polly," she replied, somewhat discomposed by his brusque manner.

"In that case you must get yer ticket at the bar. I thought you was bringin' clothes for one o' the hartists."

"So I am—for myself," said Tabitha sturdily; "here's Mr Dacre's card."

The man took it, and then looked from it to the bearer in some perplexity.

"Yes, that's it right enough," he said at last; "but—well, if 'e sent you, I s'pose you're to go in. There's the dressin'-room, straight down the other end. You'll find some o' the other gals there."

Tabitha ascribed his hesitation to some informality in her admission, not to anything peculiar in herself. So it was just as well she did not hear him soliloquizing in her rear:

"Lawks! what's the 'Falstaff' comin' to—mugs like a bloomin' nightmare gone wrong; strike me lucky if she ain't old enough to be 'er own mother!"

Meanwhile Tabitha was slowly making her way along the scanty margin left between the seating-accommodation and the wall. The hall was practically empty. In the twopenny seats were a few little boys who had paid their entrance money immediately the doors—that is, the door—had opened, lest they should be tempted to squander it on mince-pies, and, for a momentary transport, lose the lingering delight of a many-iteded programme.

"Three and a 'alf turns for a farthin'—not countin' the hextras," the Newton among them was calculating.

Tabitha caught the remark as she passed, and glanced

at the speaker, thereby to assist her understanding of it. Their eyes met, and Tabitha wondered what provoked the sudden distortion of the urchin's features ; also what was the particular application of his :

"Crikey! look at 'er, Bill," which followed in her wake.

Presently she had reached the curtain which divided the sanctities of the dressing-room from the prying gaze of the world. From behind it came the sound of high-pitched voices conversing stridently. Cautiously Tabitha edged her way through, so as not to displace more of the curtain than was necessary. It was a room about ten feet by twelve, and its furniture consisted of three port-manteaus, each sat upon by its respective owner. The last were also the owners of the strident voices. As the newcomer entered, they faced round quickly and hushed, staring at her rudely.

"Good-evening, ladies," said Tabitha, having set down her basket.

Instead of an answer, the rude stare redoubled. Tabitha thereupon proceeded to remove her hat.

"This 'ere's private, mum—ain't it, Betsy and Jane?" said one of the girls, looking at the other two for corroboration.

"I was told it was the dressing-room," said Tabitha.

"Then they didn't tell you lies ; and nobody's allowed in except on business."

"Then I'm all right. I'm going on this evening. If you don't mind giving me a hand in dressing, I'd be obliged. I don't know my way about yet very well."

Her self-possessed manner of speaking almost im-

pressed the girls; but that sober, old-maidenish face of hers was fatal, and Betsy was immediately attacked by a violent fit of coughing. It seemed contagious, for presently it infected Jane and Emma, the champion of privacy.

It was now Tabitha's turn to stare, and she did it well. The trio had fused their bodily individualities, and were rolling over one another in an inextricable tangle, the principal constituent of which was stockings.

"Don't, Betsy," gasped Jane finally.

"Don't *you!*" returned Betsy.

"I wish you wouldn't, both of you," gurgled Emma.

Then the three sat up, and leant their heads against the wall in token of complete exhaustion.

"What's the joke?" asked Tabitha, now that she could entertain reasonable hopes of getting a hearing.

"'Tain't a joke at all—I wish it was," replied Emma, tearfully; "it's a sickness we've got, bein' took by it quite suddenly, and when we ain't lookin'. Been in 'ospital for it, too—the doctor said as there ain't no 'ope for us, didn't 'e, gals?"

The "gals" assented with alacrity.

"But we'll 'elp you dress and make up," continued Jane.

"And do yer turn for you," added Betsy, intent on making Tabitha ample reparation.

Tabitha smiled at the absurdity of the offer.

"Stop yer sauce, Betsy," said Emma severely; "what's yer line, dear?"

"Singing songs," replied Tabitha.

"That's what's called 'ballad vocalist'; don't forget,

that's yer ticket. We're Sisters Jingle—'eard of us, did you? Sky-kickers, you know."

For diplomatic reasons Tabitha pretended that their name had long been a household word with her, at which the Sisters appeared both gratified and perplexed, seeing that it was only a fortnight ago since they first had entrusted the world with the secret of their talents.

"Hadn't we better begin now?" asked Tabitha.

"Lawks-a-mussles! you're much too soon," said Betsy; "we come for rehearsal, and stopped on. Mr Dacre never turns up before 'alf-past eight. D'you know Mr Dacre?"

Tabitha succeeded in keeping the blush down as she answered:

"I do—leastways, I went to see him last week."

"Ain't 'e 'andsome!" said Jane.

"Face like a hangel," remarked Emma.

"A perfect 'Polly,'" summed up Betsy. Tabitha vaguely surmised she meant Apollo, and was seized with a hot resentment that these feather-brains dared to insult Mr Dacre with their praises.

"But 'e ain't as nice as my Mortimer," Jane went on thoughtfully.

"There's nicer than yer Mortimer; look at my Vivian," said Betsy.

"Look at 'im?" Jane was scorn personified; "no, thanks—don't want to get my eyes blistered."

"Sour grapes," sneered Betsy.

"That's all you know; ain't 'e gone down on 'is knees to make me come out with 'im?"

"Liar!" hissed Jane.

"Glad to know yer right name," said Betsy, apparently calm; "don't be obstinate—you know I've always got first pick with the Johnnies."

"'Eark at 'er, Emma," jeered Jane; "ain't she got to take what's left over?"

"Emma, if you give 'er right, I'll never do another kick with you so long as I live!" screamed Betsy.

Thus adjured, Emma found herself in a terrible predicament; she thought that neither of her "sisters'" cavaliers could bear comparison with a certain Sidney of her acquaintance; but she refrained from saying so, for fear of complicating the discussion. She adopted a compromise.

"If the gov'nor 'ears us makin' sich a row, 'e won't let us go on for a month."

"Good job," said Betsy sullenly; "I'm sick of 'avin' to do with people what gets out o' bed every mornin' left foot first; wouldn't take me long to book for single turn—for two pins I would."

"I'll give you three if you'll let me stick 'em where I wants to," said Jane viciously; "puttin' us out o' step, that's all you're good for."

"*You* are—who couldn't do the twist after six weeks o' practisin'?"

Emma clutched her ears in mock despair.

"Snakes alive, cork yerselves up—fine hidea folks must get o' you," she said, the last evidently with reference to Tabitha, who looked and listened rather nonplussed.

"Well, I'm willin' to make up," began Jane.

"Nobody can say as I'm one to bear malice," followed Betsy.

“Then, kiss and be good, there’s dears.”

The embrace was somewhat perfunctory out of deference to laboriously-achieved coiffures; but it served its purpose, and the rainbow of concord once more arched gloriously overhead.

“What was that button-buster you was goin’ to tell us jist as—as the lady come in?” resumed Jane.

Emma, to whom the inquiry was addressed, clasped her hands rapturously.

“Oh, it was rich. You see, me and Sidney was out yesterday afternoon; and when we gets as far as Regent Street, ’e sez: ‘Let’s go and ’ave tea.’ ‘All right,’ sez I. So ’e takes me to the ‘Oriental,’ and we goes second floor and sits by the winder. Bime-by ’e looks out and sez: ‘There she is.’ ‘Who is?’ sez I. ‘See that gal?’ sez ’e; ‘I told ’er to meet me outside ’ere at five, and she’s ten minutes early.’ Up I jumps and sez: ‘If you go down to ’er I’ll cut yer throat with a broken saucer,’ I sez, jist like this. Then ’e starts laughin’ fit to bust. ‘Go down to ’er? No fear, ducky,’ sez ’e; ‘I only want to see ’ow long she’ll wait.’ And would you believe it, that gal—golly, wasn’t she toffed out, too—that gal waits till a quarter to six. And to see ’er chuckin’ ’er peepers all about, and tryin’ to look as like she was there only by haccident——” Emma was here overpowered by her reminiscences, and the anecdote ended in squeals and more stockings.

“Now, wasn’t that clever o’ the boy,” said Jane, on recovering breath; “I must put Mortimer up to the dodge.”

"Vivian's goin' to give me a ring to-night," answered Betsy, *à propos* of nothing.

"It's about time to start dressin' before we gets crowded up," said Jane, looking at her watch with considerable ostentation.

The suggestion met with approval.

"You'd better get yer togs out—we'll give you a 'and goin' along," said Emma to Tabitha; "by the way, what's yer name?"

"Lucinda Ventnor," replied Tabitha—she had spent several hours in practising to run it off glibly.

"How much?"

Tabitha repeated.

"Lu-cinda Ventnor," said Emma tentatively, and catching hold of her mouth gave it a violent wrench.

"What was that for?" enquired Tabitha.

"I was only shovin' my jaw straight again while it was 'ot; it's a rather difficult name. D'you mind us callin' you Cinders instead?"

"Just as you like," smiled Tabitha good-humouredly.

"What d'you say to a nip o' something, gals? I'll stand treat, and get it back from Morty later on," said Jane, beginning to put herself into *negligée*.

"I'm on," said Emma and Betsy in a breath.

"Then call Ted."

A minute after the said Ted stepped unceremoniously into the sanctuary. Tabitha gave a little scream, and hastily drew on again the bodice she had half-doffed.

"Don't be a goose—'e don't count for a man," chided Jane, getting out of her skirt.

Ted heard, but his face remained utterly expression-

less ; he only shifted one foot, but the movement was enough to make his hump stand out more sharply and to accentuate the unevenness of his shoulders.

“ Order up, gals,” went on Jane ; “ mine’s a bitter.”

Betsy and Emma ordered up.

“ Anything for you, Miss ? ” asked Ted, darting a quick glance at Tabitha.

The latter felt almost startled, not at anything in his tone, but at his knowing she was there at all ; she had not seen him lift his eyes till that moment.

“ Yes, you must, Cinders,” disposed Jane, noting her hesitation ; “ we’re goin’ to toast yer luck.”

Ted disappeared, and Tabitha passed the time till his return in smoothing imaginary creases out of her green silk dress ; it had taken her three-quarters of an hour to pack it.

“ ‘Ere’s your’n, miss,” she heard Ted say, suddenly at her elbow.

She looked up, and again caught his gaze—what a hungry, wistful gaze it was, full of importunate entreaty with which humble deprecation was fighting for supremacy. It seemed the keynote to the young man’s inner life, the note for which he was ever trying to find a listener. As she looked at him, some echoes of it seemed to strike Tabitha’s ear, and the sound made her heart sick.

“ Now, then, you jist get out, Ted,” rang out Betsy’s voice ; “ if you keep ‘angin’ about ‘ere, you’ll get the sack.”

Silently he went, and immediately the air became vociferous with the courtesies of carousing. Tabitha

gulped her ginger-beer with some difficulty ; despite the kindness her new acquaintances were showing her, she felt ill at ease. There was no real kinship in their contact—an alien spirit seemed to emanate from them ; she forgot she was nearly twice their age. But something of the true perception of things came to her as she proceeded with her toilette. She looked at their naked shoulders by the side of which her own showed like the drabness of parchment ; how good it felt to look on their fragrant whiteness, and from that she came near to realising that there could be little to feast the eye in this swarthy, shrunken, sapless skin of hers. She wondered if the difference would be as obvious to other observers, and bitterly she regretted having gone counter to Phœbe's counsel in affording so generous a view of her bust and arms. But she was not given time to extend her reflections, for which she was thankful. There were more arrivals, ladies with resplendent hair and uproarious manners, who engrossed her attention. Nor could she complain that her own presence went unnoticed ; on the contrary, she found herself constantly assailed by a battery of stares, the projective force of which seemed curiosity rather than good-will ; and then there was Jane, who introduced her with the unvarying formula : "That's Cinders, the new star ; look out, she's goin' to knock us all." At which some of the newcomers displayed ironic apprehension, and Tabitha smiled foolishly, feeling that she had considerably over-rated the storage capacity of the dressing-room.

"Come on, Cinders ; it's about time to make up," suggested Betsy.

Tabitha declared, with much embarrassment, that she had forgotten to supply herself with the necessary materials ; as a matter of fact, she had not forgotten, but she had lacked the courage to enter a shop and purchase them.

“ You can 'ave mine, if you'll let me put it on for you,” cried half-a-dozen voices ; and a very keen competition ensued as to who should obtain the privilege.

Tabitha felt hugely flattered at the evident desire of all to be of service to her ; eventually Betsy, by some vague right of priority, vindicated her claim to the office.

“ Stand 'ere,” she began ; and Tabitha stood. And then Betsy went at her task with an ardour which had not exhausted itself after ten minutes of operating. Tabitha felt quite touched at the solicitude wherewith the others watched the progress of the work ; but Betsy went on unconscious of everything, adding streak to streak and line to line, till her paint-box showed that it possessed the common defect of all things earthly—finality.

“ There, what d'you think o' that now ? ” she exclaimed, stepping back in a way Raphael probably stepped from his easel when he had just put the finishing stroke to his greatest Madonna. Even then there were some whose quibbling captiousness found fault, and offered Betsy suggestions for improvement, which she discarded with much dignity.

“ Don't listen to 'em, you'll do first-class, Cinders,” she reassured Tabitha.

Tabitha tried to smile her gratitude, only to find that

the thick layers of pigment held her features as in a vice ; so the smile became a grin.

"I'll give you my pet threepenny bit if you put a dab on 'er nose," whispered Jane.

But Betsy's reply to the nefarious offer was forestalled by the hurried entry of the stage-manager, a short and dumpy man, whose flurry made him still shorter and dumpier. He ought to have arrived half-an-hour ago, and felt a little guilty, because his tardiness was not entirely due to his efforts for the furtherance of teetotal interests, and he knew he smelt like it. Hastily he made an inventory of the artistic material at his disposal for the night. Tabitha, without further comment, was set down as an "Extra," which left the precise time of her appearance unspecified.

In the meantime, the handful of little boys in the twopenny seats had expanded into an audience of extravagant proportions. None of them were deaf mutes, and they all insisted on advertising the fact to the world. The result was a study in all the possible cacophonies of which the human voice is capable, and Babel was king. Suddenly a hush cut into the turmoil like a knife.

"Mr Dacre's taken the chair," the dressing-room informed each other. And then there was a frantic craning of necks at the wings.

"Ain't 'e a darling," said somebody.

"Never seen 'im look that 'andsome," said somebody else.

"'E's done 'is 'air a new way to-night."

"No, 'e ain't ; 'e always parts it in the middle-like."

"Wish I 'ad 'is teeth ; don't you ?"

"They say 'e uses belladonna for 'is eyes."

"Well, they're bright enough for anything."

"'Ere goes the hammer for the overture."

There were three taps, and the orchestra opened fire—that is, a piano, two violins, and a triangle gave tongue, and the prelude to "Zampa" had a hard time of it.

Tabitha stood as in a dream. She had let herself get crowded to the back, without making an attempt to resist. There she could give better play to her emotions. She stepped back out of all contact, because she was afraid that any one touching her might feel the peculiar tingle which traversed her from crown to foot. A sense of danger came over her ; she did not dream that the mere knowledge of being under one roof with her "man of ten minutes" would affect her so powerfully. Surely this was something that ought not to be. She had experienced alarms ere this ; she had felt frightened about her future, about Jimmy's future. That, however, was a tangible dread, which died as soon as the pessimist mood, which was its origin and element, came to an end ; it could be killed by a little hard reasoning, aided by a harder setting of the lips. But this was an impalpable fear, irresponsible as instinct itself, and as difficult to be rendered accountable. And then she consoled herself. This quickened heart-beat of hers, this tightening of the breath, was perhaps only due to the uncertainty of her venture ; perhaps she had exaggerated what was, after all, only a little tremor of nervousness, natural under the circumstances, into a whirlwind of panic which threatened the overthrow

of all her self-dominion. She hoped it was that, and nothing more than that; she made up her mind that it was; and, fortified by this resolution, she felt strong enough to yield to the fierce desire which was urging her to look upon him, to give new body to the pining, shadowy recollection by feeding it on the living fact. She approached closer and closer to the wings, until, by much dexterous edging and wedging, she had insinuated herself into a nook of vantage. Yes, there he was; she knew him at a glance, although, owing to his attitude, she had to guess at three-quarters of the face. Presently he turned full on his right-hand neighbour with a smile. Tabitha blinked; something like a shaft of light had impinged on her eyes. She pulled herself together; if she must worship him, she had better do it rationally, and not by way of stupid hallucinations.

So she stood there, pent up and fascinated; she had eye or ear for nothing else. She saw nothing of the troupe of acrobats, who—so the posters said—performed miracles of topsy-turvydom; nothing of the two fictitious Irishmen who, in song, professed to be building a railway from Ballyhooly straight to the Sultan's seraglio. She gave no ear to the golden-haired young woman who pathetically sang "she didn't know why—she couldn't get rid of that wink in her eye." And the gallant young soldier who, somewhere on the edge of space and eternity, was fighting the battles of the empire, died unheeded of her, despite the coloured lights that symbolised his apotheosis. She forgot the purpose for which she was there; she forgot that her absorption was liable to be intruded upon by those around her.

And so she gasped a little gasp of terror when she found somebody was talking to her. It was Ted, the waiter. She was glad he kept his eyes on the ground ; her previous experience of them was not pleasant.

"What's that?" she asked, for she had not heard a word of what he had been saying.

"The 'companist wants to know what songs you're goin' to sing, and if you've got the band parts ; and, if not, they're goin' to vamp to you," he repeated, in a dull mechanical way.

"I ain't got any music, and I'm goin' to sing 'Killarney' to begin with," she replied, hardly knowing in what manner the message concerned her.

He nodded dumbly, and took himself off.

Tabitha returned to her watch, but the spell was broken. She noticed to her surprise that the dressing-room had again become spacious. Most of the artistes had disappeared, among them her friends, the Jingles ; she remembered now having seen them for a few moments in front of the house, each of them attended by a cavalier in a long, fawn-coloured coat, dazzling silk hat, and inverted walking-stick. It suddenly struck her that the evening must be considerably advanced, although, judging from the salvos of applause, the audience was still in very strong muster. She became conscious of a great lassitude in her limbs, an aching heaviness in her eyes ; the thick layers of paint on her face tormented her. Surely the end of the performance must be near. She was right ; the next moment she heard Mr Dacre announce :

“Ladies and gentlemen, the last turn of the evening, Miss Lucinda Ventnor.”

Tabitha caught her breath—how curiously aggressive the name sounded; she felt vaguely there was something incongruous between it and its bearer. She would have liked to stay where she was and argue the thing out with herself, but she caught sight of the stage-manager in the opposite wings beckoning her on impatiently. The pianist was playing the introduction to her song already for the second time. Mechanically she stepped forward, and once she knew she had done the irretrievable, she became indifferent. She would not have cared now if her dress had been cut yet another inch lower; if only the audience would not be so astonishingly still—there was such a huge chasm of silence, and she was expected to fill it up. Then she began. She sang the first line, the second line—ah! now things were mending; her voice no longer monopolised the stillness. A slow buzz came as an undertone to it. It swelled little by little—became a good-sized hum; how glad she was of it! Under its cover her voice gained compass and confidence, but the hum grew in proportion; she found she had to strain her notes if they were to keep themselves above. The race proceeded; the orchestra refused to take part in it, and sat with folded arms, and an extensive grin on its face. So, by the time Tabitha finished the last verse, her lung-power had been taxed to the full, and the audience was unmistakably clamorous. But even then she was not prepared for the outburst which evidently they had reserved for a climax. She supposed it was applause, though it expressed itself

oddly in volleys of laughter and furious whistling; and—yes, that was a piece of orange peel that had whizzed past her ear. No doubt it was only a well-meant reminder that she had stood bowing her acknowledgments long enough, and that it was time to retire. She acted on the reminder with a grateful look in the direction of its origin—one of the little boys who had sacrificed their mince-pies for her—and stood panting at the wings. She was about to step out again, after a becoming interval; but the stage-manager frantically waved her back, and almost immediately the strains of the National Anthem informed her officially that she was not expected to become visible again. It was a disappointment to her; she found it pleasant to hear herself acclaimed—she to whom nobody had ever borne testimony that she took up any space on God's earth.

She now had the dressing-room all to herself, and was thankful for it; she did not want any one to witness the feverish haste wherewith she transferred herself back into walking attire. It would chagrin her to death if she were to lose the golden opportunity, if she had to go her way without taking with her a look and a word from him for company. Quickly she stepped into the auditorium, which by now was quite three-quarters in darkness, but her eye caught him standing right in her path. He was talking to the stage-manager, and had his back to her. She waited a moment, thinking that the sound of her footsteps might make him turn, and then she said :

“Good evening, Mr Dacre !”

He faced round sharply. “Who's that? Ah! good-

evening, Miss Ventnor. At least you've made a start now. Good-night!"

Tabitha stopped irresolutely.

"May I come next Saturday, Mr Dacre?"

"Certainly; next Saturday, and as often as you like."

His answer sounded a little impatient; he was evidently much absorbed in his interlocutor. She lingered for another second or two, hoping he would address himself to her again, and then she turned, and sauntered off very slowly. She had half a hope he would call her back, but she had already got as far as the baize-covered folding-doors, and he had not done so. With a lingering, forlorn look at him, she passed out. Well, it was better than nothing; that sinking of her heart was foolish, unwarranted, and straightway she began to make excuses for his lack of warmth. By the time she had reached the open, she had succeeded in explaining it away. The cool, freshening night air acted with optimistic results; after all, it was only an interval of seven days, and then she would see him again, under luckier auspices, perhaps. What a pity she had that stupid basket in her arms, otherwise he would very possibly have shaken hands with her.

As though in answer to her thoughts some one said at her side:

"If I may make so bold, miss, I'll carry that for you."

She knew to whom this dull, mechanical voice belonged.

"I'm sure it's very good of you," she answered with a sidelong glance at Ted's mis-shapen figure.

She meant what she said ; the aggregate weariness of the past four hours fell upon her like an iron weight, and was crushing her.

Silently Ted took up his load.

“ I’ll be taking you out of your way—I’m going across the water,” said Tabitha.

“ So am I,” he replied ; “ we’ll be jist in time for the last ’bus.”

They walked on a little way with even step. Once or twice Ted had cleared his throat as if preparing to speak ; at last he did.

“ I’m much obliged to you, miss,” he said.

“ Obliged? What on earth for?” was Tabitha’s astonished query.

He did not answer immediately ; when he did it was with an effort.

“ For keepin’ yer clothes on, miss—before, in the dressin’-room, you know, when they said I didn’t count for a man.”

“ It was horrid of them,” said Tabitha, almost under her breath ; she could not say more—she was too much taken aback. This failure of nature, with the dull, dispassionate voice, had a soul which cried out when the iron entered into it.

Ted stepped out more freely—it was as though he had got rid of an encumbrance. Without another word they reached the conveyance.

“ Outside?” asked Ted.

“ Yes, outside.”

All through the long journey nothing further passed between them except a little altercation as to the pay-

ment of fares, in which Ted gained the victory. Once or twice Tabitha felt her companion looking at her sideways; it then struck her that this was an historic occasion, it being the first time since many years that she had a male stranger for escort. Half-way on the journey she commenced debating whether she should tell Phœbe of her to-night's enterprise. She concluded that she would not; she determined to retain the knowledge of it—her sole, separate, inalienable possession. She wanted to possess at least one thing that was her very own.

Despite her remonstrance, Ted accompanied her to the entrance of N. Block.

"Good-night, and thank you very much," she said, as she took back her property.

He seemed to have something on his mind.

"Well?" she asked.

"If I 'appened to be passin' 'ere, may I come in and give you the time o' the day?" he stammered.

"Certainly, but it'll have to be 'good-evening' if you want to find me in; top floor, to the left," she answered readily; then she added as an afterthought, "but you mustn't say where you met me—I told them I went to a party."

She waited for his nod of intelligence, and then briskly mounted the stairs. Cautiously she opened the door. Her entrance woke Phœbe, who had been dozing with her head on the table.

"Had a good time?" she asked Tabitha with a yawn; and then she suddenly took a step closer, and peered into the girl's face.

“What’s the meaning of this, Tabitha?” she gasped, her eyes full of terror.

“Of what?” asked Tabitha aghast. Then, in a flash, she remembered she had not removed the rouge.

“God! Tabitha, what’s this party you’ve been to? Surely you haven’t been——”

The old woman broke off with another gasp. Tabitha’s pallor showed through her paint; her hands went over her eyes for a moment.

“For mercy’s sake, Phœbe, you can’t think that of me?” she asked, drawing herself up almost proudly. And then she told. Yes, fate was very churlish to her; it grudged her even the harmless, inexpensive luxury of a secret, and that a secret of her own making.

And meantime Ted was doing his two hours’ tramp back to his home in one of the by-streets off the “Angel,” Islington.

CHAPTER VII

NEXT day Tabitha, being of a grateful disposition, went to return thanks. This errand took her, not to a place of worship but to a locality known as Terrace Villas, where Maud Marshall had fixed her abode. A dull morning had moped itself into a disconsolate afternoon, intensified by a steadfast drizzle, as became a London midsummer Sunday with a reputation to keep up. But it suited Tabitha's purpose, because it augmented her chances of finding Maud in.

And, indeed, that was the only respect in which the weather might consider itself a success; for, in due course, Tabitha found herself accosted by Maud's: "Is that you, Tabby? Come in."

Tabitha came in, having left her dripping umbrella in the hall-stand out on the landing. Maud got up from the music stool in front of the piano, and proceeded to help her visitor off with her jacket.

"Don't let me disturb you if you're practising," said Tabitha. "Just go as long as you like; I'll listen."

"Not if I know it; those scales will be the death of me. Another ten minutes, and I don't know what would have happened."

"I didn't know you were learning."

"Been at it for three weeks ; you've got to do these things if you want to cut a figure in the world."

She followed Tabitha's glance round the well-furnished apartment, and continued complacently :

"A bit of all right this—as I used to say in the old days, eh, Tabby ? 'Tain't all my own, though ; I share digs with Alice Preston, the mimic, you know. We hit it awfully well."

"I did a turn last night, Maud."

"And you went down grand, I'm told."

"Who told you ? "

"Never mind," said Maud mysteriously, not wishing to go into detail about what was a polite conjecture ; "that's the way ; keep at it, and you'll come off yet."

The prophecy was quite safe on account of its latitude of interpretation.

"If I do, I know who's to get the credit for it," said Tabitha gratefully.

"If you mean me, you're kidding ; how's that brother of yours ? "

"Same as ever, which, of course, ain't saying much," replied Tabitha, a little disappointed at the rapid change of the subject ; "by the way, you're all in black. No mourning, I hope ? "

"Well, sort of second-hand imitation mourning ; my step-father was good enough to fall off some scaffolding a fortnit—I mean a fortnight ago."

Tabitha noticed the correction, and wondered if Maud had a Phœbe of her own, and of what sex this Phœbe was.

"He did it only just in time," went on Maud, unconcernedly. "I heard he'd found out my address."

“Is your mother cut up?”

“Awfully,” laughed Maud; “but it won’t prevent her putting up banns number three next Sunday.”

“Dear me!” was all Tabitha could say. She was rather overwhelmed by the fatal facility for getting married some people seemed to enjoy.

“Plucky sort, eh? Let’s drink the health of the bride and bridegroom. Tea — cocoa — port — what’s yours?”

Tabitha chose tea, as being more within the range of her experiences; and while Maud was confabulating at the door with the landlady, she continued taking stock of her surroundings. How good it must feel to live in a room like this, where the furniture stood disposed at the ordained distances, and did not crop up in unexpected places. It was so different to the huddled jumble of her own home, with its unaccommodated lumber and disabled gimcracks. And then the white curtains and flowers; there was no doubt about it—Maud Marshall had got on! Tabitha felt no envy, but she was sorry to have been provided with a standard of comparison, and rather fearfully she wondered how far its effects would reach; not farther, she hoped, than the other side of Maud’s door.

“Well, and what’s new at the shop?” asked Maud, flinging herself on the sofa.

“Nothing; it seems you are the only bit of news that ever happened there,” smiled Tabitha.

“If I’m still the record, then you must be lively.”

“Lively isn’t the question; the thing’s to make a living.”

“And you think you’ve done that when you get your wages every Saturday afternoon, don’t you?” asked Maud.

“Yes, all of us that don’t happen to possess a private income,” said Tabitha, not catching the drift of Maud’s question.

“I’ve thought of it many a time,” went on the latter; “that shop is a thief. It stole two good years out of my life. I’ll have to live hard to make up for them.”

“Two years! God! what about my seventeen?” Tabitha was about to say; but she checked herself. Maud might holloa—Maud was out of the wood; but she herself?

“Two whole years,” resumed Maud, “because I’m counting the nights as well. I worked more at night than in the day, and I couldn’t even mark it down in the pay-book. I can tell you, Tabitha, it was hard work breaking myself in. I nearly did—another year or so, and I should have been quiet as any dray-horse. Brunner & Fleet thought that warehouse of theirs was standing on level ground; it wasn’t. I was carrying it on my chest all the time.”

“Then it’s a wonder you didn’t upset us,” laughed Tabitha. She felt that the occasion must be taken humorously, otherwise it might prove the handle to reflections of hers, which she instinctively knew would not be advantageous to her equanimity.

Maud joined in the laugh. “I can’t help it, Tabby!” she said half-apologetically, “only to think of it makes me feel the colour of Reckitt’s. Never mind, here’s tea!”

Over the tea and its accessories Maud became fluent, and gave Tabitha an account of her doings for the last few weeks. She related her nightly triumphs, read out her press notices, mentioned her new acquaintances, while Tabitha listened, and more than once had to be reminded that her tea was getting cold. Maud's tone was not irritatingly triumphant, nay, it had a cold vindictiveness about it, as though she still bore a grudge against the adverse fortune which would have dragged her under, and which she would not forgive even in its defeat. And therefore the change in her voice was more noticeable, as she came to her peroration.

"And all this I should have missed if it hadn't been for one man!"

"Mr Dacre?" suggested Tabitha quickly.

"Of course, you know him," said Maud softly; "what do you think of him?"

Temptation stepped very close to Tabitha, and prodded her to give herself vent. But the knowledge that, having once begun, she would not stop till she had nothing more to hide, made her cautious.

"Oh, he's all right, I believe," she said, and then she grew alarmed at her powers of self-restraint.

Maud shook her head smilingly. "You don't give him very good measure, Tabby; but then you can't know him as I do. It's queer, I almost hated him at first, because there was something in his face that made you like him before you knew whether he deserved it or not."

"And does he deserve it?" asked Tabitha dully.

"Does he? I may have been unlucky, but he's the

first man I've known for more than a month who hasn't talked to me like a cad. And he's like that to everybody. Indeed"—Maud gave a short laugh—"I've heard of one or two ladies who grumble because he always treats them—well, like ladies."

Tabitha sat with clenched hands. "Yes, I suppose he's what people call fascinating," she said at last.

"You don't seem to have any opinion about it yourself—why, Tabby, what are you made of?"

Tabitha ignored the question; she was framing one of her own, a question prompted by a mysterious impulse, and yet almost fatuous in its absolute irrelevancy. She knew it, for she smiled foolishly as she asked it:

"I say, have you ever kissed a man, Maudie?"

"What do you mean?"

"Have you?" insisted Tabitha, despite the other's look of astonishment.

"Well, there was a time—not lately, when I thought that lips weren't only made for whistling," laughed Maud.

"And what does it feel like?"

"Why, Tabby, you're getting rude; what are you driving at? Perhaps you mean to say you've never tried yourself."

"Never!"

"Then I'm sure I can't tell you. I heard somebody say that, if you get hold of the right man, it takes you to Kingdom Come without first going by way of Kensal Green."

Tabitha nodded. Yes, the right man—no doubt,

everything depended on that. Then she had another question, but she asked it in fear and trembling :

“And suppose you know your Mr ‘Right’? Does that mean that you get hold of him?”

“I declare, Tabby, you make me laugh. Of course, it doesn’t. The chance is one against every other girl with eyes in her head, and that’s without counting what he himself has got to say in the matter.”

“I thought so myself,” concurred Tabitha vaguely.

“Then why did you ask? There’s something strange about you to-day. Come, Tabby, out with it.”

“Nothing. I feel a bit stupid, that’s all. You don’t mind, Maudie, do you?”

“Don’t apologise ; I used to feel like that myself in the old days. It’s the indigestion, and too much workshop.”

Tabitha was wrinkling her brows in thought. There was something else she had to ask.

“Oh, does he ever stop to talk to you when you meet?”

“Stop to talk? Who?”

“Mr Dacre.”

A smile broke over Maud’s face, and then, gradually as it had come, disappeared.

“It’s funny you should ask, Tabby ; but I don’t mind telling you . . . hullo, here’s Alice!”

Tabitha did not feel kindly towards the tall young woman who just then entered boisterously and with much rustling of skirts.

“Tea going? There’s a Christian,” said the tall young woman genially ; “I said to myself coming along : ‘Alice, you’ll take it out of the weather in tea’ What do you think of it?”

"An old friend of mine," remarked Maud.

"How do?" And Alice nodded off-hand to Tabitha, adding to herself: "Old is right."

"Where have you been?" asked Maud, as she replenished the teapot from the reservoir jug.

"All round the profession. Perfect bears'-dens everywhere; never heard such growling and grumbling in my life. The rain's washed all the appointments off the slate. May Glynn swears she's going to have the Greenwich Observatory up for damages."

Maud laughed and Alice laughed, and Tabitha felt in duty bound to swell the chorus, but she could get no further than a half-hearted snigger. After that Alice took the conversation in her two hands and made it spin along at breakneck pace, despite obstacles in the shape of sundry cups of tea, a plateful of bread and butter, in addition to half a box of cracknels. Her talk must have been very amusing, at least Maud evidently thought so, to judge by the generous meed of laughter wherewith she rewarded it. To Tabitha it seemed absurdly dull. At first she found some entertainment in watching Alice's powers of mastication; it made her wonder if, by careful observation, she might not discover the secret which enabled people to eat and laugh so heartily. Her own mouth ached with its artificial attempts to simulate merriment; the higher the spirits of the other two rose, the more leaden-weighted her heart seemed to become. Several times she had made a movement to get up, but had refrained, because she felt it would remind them they had had a skeleton at the feast. At last she had no choice; if she did not

go at once she feared she might faint—she was in positive agony.

“Off?” asked Maud, making no effort to detain her.

“Jimmy’s all alone,” replied Tabitha, frantically getting into her jacket. She felt Alice’s eyes upon her, and winced as she might under a surgeon’s scalpel.

“You’ll come again?” said Maud.

Tabitha mumbled an affirmative, and then with only half-intelligible adieus she almost flung out of the room. She did not mind that Maud did not see her out at the street door; when she got there it appeared to her she had already walked miles. Maud—Alice—the latter’s poignant hilarity—the novel atmosphere of the chamber where she had spent the last three hours—it all lay at a measureless distance behind her. Her thoughts were entirely with herself.

As she stepped outside, the rain met her full in the face; she ignored it, until an extra effort on its part reminded her that she was provided with an umbrella. Leisurely she walked down the length of Terrace Villas; at the bottom was a railway station. Just as she reached it, she saw a man issuing. Tabitha’s heart gave a great jump, then stood stockstill, and finally took to leaping furiously as though to make up for the moment it had lost. She had recognised him, despite that the collar of his mackintosh reached over his ears and his wide-awake slouched well down over his forehead. He was striding on rapidly, looking neither left nor right. For an instant Tabitha halted, desperately trying to take counsel with herself; and then perceiving the futility of the effort she did the first thing that came

into her head. She turned back and followed him. But she had only taken a step or two, when the truth flashed on her; she knew where he was going. Yes, there he stopped at the house she had left only a minute ago, and stood shaking himself vigorously.

A wild desire seized her to rush up and accost him, but before she had traversed half the distance, the door had opened and swallowed him up. What was she to do? Make her way back to Maud's room on some pretext? What pretext? In spite of her insensate impulse, she saw the folly—the impossibility of it. She would only succeed in making herself ridiculous before him; and what would Alice's eyes have to say on her reappearance? This last decided her. She would not go in.

But something she must do; she could not go back to her attic with her nerves upheaved from their very foundations, and sit through the long evening with this quivering restlessness upon her. She looked round. On the other side of the road, almost facing the house, was a fruiterer's shop, closed like all the other shops in the street. She stepped across and ensconced herself in the porch of the doorway, hardly conscious of her own purpose in taking up sentry duty here. But it filled her with a vague satisfaction to know that she was within a stone's-throw of him, that it required merely an exercise of will-power to give herself the luxury of his immediate presence.

The rain came down in fitful gusts, plunging and pawing the pavement like a restive horse, churning up the puddles in the roadway and shivering to fragments the long lines of light—the after-gleam of the newly-lit

street-lamps. They served to remind Tabitha that darkness had set in, and presently, from out of the gloom opposite, two windows flashed into brightness like blind eyes suddenly restored to sight. She caught a glimpse of Alice drawing the curtains at one of them. At the other—Tabitha's heart started a gallop—at the other she saw Mr Dacre helping Maud to perform the same office. Only a moment, and everything had disappeared again, everything except the soft-coloured glow filtering out into the street through the drapery, and giving token of the light and comfort within. An uncontrollable rage came over Tabitha. What did they mean by it, these people on the other side of the window? How did they dare to usurp all the gladness of the world and leave her nothing but its cold, its gloom, its soul-devouring pain? Why should it be given them to bid defiance to its terrors, to be safe against them by the mere drawing of a curtain? And then again her anger resolved itself into a fever of jealous apprehension. What—who was the object of his visit? What had led him there—Maud or the other one? The thought of the alternatives pleased her with a savage pleasure; at least there were two of them. If she had known him to be alone with either, alone up there in the cosy rooms, with those curtains for trusty guardians against the ambushes of the world—yes, what would she have done?

For answer she choked back an upstruggling sob. What was the use of all this anger, this jealousy, this joy of malice? They availed as much against her fate as these raindrops against the gale. And now she was again Tabitha, the long-suffering workshop drudge, who

stitched her way through life, making no sound, leaving no track, whose heart was hungering for but a few scraps of happiness. And that was why she was here, because the man behind the curtain yonder had them in his keeping ; she was waylaying him, to snatch them from him if her good-fortune so willed it. And surely what was worth having was worth suffering and waiting for !

The damp soaked through her boots, stiffened her knees, and stealthily crept upwards till it had her well in hand, and shook her like an aspen. She was getting to feel faint and dizzy ; last night's excitement had all day overruled her appetite, which now was claiming its own. Regretfully she thought of Maud's cracknels.

A burly policeman strolled by and looked hard at her.

"Wet night, miss," he said affably, having convinced himself of her innocuousness.

Tabitha forced an affirmative to her lips.

"Naughty man, to keep you waitin' like this, eh?"

This time he got no answer at all, and then he passed on, chuckling at his powers of inference which one day would doubtless make him an inspector.

The silence which followed his departure was soon again disturbed by the clatter of a brake, containing an excursion party, which had started that morning, under tolerable atmospherical auspices, and with an optimism which deserved a happier consummation. Beneath the shelter of a tarpaulin ceiling, they were now making the best of the homeward journey by means of raucous melody bawled to the accompaniment of coloured lights. One of these flashed up just abreast of Tabitha, drawing

to her general attention, and evoking solicitous enquiries as to the state of her "poor feet." Tabitha shrank back, with tightly closed eyes, nor did she open them again till the din and the glare were safely past, and then she found that in the interval the opposite corner of her refuge had also taken to itself an occupant—a half-clad, straggle-haired wretch, whose teeth she could hear chattering like castanets.

With a little scream of terror she started forth, hurrying down the street, and not stopping till she had got well back into the thick of the traffic. But she knew it was not physical fear which had hustled her away; it was the sudden rush of self-contempt at the mean game she was playing, the abject childish vacuousness of her espionage, of listening at keyholes where all she could hear was the remonstrance of her uprearing pride. So much she knew, and, beyond, her mind was a void; she had puzzled it empty. Her one desire was now to get home unobserved, unimpeded, to pull the bed-clothes over her head and forget herself, forget the aching, wounded thing she was.

She redoubled her speed, taking the shortest cuts, and keeping close to the wall, in case she might need its support. So it came that at the top of the street leading to Montague Dwellings she nearly stumbled over a nondescript bundle of humanity protruding half-length from one of the doorways. The figure stirred, moaned, and then it laughed. With a sudden thought Tabitha stooped, regardless of what might accrue to her best Sunday skirt.

"Phoebe!" she breathed in horror.

There was more moaning and laughing, and Tabitha shook her savagely by the shoulder.

“For God’s sake, Phœbe, get up!”

Phœbe struggled into a sitting position, quite dazed.

“Don’t strike me, Rupert—don’t!” came from her in a whimper.

With a great effort Tabitha got her on to her feet.

“All right, policeman, I can walk it this time—no stretcher, thank you,” said Phœbe, lurching heavily against her escort.

Step by step Tabitha led her forward. Half-way down the street was the public-house which had reduced Phœbe to her present condition of “drunk and incapable.” The sight of it seemed to awaken in her instincts of gaiety. She gathered up her skirt, and changed her stagger to a dance of her own improvising.

A man coming along guffawed and shouted: “Steady there, old hoss!”

The shout frightened Phœbe, and, before Tabitha could catch her, she was sprawling on the pavement. After that, Tabitha, with a deftness born of past experience, gripped her round the waist, and, with her burden, took the staircase to her attic in several instalments.

After all she got no bed-clothes that night wherewith to wrap herself in oblivion. Under them Phœbe lay sleeping her way back to sanity, whilst Tabitha, stretched across the foot of Jimmy’s couch, pondered on the laws which determine the reciprocity of love, as well as the bearing of window curtains on life in general.

CHAPTER VIII

“**T**OWZER, my boy, never get yer back broke, 'tain't good for yer 'ealth.” Thus Jimmy apostrophised his canine henchman.

Towzer heard him, his pointed nose on the alert, and his left ear wagging intelligently.

“If you do,” continued Jimmy, “you'll 'ave to lay low mostly, doin' nothing, with yer ribs sort of held together with a leather 'rangement, so that sometimes you can't get at yerself when there's scratchin' to be done. Or, more likely, not bein' a human boy, but only a animal dog, they'll chop you up completely, and serve 'ot with mashed taters, as they say in Beeton's. Don't like it—eh, do you? Well, don't think about it; they won't do nothing of the kind, not if Jimmy knows it! Here, that's enough slobberin'; I use soap and water for my toylette. But there's no denyin' of it—there's more use in you as a live pal than as a stuffed sheep gut. What I'd do without you for to talk to at times—well, 'ere goes! Been a fine day, eh, Mr Towzer? You're lookin' a bit off colour; the heat, you say? Very likely—feel none too bright myself. Ho, ha! yes—beastly fag these dinners and theaytres! Deuced glad the season's over, ain't you, Lord Towzer? What's that you're sayin'?”

Goin' to the Riverera this winter? Thought you'd made up yer mind to shoot grouse up in Scotland, or fish salmon down in Norrerwey—which was it? Pers'nally I've detarmined—now, Towzer, you jist stow that drivellin' rot! Why don't you talk about things you know of? How's cat's meat? Scarce? I s'pose so. That man with the basket is a bigger thief nor Jack Sheppard. Never mind; one day you take a bite out of 'is leg and call it quits, that's it. Muzzles was never meant for you; you don't know what it is to put yer noble snout in harness. And then there's that little matter o' yer license. Have you ever considered that, legally, you ain't no dog at all, because you ain't in the p'lice register? Now, what would 'appen if they found out it's four years since you left off bein' a six-months old? I shouldn't like to say; lucky no bobbies ever go to 'eaven, so 't ain't likely they'll pass by 'ere and spot you. Eh, what's that you're mumblin'? I ought to be 'shamed o' myself, frightenin' a poor orphan dog what ain't never 'ad no father and mother, and what besides 'ad 'is tail jammed off in the door by a wicked brother o' mine? Right you are, doggy—we'll change the subjeck. S'pose we do a bit o' drawin'. Get off my chest, farther back. That's it—a lovely hattitude that! Now we'll make a pictcher o' you while the light's holdin' out, and call it, 'The Evil Jennyus and the Sunset.' Whoa, keep still there!"

So saying, Jimmy reached out for a copy-book on the chair next to him, extracted a pencil from somewhere unknown, and commenced sketching. From the preceding pages of the copy-book which were already

adorned with more or less recognisable designs, such as presentments of Towzer, of fancy landscapes and portraits, it was evident that this was not his maiden effort.

Steadily he sketched away in the waning light, while Towzer looked on with an expression in which reproach was skilfully mingled with curiosity.

“Eh? What’s that? Did you say anything, Towzer?” remarked Jimmy, stopping suddenly; “could have sworn I heard a noise. Funny ’ow sometimes the silence talks to you.”

He kept on listening, and after a minute or so the noise came more distinctly, resolving itself into a tap at the door. Jimmy reflected; who could it be? Not Phœbe—she never showed her face for a week after one of her periodical digressions from sobriety, and to-day was only Wednesday. It could not be Mrs Brown, who, for a consideration, of course, ministered to his wants in the absence of Phœbe and Tabitha. It could not be Tabitha yet, and certainly it was not brother Joshua, because—well, because he wouldn’t knock. Then it struck him that the simplest way of solving his doubts would be to say: “Come in,” and await the consequences.

The consequences turned out to be a rather big head on a pair of ill-balanced shoulders, which edged their way through the door with timid awkwardness.

“What d’you want?” asked Jimmy, a little startled, but keeping a strong hold on the rampant Towzer.

“Is there a young lady what ’er name is Miss Jupp livin’ ’ere?” said the apparition.

"She is, and she's a sister o' mine ; well?"

"Well, she said as I might call in 'ere one evenin'."

"Oh, did she? And who may you be when you are at home?"

"I'm Ted 'Ickory."

"Any connection o' the stuff what they makes coffee out of?" asked Jimmy.

Ted did not quite know how to take the question, till by the last faint streak of daylight he saw the twinkle in the questioner's eyes, and became reassured. He laughed in reply.

Jimmy listened attentively.

"Straight from the chest," he commented at length.

"What is?"

"That snigger o' yourn ; and by token of it you're not a bad sort. Come in all the way."

Ted obeyed. "You've turned in early to-night, ain't you?" he said.

"It's a bad habit I've got ; I'll tell you about it bimeby. You ain't too proud to light a paraffin lamp, are you?"

"I'll light a farthin' rush if you wants me to. Where is it? Oh, all right ; 'ere's matches."

He struck one, and beheld the object of his search. A moment more and the lamp was doing its duty.

"Hello!" cried Jimmy.

"What's up?" asked Ted.

"I thought there was something wrong with you," continued Jimmy ; "appears you wasn't made to measure."

Ted started back and hung his head.

"'Tain't my fault," he said sullenly.

"Who said it was? Don't s'pose you wanted one o' yer shoulders to stop growin' before the other."

"Good-night!" said Ted, his hand on the door.

"Whoa there, old coffee-grounds!"

"Oh, beg pardon; I didn't know you wasn't quite finished with me yet," said Ted, his lip quivering.

"Not by a long chalk; come back and sit down 'ere."

Silently Ted did as he was told.

"I wish for to remark," resumed Jimmy, "as I'd 'ardly 'ave taken the liberty o' mentionin' the matter o' yer shoulders if it wasn't the pot callin' the kettle black."

"Eh?" said Ted.

"That's it. I'm myself considerably damaged; I've got even shoulders and straight legs, only the road between 'em is up for repairs."

"Spine?" asked Ted, with much solicitude.

"Right first go. Ain't you glad?"

"Glad? What of?"

"That you've come acrost a feller what's worser off nor you?"

"Yes, 'old me somebody or I'll do a 'ornpipe for joy. Poor chap!"

"'Poor's' right, but 'chap' ain't. I ain't a chap, I'm a jelly-fish. I say, will you kindly stop me callin' myself names?"

Ted laughed in spite of the solemnity of his mood, and then he said: "Well, I never!"

Meantime Jimmy had had time to review the situation, and to become curious to what conjuncture of circumstances he was indebted for conversing thus familiarly with a man of whose existence he had not been aware fifteen

minutes ago, and so, harking back to the origin of things, he asked: "By the way, 'ow was it you fell in with my sister Tabitha?"

Ted remembered, as he had made up his mind to remember, that this was just the question he was under an injunction not to answer; but Jimmy helped him out of a possible difficulty by immediately continuing:

"Oh, I know—it was at that there party she went to last Saturday night."

"So she told you about me, did she?" asked Ted eagerly.

"Not a mortal syllable. I'm only guessin'. Seems she enjoyed herself tremendous; she says she's goin' to one every week now. I'm jolly glad, perhaps she'll pick up a 'usband somewhere."

"Yes," concurred Ted, and was about to add something, but checked himself.

"D'you know," went on Jimmy, sinking his voice to the confidential pitch, "I think Tabitha must be gettin' awf'ly old. She's been grown-up ever since I've known 'er."

"That's nothing," said Ted, attempting to reassure him.

"Because all the gals what gets married in books are young and 'andsome; she's not very 'andsome, is she?"

And he waited anxiously for the other's verdict.

It came.

"Not what you might call very; but, then, when a gal's pretty, it's jist a haccident. A man don't want to go and marry a haccident. What do you say?"

"Well, 'e doesn't,—not in the way you put it," admitted Jimmy, feeling in vain for the fallacy.

"Now, there's a cousin o' mine," Ted took up the parable, "'e married a young woman what looked like a pictcher, and what d'you think 'appened?"

"She ran off with the lodger," hazarded Jimmy, as the most obvious fatality.

"She didn't, worse luck for the cousin! She stopped and brought two of 'er sisters, an aunt what was a widder, and 'er grandmothers on both sides, to live with 'im."

Jimmy expressed his sympathy with the cousin, and was not surprised to be told that it was posthumous.

"Then you seem to think there *is* a chance for Tabby?" said Jimmy.

"Chance? Lawks, I'll lay you odds!"

"Thank Gawd she'll 'ave a man to work for 'er. I know what I'll do; I'm goin' on the parish."

"You won't!" said Ted, almost threateningly.

"How do you know?"

"Well, 'e wouldn't be that mean, I shouldn't think," said Ted, getting back under cover.

"You seem to know a lot about it."

"She's late, ain't she? It was gone eight when I come," said Ted, skirting the subject strangely.

"I expect she's workin' overtime. Are you in a hurry?"

"Not a bit; ain't got no use at all for myself to-night, nor 'as nobody else neither," he continued in an undertone.

But Jimmy had heard. "If you like, I'll take over all.

yer spare time by contrac’,” he proposed, with something like a shake in his voice.

“Do you mean it?” asked Ted, looking at him steadily.

“Would you like me to spell it out for you?”

Ted remained silent for a while; then he said: “If you’ll tell me yer first name, I’ll tell you something else.”

“I’m Jim.”

“Well, Jim, you’re the first creature, counting man, woman, and child, what’s asked me for my comp’ny when they could ’ave ’ad my room. D’you still think it worth ’avin’?”

“And now, Ted Chickory, I’ll tell you another thing. You’re not talkin’ English, you’re talkin’ a lingo called tommyrot; and if you don’t stop it I’ll set Towzer on you. Are we goin’ to be pals, or ain’t we?”

“I ’ope so, I does,” replied Ted quickly.

“Then, I’ll tell you what I want you to do: I want you to get a conceit o’ yourself what’s bigger nor the Tower o’ London. You’ll ’ave to think that every bloke you meet is wishful to stand you a drink, and every woman is dyin’ to kiss you. Hold yer head up, and no snivellin’.”

Ted smiled sadly. “Give us something easier, Jim. I’ve tried.”

“Tried what?”

“To forget myself, and fancy as I was somebody else. And then a feller comes along the street and gives me a look, and what little there is o’ me shrivels up to nothing. Many a time I’ve said to myself: ‘Ted, you waste-

ful dog, what's the good o' people spendin' millions o' money to run a canal right under your bedroom winder for you to make use of?' And then I grumbles the world don't show me no kindness."

"I never knew kindness was a thing one gets drowned in," said Jimmy.

"I was speakin' sarkeptic like," said Ted.

"Oh, for that sort o' thing it was very good; but if you meant it for sense, you'd better 'ave another shot." Jimmy paused, and then suddenly came out with: "I say, what's the world done to you in the way of unkindness?"

"Eh?" asked Ted, somewhat taken aback.

Jimmy continued looking his question.

"It's made me feel cruel miserable!" then answered Ted.

"All right; it hasn't taken you on its knee, and patted you on the head, and called you 'Teddy, dear.' And what have you done towards makin' yerself 'appy?"

Ted was nonplussed at this view of things.

"What could I do?" he asked hopelessly.

"We'll find out. How d'you spend Sundays?"

"When it's wet I sits lookin' at the canal."

"And when it's fine?"

Ted scratched his head. "Now that I come to think on it, I mostly does the same."

Jimmy gave a snort of disgust. "And that's with two legs to your body," he growled.

"What's the use o' legs?"

"To walk yerself out with, you josser! Lawks, Ted,

if I only could make use o' mine! You go to a place where you've got the world all to yerself, with plenty o' comp'ny thrown in."

"What comp'ny?" queried Ted.

"Ever tried to make friends with birds and trees and flowers and sich like things?" continued Jimmy. "You'd be surprised to find what good pals they can be to a chap—better nor men and women. No gyver about 'em, I can tell you; they'll talk to you kindly whether you're a dook or a dustman, and make you welcome and ask you to call agin as soon as you like."

"Talk to you!" echoed Ted, to whom all this was incomprehensible; "what languidge?"

Jimmy gave him a quick glance to make sure that the question was not prompted by flippancy before he answered with something solemn in his voice: "Ted, I looks at it this way. Children mostly talks the languidge o' their parents; and trees and flowers 'avin' no father and mother, but only Gawd, they speaks Gawd's languidge, I s'pose."

"That sounds like po'try, Jim; are you a pote?" asked Ted, awestruck.

"Sometimes I fancy I'm something o' the sort; I gets sich odd ideas into my noddle, but I don't care about makin' 'em into po'try."

"What then?"

"Pictchers. Look 'ere!" He reached out for his sketch-book, and opened it for the visitor's inspection.

Silently Ted turned the pages. When he had come to the last he remarked with deep conviction: "Well, you *are* clever!"

"Think so?" asked Jimmy anxiously.

"Take my 'davy on it. Anybody learn you?"

"Jist a little before this back affair o' mine 'appened. I started goin' to evenin' classes, but I only 'ad time to find out what pencils was made for when I got shunted off the line."

"Poor chap!"

"That's the second time you've done it. Damn yer 'poor chap!'" said Jimmy, with affected vehemence. "Ted, you're an ungrateful cuss, that's what you are! Do I 'poor chap' you? Didn't I tell you to make the best o' things? At least you might do the same by me."

"Don't take on so, Jimmy," said Ted penitently, "I didn't mean it."

"Then, why d'you say it?"

"That is, I did mean it, but not the way you think."

"Which way, then?"

"Well, I don't mean it in the way you wouldn't want me to mean it," said Ted, floundering on in his confusion; "and I'm very sorry you thought I meant what I meant when I didn't——"

A burst of ringing laughter interrupted him.

"Snakes alive, Ted! stop it, or you'll tie yerself in a knot," hiccoughed Jimmy. "Lucky you wasn't born a hoss, or you'd starve with a bucket o' chaff at yer nose tip!"

"I owns up, Jim, I ain't good at catchin' a joke; and that's another grudge I've got aginst my luck."

"How's that?"

"Because, then, I'd see the ridicklous thing I am, and p'r'aps kill myself with laughin'."

"Ted, you're a desp'rit charickter, and I'll inform the p'lice, see if I don't—hello! 'ere's Tabitha for a wager!"

"Eh?" said Ted facing round hurriedly.

"Who's that you've got with you?" asked Tabitha, stopping in the doorway with hand-shaded eyes.

"Only me," answered Ted, gazing at her intently.

But the sound of his voice produced no change of expression in her face, and her tone was very matter-of-fact as she replied: "Oh, it's you, is it? Been here long?"

"About 'alf hour," stammered Ted, blushing like a schoolboy caught in some trespass; "'ope, miss, as you don't mind my makin' so free——"

"Oh, there's no harm done!" broke in Tabitha indifferently, and, without taking further notice of him, she divested herself of her hat and jacket.

Ted remained standing fidgetting with hands and feet. His embarrassment was painful, and Jimmy, as he watched it, felt a strange idea taking shape in his mind. It afforded him a clue to the motive of Ted's visit, and gave him a shock which sent his conversation off at a tangent.

"What made you late, Tabby?" he asked.

"Nothing in particular; I was looking at the shops," she replied, busying herself with a saucepan; "did you feel anxious?"

"Didn't 'ave time to; me and Ted 'ere was talkin thirteen to the dozen, wasn't we, Ted?"

Ted corroborated him with a scarcely audible "Yes."

"What were you talking about?" asked Tabitha.

Ted gave Jimmy an anxious look; on the whole he

preferred she shouldn't know. But Jimmy had mother-tact of his own; he guessed that a man has less compunction in abasing himself before a score of his own sex than before one woman.

"Nothing much," he replied; "we was jist gettin' to know all about each other, because we've made up our minds to be pals, me and Ted."

"Oh, have you?" said Tabitha, with a little more warmth in her voice.

"Provided, miss, as you don't 'ave no objection," qualified Ted.

"Dear me, why should I? I hope you'll get on well together," said Tabitha still more cordially. This view of utilising her new acquaintance to help her crippled brother drag his load of heavy hours recommended itself to her readily. It gladdened her the more as she saw in it one benefit, one she had never counted upon, derived directly from her undertaking. She took it for a happy augury of what it would end in for herself; and so she was doubly pleased that she had kept it a secret from Jimmy, in order to delight him more effectually with the eventual revelation of her success.

"Yes, I hope you'll get on well together," she repeated, as though it were an after-thought.

"Leave that to us, and don't worry, Tabby, girl," said Jimmy cheerily; "we don't want no female interferin' in this 'ere job, eh, Ted?"

"Oh, I dunno! Ladies is always welcome."

Ted stopped, considerably astonished at his own boldness; this was practically the first time in his life he had attempted a compliment to a woman. But

Tabitha's change of manner had had its effect, and moreover he desired to test the value of Jimmy's remarks on the art of holding one's head high. Perhaps it would work better than going about tail between legs.

Tabitha smiled. "Good hard knock for you that, Jimmy; what do you say?"

"I say I won't talk another word to you till you've gobbled yer supper."

"I ain't in the way, am I?" asked Ted anxiously.

"If you are, I'll walk round you," was her good-humoured reply; "sorry I can't ask you to join, but you can watch, if that's any fun to you."

"Couldn't touch a morsel," declared Ted with emphasis.

"Because I asked you to watch me?" Her attempt at archness was a failure, because Ted took it seriously, and vehemently disclaimed the insinuation in quite voluble terms. He scarcely knew himself; here he was talking to a real live woman, and did not feel a violent desire to hide himself in the nearest mouse-hole. Perhaps the transformation which, as he had told Jimmy before, was to him a desperate imagining, had actually taken place, and the days of his humiliation were over.

Tabitha, too, looked at him curiously. This was not the tongue-tied personification of misery of last Saturday, which it was sheer heartache merely to gaze upon. What had effected the change she neither knew nor cared to know; least of all did she connect it with herself. And, meanwhile, Ted took his share in the conversation as though he knew that the life of his hallucination hung

upon the continuous thread of his utterance. Once only the look of agony came back to his face, and that was when the turn of the conversation brought Jimmy to ask, in a moment of thoughtlessness, whether he had ever wished to enlist as a soldier. But Tabitha turned the question skilfully by saying: "Because that's one of the things Jim would like to be if he was well enough," she explained.

"I've got the pluck, if I ain't got the inches," remarked Ted under his breath.

"Well said, Ted," exclaimed Tabitha, and Ted thought that her praise more than compensated him for the stab inflicted on him by his self-consciousness.

"Come over 'ere and give us a song," proposed Jim presently; "there's an old concertina under that dresser. Can you play, Ted?"

It appeared Ted could play the instrument; not only that, but he was also the possessor of a tolerable voice, and a repertoire which included all the laureate songs of the music-halls for the past ten years. Nor was he chary in the dispensing of his riches. Jimmy fairly revelled in the delight of listening, while Tabitha evinced her satisfaction more actively by tapping time with her foot, and occasionally breaking out into a *pianissimo* under-current of melody. Even the ironical interjections, which from time to time winged their way up from the quadrangle below, had no power to rob the proceedings of their enthusiasm; and Ted felt his heart swell to bursting size to find himself for once the hero of an occasion.

But with the best intentions Tabitha's endurance

could not keep pace with his zeal. She yawned unceremoniously at the most pathetic passage in a ballad relating the demise of a prodigal daughter on the snow-covered threshold of her flint-hearted parent. Ted was wise enough to take the hint, and rose to depart.

"I 'ope, Miss Tabitha, I ain't outstayed my welcome," he said, twirling his cap irresolutely.

"If you had, I shouldn't ask you to come again; be careful how you go down," replied Tabitha, opening the door for him.

"See you next Saturday?" asked Ted of her softly.

"If I'm alive—good-night!"

"Good-night, Jim!"

"'Night, Ted—don't forget me."

"Not likely." Then the door closed behind him precipitately, a little unnecessarily so, perhaps.

Before, however, the garret household finally sought repose, Jimmy felt a strong craving to satisfy himself on a certain point—to wit, the strange idea of before, which had come to him in connection with his new friend.

"Decent chap, that Ted, eh?" he said, seemingly off-hand.

"Decent enough," replied Tabitha with a yawn. "A bit of a bore, though, when you come to think of it."

"H'm! not very promisin', that," muttered Jimmy, turning over on his side.

But Ted, as he rattled eastward on the last Shore-ditch 'bus, was troubled by no misgivings. He had at last discovered that the proper function of the canal was to convey barges, and not his dead body.

CHAPTER IX

RELATIONS between Tabitha's brother Josh and his inamorata, the redoubtable Nancy, had not changed materially since their inception. It was still a very one-sided affair ; Nancy kept him in tow, because in her part of the world convention required every self-respecting young woman to be chaperoned by a cavalier. But whilst making so much concession to appearances, she did not show herself very grateful for the conscientious manner in which Josh fulfilled the duties of his office. For, sad to relate, her foolish heart still dangled after the unworthy Bill Pretty, who, in turn, kept fast in the meshes of his russet-haired Peg.

In consequence, Josh was not very sure of receiving a cordial welcome, except when there was a silver lining to his pockets ; and as this was but an event of spasmodic occurrence, his peace of mind was only guaranteed at proportionate intervals. To-night, however, he walked down with a swinging gait to West's Folly, as some unknown moralist had christened the court where Nancy had taken up her domicile. Several times he tried to moderate his pace, in order to eke out to the very longest the certain prospect of a kindly reception ; but then again the good news he had to impart, together

with the uncontrollable promptings of his love, lent him wings with which to scorn the ground. He had that day, acting on information received, backed a twenty to one chance in horse-flesh, and the bookmaker had been so fatuously honest as to pay his claim in full.

He found Nancy at the corner of the court in the regulation attitude of her kind, with back planted against the wall, and hands modestly seeking the cover of her apron. The sight of Josh produced in her no violent demonstration of delight. To punish her indifference, Josh determined to conceal, for the time being, all evidence of his good fortune. He put on a hang-dog look, and slouched up skulkingly.

“Waitin’ for me?” he asked.

“Not pertickler,” Nancy replied unmoved.

“Somebody else, I s’pose?”

“You’ve got it.”

“A bloke?”

“Got it agin.”

Joshua’s face fell; he did not intend his jest to contain any truth. Then his bile rose.

“Look ’ere, Nance—anybody foolin’ round ’ere ’ad better bring his funeral along of ’im.”

To his relief Nancy broke into a laugh.

“S’ ’elp me taters, if ’e ain’t jealous o’ my own father!”

Josh pricked up his ears. He knew Nancy’s surviving parent had been spending the last five years in enforced retirement; but beyond that he had for reasons politic refrained from enquiring further into the subject.

“Comin’ ’ome to-day, is ’e?” he asked cautiously.

"Yes, they sent 'im from Portland to Wormwood Scrubbs a month ago accordin' to them new reggelations. There's 'alf a dozen of 'em gone to fetch 'im."

"Why didn't you go?"

"They wouldn't take me—said a female was in the way at them sort of occasions."

His curiosity overcame Josh.

"What was 'e in for?"

"For killin' flies."

"No 'ank, Nance—breakin' the peace?"

But his delicacy in suggesting the most venial of criminal offences was not appreciated.

"Breakin' the peace, hindeed! When a Bunker gets into quod, my boy, it's for something worth while. Burglary with vi'lence was 'is ticket."

"Plucky chap 'e must be!" remarked Josh, with the timbre of admiration in his voice; "I'll be proud to know 'im."

But despite his apparent assurance Josh felt ill at ease in his heart. For all he knew Nancy's father might be one more disturbing influence in the already greatly troubled history of his courtship. It would certainly be judicious to conciliate him from the start; luckily he had the wherewithal.

"What are you thinkin' on?" said Nancy, interrupting his meditations.

"I was wonderin' if yer old man was a teetotaler," replied Josh casually.

"'E wasn't before 'e went in; shouldn't think 'e'd sworn off since," said Nancy with conviction. "Why? Goin' to stand him treat?"

"I am, see if I don't."

"What d'you call treat—pint of 'alf and 'alf? And I expects you'll 'ave to get even that on tick."

"Will I?" Josh stepped back dramatically, and pulled his hand out of his pocket.

"Shut yer peepers or I'll blind you!" he said.

As a natural result Nancy opened her eyes wider; but she opened them very wide indeed when she saw the two sovereigns reposing snugly in Joshua's palm, and listened with rapt attention to the account of how they were obtained.

"Bust me, though, if I don't blue 'em in to-night, every penny!" Josh wound up gleefully.

Nancy gave the project her unqualified approval, and, pinning her faith to the inexhaustible wealth implied in forty shillings, enquired the possibility of buying up a whole public-house with the amount.

"We'll buy it up for the evenin'—or dry it up any'ow," laughed Josh.

"Let's go to 'The Box Tree Tavern'; they've got a nice little bar-parlour that'll do us AI," said Nancy.

"What d'we want the parlour for?"

"Because the fust night the guv'ner likes it quiet, and, besides, there'll be more chairs for the rest of 'em."

"What rest of 'em?"

"Guv'ner's pals, in course; you don't expects 'im to be that mean as to leave 'em outside?"

"Oh, certainly not," Josh hastened to assure her with quailing heart. He had not reckoned that the magnitude of his undertaking would be thus immeasurably increased; but to draw back would be to incur Nancy's

undying contempt, and might drive the last nail into the coffin of his hopes. So he took his misfortunes bravely, and looked happy.

“Six o'clock—it's time they was 'ere!” said Nancy.

“When was 'e expected out?” asked Josh sympathetically.

“Fust thing in the mornin'.”

The news was welcome to Josh; he calculated that the length of time consumed by Mr Bunker's escort in conveying him from Wormwood Scrubbs to Walworth, divided into the number of stoppages for refreshment on the road, would by now have considerably diminished their powers of absorption. He, therefore, in a few well-chosen words, expressed his belief in the efficacy of patience as a virtue. He further utilised the interval of waiting for the purpose of acquainting himself more intimately with the life history of the expected arrival. In the course of Nancy's communications he learned that the great prestige which Mr Bunker enjoyed in the neighbourhood was due to the fact that fifteen years ago he had been in the final heat of candidates for the then vacant post of hangman. Nancy herself mentioned the circumstance with pardonable pride, and Josh experienced a sharp pang of regret at having so narrowly missed being the prospective son-in-law of a great public functionary.

After that, Joshua's eagerness to shake Nancy's papa by the hand was no longer fictitious; and perhaps it was the telepathic force of attraction exercised by their joint anticipation which led to their desire being speedily gratified. A few minutes later, a decrepit-

looking waggonette, drawn by a despondent hack, turned the corner, and rattled up the court.

"That's 'im next to the driver," said Nancy, without much show of emotion.

Josh hardly required any assistance to identify the red-faced, bullet-headed man she pointed out to him.

"Looks as if 'e'd been to the seaside," he said, considerably impressed.

The noise of the vehicle had brought half a dozen urchins and as many frowsy females to the scene.

Mr Bunker looked round him with an air of disappointment.

"Thought there'd be more of a turn out, Jenkins," he said to the driver as they pulled up.

"Couldn't 'elp it, old pard," replied Jenkins, apologetically; "didn't know when we was comin' back or I'd 'ave sent round word. There's yer little gal, though."

"Where—where?" cried Mr Bunker excitedly; "bless my 'eart, so it is! Where's my bloomin' eyes?"

He proceeded to clamber down, helped solicitously by the members of his bodyguard. Mr Bunker thought this a suitable opportunity for a display of paternal affection. He advanced on Nancy, who stood stock still, waving his arms, and shouting vociferously:

"My child—my darlin' che-ild!"

But Nancy foiled the intended embrace. "Don't make a hass o' yerself, old 'un," she said coolly, sending him back by a well-timed lunge.

Mr Bunker, however, deftly converted his rebuff into a cause for self-congratulation.

"See that, boys?" he cried, turning round to Jenkins

& Co., "see that? That's the Bunker breed; won't stand no nonsense, she won't, not even from 'er own father. I'm proud o' you, gal!"

Nancy received the compliment with indifference. "If you do it decently, you can kiss me," she said, holding out her cheek.

And Mr Bunker, chuckling with delight, availed himself of the permission.

Joshua, who stood close by, derived much comfort from the incident; it consoled him for numerous repulses and increased his admiration for Nancy, to see that even her father submitted so readily to her high-handed treatment.

Meantime he was strongly desirous of taking part in the proceedings. He nudged Nancy, but Nancy ignored the hint. Then accident came to his aid.

"Got a 'usband yet?" asked Mr Bunker genially.

Nancy tossed her head in a manner intended to signify both denial and disdain.

"Well, she can 'ave one any minit o' the day if she's that way minded," said Josh, stepping forward.

"Eh? Who are you?" asked Mr Bunker.

Josh waited in the faint hope that Nancy would take it upon herself to reply; then finally he said: "I'm sort o' fixed up with Nancy."

"Know 'im?" Mr Bunker enquired of Jenkins & Co.

"Seen 'im about, that's all," said Jenkins. The others had not even done that.

Mr Bunker eyed Josh suspiciously. "In that case, I'll 'ave to find out about yer hantededings," he said formidably; "young man, do you know the hawful re-

sponsibility on a father when 'is child gets old enough for the haltar?"

"Can't say I does, guvn'r, but I know where they keep the best four-ale in the kingdom," said Josh insinuatingly.

In fairness to Mr Bunker's intelligence, it must be stated that he caught Joshua's meaning in a flash.

"I'll be glad to share the knowledge and the four-ale with you," he said breezily, "which way?"

"Nancy says as 'The Box Tree' might——"

"Right you are; what are we waitin' for?" asked Mr Bunker, setting off.

"Come 'long, gennelmen," said Josh, addressing Jenkins & Co., whose eyes had looked haggard anxiety as to whether the invitation would be extended to them. Needless to say they accepted with alacrity, and there was a general move to catch up Mr Bunker, whose cry of "'Urry up there be'ind!" was already being dimmed by distance. The only one dissatisfied with the course events had taken was Jenkins' son, to whom his father, who was owner of the equipage, had delegated the task of taking the exhausted team back to stable, before, as Jenkins sagely remarked: "the brute got up to 'is pranks o' shammin' dead." The passionate yearning of the glance wherewith the youth followed them was a powerful study in aspirations.

Josh and Nancy had meanwhile got abreast of Mr Bunker, and had tied up the loose ends of Joshua's introduction in the matter of nomenclature.

"Joshua Jupp," repeated Mr Bunker, as though he were tasting the words with the tip of his tongue,

"seems an honest sort o' name. I likes folks what their fore and after names begins with the same letter o' the alphybet ; it's a sign o' respectability, I thinks. Now, for a sample, there's mine, which is Bertie Bunker, Esquire."

"What made you come so late?" interrupted Nancy, rather rudely.

Mr Bunker, without expressing umbrage at her discourteous conduct, hereupon blandly narrated that owing to a difference of opinion on the English prison system between himself and the chief warder, the latter had pressed him to stop to dinner and tea in order to thrash out the subject more fully. The information disconcerted Joshua, inasmuch as it upset his preconceived theory on the lessened storage capacity of his guests ; nor was he reassured by an incidental remark from Jenkins that, "it was bloomin' dry work 'angin' about from ten in the mornin' till four in the afternoon with only elevenpence between the lot of 'em." But being informed by Nancy of the capital at their disposal for the evening, both Mr Bunker and Jenkins found themselves in the happy position to certify that it would no doubt cover all requirements.

The exterior of "The Box Tree" presented no special points of architectural interest ; on the contrary, since Mr Bunker had seen it last it had grown more shabby and out-at-elbows. But even had it rivalled the great Taj Mahal at Agra, he would not have wasted an instant in contemplating its beauties ; as it was, it preached to him a trenchant sermon on the sinfulness of judging by appearances.

Having stepped inside, Mr Bunker marked the beginning of proceedings by a dramatic incident. An inoffensive jug of water, modestly occupying a side-table near the entrance, caught his eye. Acting on a sudden impulse, he snatched up the said jug, and sent it crashing to the ground.

It was Jenkins who asked the question: "What is it, Bunker—hyderphobia?"

After studying the debris for a few seconds, Mr Bunker explained: "Couldn't 'elp it, you see," he said, addressing himself chiefly to the publican, whose attitude in the matter was distinctly hostile; "couldn't 'elp it really; my feelin's was too much for me. After bein' kep' for dunno 'ow long on a stric' water diet, what's simply p'isin for a chap o' my constitoon, the fust thing I claps my eyes on in the fust pub I sets foot in is"—he paused for effect—"a mugful o' perishin' *water!* There it was, fair starin' me out o' countenance. I never was so hinsulted in my life. A houtrage, I calls it—a bloomin' houtrage! All right, George,"—this last exclusively to the publican, who here interposed with a brusque claim for damages or an alternative in the shape of constable—"I'll pay for the china, don't fret!" And then Mr Bunker, having finally regained dominion over his emotions, entered into negotiations for the supply of potables during the evening, making arrangements which strained the purchase power of Joshua's two sovereigns to their utmost. The party then betook itself to the afore-mentioned bar-parlour, which fortunately was at its disposal, and settled down to the order of the night.

At the suggestion of Jenkins, who carried his point without opposition, a chairman and master of ceremonies was appointed in the person of Josh, who accepted the dignity not without a lively sense of gratification. Mr Bunker, of course, supported him on the right, and Nancy, whose concern in things had so far been subdued and passive, was on Joshua's left.

The first round or two were drunk in exceedingly business-like silence. Mr Bunker was watched with much curiosity. To see a man drink beer after having been deprived of it for five years was a sight indeed not knocked up against at every street corner. The epicures of the company were even disposed to envy Mr Bunker the pleasurable experience of a throttle reduced by a long period of abstention to a practically novitiate state. It must be said that he rose to the occasion all his height; he more than justified the interest evinced in him. The way he gripped the pot-handle, the terseness of his "'Ere's luck, mates!" the three initial sips of the connoisseur followed by one long-drawn chromatic gulp, were a hedonistic education in themselves. Joshua felt that now was the opportunity to fulfil the obligations of his office, and voice the general admiration attaching to Mr Bunker as a man. He knew he was not a born orator, and yet he was not afraid; for the theme was its own inspiration.

A great burst of applause welcomed his intention as soon as divined.

"Ladies and gentlemen—that is, as many of each as is present," he said, "which I takes the liberty o' statin' that this 'ere is a gay and festive occasion, which I'm

proud to say as we've got the honour o' sittin' at the same table with a gennelman which 'is name is a byword wherever there's sense enough to unnerstand what a gennelman is."

He stopped, overwhelmed by a torrent of approbation.

"Which, gennelmen and Nancy," he continued, as soon as he could, "I also wishes to remark, as 'e's the father of a daughter what is a lady down to the toes of 'er tootsies, which last is that small as they can be seen only through a strong maggyfyin' glass."

"Shut up yer blarney!" interjected Nancy ungratefully, without, however, being able to repress a smile of pleasure at the hearty manner in which the pewters rapped their substantiation of the compliment.

"And, now, while I've got any more breath left to talk," proceeded Josh, "I'll jist say as we gives our honourable guest 'earty welcome, and 'opes as 'e'll never 'ave no more haccidents."

Josh sat down amid acclamation; the delicate euphemism of his concluding sentence was especially commented upon and appreciated. This was followed by a clamorous demand for Mr Bunker's reply.

Mr Bunker was known to possess a style of eloquence inclining to the dithyrambic, and therefore his effort was looked forward to with intense interest. For a while he let the storm rage; leaning back in his chair, his head, as though heavy with the weight of thought, low down upon his chest, he looked the picture of meditation. Then his hand strayed towards his pewter which he drained in an absent sort of way; next he usurped

Joshua's, and treated it in a similar manner, and would have helped himself to Jenkins', had the latter not rescued it in time.

Jenkins' alertness seemed to galvanise Mr Bunker's own faculties; he rose to his feet, swept his audience with a soul-compelling glance, and broke forth with:

"Friends o' my buzzum." The silence which followed was fit atmosphere for a corpse. "This is the solumest moment o' my life. I didn't feel 'alf nor as solemn-like when I was standin' before the sawbones up at the Old Bailey, showin' my credentials for bein' able to manny-facture hangels with nothing but a rope and a trap-door; which job I didn't get, though I was odds on in the runnin', bein' beat by a bloke what 'ad 'ad a huncle in the trade."

"Shame!" ejaculated Jenkins.

"Howsomevers, I'm goin' off the line, as the slack-wire walker said when 'e tumbled and broke 'is neck. I was sayin' as this 'ere's the solumest minit in my life; I knows it is because I'm that touched in the 'eart as I can't find words enough to subscribe my feelin's, it bein' known to everybody as I ain't a bad 'and at makin' a speech, 'avin' spoken in public not once but siveral times, and bein' reported for the same in the papers, chiefly the *Licensed Vittlers' Gazette*, with the Judge's remarks at the bottom. Now, what concerns the nice things this 'ere young man's been sayin' about yours trooly, I may say as I've deserved 'em, and a good deal more. Likewise, I begs to remark as it's only a toff knows another when 'e sees 'im, and I'll bet any o' you the Bank of England against a pair o' braces

as there ain't a man livin' in the world whose beer I'd be drinkin' sooner at this moment than Mr Josh Jupp's. And by token, I'll trouble you to fill me up, Jenkins."

He passed his mug to Jenkins who handed it to the distracted potman to be replenished. The interval was taken up by further demonstrations of delight. Mr Bunker imbibed and then continued:

"Now, what I spesh'ly wants to make the theme o' my discourse—as the chap'in used to say—is the present state o' the British law. I'll let it down gently, and only say it's the most disgraceful thing as 'as ever 'ad the cheek to 'old its 'ead up in 'istory. I wouldn't mind layin' odds that if Charley Cromwell was to get out of 'is grave to-morrer, and see what a 'ash the beaks 'as made of his Magny Carter, 'e'd go straight to Tower 'ill and ask the fust Tommy 'e met to chop 'is cokernut off again, which the reg'lar name for the biz is decapitation. The British law, I sez, is about as rotten as cat's meat six days on the road to resurrection. Now you mustn't think I'm a chap to give a dog a bad name and 'ang 'im; and p'raps 't ain't quite fair to attack somebody when 'e ain't 'ere to defend 'isself. But the insertions I've made about this 'ere British law I'll stick to, and I don't care who's goin' to prosecute me for libel. In the fust place, what is the law? I'll tell you; it's a thing in blue, with a trenchon round the middle, what comes sneakin' round hareas jist when honest people what works for their livin' at night-time 'as got fairly in the swing of it. Then it blows a whistle and kicks up a rumpus, and afore you know what's o'clock you're at the Station, and yer name's

down on the charge-sheet. And presently you're mixed up with a lot o' fellers with second-hand white wool on their pates, and jist as you're gettin' sick o' the whole lot, and wants to go 'ome and read the fam'bly Bible, you're told as a five-years' dose o' the golden stairs is jist the proper thing for you. That's yer law what you pays rates and taxes for. Now, I asks you, in the name o' creation, where's the sense o' kidnappin' 'a 'ealthy, able-bodied man, and clappin' 'im in a cage worse nor a wild hanimal, and feedin' 'im at public expense—pence? It costs pounds and shillin's, I tell you—when 'e might as well be hout and about, walkin' the streets as a gratooitous hadvertisement o' the fightin' strength of 'is country. O Hengland, Hengland, what used to was the 'ome o' liberty! Now you're yerself a pris'ner in the talons o' beaks and coppers and sich like blood-suckers; no wonder them furrin states thinks slops and small beer on us seein' we no longer get no great men left, the likes o' what lived in the good old days o' Tyburn, and used to put the gloss on the British lion's hide. We don't grow no more Claude Duvals, which is only the French way o' sayin' devils, because they 'as no time to devilup—ha, ha! that's a pun, d'you see?—been nipped in the bud by the crool 'and o' this 'ere law. And that's why the glory of Old Hengland is Ike Abbott"—Mr Bunker presumably meant Ichabod—"which the meanin' of it is, gone, hemigrated, slung its 'ook, vamoosed. Now what's to be done under these 'ere dreffal suckemstances? I ain't clever enough to say. Seems to me the only thing is to do away with beaks and assizes and all sich things what interferes with the convenience o' the

ginal public, and introjooce a bill into Parlyment, providin' that every man what joins the Force is to be considered a traitor to 'is feller citizens, what 'is punishment is to be, to be took to the Dogs' 'ome——”

Here, unfortunately, Mr Bunker's suggestions for the improvement of our social organisations were interrupted by a hurriedly whispered communication from Jenkins.

“Nat Crocker, the plain-clothes' man?” Mr Bunker whispered back.

“Sure as I'm alive! Saw 'im walk into the bar this very minute,” replied Jenkins.

It was in this emergency that Mr Bunker showed the true greatness of his soul. Without changing mien or tone he added: “Yes, I fancy she was took to Battersea, because I never saw 'er no more. Fine little bitch she was, with a white spot on the tip of 'er nose, and sudden death to anything with a tail and a sweet tooth for bacon. And now, gennelmen, 'avin' been wasteful o' yer vallyble time long enough, I'll thank you kindly for proposin' o' my 'ealth.”

The somewhat incoherent conclusion of his speech was not considered to detract materially from its intrinsic merit, and Mr Bunker came in for an ovation at the end not only from the table but from the throng of onlookers which out of small beginnings and great curiosity had grown into bulk about the doorway, and Tantalus-like eyed the Saturnalian glories before them.

This throng contained acquaintances of ours in the shape of Pretty Bill and his Peg, who had heard of Mr Bunker's home-coming, and thought it their duty, owing

to their past dealings with a member of his family, and also through lack of more profitable occupation, to pay him the tribute of their unspoken respect. Peg had insinuated her lithe body to where she could see without being seen. She did not hear much of Mr Bunker's oratory, because she was too busy watching Nancy, who, to all appearances, showed provokingly contented with the condition of things.

A feeling of something like resentment came over Peg at the sight; presently, however, it gave place to a spirit of mischievousness, which tickled her into daredevilry. She edged her way back to Bill and informed him of her intention.

"What? Make old Bunker stand you a drink?" he asked laughing heartily, "that's too funny!"

"Blowed if I don't, though!" said Peg.

Bill abruptly stopped laughing. "'Ere, Peg, none o' yer nonsense—I won't 'ave it."

"Who said you would? I'm keepin' it all for Bunker."

"She'll scratch yer eyes out."

"Will she? I'm goin' to 'ave that drink, though. 'Ere, Bill, don't you think I'm pretty enough to come it over an old fool?"

Bill looked at her critically, and was compelled to own that she satisfied that particular standard of measurement.

"How are you goin' to do it?"

"Wait and see; so long."

Despite much angry remonstrance from the dislocated crowd, Peg forced a successful entrance into the sacred

precincts of the bar-parlour. Nancy was the first to catch sight of the intruder. Angrily she rose and cried :
“ Clear out—you’re trespassin’ ! ”

Peg pretended to come to a discomfited halt ; but Mr Bunker, whose notorious propensities for the fair sex had not become attenuated by his five years of isolation, hastened to her rescue. He turned to Nancy and said suavely : “ Excuse me, my dear, if anybody knows what’s trespassin’ and what ain’t, it’s me. I’ve ’ad enough to do with the law for that. Step nearer, miss.”

Thus encouraged Peg approached the table—at the end farthest from Nancy, however.

“ Are you Mr Bunker ? ” she asked.

“ I am and always ’ave been,” was the reply.

“ I’m told as you’ve jist come away from Portland.”

“ Not jist ; but still, what about it ? ” asked Mr Bunker, with rapidly growing interest.

“ Maybe you can give me news o’ my brother ’Enerly Jones what’s in there ; ’e ain’t written us no letter these seven years, and mother worries shockin’.”

This revelation of a skeleton in Peg’s family cupboard came as a surprise to Nancy ; but, such as it was, it gave her considerable satisfaction. It was pleasant to hear that Peg’s mother worried.

Mr Bunker remained for some time in an attitude of reflection.

“ ’Enerly Jones—’Enerly Jones,” he ruminated. “ Now that I come to think on it, there was a chap there what looked remarkably like you—’air and all ; but I never ’eard ’is name. What was ’is number ? ”

"I forget, but 'e 'ad a scar over the left eyebrow. . . ."

Here Mr Bunker interrupted her by dealing himself a violent blow on the jaw.

"I'm a darned idjit, that's what I am," he exclaimed excitedly, walking into the trap which the wily Peg had prepared for him; "fancy forgettin' my pal 'Enery Jones in a month. In course I knows 'im, my dear; many and many a time I slipped 'im a quid o' baccy while we was workin' shoulder to shoulder, bein' once caught in the act and gettin' my marks docked for the same. But we was pals, me and 'im; and what's more 'e used to talk to me about a sister of 'is'n what 'er name was Maria, I b'lieve. . . ."

"No, Peg," corrected Peg.

"Peg? So it was. And 'e said as she was likely to grow up the stunningest gal this side the water; and only the day afore I gets my ticket 'e sez to me, with tears in 'is hoptics: 'Bertie, my boy,' sez 'e, 'if ever you comes across my sister Peg Jones, you be a huncle to 'er.'"

"How was 'e?" broke in Peg anxiously.

"Lively as a cricket. 'Bunker boy,' sez 'e, 'take care on 'er, and one o' these days I'll do the same by you.' So I promised 'im, 'ardly thinkin' as I'd knock up against you that soon. And now, my dear, you'll take a drop, in course."

"A six-foot drop I'd give 'er," said Nancy under her breath.

"Well, I don't mind," consented Peg.

"Get up, Jenkins, and let the lady sit down," commanded Mr Bunker; "surprised you ain't got sense enough to do it without bein' told."

Jenkins got up, gulping down a dozen maledictions, and Peg seated herself next to her new uncle, because that would not foil her ability to beat a hasty retreat in case of necessity. Mr Bunker moved closer to her, smacking his lips, and wondering at the lucky auspices under which he had apparently resumed relations with the outer world.

“’Ere you are, my dear,” he said.

Peg took the proffered glass and emptied it, glaring defiance over the brim at Nancy, who looked on sinister-browed. Then she rose.

“You’re not goin’ off yet?” asked Mr Bunker taken aback.

Peg edged away as near to the exit as she could get, making desperate efforts to keep her face steady.

“Yes, I am,” she replied, fixing her eye on Nancy, to catch the effect she was certain of producing, “because it come over my mind, while I was shiftin’ that glass, as I ain’t at all the gal what you was told to take care on, me never ’avin ’ad no brother in Portland, the eldest bein’ only eleven year old, and I’m sorry I made a mistake, and I won’t do it agin. Good-evenin’!”

She just stopped to witness the look of stupefaction on Mr Bunker’s face, and the Berserker rage on Nancy’s, and then she turned hastily to get beyond the arm of danger. The crowd, demoralised with laughter at Mr Bunker’s discomfiture, readily accorded her passage, and a yard or two further stood Bill to haul her finally into safety. But she had given Nancy too strong a lever for revenge, and this same lever lifted the avenger with two bounds across the

length of the room and landed her within still reachable distance of the evil-doer. An ear-piercing shriek from Peg told of a catastrophe; and clutching her head with both hands she staggered blindly into Bill's embrace.

Nancy stepped back to the middle of the room, flourishing a tuft of red-brown hair, and screaming shrilly: "You won't do it agin? Shouldn't think you would, or I'll pull yer 'ead off altogether."

By this time the sympathies of the onlookers had taken sides, and opinions on the justice of the punishment were divided. But as every one was intent on obtaining a fair hearing for his individual view of the case, the result was a riot in fair way of business. Supreme over all rose the strident voice of Nancy calling upon the fugitive to come back and partake of more beer.

Peg, however, did not come back. She went out into the street where she found Mr Nat Crocker, the aforementioned, doing patrol, and sobbed out to him, without exactly considering the consequences, a rather garbled version of the *contretemps*. Mr Crocker happened to be related to her to an infinitesimal degree of cousinship, but it sufficed to convince him who was in the right.

Even Nancy's ebullitions became moderated as he appeared on the scene, and Mr Bunker's face assumed a most conciliatory smile. Mr Crocker, however, regarded him with a look of displeasure.

"I'm sorry to see this, Bunker," said the majesty of the law; "this is the first day you're out on leave, and

already you're kicking up a row; I won't have it; you've got to clear out.'

"You've gone cranky," burst out Nancy.

"Young woman," said Mr Crocker with dignity, "you'll please wait till you're spoken to, however elegant yer remarks may be. You ought to be glad as the victim o' yer brootal hattack ain't laid no formal charge against you, or you'd catch it 'ot. The rest o' you can stop if you like. Now then, Bunker, I'll trouble you."

"But, Mr Crocker," appealed the hapless Bunker.

"I'm not goin' to waste any time argifyin' with you, unnerstand that," said the law inexorably.

And Mr Bunker, knowing his man, thought it best to make graceful concessions.

"See you tomorrer, boys," he said, with as much jauntiness as he could pretend; "comin' along, Nance and Josh?"

Although she was still rather sore against her father, who had brought his misfortune on himself by his absurd desire to pose as uncle to Peg, Nancy felt she could not do otherwise than accompany him in his exile. Nor did it take Josh very long to decide which was the more correct course, to follow Nancy or to go on spending his substance on Jenkins & Co. The latter heard his mumbled apology in consternation, for reasons which do not require to be further specified.

"Damned if I don't follow 'im!" said Jenkins, with the air of friendship prepared for any sacrifice; and the others were equally ready to seek salvation on the same terms. But Jenkins' suggestion to finish the

evening quietly somewhere else met with a firm refusal from Mr Bunker, who asked them indignantly if they wished to provoke additional friction between himself and the police. This unexpected perversion of the facts so dumbfounded the party, that, without attempting further argument, they withdrew to console each other with adverse reflections on human nature in general and Mr Bunker's memory for favours received in particular. The foolhardy Peg then came in for a cannonade of anathemas, which, if properly organised, might have laid a good-sized fortress in ruins. Fortunately, they were spared the knowledge that at that very moment Peg was packing her belongings with the intention of quartering herself next morning on her married sister at Croydon, till what time the cloud of unpopularity which shadowed her would have evaporated.

The Bunker trio, meanwhile, was wending its way along in silence, heavy with distasteful reminiscences, till they reached a conveniently unobtrusive beer-shop. At the door, however, Nancy suddenly intimated that beer had ceased to be an attraction to her for that night, and that she would prefer the solace of her couch.

Josh made no secret of the chagrin caused him by her determination; but Mr Bunker approved of it with a cordiality which was almost discourteous. Then the two men sat down to a *tête-à-tête* in the course of which Mr Bunker descanted on the drudgery and precariousness of a dock labourer's lot, hinting that there were shorter cuts to fortune, and that it had been the desire of his life to come across a comrade of Joshua's calibre.

Josh listened to Mr Bunker's overtures with mingled emotions. Once he felt an idle wonder what his dead father, whose favourite he had been, would have said had he been present at the colloquy. He also thought—he scarcely knew why—of his sister Tabitha ; but the next instant the vision of Nancy's white teeth and flame-glinting eyes rose to his mind, and glorified his tempter's words into an evangel.

And so, when at parting Mr Bunker slapped him on the shoulder and said : " I'll try and make a man o' you, my boy," he had virtually promised to lend himself to the experiment.

CHAPTER X

THE workshop of Brunner & Fleet was at tea. The meal itself was not so much a consideration as the half-hour's break which it formed in the monotonous routine of the afternoon, and the respite it gave to patient arms not utterly inured, despite their long training, to the fatigue of that frettingly mechanical swing-swing of theirs. Tabitha was the only one in the workroom who did not seem to need the relief; according to her wont, she stitched away unintermittently, with an occasional sip at her cup which kept the others in countenance rather than satisfied an actual want.

Arthur Page, however, took the repast in a much more conscientious fashion; he made it a solemn occasion, an act of worship at the shrine of the material. Nevertheless, he could not refrain from referring to it in a flippant strain.

"Don't think the Queen's got any better," he said; "five courses—tea, milk, sugar, bread, marmylade—not reckonin' the smell o' Miss Short's winkles."

"Can't you think o' something new? I'm sick and tired o' that stoopid old joke o' yourn," said Jenny Fly testily.

"It's good enough for what I gets paid to keep you in laughs," replied Arthur.

"I'd give something to keep you quiet," said Jenny acidly.

"All right—kisses will do," suggested Arthur.

"Hark at 'im, 'e wants to be kissed! Now's yer chance, Tabitha," laughed Dolly, the girl with the chronic cold.

Tabitha replied to the hint with becoming silence; not so Arthur.

"Well, I'd rather kiss Tabitha than a gal what gets a blue nose only by lookin' at a lump of 'okey-pokey," he retorted.

The girl with the cold strongly desired for the moment to change lots with one of Miss Short's periwinkles in order to have a shell into which to retire.

"One for your little nob there, Dolly," said Jenny sweetly.

"Don't be jealous; you can 'ave as good," threatened Arthur.

"You wouldn't 'urt me, on my birthday, too, would you?" asked Jenny, with mock anxiety.

"Rats! 'T 'ain't yer birthday, is it, Mrs Fly?"

"As likely as not, I dunno," replied Mrs Fly.

"Pity; I'd 'ave bought you a sealskin jacket," said Arthur.

"I'd rather 'ave a monkey on a stick. Where's yer stick, Arfer?"

"Yes?" exclaimed Arthur suddenly, getting on his feet, and straining his ear in the direction of the little office where Miss Short was consuming her winkles in splendid isolation. "Leave off bellowin' there, yer silly

femules, can't you?" he continued severely; "you know what a bloomin' paddy she gets in if I don't answer sharp!"

"Good old dodge that," said Jenny disdainfully.

"What dodge? I wants you to make up yer mind, Jinny Fly, that I never does no dodgin' excep' when I've got the gloves on, and then greased snakes ain't in it with me. Ask Timmy Bowles."

"Oh, certainly, anything to please you," consented Jenny; "what shall I ask 'im?"

"Why 'e stole that strip o' raw steak from 'is father's supper. Any'ow, that's what I'm goin' to take to."

"What, raw steak? Next, I s'pose, you'll be turnin' cannybal."

"Steak? No fat-'ead; the gloves is what I means, in course. Think I'm goin' to waste my precious life nailin' wet skins to a plank? Don't you believe it. Five thousand suv'rins a-side, that's the game for me, and the noosepapers givin' perticklers each time I gets my 'air cut to redooce myself to the proper ounces, and the Prince o' Wales pokin' 'is arm through mine and sayin': 'All right, Arfer boy, I'm goin' to make you a lord when I gets on the box-seat; meantime, try this 'ere cheroot, it's the brand the Shah smoked when 'e was in Lunnon.' Bet yer boots, I'm goin' to be a great man one o' them days, and then you'll be sorry you didn't respec' me more when you 'ad the chance. If it wasn't for my rotten luck I'd be 'avin' a job already."

"Killing cockroaches?"

Arthur pretended to take Jenny's query seriously; for he looked at her pityingly as he answered: "Now,

Jinny, what's the good o' me takin' pains to give you a little eddication if you ain't got no sense o' yer own at all? You're parfikly old enough to know as the best way o' gettin' rid o' them things is not to go for 'em with the dooks, but to make the kitchen floor in a mess over night with fresh cut cowcumber peels; that gives 'em the 'ump pretty quick. My job was one at Johnson's, the penny gaff up Lambeth way. Sez Johnson to me: 'Arfer, you come and challenge the world.' Sez I, 'I'm on guv'ner—anybody this world or the next.' So I comes there two nights runnin', but nobody seemed keen on the claret biz, not even a ghost what needn't be afraid o' gettin' tapped for 'is bleed, bein' furnished instead with a sort o' white fog in the way o' circelation. And then, gettin' no customers, I offers to punch my own mug about to make things more lively; but Johnson 'e sez, sez 'e: 'Arfer, you're too good for a penny gaff, that's what you are; what you wants is more show and hadvertisin'. Wait till Barnum's comes round agin 'ereabouts.'"

"What kind o' freak d'you think you'd suit for?" asked Jenny innocently.

This time there was no subterfuge in Arthur's making a dart towards Miss Short's office, from which her summons had issued clear and shrill. It appeared that Miss Short had suddenly been taken with a violent passion for sponge-cake, which had to be gratified at all costs. So she handed Arthur a penny, and bade him speed forth on his mission. The merriment caused by Jenny's last sally gave him an additional impetus.

"She'll drive 'im off 'is chump," said Mrs Fly, wiping her eyes, to her left hand neighbour, Mrs Ford.

"'E's a bad lot out and outer—all Arfers are," replied Mrs Ford, speaking from bitter experience.

"Who said 'e was?" snapped Jenny.

"Well, it seems from the way you go on at 'im you'd like to eat 'is liver," said Mrs Ford, taken aback.

"Then I wouldn't want you to lend me a knife and fork for it. You 'tend to your own Arfer, and say what you like about 'im!"

"Wish it was lies, too, but it ain't, wuss luck!" broke forth Mrs Ford lachrymosely; "I'll bring you a couple o' bits o' ribbon, 'alf a feather, and a 'andful o' pansies, and if you'll reckernise that for my Sunday bonnet what I bought only six months ago, yer eyesight's a thing worth 'avin'; that's what my Arfer did for me last night."

"'T ain't much to brag of, I'm sure," said Mrs Fly off-hand.

"What ain't—a 'usband?" Mrs Ford could not resist asking.

"Well, not one o' them sort," replied Mrs Fly, burying her scarlet face in a tea-cup she knew to be empty.

"It's 'ardly the thing to give yer old man away like that before strangers, Mrs Ford," said Jenny, putting shackles upon her soul.

Mrs Ford saw she had committed an error of judgment, and attempted to retrieve her husband's reputation.

"You see, it depends on the way you looks at it, entirely; if 'e did it of a purpose, I wouldn't say 'e ain't to blame; but if 'e did it by mistake like, comin' 'ome from work, and finding nothing but 'cat's tails all 'ot'

for dinner, me 'avin' gone round to the Surrey Palace o' Wonders with a third-rate cousin o' mine, thinkin' my second best togs class enough for the same—well, in a sort o' ginerall way o' speakin', and considerin' all things where consideration is doo, I'd say as it was only kind o' practickle joke, don't you think so, Mrs Fly?"

"I'd scarcely feel *tickled* by it," punned Mrs Fly drily.

Here the original "Arfer" reappeared on the scene, having found no inducement to loiter on his errand owing to the sharp drizzle which was scouring the streets.

"'Urry up—I've got something for you!" exclaimed Jenny at sight of him.

Arthur made haste to deposit his purchase in Miss Short's fairy hands.

"Don't care if you *do* tell 'im I said 'e was a bad lot," rasped Mrs Ford defiantly.

"Well?" asked Arthur, issuing from the holy of holies.

"Mrs Ford's been sayin' as you was the best boy in the world, and she wishes her old man, what 'is name is hidetical with yourn, would take a leaf out o' yer prayer-book."

"Why, what's 'e been up to this time?" asked Arthur solicitously, readily catching the drift of Jenny's quizzical look.

"She says 'e's been locked up for attempted murder of 'er, 'e 'avin' caught 'er up at the docks bookin' 'er passage to Horsetrailia with a man cousin of 'er'n."

"Lawks! and I always thought you was sich a nice

respectable body, that I could introdooce my mother to," said Arthur, eyeing Mrs Ford as one eyes a shattered illusion.

Mrs Ford looked from one to the other aghast.

"Well I never!" she managed to vent herself just before she reached bursting point.

"Now, it ain't the least bit o' use backin' out of it, and pertendin' you said something else, Mrs Ford," resumed Jenny, who thought it a pious duty to pay off her mother's score; "you all 'eard 'er, gals, didn't you?"

It must be set down, despite the gloomy sidelight it casts on our latter-day morals, that Jenny's atrocious distortion of the truth met with instant corroboration.

"I haccept the evidence," said Arthur graciously; "doin' the bunk along of another bloke, and gettin' yer 'usband locked up into the bargain—well, I'm simply spifflicated!"

At this point Mrs Ford's notorious lack of the sixth sense, which is that of honour in a man and humour in a woman, became distinctly manifest.

"But 'e ain't locked up!" she gasped; "and I never thought o' doin' a guy, and there ain't a sybubble o' truth in it."

"Well, it seems the whole room 'eard you," insisted Arthur.

"They're a pack o' lyin' 'ussies, every one of 'em, and I'll 'ave 'em up for libel," said Mrs Ford chokingly.

"Anyway that's what you told us," said Jenny relentlessly.

"So you did," came from the chorus of false witnesses.

Mrs Ford was just deliberating whether to indulge in a fit, or to entertain the possibility of having, through

some strange antic of her tongue and ear, really given utterance to the statement she was charged with, when her desperate eye fell on Tabitha, and a ray of hope shot through her soul.

"Now then, Tabby, you'll tell the truth," she appealed; "did I say——?"

"No, you didn't," responded Tabitha readily; "it's Jenny's nonsense."

"See?" shrieked Mrs Ford at everybody.

"Sneak!" hissed Jenny at Tabitha under cover of the ensuing laughter.

Tabitha shrugged her shoulders indifferently; she had given her testimony so readily, in order to escape being further involved in the altercation. Of late she had become strangely sensitive to noise and discord; had she been a lady of leisure she would have said she was developing nerves.

"Anybody seen Maud Marshall lately?" asked Dolly.

"I should think so," replied Jenny; "there's about ten thousand people goes to see 'er every night."

"Any o' yours?" exclaimed Dolly deferentially.

"I have," broke in Miss Short, who had just entered, wiping her lips daintily; "I saw her last night." The stress on the words, however, boded Maud Marshall no good.

"I s'pose she went off with a bang, as usual," continued Dolly.

"I don't know what you mean exactly," said Miss Short with *hauteur*; "but she did go off—that is to say, she wasn't kicked off, which to my mind she ought to have been."

"Lawks, miss!" and similar expressions of surprise assailed Miss Short from various quarters. Jenny telegraphed in eye-language to Arthur as she queried: "Why, what's wrong with 'er, miss?"

"She's too lady-like for my taste," answered Miss Short with overt irony; "she doesn't smirk and ogle enough, and she doesn't wear her skirts as short as she might, and she doesn't want people to know she's got any—hm! yes—any legs. And the songs she sings! I could feel my finger-nails growing while I listened—me, that was brought up so respectably, too."

"Yes, but that's sich a long time ago," murmured Jenny.

"What's that you said?" asked Miss Short suspiciously.

"I said you shouldn't 'ave gone to the place, then."

"Who was to know? I was walking by with my friend Amy Blobbs, from Shoolbred's, and she says: 'Suppose we go in and see what it's all about.' I saw enough for my money."

"If I was you," suggested Arthur humbly, "I should 'ave got up and walked myself out in the middle, jist to show people what I thought of 'er."

Miss Short kept silent for a moment or two in order to inveigle her listeners into the belief that she was deliberating whether she should bandy words with one so inferior; then she answered: "That's what I wanted to do, but each time I got up some rude men behind shouted out: 'Sit down there in front'—well, you don't think I was going to make a disturbance?"

"Oh dear, no, miss!—'t ain't likely; I wouldn't in-

sinivate sich a thing for the life o' me," said Arthur volubly ; " but I did 'ear"—there was an abysmal sinking in his voice—" as pretty Maud's goin' to the bad quicker nor a thrippeny bit once you've got it changed. She's carryin' on with chaps something awful."

" Oh, who told you?" asked Miss Short eagerly.

" Well, 't ain't so much what I 'eard as what I seed myself——"

" Really?" interrupted Miss Short.

" As what I seed myself one night, a couple o' nights back," went on Arthur pensively. And then he related how, casually frequenting the precincts of a certain Variety Theatre, he had witnessed Maud issuing from the stage-door, and not alone ; which, viewed as evidence concerning Maud's gutterward career was somewhat insufficient, though it served Arthur's purpose in other respects.

" Well, 'e was a toff, Miss, and no mistake," he enthused. " Twice my heighth, and black 'air and white teeth and a grey hulster all the way down—an 'eighteen-carat' swell, bet yer number threes, miss. Then she sez : ' All right, dear,' and 'e calls a 'ansom and off they goes."

Now, of course, in giving the above account it had been Arthur's insidious purpose to twist Miss Short's envy sharply by the tail ; he would, however, have been much surprised to know that the sting of his words had found another target—to wit, Tabitha's heart. She could not tell how far his description of Maud's cavalier was a fancy picture. But from the details supplied, among which the grey ulster figured largest,

she thought there was no difficulty in identifying him. She thought—aye, thinking was the worst of it; she did not want to think. Not for the extra shilling it brought her, but in order to drill her mind into an unaccentuated shapelessness did her needle encroach on the legitimate intervals of rest. It was as though she were stitching her thoughts dead; and then came some inconsiderate chance, as now, and gave her brain a fillip and made them swarm back into life.

How had she fared in the quest in which she had set out a second time, unwarned by her experience of the first? Not very prosperously so far, she had to admit, for else she would continually be rousing herself to take stock of her progress, instead of doing her best to stifle remembrance of the attempt. And yet in her heart she knew she was loth to relinquish it once for all, because she was assured that there would be no recommencing afterwards. And somehow she was frightened at ruling off irrevocably the folio of her life when, in the natural order of things, there was yet so much space left to fill. She did not want to bid farewell, a last farewell, to the influences which had again begun to dominate her affairs, for weal or woe—whichever it might be; she did not want to go back to the ding-dong life, the narrowness in which she was the beginning and end of herself, where she and her loneliness would sit peering into each other's eyes, the one afraid of the other. No, there was no provocation for that. Surely there was hope yet; in the space of a few weeks she could not fairly say she had exhausted her trial.

Yes, however much her astonishment might make

her question the fact, it was only a little more than a month ; but then, time was old, and therefore must be expected to indulge in eccentricities. Only a month or so it was since she had—had done what? Had called at the office in Stamford Street and had talked for ten minutes to the man who subsequently wore a grey ulster. She asked herself the reason of her momentary hesitation in specifying the event. Was there any other which had a more prominent place in her calendar? Why was she not honest to herself, at least, and admit that her acquaintance with Mr Dacre had taken her whole being in a tyrannic grip? That would simplify everything ; by its light she would solve her discontent, her fears, her longings, and would view her life clear, not blurred by the haziness of self-knowledge, which came so near to being self-deceit. There was much to be gained by that ; it would help her to realise that as much as Mr Dacre was the culmination of her possible success, so he stood for the sign and symbol of her present failure. She had not lessened the distance, which lay in its infinity between him and her, by a single inch. She felt it in a sort of pained wonder which vaguely questioned its own right to exist.

Since the Sunday on which she had met him making his way to Maud's, she had seen him on the two ensuing Saturday nights at the "Falstaff". She had gone there ostensibly to take her place in the programme, but in reality, as her heart had told her plainly, to revel in the gladdening sense of his immediateness. And then, when she found that she was turning her main purpose into a

side-issue, even then she made herself no reproaches. What impression she was producing on her audience, what result she was achieving, whether this new vocation of hers was likely to bring about momentous changes in her circumstances—these were considerations which did not exercise her for an instant. Her consciousness of things began only when the evening had come to its end, when the lights were being turned down in the auditorium, and she had managed to crowd up against Mr Dacre in the doorway and be thrilled with the contact. The week before she had walked by his side the whole length of the corridor, and had snatched from him a few words of encouragement and a kindly smile at parting. The following Saturday he had answered her "Good-evening" very perfunctorily, and had pushed on in a hurry. That was not so good as a whole length of corridor and a smile; in fact it was no good at all. It was that which had produced her depression of mood, and made her intent on mental suicide, which last was, as she saw now, after all, bad policy. Sane analysis profited more than unreasoning self-effacement; already it bore fruit in the new hope she felt recruiting in her heart. It even robbed Mr Dacre's apparent understanding with Maud of all its significance.

Tabitha took a firmer grasp of her self-evolved theory on the reaction of love. Sooner or later—later, if need be—her heart-energy, her passionate straining after the longed-for desire would harvest its reward. Love was too precious to be wasted even in a single grain; surely Providence ordained for it a fitting equipoise, a suitable counterpart. If she loved only hard enough she would

gain a requital of love. The whole thing was merely a matter of time, and of time she had an ample supply ; it was a marvel to her how young she could still feel.

So ran her ruminations, undisturbed by the chatter around her—by Mrs Fly's screech laugh—by the passages-at-arms between Jenny and Arthur. Once or twice she became aware that she was being interpellated, and she answered at random, quite indifferent whether her reply had an accurate bearing on the question. The sound of the "dismiss" bell came upon her with a shock ; she had no idea that the day's work had already come to its close. Reluctantly, almost, she laid down her half-finished sewing, lingering in the act till all her work-mates had passed out. She was always the last to leave ; so she could best avoid having company thrust upon her if she preferred a solitary homeward walk.

As she made her exit into the street, she fancied she caught a glimpse of what appeared a familiar figure propped against the lamp-post opposite. However, she continued her way without pausing to make sure of her impression. A few yards further on she felt somebody at her elbow. She looked, and an indefinite "Oh," escaped her.

"You said I might come and fetch you one night, you know," replied Ted.

"Did I? So I did, though I don't know why you should. No chance of my taking the wrong turning hereabouts."

"Never know yer luck," said Ted.

"No," assented Tabitha vaguely.

"Sounds like you don't think much o' yer luck in me comin' round for you to-night."

"I didn't say so."

"Only 'avin' asked you if I might, and you bein' willin', I thought I'd chance it."

"All right ; there ain't much harm done."

Ted looked at her puzzled. The lamp-post, which had served as his prop, could tell of half an hour's patient waiting, could complain of having its cast-iron organism troubled by the antics of a human heart beating fast with anticipatory pleasure, and would have been grievously disappointed to know that the strenuous expectancy, wherewith it had pulsed, had found so tame a consummation. That was what Ted thought ; in a sort of way he felt contempt for himself. The Ted of the present moment was so invertebrate a creature compared to the Ted of the lamp-post, and therefore he had recourse as a tonic to the homily which Jimmy had preached him on the duties of self-appreciation. It worked, and Ted felt himself once more a biped.

"Jim any better?" he questioned cheerily.

"He's always better—at least that's what he'll want you to believe whenever you ask him."

"P'r'aps he'll believe it himself one o' these days and then 'e'll get up and walk. Sich things 'as 'appened before," said Ted earnestly ; "let's see, there's a speshul kind o' name for that sort o' cure."

"Don't care what it's called, but it's too good to happen to him by any other name either. Not 'but what he's deserved it."

"'Old 'ard there, Miss Tabitha—people 'll say you're

prejudiced ; if you wants 'is charickter, I'm the man for it. I sez as follows : ' Jimmy Jupp's a gennelman ; 'e ain't very strong in the back, but is gettin' on towards that way. Can reckermend 'im—wish I could mend 'im altogether—for teachin' good Christians 'ow to be down on their luck without makin' any fuss and usin' bad languidge. Likewise 'e's clever at drorin' o' pictchers, and would be all right for 'elpin a pal out of a fix if 'e was able in body, which 'e ain't at present and which is a pity. Likewise 'e's got a sister—oh, beg pardon, that's goin' off the lines."

"Still, what about her?" asked Tabitha smiling faintly.

"Oh, nothing ; I'd rather not say," replied Ted in great embarrassment.

"So bad as all that, is it?"

"'Tain't any bad at all, but——"

"Well?"

Ted hung his head and was silent.

"Oh, never mind, it doesn't matter," said Tabitha, a little sharply. Her curiosity had been aroused, and she was piqued at not having it gratified.

Ted was not sparing in his self-objurgations ; he told himself, in terms of emphatic disparagement, that a fellow, who has neither the wit nor the pluck to pay a compliment properly, and is moreover cognisant of his short-comings in that respect, had no business to launch on the attempt, especially with a lady whose temper it is to his advantage to study.

"I 'ope you ain't cross," he said lamely.

"Cross?" was Tabitha's scornful retort ; "it would take two and a-half of you for that—mind yourself!"

They were making for the other side of the street and the wheels of a fast-bowling cab passed within an inch of Ted's toes. The Jehu slackened pace and looked back, his language highly pyrotechnical.

Ted laughed awkwardly. "Clever o' me, wasn't it? Any other chap wouldn't do it for a wager; much obliged to you, though, for seein' me safe through."

"You gave me such a fright," said Tabitha.

"Did I? Come in and 'ave a nip o' brandy," and Ted looked anxiously at her blanched face.

"I'd rather not—I want to get home."

Ted reflected during the silence which ensued that their side-by-side—it could hardly be called a *tête-à-tête*—was so far not in the nature of an unqualified success. Its incidents had not redounded to his credit; he himself, it was true, could boast of compensation in having felt during the cab crisis Tabitha's convulsive grip on his arm. But even for that—he could not disguise the fact from himself—he was indebted to the general dictates of humanity rather than to any exclusive predilection of Tabitha for his well-being. Luckily the evening was young, and he would have ample time to retrieve himself.

Five minutes remained between Tabitha and her home. It suddenly struck her to utilise the occasion.

"Did you hear there was something on between Maud Marshall and Mr Dacre?" she asked.

"I guessed it all along," replied Ted eagerly, glad to be taken notice of; "only I kep' my own counsel and didn't say nothing. Is it all right?"

"I don't know," said Tabitha curtly.

"Well then I 'ope so; she's the real thing in ladies—no imitation. She's been that good to me at the 'Falstaff'—oh, by the bye, she's a friend o' your'n, I 'eard say; is she?"

"I know her well enough."

"It was plain to me the fust moment," went on Ted garrulously; "to see 'im canoodlin' round 'er like a cat round the milk-jug—well, seems there's no 'arm in givin' the game away when you got 'old o' the trumps, eh, miss?"

Receiving no reply to his query, Ted went on to hope fervently that Mr Dacre's intentions were honourable, adding that from what he knew of that gentleman's habits and disposition, his hope stood at a premium. He was also of opinion that from a physical point of view the couple would appeal pleurably to the most highly developed æsthetic taste.

A few more remarks on this seemingly inexhaustible topic brought the two up to the iron palisade which fenced the front of Montague Buildings. Here Tabitha came to a sudden stop, and without any apparent provocation, said "Good-night."

Ted looked round him to see for whom the salutation was intended; by the time he had completed the circle of inspection, and was again facing Tabitha, he was favoured with a second "Good-night," which was unmistakably addressed to him, even were not the explanation forthcoming that she scarcely cared to ask him up that particular evening, because her fatigue would prevent her from acting hostess with sufficient

thoroughness. Ted was simply too much surprised to look chopfallen.

"But I wanted to see Jimmy—I've got a little something for him," he said, extracting a small neatly-wrapped parcel out of his pocket.

"What is it?" asked Tabitha suspiciously.

"Only a box o' paints; 'e said 'e'd like one."

"Well, I'll take it up to him, and you can come and fetch your thanks another time. No hurry, is there? Good-night."

"Good-night," responded Ted mechanically. A moment or two later he was staring blankly into the passage which had swallowed her up; then he caught fleeting glimpses of her figure silhouetted against each of the ascending staircase windows. But the strain on his eyes must have been very great, for when he brought them back to their level they had melted into moisture, and the dimly-lit street swam in a blur of chaotic hues. The moisture flowed over on to his cheeks, and he dashed it off with a half-angry gesture and a muttered imprecation on his folly.

Then having regained clearer vision he strode on rapidly, as though to escape from any possible witness of his humiliation. For as such only, neither more nor less, he could consider it; he had virtually had the door slammed in his face, because Tabitha's excuse was manifestly insincere. And yet, however much he tried to think of it with resentment, he found that his more predominant feeling was pain. Once more had the undesirability of his presence been brought home to him; once more had he met with the scathing rebuff which had so often made

him clench his fists in impotent despair. But this time the disappointment was keener than any he had known; it seared him till he writhed, and he knew why. He had never thought of women except in a vague impersonal way; he had wondered at and speculated about them as entities strange and distant. He was acquainted with them only as animate mechanisms, into whose inner workings it would never be his privilege to obtain insight. But the first moment he had set eyes on Tabitha there had welled up in him a mysterious hope of approachment. He did not trouble to trace it to its source; it did not even strike him that her outward unattractiveness would probably leave him a field clear of competitors. Perhaps he did read in her face, as she had read in his, the dumb questioning of life's niggardliness, the baffled craving for what it so obstinately withheld. All he knew was that she had implanted in him a sense of the attainable, a sense which by degrees had matured into a half-certainty of ultimate possession.

Where was his half-certainty now? It lay somewhere near the iron palisade from which he had just fled; it lay there, felled to the ground, stunned and effortless. And for company it had those numberless, nameless cherishings which had crept forth unbidden from the dark corners of his heart, and now paid the penalty of their rashness. Poor little aspirations, that had followed the deceitful beacon-light of hope to their ruin. He felt sorry for them—it was no use feeling sorry for himself; in fact he was surfeited with self-pity. But these same aspirations had been things of such alien growth, had been so foreign to anything he had known or felt before,

that it was as though he were commiserating another man's disaster.

The conductor of the omnibus, in demanding his fare, had to tap him on the shoulder with the question :

"Anything wrong, mate? Missis gone and 'ad triplets?"

Ted, as he fished in his pocket for the money, rewarded the witticism with a smile which made the conductor heartily sorry for having perpetrated it.

"Touched—looney," whispered the latter to Ted's only fellow-passenger before descending.

Ted caught the remark easily, but, instead of endeavouring to controvert it, resumed his brooding attitude. He found it quite natural that, seeing his ill-shapen body people should credit him with a distorted mind.

He nearly missed his terminus; he got off, and wondered what to do next. The question was set at rest by the incapacity he felt to extend his peregrinations beyond the compass of the remaining walk home. His physical fatigue struck him as odd; it did not occur to him to look for its cause in his mental exhaustion.

Ten minutes of brisk pacing brought him to the tiny coffee-shop from which he and his mother eked out sufficient to live on; his Saturday night job at the "Falstaff" he owed to the proprietor's friendship with his late father. It enabled Ted to lay by the cost of an umbrella for the proverbial rainy day.

It was after business hours, and the shop was already shuttered. Ted tapped gingerly.

"All right, mother," he exclaimed, as he heard some one stop and listen at the door inside.

"What, back already?" said Mrs Hickory in tones of glad surprise, admitting him and leaving him to shoot the bolt. "And 'ere I was jist startin' to make myself comf'table with a fresh brew o' tea and the new trac' they give us last night at the mothers' meetin'. I thought you'd be late—didn't you say so?"

"Some'ow I didn't care to go into the theaytre when I got there," explained Ted, following her into the miniature parlour to which the shop stood in the relation of vestibule.

"You don't look very bloomin'; what's up?" asked Mrs Hickory, scanning him closely.

Ted fidgeted beneath her gaze, and, as an after-thought, stooped to take his boots off.

"That's better," he said, evading a direct reply.

"Feel peckish now? You didn't touch a morsel o' supper afore you went out."

"Had some trotters on the road," prevaricated Ted; "I'll drink yer 'ealth in a cup o' tea, though."

Silently Mrs Hickory rose, and reached down another cup from the fancy-papered dresser; in the act, however, she turned suddenly and surprised Ted's face in undress, as it were. She saw the look on it, and sighed.

Ted took the steaming beverage she handed him and began to stir it absently. His mother watched him hard. He took a sip, another, and yet another. Mrs Hickory's eyes were now riveted on his face, but the stone-wall expression it bore had undergone no change.

"Ted," she said suddenly.

"Eh, mother?" Ted started as though stung.

"Since when do you take yer tea without sugar?" asked Mrs Hickory.

"What's that? I thought it was quite sweet enough."

"Then it's a miracle—I didn't put any in, nor did you."

"I s'pose it was the flavour," said Ted awkwardly, helping himself to a good-sized lump, and making the spoon pirouette anew.

"Ted," called Mrs Hickory once more, and Ted jumped again; "you ain't been to no theaytre to-night, and you never thought o' goin'."

Ted flushed, but said nothing.

"It's a gal, and she didn't turn up," went on Mrs Hickory with conviction.

"She turned up right enough," said Ted wearily; "only she didn't want as much o' me as I wanted of 'er. No blame to 'er either."

"Why not?"

"Why not? Because she ain't blind," burst out Ted in an access of despairing rage; "look at me yerself—ain't she right?"

Mrs Hickory sat up very straight and then drooped forward nervelessly. Ted paid no attention to her. A minute—two—went by in petrified silence. Slowly Mrs Hickory recovered herself, rose and wedged her way in between the table and the old-fashioned little sofa at the head of which Ted had ensconced himself. She put her arm round his neck and he did not resist her. The silence continued, but it had steeped itself in an emollient; it no longer suggested a rigid painful reserve, and almost naturally it dissolved itself into speech from Mrs Hickory.

“Teddy boy—there, don’t think ’ard things on me; I couldn’t ’elp it. Wouldn’t I ’ave liked you to be tall, and straight, and ’andsome and sicklike? Don’t go blamin’ me, Teddy. I nussed you like as though you was a prince; I gave you the soft and left myself the crust. I’ve cared for you and prayed for you, my little ewe-lamb, and I’ll die this minit with all my sins like rust-spots on my soul if that ’ud take away the blemish from your body. But don’t go blaming me, Teddy, don’t.”

“I don’t,” said Ted. “I don’t blame any one—not even Gawd.”

“Ted!”

He shook his head in token of repudiating the rebuke.

“Strikes me as Gawd now and agin makes a mistake o’ purpose, jist to warn people they mustn’t be too cocksure of ’is always doing the right thing instid of ’em. But, mother, it don’t feel very nice to be one o’ Gawd’s mistakes.”

For some little time longer mother and son sat in their silent embrace.

“I think I’ll turn in now,” said Ted suddenly.

“Tell me about it—who is she? You’ll do yourself no good chokin’ it up like that,” said Mrs Hickory.

In a few brief sentences, Ted told her the origin and subsequent history of his acquaintance with Tabitha; then he gently wound himself loose, with a grateful look at her for her muttered consolations.

When he came to his room, he divested himself of his coat, rolled up his shirt sleeves, and by the flickering tallow-dip examined his arm attentively. He found

there, as he had expected, the impress of Tabitha's fingers. Long, long, he looked at them, and an awe came over him, sitting there on the edge of the bedside, such as might have been felt by one of the old-time astrologers, trying to decipher, in the silent hieroglyphics of the heavens, the shape and current of his future.

CHAPTER XI

“TELL us some more, Phœbe, there’s a dear,” said Jimmy, whose ears were already stiff with listening; “I want to get to know as much about the world as I can, and you’re as good as readin’ a book.”

“Thanks,” smiled Phœbe good-humouredly; “but please remember that my throat is not made of cast iron.”

“Well, then, whisper, and I’ll like it better; seems to me that ’ud be the proper tone o’ voice to talk o’ things what take yer breath away.”

Phœbe laughed, and obediently proceeded with her reminiscences. No wonder they seemed great and glorious to the poor invalid, whose untutored soul was groping with blind instinct, with dream-like presentiment for the first distant glimmerings of what was beautiful on earth. Right eagerly he followed his guide into the treasure chambers of creation to which she had had access; through the windows of her memory he caught rapturous glimpses of Southern Paradises, of the languorous loveliness of phosphorescent seas; he looked out upon the multitudinous charivari of populous cities; he saw and sounded the

myriad manifestations of life till he felt he need but spread out his wings and fly away into the unknown infinite, leaving behind, without a backward glance, this poor crippled body of his, to sink or swim in the tide of its vicissitudes. For Phœbe had seen a great many things, and there was magic in the way she spoke of them, the magic of inspiration. She knew its source well enough; it came to her from the occasional intervals of silence into which she lapsed, and in which her soul became immersed, till—after decent waiting and with gentle promptings—Jimmy's request for "some more" came and made her emerge from them. Jimmy knew these interstices of silence and respected them, and he remembered why. Once, long ago, he had told her:

"There's something funny about you, Phœbe, when you've got into a thinkin' fit; seems to me yer eyes are tryin' to make a hole in something."

"So they are—they are burrowing in the past and digging up my dead," she had answered.

Jimmy had not quite understood her meaning then, but it was coming home to him now, and filled him with reverential fear. It dawned upon him suddenly that he had taken his strange associate too much for granted. She had stepped into his cognisance when he was yet a mere child. One pitiless winter evening, soon after Josh had ceased to live with them, Tabitha had brought her in, a veritable apparition, and had given her house-room, till her limbs, rendered inarticulate by weeks of privation and exposure, had once more resumed their normal functions. And in no great

length of time she had insinuated herself into the little garret household without any visible effort, for there was something inexpressibly smooth and gracious about her, a glossy sweetness of manner which made her glide into her place as though she had spent years of forethought how to adjust herself to it.

Equally imperceptibly, equally noiselessly her influence had radiated both through the brother and the sister, bringing with it a gradual refinement of thought and speech in Tabitha, and instilling into Jim a complacent patience which was not torpidness of feeling, and could only come from some subtle massage of his soul. And as he listened to the melodious voice, musical even to monotony, it flashed on him that he owed to its owner, he knew not exactly what, but something which none other of those with whom his narrow life brought him in contact could have ever conveyed to him. Perhaps it was the power of imagining beautiful things, of creating those whispering phantasms that hovered round his bed caressingly; and what he would have done without these day-dreams, these dear playmates of his dreary waking hours, he trembled to think. Yes, he was much in her debt; the occasional crust and makeshift couch were hardly an adequate return, and, such as they were, they stood to Tabitha's credit. When would he be able to repay—ever?

But even the anxiety as to his ultimate fate, was just now mastered by the desire to see clearer into this living secret which divulged to him great mysteries, and yet withheld its own revelation. Discreetly he waited for

one of the "thinking fits." Then he broke out: "I say, 'ow did you get 'ere, Phœbe?"

"Why, I walked, of course," was Phœbe's ready, though somewhat astonished reply.

"I don't mean to this room, I mean gin'rally 'ereabouts, to this part o' the world."

"I'll try and give you some idea of what an eruption of Stromboli looks like from a distance," said Phœbe.

But Jimmy shook his head impatiently at the evasion.

"No, 'ow did you get 'ere," he iterated.

"Don't ask me, Jimmy; it's long ago, and I'm forgetting the road I came by. It wasn't a road with rose-bushes for hedges, you can guess that, I daresay."

"I never guessed anything about you, Phœbe," said Jimmy, abashed by the quiet voice that answered his importunity, "and if you'd rather not——"

Phœbe seemed to be debating with herself; suddenly she asked: "Do you know what eau-de-Cologne is, Jimmy?"

"Something to eat, it sounds like," hazarded Jimmy.

"Something to smell, and sometimes, when you feel a little faint, you put a few drops on a lump of sugar and it revives you. That's the proper use for it. There's another, which was invented by the devil. When you feel low in spirit and your heart is sinking bottomwards with despair, you take rather more than a few drops, and it mounts high up into your head and pulls your heart up after it like a steam crane. And by-and-by you want more and more drops to make the crane

strong enough, till there comes a time when you can take as many drops as you like and you won't make it work. Then you try something else, more especially fitted to do the devil's business, and cheaper when the funds run down, till at last you like the thing for its own sake, and forget that it was to be only a means to an end; do you follow that, Jimmy?"

Jimmy nodded sagaciously. "You mean that's the way that ladies gets fond o' the bottle."

"Jimmy, you are a model of directness, and for that you deserve to be rewarded. I shall tell you something else. One day last week there was a tremendous crowd in the High Street, all watching a great lady drive up to open the new Tee-to-tum. I was among the crowd, right in front too, because I wanted to see what she was like after these many years."

"Then you knew 'er?"

"Her look caught mine, and I thought she—— Quickly I pushed back because I didn't want her to, and a man nearly elbowed a hole into me for stepping on his foot. That made me think how angry she got when I trod on her train the day we went to kiss the Queen's hand."

"You, Phœbe—you kissed the Queen's 'and?" Jimmy almost wriggled himself out of bed with excitement.

Phœbe stood up stiffly, with bowed head and entwined fingers, as she said:

"I did—may she forgive me for it."

Then the room became very still, and the waning afternoon seemed to fade more rapidly into evening shadows.

"Why don't you go back to yer people?" came at last from Jimmy; "if I was you, I'd ask 'em to let me 'ave enough to live on comf'table instid o'——"

"No, you wouldn't, Jimmy; you would do as I am doing. It isn't pride, no—not pride; if I have begged for farthings I wouldn't be too proud to beg for pounds, would I? I'll tell you what it is, Jimmy: it's fear—funk, as you would say. One look, whether of anger or disdain or reproach or pity, one look from any of those who knew me of old and recognised me now, would stab me mortally. And I don't want to die just yet, Jimmy,—not at least till my heart has caught the first faint whisper of the message hinting to me that, when I go to be judged beyond, I shall not appear all scarlet. I am waiting for it every day; I listen for it every hour, hard, with all my ears. But the past still surges in them too loudly with billows of memory. Thank God, once they roared; now they only hiss. As the years went on they became calmer and calmer; and therefore I don't despair—perhaps in time to come they will cease altogether, and then I shall hear God's peace calling me. Meanwhile, I shall keep to my rag-picking. Who knows? One day, when I am least thinking of it, I may sort out my redemption from a dust-bin. There, Jimmy, you're a naughty boy—why do you let me maunder on and make myself ridiculous? Or perhaps it's the fault of the twilight. Well, then, we'll have it out on the twilight; we'll kill it—with paraffin, eh?"

And taking Jimmy's consent for granted, Phœbe proceeded to perform her self-appointed task. The light showed her Jimmy's curiously scared face, but

she ignored it, and set herself to break the tension with lighter talk.

"I'll surprise Tabitha—I'll put that frill round her collar, and then she can go to bed the moment she has had supper if she feels so inclined. That's a brilliant idea, don't you think so?"

"Not so very," replied Jimmy; "I think you'd do better to keep 'er up a little."

The mention of Tabitha had reminded him of a resolve which had been formulating itself in his mind for the last day or two, and the execution of which circumstances had foiled till this moment.

"Keep her up?" echoed Phœbe; "what on earth for?"

"For—for a purpose," temporised Jimmy, whose heart almost failed him at the magnitude of the enterprise. Then as he saw Phœbe waiting with sympathetic interest, he plucked up heart of grace and continued:

"To find out about that chap Ted you've seen 'ere."

"Why—what does she know about him?"

Phœbe's lack of comprehension exasperated Jimmy.

"Call yourself a clever woman, don't you?" he jeered; "but when it comes to showin' off yer cleverness, you suddenly find you've mislaid it."

"Dear me," said Phœbe in distress.

"Dear yourself as much as you like—that'll do you or anybody a lot o' good." Then remembering that the impetuosity of his manner would only tend to increase her confusion, he moderated it to a coldly argumentative tranquillity.

"Now lookin' at it with yer eyesight, what do you think a feller 'ud come 'angin' round 'ere for? To admire the furniture? Or because the doctor's gone and ordered 'im to climb as many stairs as 'e can for eggsercise? Or to find out 'ow many pieces a chap's back can get broke into without killin' 'im right out? Phœbe, Phœbe," and Jimmy shook his head sorrowfully, "I'd given you credit for jist one thing too much."

"But the idea," exclaimed Phœbe.

"That's what we're 'ere to discuss. I thinks 'e's as good a chap as ever breathed, and I'll be best man if they 'as to take me there in my coffin."

"Don't!" and Phœbe shuddered; "but are you sure you're right? Has he said anything to you?"

Jimmy smiled a smile of ineffable wisdom.

"Not as I might say word for word, but I've got better proof nor that."

He put his hand into the narrow space between the bed and the wall, and brought to light a square piece of white cardboard, one side of which contained a mysterious design in colours.

He passed it to Phœbe, who took it to the light, and submitted it to a searching investigation. Anxiously Jimmy followed the track of her gaze over the surface; he noted with dismay the contracting of her brows, the blinking of her eyes, and other signs of bewilderment.

"Well, what d'you take it for?" he questioned at last, unable to bear further suspense.

"Seems to be meant for a woman's head," said Phœbe.

“Then why didn’t you say so at once?” said Jimmy in tones of relief; “now guess again—who d’you think it stands for?”

“Me?” suggested Phœbe desperately.

“You!”—the monosyllable was a growl—“why no; Tabitha it’s meant for, can’t you see?”

Phœbe, of course, could not, but daylight poured in on her darkened mind and she saw something else.

“You’re doing it for Ted,” she declared.

“Now you’re pullin’ yerself together, because you’re quite right. That’s what ’e gave me that shillin’ box o’ paints for; ’e wanted ’er photograph, but ’e couldn’t ’ave it, because Tabby never got took since she was twelve, and that’s gone and got faded, and ’e didn’t ’ave pluck to ask ’er to sit for one, poor bloke. So ’e sez: ‘Jim, will you paint ’er?’ I sez: ‘I’ll try, Ted.’ Seems you don’t think much of it, Phœbe?”

“It’s not as accurate as it might be; still, when you look at it hard, there *is* a certain likeness,” compromised Phœbe, “but even then, what’s the good of it?”

“The good of it?”

“I mean, what’s the use of his cheating himself with false hopes, or getting deeper into this sentiment of his, when she does not give him the least encouragement; besides, can you blame her if she doesn’t?”

“That’s where you come in. Talk to ’er, crack ’im up sky-’igh; say anything you like to——”

“Jimmy, it’s no good meddling in other people’s love affairs.”

“Muddlin’ ain’t, you mean; but when a clever, clean-fingered lady takes the job in ’and——”

“Even then there’s likely to be a hitch, you wily flatterer.”

“That’s exac’ly what we want: we want to get ’em ’itched, don’t we?”

Phœbe laughed, but immediately became grave again. She knew more than Jimmy—a good deal more. She had not forgotten Tabitha’s confidences, and from latest observations she had gathered that Tabitha’s feelings in a certain direction had not undergone much modification. That, however, she reflected, was only a stronger reason why she should undertake to champion Ted; he would furnish a pretext for weaning Tabitha from a pernicious prepossession which could not but end in hopelessly wrecking her peace of mind. She knew that Ted’s was a losing cause; but that only gave him additional claim to her support, for it made him akin to her; was she not herself a lost cause?

So, much to Jimmy’s delight, she promised to do what she could in the matter and entered with him into an unprincipled conspiracy, one of the conditions of which consisted in his shamming a lethean slumber when Tabitha came home, so as to leave his coadjutor a clear field of action.

The interval was filled with desultory talk, of which the lion’s share fell to Jimmy, because Phœbe was preoccupied in drawing up her plan of campaign. Punctually at a quarter past eight Tabitha returned, and to keep up appearances Phœbe put a peremptory stop to Towzer’s customary acclamations. Tabitha took off cape and hat and seated herself wearily. With aching heart Phœbe noted the thin edge-like angularity

of her face, the dark circles beneath the lack-lustre eyes, and the piteous expression of premature age which is proper to those who have relaxed hold of the reins of life when only in mid-career. To Phœbe it was a new sign, and one of bad augury. She refrained, however, from troubling Tabitha with commonplace enquiries, and, extracting from the paper cover the smoked herring, which, with only slight variations, Tabitha purchased nightly for her supper, Phœbe got ready the simple repast, not forgetting an extra spoonful of tea to give the beverage more back-bone. She knew the constructive as well as the destructive value of stimulants.

“Better?” she asked finally.

Tabitha sat back with a sigh. “Thank you, I’m feeling alive again.”

“You are overdoing it, Tabitha; you work too hard.”

“Well, there’s nothing else to do, is there?”

“No, but your way of doing it looks like a slow form of suicide.”

“Don’t care what it is.”

“That’s right,” exclaimed Phœbe; “let yourself go—say ‘don’t care,’ and ‘go-hang,’ and show generally what a mean selfish thing you are.”

“Selfish?”

“Of course; if you go on killing yourself, of which you have just announced your intention, what is to become of Jimmy, among other things?”

“You’re talking nonsense, Phœbe—blaming me for feeling worn out. I suppose I’ve got a right to feel

as I like, there's no extra charge for it. It just happens that I've got a pair of hands which I know what to do with, and that's all."

Phœbe noted the irritation in her voice, but was not abashed.

"It's not the way you use your hands I complain of," she said, sitting up for the attack; "you let your thoughts work too hard—that's the trouble."

"How do you know?"

"Know? It's written on your face, and a baby could spell it, my dear. It is only of late I have noticed it, though. You have never been like this before. To my mind, you are not suffering from any bodily ailment—or, am I wrong?"

Phœbe waited for the feeble head-shake in token of denial, and continued: "Then it's your mental labour: it can't be domestic anxiety—you are paying your way, you owe no debt, and Jimmy, if he's getting no better, is getting no worse. There's only one way I can account for your going to pieces like this."

Tabitha directed at her a glance of enquiry; but against Phœbe's steady and critical gaze she could not sustain her own.

"You may be angry with me, Tabitha," resumed the older woman; "I give you full leave, but it's better I should talk. You want setting right with yourself; there's too much of Mr Dacre in your life. Whenever you talked of him to me I replied with nothing but a casual warning, because I did not have the courage to rob you of your illusion. But it's high time; you are feeding yourself on your fancy, and it makes poor fare

and hollow cheeks. Do you remember what you told me the first day you saw him? You said he had made you feel at peace with the whole world; and the result is, that you are at war with yourself. Your thoughts have turned against you; with them it was the story of the snake in the husbandman's bosom over again. Once they got warm in their place, they began to gnaw at your heart, and ended by biting large pieces out of it. If you want to live, Tabitha, get rid of them."

"I can't, Phœbe—I can't."

"I daresay it's difficult; it's much easier to do than to undo. But that's no reason why you should not make a trial. Take your time over it; that's better than a sudden wrench which may leave the roots of the evil behind. And perhaps they are not even as deep as you think. Look at it reasonably—argue it out with yourself."

"But I can't argue," said Tabitha sadly.

"Then let me do it for you. Why do you let this man hold you in bondage, as it were?"

"Because I love him," replied Tabitha almost sullenly.

"But you don't, Tabitha—believe me you don't; how can you? From your own saying you only once talked to him for as long as ten minutes; after that he addressed a few occasional remarks to you—scarcely enough to learn the sound of his voice. And on the strength of that, you allow him to play umpire over your heart and happiness. It's childish, Tabitha—or at least, it isn't womanly. That's not the cloth that love is made of; it's flimsy frippery, which won't even work up into the ghost of an infatuation. You go about

nursing a fraud and imagining that it can produce the effects of the genuine article."

Phœbe was astonished at her own display of sophistry ; she knew from experience, for which she had been paying the price for twenty years, that the heart is no logician, that it leaps—because it is in its nature to leap—to conclusions built on the most insecure premises, and there was no reason why Tabitha's should not follow this same law of ill-considered gravitation. But the purpose in hand demanded extreme measures, and Phœbe was prepared to go to any length.

She was, however, not prepared for the more immediate result. Piteously Tabitha lifted her hands :

"Don't say I'm fooling myself, Phœbe," she murmured, "because I want to think that I know what it's like—to—love—a man."

The last words had been mere ejaculations, wedged in between half-stifled sobs ; and then Tabitha succumbed entirely, and allowed her pain to gush out in a flood of tempestuous tears. Hastily Phœbe moved close to her, gathered the cowering figure in her arms, and mother-like stroked the head with its prim antiquated hair-dressing ; at the same time she signalled caution to Jimmy, who had lifted his face above the counterpane and watched the scene with eyes of dumbly questioning distress.

But almost as quickly as the outbreak had come, it ebbed away. Tabitha had not cried for a very long time, and in weeping, as in all other accomplishments, one loses proficiency through want of practice. She disengaged herself from Phœbe's clasp and sat up again

with a sober look which contrasted oddly with the still visible traces of her emotion. She evidently wished the incident to pass without comment, and Phœbe had tact enough to humour her.

“Don’t be afraid; you will know it right enough,” she said, tacking on her reply to Tabitha’s last words, as though there had been no interruption.

Tabitha, too, quickly recaptured the thread of ideas.

“Never, Phœbe,” she answered softly; “if not this time, then never.”

“Never is a word which ought to be prohibited by act of Parliament; it does such a lot of mischief,” said Phœbe in lighter vein; “I guarantee you are wrong. Only, next time, you will set about the business in more correct style.”

Tabitha echoed the last words in wonder.

“That is,” explained Phœbe, “you will wait till somebody gets very fond of you, and then you will return the compliment.”

“I shall have to wait then.”

“Not very long,” said Phœbe; “in fact it’s done already. Hasn’t it struck you, Tabitha, that—how shall I put it?—that you have made a conquest?”

Tabitha looked at her almost in terror. Since when had Phœbe, her *protégée*, as it were, grown so presumptuous as to ridicule her? But with yet another moment’s thought Phœbe’s meaning flashed on her. She acknowledged it by setting her lips very tightly, and turning her head to one side.

“Well?” asked Phœbe, not without apprehension.

“Phœbe, how can you?” was the impatient reply.

"I'm sure I don't know, but there it is. And it's the next fact we have to deal with."

"No, it isn't," cried Tabitha, with moist-gleaming anger in her eyes; "how dare he? What's given him the right to think such a thing, and—oh, I'm a fool, Phœbe; you're not serious?"

"You are not a fool, and I *am* serious. And if you feel indignant you had better have it out at once and be done with it, because presently you'll have to listen to reason."

Tabitha moaned; she had had a taste of Phœbe's reasoning, and it sounded terribly convincing. This time, however, her whole being rose up against the possibility of being convinced.

"Don't, Phœbe, it's no good," she deprecated; "I never knew he was alive—I never knew he had a brain to think with about me or anything else, and I should never have known about anything if you hadn't told me. Surely that's a thing which must be left to every woman to find out for herself."

"Very true—that is, if she is not otherwise pre-occupied, and you must admit, dear, you have not given yourself a fair chance."

"I didn't want to, either; and you didn't do me a favour."

"I think I did; you forget what use we are going to make of him."

"Use?"

"Why, yes. He is to be the antidote to the Dacre poison—do you understand me?"

Tabitha laughed incredulously. Phœbe had no

objection to the laugh, although it did not sound pleasant.

"We must try everything," she continued; "who knows? Now what have you to say against him?"

"I should have nothing to say for him if I lived to be a hundred. Phœbe—you torment me!"

"No operation without pain, my dear; let us go on cutting. You don't care for him? You don't want to care for him. I must congratulate you on your forethought. As a rule married people——" she noticed, without being disheartened, the shudder with which Tabitha rejected the implication—"married people begin at the wrong end of the stick. They start with their feelings for one another quite full grown; they leave no room for development. They forget that love is a thing too much alive to stand still for a moment. It must either grow or dwindle; and then they are disappointed that it does not come up to their expectations. You will be luckier, Tabitha; you will have everything to gain and nothing to lose—what more do you want?"

Tabitha did not say, because she could not find words. The vague fear with which she had looked forward to Phœbe's argumentation had been justified; the smooth, well-turned phrases, as they appeared to her, to which she had just listened, seemed imbued with the spirit of gospel; it seemed like heresy to disbelieve them. And yet, though her lips were dumb, she heard a voice in her heart crying out against them and giving them the lie. But she was surprised that she could refrain from giving that voice physical shape; it argued a certain indiffer-

ence with which ten minutes ago she would not have credited herself. In fact it was this indifference to which she gave utterance in saying :

“ I will think about it.”

The next moment, however, she felt a frantic desire to recall the words ; they were treason to the one dream of her life, the dream to which she had sworn allegiance for better or for worse.

“ You are a sensible girl,” replied Phœbe, and the praise stung Tabitha as though it were the bitterest recrimination.

That concluded the proceedings for the evening. Phœbe, on enquiry, admitted that business had been bad that day, and she was consequently without any other shelter than that which Tabitha readily offered her.

“ Hard work this, manufacturing fallacies, especially on an empty stomach,” said Phœbe to herself, tossing on her shake-down, sleepless with pangs of hunger ; “ I wonder which is the worse dilemma—to be too hungry to sleep or too sleepy to eat ? ”

And then the animal, which is the mother of everything human, asserted itself, and from out all the pitiable wreckage of her past she chose for her one plank of regret the many-course dinners, which, in her time, she had counted among the discomforts of existence.

“ I say, Tabitha ! ” she exclaimed.

“ Yes ? ”

“ Do you know what would be better than teaching people the Ten Commandments when they are children ? ”

“No.”

“To din into their heads that they can only live their life once.”

And Tabitha, without seeing the particular application of the remark, or knowing the ignoble motive from which it sprang, conceded its truth.

CHAPTER XII

“**D**ING dong! ding dong! don't we sing a pretty song?—'Ear them bells, young Towzer?” asked Jimmy; “that means church time for all good people. Now 'ow long is it since you last thought about the savin' o' yer soul, you ragged 'eathen?”

Towzer yawned cavernously, but otherwise showed no signs of contrition.

“If that's the case,” continued his allocutor, “we'll pass the time, while Mammy Tabitha's out gettin' in the dinner, by 'avin' a little service all on our own—some—what d'you say?”

It was an unfair question, and so Towzer was justified in ignoring it.

“We'll begin with a nice bright hymn—now, which? ‘Oh, Molly Reilly’—'ow dare you, Towzer? What d'you mean suggestin' sich a low vulgar toon? ‘'Twas in Trafalgar Bay.’ That's better—no 'arm in singin' of a man doin' 'is dooty, even of a Sunday; but it won't do quite. Oh, I've got it! ‘The Lord is my Shepherd.’”

He cleared his throat and reverently chanted the verses, here and there, when his memory failed him, substituting a reading of his own. Towzer hung his ear-

flaps and generally observed a respectful demeanour, although he was, as a rule, not very partial to music.

“Now we’ll proceed to the next hitem, which is a sermond,” said Jimmy, when he had come to the end; “the trouble, though, is to find a good text. Well, what you can’t get, do without—’ello, that’s about as good a text as any. Sit up, Towzer, it’s comin’; now, jist you dare fall asleep!—Dearly beloved brethren, I’m goin’ to talk to you this ’ere mornin’ on the wickedness o’ wantin’ more nor what you’ve planked down money for. What I sez is, that none o’ you ’as given Gawd any stakes to ’old, and though you may be runnin’ ever so well in the race for ’eaven, don’t be surprised if you don’t get paid nothing on account. And, what’s more, you’ve got to be more thankful for what you don’t get nor for what you do. Now, s’pose you was gettin’ thunder and lightnin’ this day instid of it rainin’ sunshine in bucketsful, and you couldn’t take yer best gal out in the afternoon. That’s why I sez: take my advice, and thank Gawd for small mercies, or else you won’t get nothing at all. Don’t be greedy, and you’ll get no belly-aches, and no ’eart-aches neither. For instance, look at Towzer ’ere! ’E gets a farthin’s o’ cat’s meat every day, but so soon as ’e sees me takin’ a bite, ’e comes snufferin’ round most shameless. What’ll ’appen? ’E’ll die, and that’ll be the end of ’im. So, take warnin’, my brethren—’ave yer bite, and, if it’s only a little ’un, chew at it as long as you can. It’ll all come right in the sweet bimeby. Amen.”

“So much for that,” said Jimmy, with considerable satisfaction; “to foller on, we’ll ’ave a bit o’ prayer—quite ’ome-made like, and strickly private. Would you

mind goin' down on yer knees for me, Mr Towzer, because, as you know, I can't do it for myself—no, the fore-knees not the hind 'uns. Now, jist keep like this till it's all over.—Gawd up in 'eaven, I know you ain't got much time for a poor bloke like me, but I won't keep you very long ; I only want you to grant me two or three favours. First, I want you to patch up this 'ere back o' mine, so that I can stand up straight and look the world in the face, which you know is the proper thing for a feller my age. Second place, see what you can do for poor old Phœbe, and make 'er find that there redemption she's always talkin' about and lookin' for in the sweepings, pretty quick. Next, please, there's Tabitha. I want you to be hextra kind to 'er, because, you know, she's a good sort ; don't let 'er cry agin as she cried the other night which wasn't for joy. Make 'er take 'er 'eart off from the chap she's 'ung it on, and instid, 'ang it on to little Ted 'Ickory, what'll make a much better peg for it. Then, there's brother Josh ; if you don't mind, I'd like you to take 'im in 'and a bit, and give 'is soul a new coat o' paint—I'm afraid it must be a good deal off colour by now. That's about all—no—'old 'ard, I've got another one. Kindly chip a bit off Towzer's appetite ; it's too large for the size of 'is rations, and I don't like the 'ungry look about 'is jaw when it gets to meal-times. Yes, that's quite all. Thank you—Amen ! Hallelujah !”

Scarcely had he uttered the last word when a volley of barks from Towzer heralded Tabitha's return. She brought with her the table delicacies which the butcher round the corner had considerately reserved for her,

despite the overwhelming demand for them the night before ; for the tradesmen in the neighbourhood took kindly to the quiet-voiced customer who came as a relief to their nerves after the importunate, bargain-driving housewives of the district. There was also a bone for Towzer, for the cat's meat man took no official count of his clients on a Sunday. In addition, she had brought vegetables and a piece of rather vigorous cheese.

She placed them on the table, and drew a long breath.

"O Jimmy, it *is* fine outside!" she said.

"I can see," assented Jimmy wistfully.

"Never mind, old boy, when I start earning more money we'll take a flat on the ground floor, and then you can go into a bath-chair for an hour or two."

"And get wheeled about along o' the babies in the p'rams. Jingo! won't that be excitin'! But I'll tell you what I'll do, Tabby—I'll die; then I can turn ghost and walk."

Tabitha laughed, but only a little.

"Jimmy, you mustn't die or I'll never forgive you!"

"By-the-by, what did the parish doctor bloke say last time?" asked Jimmy.

"Why, I've told you twice; he says there's hope. It's only a matter of time when the bone starts mending, and he's known worse cases than you which recovered."

"You ain't learnt them words by 'eart, 'ave you? Because each time you've said 'em off like a parrot."

"Jimmy, it's God's truth!"

"O Tabby, I'm devilish glad!—I'm sayin' that to pay the Devil a compliment on the sly; p'r'aps I've offended

him—been too good, or something—and that's why 'e's got 'is knife in me. I don't want to rot like this much longer; the more I lay 'ere, watchin' them fly-spots on the ceilin', the more ideas keeps whirlin' through my 'ead. And then they creeps down into my fingers, and start itchin' there, and then I've got to take up a pencil and make things out of 'em on paper. But I s'pose 't ain't what they want, because presently they get disgusted, and go crowdin' back to my 'ead, fit to make it bust. Now, if I could get about, I'd go and ask a man what understands which way they've got to be made right. That's what's troublin' me worse nor everything."

"Quite right, Jimmy; as soon as you're well, you'll learn drawing, and all that sort of thing, properly, and one of these days you'll be a great artist."

"Is that what it's called?"

"Yes; and meanwhile you must be patient."

"That I'll be, don't fret—patient as the rock of ages. Go it, Towzer—up with yer tail, and three cheers for the good time that's comin'!"

The new hope made him loquacious, and he prattled on merrily, so that he scarcely noticed the taciturnity with which Tabitha went about her culinary duties. Even when he had to repeat a question thrice, and then only received a perfunctory reply, he ascribed it to the application which her task exacted. Had he, however, chosen to enquire more intimately into the cause and meaning of her preoccupation, Tabitha would have felt considerably embarrassed. For, truth to tell, she had tried to analyse it herself, and had failed. She had woke up that morning with a singular disquietude upon her, for

which even her having had full five minutes' speech with Mr Dacre the previous evening could not entirely account. True, the slightest attention he showed her made her brim over with happiness ; but it was a happiness subdued, sedate, and full of quiet gratitude. It was in nowise akin to this unbalanced restlessness of her present humour. Her mind had abandoned itself to a see-saw of subtle undulations, the drift of which seemed more like the ebb and flow of a strange caprice. It had gone forth with her into the sunlit streets, had kept her company on her errands, gathering strength on the way, and was now gasping for breath in the narrow confines of the attic. Tabitha felt it playing queer antics with her ; it robbed her of the patience requisite for the conscientious peeling of potatoes, and a rigorous enquiry into the complications of cabbage leaves. More than that, it filled her with an absolute distaste for the idea of consuming the victuals she was now preparing by dint of so much self-control.

By the time they were ready, the distaste had grown to an aversion, and she left her plate almost untouched. The few morsels she had swallowed seemed to have paused half way in protest, and yet she knew she was not ill—no, that least of all! She was conscious of a buoyant strength that seemed fain to lift her out of herself and carry her shoulder-high above the level of her every-day soberness. For a time she resisted ; then the impulse seized her and would take no refusal.

“Would you mind if I go out a while?” she asked tremulously.

“Mind?” said Jimmy, “I was jist goin' to tell you

myself; this is the first Sunday for a month it hasn't rained. Look sharp—off you go!"

Tabitha got up with a curious impatience in her feet; they seemed chafing against the caution of movement she had to impose on them from restricted space. She went to the wardrobe to make her selection. It proved a lengthy affair. Her skirt and blouse did not give her much trouble, because she possessed but one of each which might be deemed worthy of Sunday wear. What she lingered over was the choice of the fineries which she owned in larger assortment; there was the neck-ribbon which for a long time refused to conform to the prevailing crimson of the ample sash. There was the cheap silk handkerchief which, draped in graceful folds at the throat, was to act as a foil both to ribbon and sash; and lastly came the paste brooch which was to throw the beauties of all into stronger relief. The donning of these was, of course, preceded by a copious use of soap and water, and a more or less successful attempt to subject her refractory hair to the ordinances of the latest mode.

Jimmy noted these unusually extensive preparations in wonder, but he made no comment for fear of putting a premature stop to them. What surprised him the more was, that Tabitha herself offered no explanation of what was so foreign to her customary practice; as a rule, her toilette, even for those Saturday night excursions of hers, occupied her a quarter the time. Tabitha and vanity—what was the world coming to?

But Tabitha herself was very clear on the point; what she did was only in accord with the same fancy—

so she called it for want of a more accurate denomination—which had thrown her out of the track of her routine habits. It prompted her for once to give herself what attractiveness could be derived from a skilful manipulation of accessories, in order to satisfy the desperate, unaccountable desire to be noticed favourably, to please, which had taken possession of her.

She made Jimmy her first touchstone.

“Well, what do you think of me?” she said, parading herself with just a tinge of coquetry in her manner.

Jimmy stared at her aghast; he had not anticipated this result. As she stood attitudinising before him in the garish sunshine, she struck him with a strong sense of artificiality, of patched-up gaudiness, which seemed to do duty as a note of exclamation to the uncompromising plainness of her features. It suddenly made him think that this was quite a different Tabitha to the one he knew as his sister; she looked so very much older, and also bolder, than the real Tabitha, who in his eyes was always as young and demure as she had been at twenty. His heart ached, and yet—well, he had to repress an inclination to smile.

“Doesn’t it look a bit showy?” he asked anxiously,

Tabitha laughed jauntily. “That’s all you know about it; you’re only a man. Don’t you know what’s the secret of dressing well? To take your cue from the weather; well, it’s bright enough outside, isn’t it?”

That killed further remonstrance from Jimmy, and presently Tabitha took her departure, without fixing any particular time for her return, which was also a swerving from tradition. She knew, as she descended the stair-

case, that she had not been quite candid to her brother ; to-day she had not dressed according to the weather but according to her mood. That mood was more than mere high spirits ; there was something flaunting and *insouciant* about it, which she might almost call recklessness, defiance. What she defied, whom she defied, she had not yet enquired into, and for the present, she did not care to know.

She got down into the quadrangle ; it was empty, but at the gate she had to pass a group of loungers who greeted her with various expressions of astonishment. One youth begged her for the address of her milliner, because he wanted to order a headgear of like pattern for his grandmother to get buried in. Another asked her permission to light his extinguished pipe at her sash, which he apparently mistook for living flame ; a third offered her his company on condition that she paid his expenses and a trifle over.

Tabitha, of course, vouchsafed them no reply by word or look, and continued at a high-stepping pace, which had the appearance of being more in the nature of an experiment. From the first flower-girl she met she bought a twopenny blush rose, without which she had hardly felt complete. Another few minutes brought her to the High Street, which on Sundays transformed itself into a promenade. It was as yet tolerably empty, because the greater part of the local population was still at table. The sunshine took advantage of its tenantless state, and made itself thoroughly at home ; it flung itself boldly, bulkily almost, between the two rows of houses, and sent special little beams to recon-

noitre in outlying nooks and crannies. The dull, old structures bore a good-humoured air; the newer ones, which had no dignity of age to consult, seemed all a-giggle. The very sky, crinkled here and there into delicate white ripples of cloud, seemed as though wreathed in pellucid laughter.

Tabitha moderated her pace; it struck her that as she had no particular destination, she need be in no hurry to reach it. So she could taste the sunshine at her leisure, and digest it more completely; she was almost glad that she had not been able to eat anything at home—surely this was better fare! Moreover, she was pleased to notice the increase in the number of pedestrians, which, though gradual, was sustained. It was, in some measure, a guarantee to her that she was not putting an exaggerated value on the enjoyment of the hour, because there were these others to corroborate her. But it likewise meant something more to her. It gratified her craving for companionship, for closer contact with her fellow-creatures, which had been as an undercurrent to her turmoil of soul. To her own surprise, she had the courage, instead of concentrating her sight on the pavement, according to her wont, to study the appearance of the passers-by. What proved of most interest to her were the sweethearting couples, who formed a large percentage of the promenaders. Most of the girls were young—some of them pert little chits in their teens; all of them bore an expression of proprietorship more or less provocative according to the circumstances of the case. There was something in it which instilled into Tabitha a resentful feeling of

inferiority, of exclusion ; it seemed to her that, having come into the world so much earlier than they, she was being deprived of the rights of seniority. They had started life years and years behind her, and yet they had already attained to what to her was still a distant possibility. Ted? She laughed at the thought ; what was the use of achievement when the pride in it was absent? A tinge of discontent was beginning to discolour the pleasurable anticipation with which she had sallied out.

Meantime, her curiosity anent the people she met did not go unreciprocated. She was favoured with a profusion of backward glances, the intent of which was scarcely complimentary. Not infrequently a laugh came floating back, and made her think what a good jest it must have been which had evoked it. She was a little annoyed that not everybody gave her the right-of-way which was due to a well-dressed, ladylike young woman ; indeed, on one or two occasions she was distinctly hustled, and her remonstrances met with open derision. From time to time it occurred to her she would be much more comfortable at home, reclining on the couch with a cup of tea at her side, and an atmosphere of velvet-mannered carpet-knights emanating from the pages of her novelette.

But, despite these seductions, the idea of cooping herself up in her attic was revolting to her ; to-day she had no patience for mere phantasms. It was something more than her imagination which required to be fed.

What was that? Surely she must be mistaken.

There, in front of her stretched Blackfriars Bridge, and here, to the left, was Stamford Street. She had evidently been sauntering on for an hour and a half, and yet it appeared to her as though she had but just set foot on the pavement. She scarcely knew whether she had been cheating herself consciously or unconsciously, whether she had let her steps stray hither through a half-latent purpose or an ungoverned instinct; but, in any case, here she was. A few more steps and she would be at Mr Dacre's door. The thought frightened her, and yet, it was so inexpressibly sweet,—it almost made her faint with the very joyousness of it.

Still irresolute, she turned off into the street, strolling on at a snail's pace till she came abreast of the house where the door-plate said: "Algernon Dacre." The words startled her: somebody seemed uttering them aloud. Hastily she crossed over to the other side and stopped for an instant to glance up at the unresponsive windows on the first floor. Somehow she guessed he must be there. Then she passed on, but only to retrace her steps presently.

So she paced up and down, reminding herself that it was not the first occasion on which she was thus watching for him. But this time she was not spying; she did not know what it was she was doing. However, she must make up her mind quickly, and she did. The sense of daring, of giving herself rein, which seemed to have intruded into her life that day, a dispossessing alien element, rose up in her strongly, argued eloquently, and carried off a final victory. Yes, she would go; she would thrust herself upon him, because she could

not do otherwise, unless some one came and put her in chains. Some pretext or other, even of the flimsiest, would be sufficient for her, so long as she gained his presence, and——

In the exultation of her resolve she had left the house a good distance behind her; now she turned to hurry back ere she had time to reconsider, when her heart gave a sudden leap that made her stand rooted to the ground. At the first glance she saw that the door had opened, and Mr Dacre had stepped out, closely followed by two other men. They all wore frock-coats and silk hats, which implied that they were going out for the day. Evidently they were in very good spirits, if loud laughter and animated conversation could be counted as evidence of the same. So they came on. As they passed the spot where Tabitha had become transformed to a statue, Mr Dacre cast an involuntary look across. Her lips were just expanding into a smile of acknowledgment when his look glanced off again as though she were empty space.

She interpreted the incident correctly. It was not his intention to disclaim his acquaintance with her; she simply struck no chord or recollection in his mind. He had forgotten her. Slowly her heart resumed its action. She turned to gaze after him—the other two did not exist—with an impotence of foiled desire, almost counting his steps to the corner, where the bend of the street snatched him from her horizon.

When she reached it herself there was nothing to be seen; a hansom speeding away in the distance gave her a clue to his disappearance. And now she waited for

the coming of the unrepining heart-break with which she watched him leave the "Falstaff" every Saturday night. To her surprise it came not ; it apparently sent for deputy a vehement rush of feeling, a half-furious impetuosity which threatened to sweep her reason off its feet. Her bonds of control were rent to ribbons, and seemed to be fluttering loose in a whirlwind of passion.

Without attempting what she knew was impossible—the collecting of her thoughts—she started back in the direction by which she had come, her speed growing with every step, till she had almost broken into a run. Oh, yes, she was running away from herself, from the wild spell which was each moment gaining stronger mastery over her ; and yet she felt that the faster she went, the more she was defeating her purpose. Her very power of endurance—this strange strength of hers—was the life and soul of her obsession ; it would leave her, it would abate once she herself grew tired, and that seemed a long way off. It was to her as though she had been husbanding her energy of limb for years so that she might riot it away in one brief afternoon.

A familiar voice suddenly struck on her ear.

"Hi, there, Tabby, you've cast yer left shoe!"

This was followed by another voice which enquired : "Got the 'tecs after you?" Then it continued : "Lawks, don't look so scared—it's only me and Arfer!"

"Ah, yes, of course," said Tabitha, recovering herself from the effects of the shock ; "didn't know you at first. The sun had got into my eyes."

"So long it don't get into yer 'ead," joked Arthur Page.

Tabitha smiled, but Jenny Fly sharply called her admirer to order.

"Been to a christenin' or something?" she went on, exhaustively overhauling Tabitha's attire, and noting the most striking details for her mother's information.

"No, only just out for a walk."

"So am I; and Arfer 'ere asked if I'd let 'im come along. Don't mind givin' a bloke a treat once in a way."

Arthur looked mutinous, but on second thoughts possessed his soul in peace.

"Very fine day, ain't it?" remarked Tabitha, looking at him.

"Funny, jist 'eard a man top o' the street say that," he replied, looking at Jenny, who understood.

"Come along if you can't behave yerself," she said severely. "Which way are you goin', Tabby? Straight on, I s'pose. Well, we're off down 'ere to the right. See you to-morrer."

Tabitha looked after them, guessing hard why she did so. How ridiculous! Surely, she was not envious of Jenny? Nevertheless, it struck her as strange that she had never before remarked what a well-set-up, good-looking boy Arthur was.

Once more she was alone with herself. The crowd had thickened. Now that there was less room for perspective, and consequently less opportunity for taking in the incongruousness of her *ensemble*, she passed almost unobserved. She became aware of two things—a desire to obtrude herself, and a feeling that she could do so with safety amid the teeming multitude that surged round her on all sides, and amid the rapidly

gathering foreshadows of the dusk. The casual glance with which hitherto she had taken stock of the passers-by became an aggressive stare. Men caught and returned it, but she bore it hardily—one could almost have said, brazened it out. Once or twice their look was accompanied by a nod and a smile of implied overture, and Tabitha felt that her own expression could not be construed into one of rebuff.

But the whirl of the crowd, and a self-conflicting revulsion of her own, hurried her on. She began to force her way along, without knowing from what motive or to what purpose, till she saw she was clearing the eddying throng, and gaining its backwaters where the High Street degenerated into a sequence of semi-detached residences.

Here she paused to draw breath—a long breath which, however, was interrupted before it had reached half its intended length. Somewhere from out the twilight a man had stepped up to her.

“Evening, Polly,” he was saying, “come home and have some supper with me? Oh, it’s all right—landlady doesn’t mind my bringing a sister of mine to see me now and then—ha! ha! don’t you twig?”

Tabitha turned to walk on, shaking her head dispassionately. The man misunderstood her, and kept at her side, renewing his importunities. Tabitha continued her silent gesture of refusal with the monotony of a clockwork apparatus. Then, when the man’s voice became to her more than a meaningless drone, she said quite slowly and deliberately: “You’re wrong—I’m not what you take me for.”

That seemed to exhaust his patience, for with a violent push he sent her spinning off the pavement; then a brutal oath or two, and he was gone.

Tabitha stooped to pick up her parasol which she had dropped. She picked it up by the wrong end, because that seemed the proper way now that the whole world had turned topsy-turvy. Her own body had apparently undergone some strange inversion, and her head seemed where her feet ought to be, which alone could account for the dizzying rush of blood that blinded her.

A few minutes passed, and then things began to right themselves. The moisture in her eyes, which she had thought was blood, she found to be only tears. Her mind worked less feverishly, and suffered her to enter into account with herself. What had she been doing—thinking? What had given a man the right to strike at her with his hand, and lacerate her with his tongue? She had gathered from his incoherent curses that the fault had been hers; he had read a promise in her eyes, and had followed her to claim its fulfilment. What, then, was the legend she had written on her face for all the world to read, and from which men thought themselves entitled to be as brutes to her?

As though by inspiration her memory harked back to her return home the night she had made her *début* at the "Falstaff," and the half-uttered innuendos with which Phœbe had received her. She remembered with what indignant pride she had given those innuendos the lie. What could she answer herself now without being stared out of countenance by the truth? But she was not going to attempt self-deceit, she would not confuse

the issues—no, she would take upon herself what penalty they might impose.

Now, too, she could rightly construe the spirit of defiance which had gladdened her so much, because it made her feel bold and strong. It had been nothing but a challenge to herself, a pitting of her womanhood against her lower nature, in which the latter had conquered ignominiously. She could have cried with vexation, with self-abhorrence. After all these years of absorption she was still not sure of herself; the shackles of control, which she thought she clutched so securely, were still apt to slip her hands and make her scramble after in hot-blooded chase till they were gathered in again. And a chase often meant a stumble, and sometimes a fall.

Well, this time she was safe—nay, more, she was quits with herself. She had probed her heart to its deepest depth, she had laid her finger on its guilt, and self-knowledge was self-atonement. And now it would be quite easy to divest herself of the final traces of her madness, to smooth out the legend from her face, and quench the last tell-tale flicker in her eyes. When she came home she might find Phœbe there—Phœbe, to whom she was an open book; she did not like to say *mea culpa* twice. Her offence was not so magnificent as to deserve a double martyrdom.

For the last hour there had run through the tangled skein of her thoughts a shadowy sensation of being tracked; now that her faculties were becoming reorganised, it took more bodily shape to itself, and resolved itself into alarm. She was convinced some one was

following her, and she shrank aghast from a repetition of the recent episode. Nervously she looked back down the narrow by-street into which she had unconsciously drifted. It was empty save for an indistinct figure moving at a slovenly pace, a fair distance in her rear.

However, to guard against all emergencies, she steered her course back to more populous environments. Some little way on, there flashed on her sight a sudden brightness, which presently she identified as the effulgence of a number of oil-lamps. The eminence on which they were placed she recognised to be the top of an harmonium, which, in turn, was surrounded by a circumference of men and women, two or three deep.

Just as Tabitha came up with them the final strains of their devotional chant had died away, and a woman stepped into the circle to address, not so much the regular congregants, as the adventitious strangers to whom they were to constitute a nucleus. Tabitha stopped, because something told her that here she had reached sanctuary from the adversaries within and without her. She almost thought her good angel had set these people into her path in order to help her make peace with herself more effectually. She looked at the woman who was preaching, and, in looking at her, forgot to listen. The woman's face was much more eloquent; it was young and beautiful, but that seemed due not so much to its symmetry of feature as to the utter calm and restfulness of soul which kept it placid. It spoke balm to Tabitha; it ousted from her heart the sting of self-reproach, of self-abasement, and made her hold her

head up high, now that she had no longer need to shield it against the buffets of remorse. The great grey eyes of the street-preacher, shimmering wonderfully with many-hued tints, seemed to be her rainbow, her covenant of peace, bearing the message that the storm and stress of her inward strife was over.

The service came to an abrupt end; a constable had stepped up and intimated to the worshippers that they had outstayed their limit, and now fell under the category of street nuisances. Tabitha just noted the look of silent remonstrance the preacher cast at the intruder, and the gracious dignity with which she gave the signal of departure to her following.

Then Tabitha started for home; she was not afraid of Phoebe's scrutiny.

Soon she was once more traversing the tortuous turnings into which the humbler localities of the district branched out. It struck her that they had been fashioned purposely into this network form, so that their shame and squalor, caught fast in labyrinthine meshes, might never struggle forth to offend the sight of squeamish prosperity. There was plenty of life in them, plenty of tough strength and noisy haphazard mirth; they gave no hint of silent suffering and tears, because they had learned the value of keeping secrets. The big gin-palace at the bottom shone out in sleek and smug complacency, looking all unconscious that it was the vampire which had sucked many a home and many a heart dry of happiness.

Tabitha glanced into it with a shudder, and so, not keeping her gaze in front of her, she cannoned full tilt

against a man who, followed by a girl, was just issuing from one of the side doors.

"Who're you shovin' of?" he remarked, keeping his balance with difficulty.

Tabitha trembled. "I beg your——" She broke off as she caught sight of his face. "Why, it's you, Josh!"

"So it is," said Josh, a little more conciliatingly; "for all that, you needn't knock the wind out o' me like that. 'Ere, Nance, this 'ere's sister Tabby."

Nancy was apparently not much impressed by the information, and silently stared at the new acquaintance. Tabitha returned the stare, and thought, so far as she could judge of these things, that her brother had a good taste as regards looks at least. But it was clear to her woman's instinct that otherwise his choice was not to be commended, and she looked at him with infinite pity.

"Don't gape like a stuck pig," he said roughly; "come in and drink luck to yer sister-in-law what is to be."

"I'd rather not, Josh; thank you all the same."

"No reason to say 'thanky'; I mean you to stand treat."

"I can't afford it—really not, Josh; every penny counts with us."

"None o' yer bunkum, you old currymudgeon! I know you've got a fine fat stockin'. Shell out—don't be shy!"

"Good-night!" said Tabitha, trying to get past.

"No, you don't!" said Josh, catching her unmercifully by the wrist till she groaned.

Nancy was looking the other way, and carelessly humming a tune to the accompaniment of her heel, to show

manifestly that the proceedings did not interest her. It was her unconcern all through which had infuriated Josh, and pricked him to wreak his vengeance where he could do so with safety. His eyes were bloodshot and his voice hoarse.

“Now we’ll see! Look out, or I’ll damned well. . . .”

“You won’t do nothing of the sort,” said some one else, and, for emphasis, landed Josh a dexterous blow on the chest which caused him to shift his standing ground suddenly and to release Tabitha.

He recovered himself with a jerk, and prepared to annihilate his assailant; but no sooner had he taken stock of the latter, when his fists unclenched, and, doubling himself up till his hands were propped against his knees, he burst into a guffaw.

“Strike me lucky, if it ain’t a bloomin’ kid!” he exclaimed, during a pause in his merriment; “now, Tommy, be good to yerself, and go ’ome to mummy afore. . . .”

“Josser, ’t ain’t no kid; it’s a bloomin’ ’ump!” interposed Nancy.

Tabitha, of course, knew from the first moment who her champion was; but the course of events had been so rapid that she had not yet had time to consider whether to feel grateful to Ted or not.

Ted meanwhile continued on the defensive.

“It’s all right, midget, I won’t ’urt you,” said Josh magnanimously; “there, walk through my legs and be off.”

“I want to know if you’re goin’ to ’ollygise to the young lady,” said Ted, his face very white.

“Did you ’ear that, Tabby? ’E called you a young

lady ; 'ow much did you pay 'im to say that?" asked Josh mirthfully.

"You ain't answered my question," said Ted.

"Now, you're takin' yerself a bit too serious, 'umpy," said Josh impatiently ; "take my tip, and leave well alone."

"'Pollygise?" asked Ted curtly, ignoring the proffered advice.

"No!" shouted Josh ; and, in order to emphasise his contempt for the other's demand, poked his face close against Ted's uplifted fist. The next instant he had withdrawn it, his left ear tingling from the application of the said fist. But what maddened him more than the unexpected blow, what made a shiver of rage thrill through him from head to foot, was Nancy's peal of hard, malicious laughter.

It must not be supposed that the altercation had reached so advanced a stage without having attracted a numerous audience. At the first sound the public-house had emptied itself, and the rest of the neighbourhood was not slow in taking advantage of an entertainment provided at a minimum cost. A fight was nothing less than a direct dispensation of a capricious Providence which only occasionally woke up the monotony of their lives.

Josh saw no one ; discarding a more legitimate mode of attack he sprang at Ted, grabbed him by the hair, and dragged his head down, presumably for concussion with the pavement.

"Foul!—fight fair!—fight yer own size!" came from self-constituted umpires.

Ted, finding that his opponent did not adhere to

the rules of the game, and feeling his head in uncomfortable proximity to the ground, swung round an abnormally long arm, and caught Josh terrifically in the wind.

Josh gasped, and let go ; and then Ted, knowing his only chance lay in immediate action, followed up his advantage by a succession of postman's knocks, elementary in science, but otherwise effective.

The crowd yelled with delight, as it always does when the smaller man wins. Josh hit out blindly ; he had lost his bearings ; there was something uncanny about this dwarf with the giant's strength. But it was not the plaudits of the crowd which inspired Ted. This was his first fight ; he felt as though this man were his insidious destiny, which had entered the lists against him, delivering itself into his hands. And now he would pommel it powerless. Josh had just overreached himself ; Ted stepped aside swiftly, and somehow crashing his fist into the other's nape, sent him down headlong.

Tabitha had stood by watching the duel, partly because she was hemmed in by the throng, and partly because she wanted to take away with her the assurance that her brother was not killed right out. That was as far as he could expect her sisterly solicitude to go.

And now, as Josh laboriously lumbered back to his feet, Ted had stepped up to her, had taken her by the arm, and whispered : " For Gawd's sake, come away ! "

She followed him without demur, and the crowd respectfully gave them passage. Down the other end of the street was heard a policeman's whistle. The two hurried on to avoid being questioned. For five

minutes neither spoke; then, when the last echo of the commotion they had caused had died away, Tabitha said: "How long have you been following me?"

"I saw you at that there prayer-stand," he answered without hesitation.

It was a point on which he had come to an arrangement with himself, should she ask him about his opportune interposition. It would not do to tell her how he had been loitering round Montague Dwellings for quite a purpose of his own, and was just beginning, as he thought, to satisfy himself on his point when he had noticed her issuing. He had hung in her wake, priming himself unsuccessfully to make his presence known to her till she came to Dacre's house. There, spying from the ambush of one of the lesser turnings, he had learned her secret, his knowledge of which—he felt—he would have to dissemble at all costs. Then, too, the hopelessness of his case had become manifest to him, and his despair had dragged him on behind her with a sort of magnetic perverseness which almost made him delight in his own torment. After that he had tracked her through the shifting crowds sleuth-houndlike, more by instinct than by the keenness of his sight, and had witnessed the incident of the man who had accosted her.

He was too dazed to know what to do on seeing the bully's cowardly action, and, by the time he thought of hurrying to her assistance, the occasion had passed. He then traced her to the prayer-meeting, where he had wondered at the strange radiance creeping visibly over her face.

Then there was the public-house scene. This time his mind worked more surely and rapidly. Even if she did not love him—though she never would—that was no reason why she should be the toy of every ruffian's ill-humour.

And now they were back at the Dwellings. She was trembling with fatigue and faintness, and yet, despite all, she did not find it hard to invite him in.

Ted was prepared. The memory of his dismissal two weeks ago combined with the memory of Stamford Street to make him say : "Not to-night!"

She did not press him, but with a silent nod held out her hand. He took it, remarking to himself that the thing had no precedent.

She did not thank him for his championship. She knew she was doing him greater service by hiding from him who it was against whom he had defended her.

CHAPTER XIII

FOR the last quarter of an hour the low roof of the outlying railway arch had echoed to the impatient strides of William Pretty. It is more appropriate to apply to him his parliamentary appellation rather than his sobriquet, which, streaked as it was with a tinge of flippancy, hardly accorded with the soberness of his mood. He was awaiting the result of a certain experiment of his—to wit, a demonstration of the personal magnetism he had always supposed to be latent in himself. The failure of the test might result in a possible diminution of self-respect, or at least in a rude awakening from a treasured illusion. Hence the seriousness of the situation.

He had sent Nancy Bunker a message fixing hour and place for an interview that evening. This action was the outcome of a long and carefully graduated chain of circumstances. Peg was still hugging the retirement of Croydon, where she had gone into service, and where she would probably have to abide till Mr Bunker chose once more to retire into the Order of the Broad Arrow.

Meantime, however, Croydon remained where it was—that is, a considerable distance from the “Elephant and Castle,” and Bill questioned the justice of letting his

scanty earnings go to swell the already bloated dividends of railway shareholders. At last he mentioned his scruples to Peg, who expressed her willingness to allow him half her wages for travelling expenses. But even this arrangement did not work well. Bill's affections, however full-fed at the beginning, atrophied beneath the strain of a wearisome train journey ending in an occasional disappointment, because Peg's mistress obstinately refused to subordinate her domestic convenience to the exigencies of Bill's courtship.

So his visits became farther between; instead of marauding round unsympathetic area-gratings, he converted Peg's two shillings into beer, and lit his pipe with her agonised letters, in which she adjured him to show himself worthy of the trust she would repose in him till death and after.

But Bill's perfervid temperament required a less precarious love diet; and so his thoughts turned hungrily to Nancy, for whom his temporary aberration had given him additional zest. Whether she would respond was doubtful, and depended chiefly on what headway that stupid Jupp fellow had made in her affections. Bill stopped and settled himself in an easy attitude; he would wait for her another five minutes.

"Well, what d'you want?" he heard her say the next instant.

He started.

"I—I expected you to come the other way," he said, looking the pleasure he felt.

"Bloomin' cheek o' you to expect me to come any way," she replied coldly.

"P'r'aps you was passin' by haccident," he suggested deferentially.

"Don't blarney—what 'ave you got to say? I ain't goin' to wait for yer 'ighness's pleasure all night."

Bill wished sincerely he had more experience in the handling of a crisis. He resorted to the orthodox tactics for gaining time, and scratched his head.

She looked at him, embarrassingly calm.

"I was goin' to say," he began, "I was goin' to say as 'ow I've been thinkin'——"

"Give yerself a shake—p'r'aps it'll tumble out."

Bill suddenly became resolute.

"Look 'ere, Nancy, I know I ain't been doin' right by you, and it's give me the worrits."

"Lawks, Bill Pretty, you ain't took dangerous, are you? I 'eard say carrots was a good thing for the complaint."

Bill ignored the taunt. "And I couldn't abear the thought as maybe you was callin' me a blackguard to yerself."

"Bill Pretty, you're a gennelman, first water; I'll swear it afore a beak if you like. Is that all?"

"Nancy, I want you to let bygones be bygones and take on agin," said Bill, speaking very fast; "'twasn't all my fault what I done. There was that freckle face follerin' me about, and chuckin' 'erself at my 'ead, and—well, I took 'er on jist for the joke o' the thing, and then she stuck to me like bad luck. But I'm done with 'er—ain't seen 'er for a fortnit—and I want to come straight back to you. Give us yer 'and, Nancy; let's start fresh."

Quickly Nancy put her hands behind her.

"You're a liar!" she said between set teeth; "I know yer tricks. It's a put-up job 'tween you and 'er, and then both o' you'll go and 'ave the laugh o' silly Nancy, eh? But you won't! I'll see you dead fust!"

Her vehemence almost terrified Bill, but he spoke calmly, knowing that thus he would carry more conviction; and, admitting readily her provocation to doubt him, he protested the sincerity of his purpose with formulas of overwhelming emphasis.

She heard him patiently; when she spoke next her voice was full of piteous anxiety.

"Never mind makin' a speech, Bill, jist say after me: 'Nancy, honour bright, I ain't kiddin'.'"

Bill repeated the words without a flaw, and substantiated them by additions of his own.

Nancy drew a deep breath, and, ignoring possible witnesses, threw an arm round his neck.

"Oh, Bill, darlin', I'm so glad—so glad!" she murmured dreamily; "I've loved you all along—thought o' you every minit o' the day, and most o' the night, too. Bill, dear, I don't mind you knowin' it. The mornin' after I saw you and 'er together the fust time I went and looked at the water; and then I thought you might jist be passin' by when they pulled me out, all draggled and sodden and slimy, and not a bit pretty, and that wasn't the way I wanted you to see the last o' me."

"Don't say you did that," he said, caressing her hair, and not feeling half as elated as he knew he ought to feel by this attestation of his prowess; "I'm a damned

brute, and worse, and you'll do me a favour if you'll give me a good dose o' what for!"

"All right, Bill, 'old up, I'm goin' to 'it you right on the mouth—with mine."

The chastisement was administered silently, if thoroughly.

"What about 'im?" enquired Bill finally, indicating Josh by a vague jerk of his head.

Nancy's lips doffed their kissing look.

"'Im? I should say 'it," she replied vindictively; "all measles and mumps, that's what 'e is. Something sideways about 'im, too, never does nothing straight from the shoulder, snarlin' and growlin' and ferretin' round, and never nothing but coppers in 'is pocket. I'm sick of 'im!"

Bill professed himself delighted at her summing-up of his *locum tenens*, but pointed out to her that this did not dispose of Josh as a possible disturbing feature in the renewal of their troth. But Nancy was in a humour to defy heaven and earth.

"What if 'e does know?" she asked; "'e's got as much fight in 'im as a sponge. Last Sunday night I seed 'im knocked out second round by a little chap 'alf 'is size and weight."

Bill let slip the opportunity of displaying indignation at the implied aspersion on his capacity for self-defence. Instead, he turned his thoughts to the future. However much he desired to flaunt his reconquest in the eyes of the world, he feared that such publicity might embarrass his retreat, in case—could he help it that he had a weathercock for a heart?—in case he might be tempted

again to transfer his allegiance. So, with the air of a man reluctantly yielding to a repugnant necessity, he asked: "But s'pose 'e does something tricky? That's what 'e's likely to do from what you say yerself."

His apparently just apprehension jogged Nancy into certain misgivings of her own.

"Dunno but what you're right, Bill," she said thoughtfully; "besides, the dad and 'im 'as got thick as pea soup. And sometimes they puts their 'eads together that close, it makes you think o' the Si'mese twins. I'd 'ave to settle with the old man if I gives 'im the sack."

"Then, we'll lay low, keep dark, eh?" suggested Bill readily.

"I s'pose so," was her regretful reply; "but it won't be for long, will it, Bill? You'll start lookin' about you and gettin' together a couple o' chairs and a table, and one mornin' we'll go and get 'itched unbeknown to everybody, and then they can bust their belts shoutin' 'murder.' What d'you say?"

"I'll be thinkin' about it," said Bill uneasily.

"Swear you will!"

And Bill swore, knowing he was not compromising his conscience by undertaking to give the matter his serious consideration; thought did not necessarily imply action.

A neighbouring clock, with more regard for its chronometric duties than for the joys of re-united love, rudely reminded Nancy that she was due home an hour ago. And at last, after many a "just one more," and elaborate instructions for future appointments, the leave-taking was effected. But not even then. Bill was just turning

away when Nancy called him: "One thing I'm sorry about," she said.

"What's that?"

"I ought to 'ave wiped yer lips afore I kissed you."

Bill looked blank.

"Because she's been there, and I might 'ave got poisoned," was her explanation.

And then she went finally, leaving him somewhat startled by this additional manifestation of her talents for hating.

Nancy's feeling that she was overdue was well warranted. For the last two hours the back-kitchen of the lodging-house down West's Folly, which back kitchen, together with a cupboard-like private room for Nancy, contained the whole of the Bunker establishment, had been squirming with the suppressed impatience of Joshua Jupp. The suppression was necessary because he and Mr Bunker were talking business, and he knew it would be imprudent to give any indication that his attention was not being monopolised. He had every desire to stand well with Mr Bunker.

If the latter arrogated to himself most of the talking, it was only in accordance with custom.

"No, Josh, can't say as this 'ere syndikit of our'n 'as been payin' very good divvydends yet," Mr Bunker was remarking, with a doleful shake of his head. "I've been walkin' myself off my legs prospectin' and pokin' my nose wherever there was likely to be any game. But, damme, if there's a brass button to be got."

"P'raps you've gone off yer scent," suggested Josh.

"No, I don't think so, my boy; it's something else.

There's a change come over the world. People's losin' their faith in human nature ; they're gettin' mistrustful and uncharitable, and go in for shutterin' up their 'ouses, and givin' notice to the p'lice when they're off for their 'olidays. Narrowy-minded and selfish I calls it. That's what yer eddication and talk about them there rights o' man 'as done for you! They've killed yer eleventh commandment, which is worth all the other ten put together, and which the text of it is: 'live and let live'—knocked it clean on the 'ead, that's what they've done! Now, years ago, I used to 'ave a large practice in them villas round about the subu'bses—good pay and easy work. The 'ouses jist seemed to say: 'Come in and 'elp yerself, and when you've got as much as you can carry, send yer pal in for the rest.' Ah! my boy, that was the time when it wasn't a bloomin' mistake to get born at all."

Mr Bunker lapsed into a reverie, the probable burden of which was, as it is of so many reveries, the glory of a departed age. Josh, not seeing how he could interfere in the matter with any practical result, maintained a concentrated silence.

"Narrowy-minded and selfish," continued Mr Bunker, reverting to his original theme, "that's the size o' the pattern your good old 'ouse'older gets cut to nowadays. Ain't got the pluck to get 'isself robbed decently, nor ain't got the sense to pretend it don't matter the prick of a pin to 'im if 'e gets cleared of a few trumpery bits o' silver what's only a trouble to the poor slavey to keep in shine. And, what's more, 'e ain't at all grateful to be rid o' the lumber, so that 'e can put in a claim for re-

duction on the rate of 'is insurance. Oh dear no!—it isn't in 'im! Up 'e goes to the Station, and makes a fuss like a kid what you've took 'is butter-cake from, and, knowin' as there's a man in blue to every pore of 'is body, which gives 'im odds of 'undred to one—the coward!—'e goes and——”

But the consequences resulting from the litigiousness of the unsportsmanlike householder clamouring for his due were no doubt still fresh in the memory of his listener, and so Mr Bunker refrained from wasting breath in rehearsing them, and passed on.

“That's yer British public—look at 'im 'ard if you've took p'ison by mistake, and ain't got no stummick-pump 'andy! There 'e comes down to the City every mornin', travellin' fust-class, silk 'at, black bag, toothpick, and all, goes to the orfice to muddle with figures, findin' out 'ow fast 'e's rakin' in the rhino, and sendin' the other fellers to—never mind where. ‘Bang!—there goes Jones,’ 'e sez, rubbin' 'is 'ands; ‘next, I'll cook Jackson's goose for 'im. Awf'ly sorry, old boy, couldn't lend you the chink of a dollar; beastly 'ard up myself—oh, I know you've done me a couple o' favours, but very sorry, very.’ But Sunday's the day when 'e gets 'is money's worth of 'umbug. Mornin' it's church, and, while the serment's on, 'e calk'lates 'ow much 'e stands to win in the cuttin'-up stakes, and 'is missis sits by with a look on 'er mug like the conscience of a hangel, because she thinks she's got the nobbiest bonnet o' the lot, and everybody's givin' it credit for costin' twice as much nor what it does. And in the afternoon it's tea, and ‘dear Mr Vicar—really can't give more'n 'alf-a-crown for poor Mrs Ferguson and 'er seven

horphans now that the gals is hout, and George up at collidge—and don't you think we might stop these 'ere Christmas feeds for the parish, seein' they ain't used to good things, and a change o' diet might 'urt their digestion, poor dears?' Damme, Josh!"—Mr Bunker brought down his fist on the table, but, instead of exploding, he contracted himself into an attitude of quiet reserve which was much more impressive—"listen! There was once a chap workin' in my gang what in 'is time was a gennelman in 'is own right till things got a bit low, and 'e took to palmin' off suv'rins which wasn't baked in the Queen's oven. Now that chap was what you call a great scholard, and 'e once told me a yarn—I forgot 'ow it came about—of a Roman hemperor what was a brute, though 'e could play the fiddle very well, and what said as 'ow 'e wished all the Roman people 'ad one 'ead, so that 'e could chop it off. Now, what I wishes is as 'ow the whole British public 'ad one safe I could burgle, so that they'd 'ave to send to Paris or Germiny for the loan of a loaf aginst next mornin's breakfast."

"It 'ud be a good thing," remarked Josh absently. Even Mr Bunker's noble ambitions were insufficient to recompense him for his lady love's dilatoriness. He knew he would only defeat his own ends by sallying out in quest of her, because Mr Bunker would doubtless insist on accompanying him, and turn off in the wrong direction. So he thrust his hands deeper into his pockets, made his legs still longer, and did his best to give himself the look of an intelligent and interested audience.

"I'll tell you something else," remarked Mr Bunker

confidentially ; “ there’s a ‘orrible ‘orror tormentin’ me night and day. It’s the thought that when my soul goes to glory it might get sooty flyin’ through one o’ the work’ouse flues. If there’s anything worser nor to live a pauper, it’s to die one ; because once you do that, you never get no other chance o’ sportin’ yer own colours. And I’ve always ‘ad a fancy as the fust question you gets asked, as soon as you gets aloft, is : ‘Ave you paid for yer own funeral?’ And it’s all accordin’ to that whether they offers you a chair, or tells you to wait outside. Well, I’m goin’ for the chair ; and by Jingo, I’ll ‘ave it !”

“ Strikes me ‘ard you won’t, if we go on at this rate,” said Josh, whose vexation of soul was at last making itself vent in criticism ; “ if something don’t come my way soon, I’ll jist settle back to work, and take things as I finds ‘em, afore my back gets right out o’ trim in the navvyin’ line what’s give me bread and butter these ten years and more.”

Mr Bunker looked at him in reproachful astonishment.

“ Never, Josh ! I wouldn’t ‘ave expected it from you last of all ; ain’t I been doin’ my level best ? The trouble is, you don’t unnerstand me quite. When I sez that the swag’s off, I don’t mean that it is off ; there’s many a drib and drab to be picked up, but it ain’t worth the risk o’ burnin’ yer fingers. The motter o’ success is, ‘ Don’t go in for trifles.’ The bigger a thing you’re after, the more likely you are to pull it off. Stands to reason, if you look at it properly. You see a bit o’ game what no chap with a shred o’ self-respec’ would do the honour o’ swipin’. You sez : ‘ I’ll go for that ; it’s heasy.’

Sez yer luck: 'Can't you trust me more nor that, bloomin' skunk? All right, look after yerself then.' And the next minit there's a bull's-eye takin' yer measurement, and some young wipper-snapper in the force sez 'e's much obliged to you for gettin' 'im 'is fust stripe. I thought it all out, Josh, and I know I'm right. If we're to do any good at all, we've got to do the best we can—something tremenjous, what nobody 'ud think was only two men's work, and 'ud shift the cry on to one o' the full-sized gangs. One big haul, and then we retire from the perfeshun, pull up the blinds, open shop in the book-makin' line, and live 'appy ever after. Amen. Now I didn't want to say nothing till I'd got things a bit more ship-shape, but, seein' you ain't good at eatin' yer soup cool, I'll report progress, as they sez in parlyment."

Mr Bunker extracted from some undreamt-of receptacle in his clothing certain scraps of paper covered with hieroglyphics, purporting to be notes he had taken during his extensive surveying tours. But this very minuteness, to which he at the outset pointed with much pride, proved his undoing. In his efforts to extract some sense from them, he only complicated the tangle of incoherency in which they involved him.

Josh listened to his self-contradictions with apparent good humour, which, however, Mr Bunker divined, was only skin-deep, and it was very much to the relief of both when Josh, whose ears impatience had cocked like triggers, exclaimed at the sound of descending footsteps, "'Ere's Nancy."

Mr Bunker snatched up his documents, and thrust

them back out of sight, hurriedly promising to give them his most serious attention at his earliest leisure, and to demonstrate to Josh, at the next opportunity, their at present rather invisible value.

Josh had got up, and was facing the door; he was struck by the briskness of Nancy's pace, which varied from her usual and more leisurely method of descent. He was more struck by the strange exultation which flashed from her eyes, and flushed in her cheeks, and of which she had imprudently forgotten to divest herself before making her entrance. Beside it the unwonted disorder of her front hair paled in significance.

For a moment a fatuous hope filled Josh that these signs of emotion were due to the prospect of seeing him—it was fatuous, inasmuch as her first glance was at her father and her second at nothing in particular. Josh grimly watched her taking off her hat and the shawl which is the badge of her tribe.

"You might give a feller the time o' day," he growled.

"Evenin'," she replied shortly.

"Been workin' over-hours?" put in Mr Bunker.

"Yes," said Nancy, readily snatching at the excuse she had been too pre-occupied to formulate for herself.

"Want yer supper?" continued Mr Bunker, on whom devolved the commissariat of the household.

"No," she replied untruthfully; but earthly provender after the ambrosia of Bill's kisses would be sacrilege.

An air of restraint settled upon the room, thinly attempered by a sparse and spasmodic flow of converse, and finally compromised, at the suggestion of Mr Bunker, by a game of "touch-and-go" between the two men.

Mr Bunker won game after game, because Josh's hand was very unsteady, and the object of the pastime is to extricate, by means of a hooked pin, from out a jumbled heap of splinters, varying in size and value, each single constituent, without disturbing the rest. He was chafing, moreover, that, not having had the choice of position, he was compelled to turn his back on Nancy.

Nancy herself was operating on a lapful of coral beads, which she was stringing together with much careful selection. Unconsciously almost she was humming a passionate love-ditty, which had just recently become the favourite of the streets. Her thoughts were hovering over the golden future which belonged to her and to Bill, and in which archways and other subterfuges would have no share or part.

"What's the night like?" asked Josh suddenly, jerking his question at her across his shoulder.

She jumped. "Lawks, what a turn you've give me!"

"Sorry, I'm sure—what's it like?"

"Oh, all stars and silver," replied Nancy, hoping her poetic description would tempt him to go and sample its beauty.

"Then come and pick some of it up."

She was taken aback, but quickly collected herself.

"Well, I never; give us a chance, Josh! Don't care for gallivantin' about after slavin' all day."

"No, only a quiet stroll around the 'ouses."

"Not to-night, thanks."

"I think you d' better—what d'you say?" he asked, looking at Mr Bunker.

The latter pretended to consider the case, so as to give

his ultimate decision more weight. It had long been patent to his astuteness that Joshua's suit was not a popular one; he had been witness to many a rebuff Nancy had administered to Josh, whom he rather admired for preferring to fight his own battle, instead of enlisting paternal influence in his cause. His perseverance augured well for their future undertakings. This was Joshua's first appeal; and the fictitious composure with which it was made did not deceive Mr Bunker; he saw it was a psychological moment.

"Yes, I think you'd better," he delivered himself.

"Shan't," said Nancy, wavering, however.

"Nancy!" exclaimed parental authority; and Nancy thought it time to submit. She owed it to Bill to hold herself unscathed.

Poutingly she resumed walking attire. Properly considering the nature of the outing, a feature of it should have been the plush jacket, which set her figure off to best advantage, but apparently Josh deserved nothing better than the shawl of red worsted. A corner of it, as she carelessly flapped it round her shoulder, flicked Josh on the ear, but he made no sign of noticing it.

"I'll bring 'er 'ome safe enough," he said to Mr Bunker at the door.

Anybody examining Mr Bunker's expression of face at the moment would have declared it to be one of doubt.

Nancy had not exaggerated the serene magnificence of the evening. The moon held the earth in thrall; she bound it with filaments of silken radiance, in which it lay supine and solemn, breathing forth a hush as of

unspoken prayers. Perhaps it was praying, this weary earth, never to be given back to its own responsible self, to its travails and sins, and that this loving bondage might be the gateway through which it was to pass out into eternity; and the kindly little stars seemed to be nodding their heads and wishing the sad old reprobate every success. Even the murky, blear-eyed dwellings in the by-streets Josh and Nancy were traversing made bold to remember that they too were once upon a time young and virtuous, and thought this sheet-like effulgence had been sent expressly to wrap them in a stole of sanctity.

Nancy was ill at ease. She did not like the idea of the moonlight peering so inquisitively into her heart; it might tell Josh what it saw there. But Josh had no intention of utilising the moonbeams as a search-light; he knew well enough that the link between them was but a thread. And yet he hoped against this knowledge—hoped that with each next time he saw her, he would gain the certainty that he was mistaken.

He had not gained it to-night. Wordless and sullen he strolled on without bestowing a single glance on his companion. Nancy thought it prudent not to drive his annoyance too far.

“I see, that’s what you’ve brought me out for,” she said lightly.

“What’s that?” snapped Josh.

“To show me ’ow beautiful you can sulk; not as it was wanted—I knew all along.”

“I should think you ought to; you’ve riled me often enough.”

"Me?"

"Stow it playin' the don't-know-nothing game; you've set yerself to drive me off my chump, and, while you're doin' it, you might as well let me 'ave fair play and show up yer 'and."

"You're drivellin'."

"Well, didn't I say I was on the road to the 'Atch? Strikes me you ought to be pleased as you're makin' 'eadway."

"P'r'aps you'll tell me what I'm doin' to you?"

"It's what you don't do; you never give me a civil word or look; you never let me come within arm's len'th o' you; and, as for kissin'——"

"Oh! that's the trouble with yer ludship, is it? Well, I can't 'elp it," she went on pettishly; "I ain't got no hankerin' after bein' slobbered over. And for another thing——" She paused a moment to work up audacity.

"What?" he asked.

"I'm always afeared o' catchin' ex'ma or something—your chin's that scrubby and scratchy."

"'T ain't," said Josh fiercely; "I've shaved three times a week since I've knowed you."

She shrugged her shoulders at his remonstrance.

"I s'pose Bill Pretty's skin is smooth enough," continued Josh maliciously.

Again she made no answer, but Josh caught the gleam which leapt into her eyes. It startled him, recalling as it did to his memory the unmistakable look of joy she had brought home with her earlier in the evening. He had lost sight of his original in-

tention to tax her with it, and ask its meaning, but now he had a clue—nay, more than a clue, an intuition. Of course, he did not expect to arrive at the truth at once; still, he would try.

“I’m told you’ve been talkin’ to ’im to-night,” he said casually.

“Only for a minit or two,” replied Nancy, without pausing to consider how Josh could have come by his information. And then she could have bitten her tongue off. So she had let her secret slip after all.

Josh had stopped as though petrified; he looked to see if she was joking. Her blanched face told him the contrary.

“But you did talk to ’im all the same,” he said, dazed.

“Lawks, Josh, don’t make such a fuss about it!” she said, attempting to carry the thing off with a high hand; “you needn’t bite my ’ead off for passin’ a word or two to an old acquaintance if you should ’appen to meet ’im accidental like.”

“But after all you’ve said about ’im—after the way you’ve cussed ’im and swore you’d never—why, what’s yer pride made of?”

“Well, you can’t always be respons’ble for suckumstances,” said Nancy awkwardly.

Josh’s lips curled cruelly. “And p’r’aps—why, damme—p’r’aps you’ve let ’im kiss you, jist for the sake of ’is smooth chin.”

“I ain’t,” said Nancy, quaking inwardly.

“You’re a liar!”

“’Ave it yer own way then.”

He stepped close to her; an evil look contorted his face; Nancy's quaking grew to a great fear. They had got into an open space, and not a soul was in sight.

"Look 'ere, Nancy," he said quite slowly, his voice almost unrecognisable; "you've been the terrier, and I've been the rat. You've dug yer teeth into my 'eart and bit it to ribbons; I bore the pain o' bitin' but I can't bear bein' tickled in my gyver. And this is goin' to be the end of it. Fust time I set eyes on you I knew you was goin' to be either my paridise or the rope that's goin' to swing me. You say it's rope; well, then, 'ere goes!"

He lifted his arms, his fingers crooked into talons.

Nancy had got over her fright: she was prepared for him. "Choke me, would you? Choke away, then!"

Deftly she flung off her shawl, ripped open her bodice down to the waist, and held it asunder. Her bust showed bare to the corset. The moonlight played full upon it, and transfigured it into an argent glory of heaving, living marble.

So she stood, craning her neck all its length, and a smile parting her lips.

Josh looked, and the next moment he was half down on his knees, grovelling before her, clutching at her skirt, and muttering half-sobbed entreaties for forgiveness.

Slowly and silently she refastened her dress, bade him get up, and turned homewards.

She wanted no finger-marks on her neck; she must keep herself beautiful—for Bill's sake.

CHAPTER XIV

THE bar of the "Falstaff" was Babel and chaos. A passer-by might have thought that its eponymous hero and his crew of roysterers had invaded it in the flesh and were now taking *carte blanche* at the taps.

Truth to tell, such turmoil was no unusual occurrence in this palace of King Brew ; it re-enacted itself almost every Saturday, but only at the comparatively late hour which saw the end of the performance, when the capacious tap-room became filled with the artistes and audience from the hall at the back. But to-night the public-house clock, which could be trusted with a rigorous adherence to the canons of Greenwich, showed only five minutes past eight ; and the hall beyond, whenever the through-door opened and yielded it to view, was an impenetrable blackness, amid which the tutelary Muse of the *locale* flitted perplexed and disconcerted. For she did not know that a certain terrestrial organisation, calling itself the County Council, had that afternoon, in accordance with its duty, made a sudden descent on her abode, had judged it by some code of utilitarianism not in vogue on the slopes of Helicon, and interdicted it from being put to its professional purpose.

But the Muse's bewilderment could not hold a candle to Mr Whittaker's — the proprietor's — indignation, of which he was just giving Mr Dacre the benefit.

"Daylight robbery—nothing short of it, Mr Dacre. I've already had an estimate; two hundred pounds, that's what it'll come to. A new exit, a back entrance for the pros, a big dressin'-room for the girls, and a fixture of them new-fangled patent footlights to keep their dresses from catchin' fire."

And then his eloquence built up his wrongs into a monument of shame which would effectually damage the reputation of the Council unto all posterity.

"I suppose, though, you'll make the alterations," said Mr Dacre somewhat drily.

"Damme, I'll have to! And it'll mean shuttin' shop for two months."

"Two months?" echoed several listeners horror-stricken.

And then the uproar broke forth afresh among the golden-tressed damsels; the Jingle trio distinguished themselves especially by the vehemence of their criticism. From Emma's remarks, it appeared that the Inspection Committee had escaped severe bodily injuries only owing to her absence from the scene at the time of their visit. Betsy went one better, and raised the possibility of issuing against them a warrant for trespassing; quoting, with rather questionable point, the case of her mother who had nearly had the law on the washerwoman next door for permitting the steam of her boiler to intrude into "our back garden." But it was left to the more analytical Jane to probe the heart

of the calamity ; she reminded her "sisters" that, having appointed their escorts for eleven o'clock, they were left with three long hours dangling prodigally on their hands. And as this was the case with most of the other dazzling-haired aspirants, it gave the death-blow to whatever popularity the County Council might still be enjoying within the precincts of the "Falstaff."

Tabitha, as usual, had been amongst the earliest arrivals ; she had got crowded against Mr Dacre, whether by accident or any intent of her own, she could hardly tell herself. Hers was one of the few tongues which had refrained from making confusion worse confounded. She was probably also unaware of the something in her face which suddenly made Betsy call general attention to her.

"Look, Cinders is goin' to cry ; there, don't take on so about it—there's a dear. It's jist the very thing you want, to give yer voice a rest—ain't it, gals?"

The latter readily assented, although they did not appear to treat the matter with the seriousness it deserved. A flush crept up from Tabitha's neck and did not stop until it lost its way amidst her hair ; she cast a swift look at Mr Dacre—her first thought was whether he had heard her sobriquet and the subsequent laugh at her expense. He had not—at least so she judged by the earnestness with which he was impressing the still rebellious Mr Whittaker with the necessity of making smiling concessions to the inevitable. Only not to be rendered ridiculous in his eyes ! She was tempted to strike herself in her exasperation. When would she learn to keep her thoughts under cover, even

when silent? When would she cease to be an open book to every giddy little minx who chose to cast a glance at her? Yes, she was sorry, desperately sorry at the prospect of having to go without a sight of him for one, two, three—seven, eight weeks, an eternity in miniature. It was something she had never contemplated; she had not given it a thought that, sooner or later, the precariousness of their meetings would assert itself, and the landmarks, by which she was now measuring her march of life, would cease to be available. In her improvidence she was not even grateful for this sounding of the alarm, this premonition of what the end must be. She only felt disconsolate, and therefore she looked it.

Fringing the very edge of the throng stood Ted and Mrs Hickory. On Ted, too, the news had come with a shock, and ever since he had been trying to persuade himself that his regret was due to the impending loss of his Saturday night emoluments, and not the sundering of an important link between him and Tabitha. Once he had nearly succeeded, but then he had turned round on himself viciously, asking inwardly what fool's game he was playing, and whom he was hoodwinking. It was Tabitha with him now, and Tabitha it would be to the end of the chapter. She would be always the same to him, although he had quite made up his mind to despair of being to her anything but what he was. His resolve had come to him the evening he had fetched her from the workshop, and had been dismissed with the sting of his ignominious rebuff deep in his heart. Never again would he put her under a like necessity, more for

her sake than his own, because he guessed that to her, too, it meant at least one inward qualm. And he was firm—why, the previous Sunday he had gone all the way to Montague Dwellings only to assure himself of it. He had looked at the railings, the spikes of which seemed fingers pointing at him in scorn, and had tested his strength of resistance. True, perhaps the test was not quite convincing, because he had not been there more than an hour ere she came out to start forth on that mysterious pilgrimage of hers, every step of which he had followed so patiently, patiently. But, at all events, he certainly had been prudent in refusing her invitation to enter when they had once more reached the Dwellings. That invitation meant nothing ; she could not do less—he had done her a service which she had to acknowledge. And fortunately he was worldly-wise enough to distinguish between promptings of heart and the rudiments of politeness. Besides, she loved the glorious Mr Dacre—that settled everything.

No, he would never trouble her again ; he would go to the Dwellings to see Jimmy, but only when he was quite sure of Tabitha's absence. At the earliest opportunity he would rescind that commission for her picture, at which Jimmy had been making attempt after attempt without doing the original justice. Best not to be reminded of her at all ; in any case he would not see her for eight weeks. Well, he would look on the vacation as a god-send, although he did not quite know what formula one might fitly employ in offering thanks for such a gift.

He looked up with a start ; his mother's scrutiny was grazing him uncomfortably.

"Well, so you won't get yer birthday treat after all," he said smilingly.

"Can't say I mind it very much; so soon as we got 'alf way I didn't feel so keen on it as I thought," was her reply.

That afternoon Mrs Hickory had electrified Ted by uttering the wish to favour the "Falstaff" with her patronage, as a way of celebrating her birthday. The wonder of the thing consisted in her spontaneous offer, for, to Ted's oft-repeated invitations, she had invariably turned a deaf ear, pleading the exigencies of the business. And then Ted wondered at his own wonderment, for surely the occasion justified Mrs Hickory's self-indulgence.

Owing to the lady's toilette, protracted somewhat unduly by a certain flurry of hers, resulting naturally—Ted thought—from a state of subdued excitement, they reached the "Falstaff" a little late, and already found it in the initial stages of disorganisation. Ted suggested her immediate return, but Mrs Hickory expressed a desire to stop and make a more intimate study of the circumstances of the case.

She did so by carefully examining the faces of the feminine constituents of the assembly. Now and again, but much oftener than Ted guessed, she followed the direction of his glance, only, however, to be baffled by its aimlessness; it mostly tricked her into a *cul-de-sac* formed by the pictured presentment, displayed on the wall opposite, of a noble steed canonised in the calendar of the Turf for miracles at Newmarket. Mrs Hickory would gladly have exchanged him for Balaam's ass,

which, although it did not run races, was a sensible, articulate beast, and might have told her what she wanted to know.

Failing that, she had recourse to a more available, though also more disagreeable method.

“Which is she?” she whispered, nudging Ted.

“She? Who?”

“The gal you was tellin’ me about—you said she comes ’ere.”

“Oh, yes,” said Ted, feigning that it had cost him an effort of memory to recall the topic. He looked round absently; “Oh, yes,” he repeated, “that’s ’er in the brown ’at and black mittens. And that there is Mr Dacre, the chairman, a toff inside and out; and that’s Mr Foster, the manager, and next to ’im——”

But his enumeration was cut short by Mr Dacre, who, facing round, pleasantly wished the ladies and gentlemen present a very good evening and hoped to see them all at the re-opening. After a profuse dispensation of handshakes he was finally allowed to make his exit; and his departure inaugurated a gradual trickling away of the aspirants to whom the gratuitous “half-and-half,” in which Mr Whittaker generously asked them to drown their disappointment, was no attraction.

Amongst them was Tabitha. She had been unlucky in the scramble for Mr Dacre’s handshakes; nevertheless she moved out with a quiet smile on her lips which was a curious fusion of gratification and of cunning. She had raffled something better, for she had overheard him stating his arrangements for the morrow, which shaped themselves into an excursion to Teddington. Mr Foster

had accentuated the information with a wink, which however, conveyed nothing to Tabitha. She had set herself to calculate how many years it was since she had visited Teddington; quite twelve years it appeared. Poor Teddington—she was struck with a sudden sense of guilt for having neglected it so long. Well, she would make it instant reparation—by repairing thither tomorrow. And if incidentally she thereabouts met Mr Dacre. . . . Her heart leapt at the possibility of staving off the impending bleakness of her outlook for yet another day.

Mrs Hickory's gaze tracked her to the door. Ted was standing very stiff, his feet thrust against the floor as if he were resolved on taking root in it.

"Get us a bottle o' ginger-beer, will you?" said Mrs Hickory suddenly.

"All right, mother," replied a far-away voice at her side.

Mrs Hickory watched him dive into the bibulous crowd besieging the drink-counter and then quickly hurried out into the street. A few yards in front of her walked the girl with the brown hat and the black mittens.

"'T ain't what I call a 'appy walk," remarked Mrs Hickory to herself, looking at the bent shoulders, and presently she was begging Tabitha's pardon for accosting her in the street so "promiscuous-like."

"You're Ted's mother, I should say. I saw you standing with him," said Tabitha, after the first start of surprise.

"Yes, and Ted's been tellin' me sich a lot about you, that, 'avin' the chance——"

Tabitha nodded understandingly. "And I'm very glad to know you, Mrs Hickory." She rather wondered at remembering the name so pat. But her "I'm very glad" was no polite fiction; the woman's face had struck her on her entrance, and she had liked looking at it from time to time.

"Thank you kindly, miss; you've a long way to go?"

"Not so very, and it's early."

"Maybe you'd care for a cup o' tea under my 'umble roof; you'll be welcome, and more."

Tabitha hesitated; then recollecting that her Sunday skirt was a little frayed at the edge and required a new binding, she gratefully declined.

"But perhaps you'll give me a little of your company on the way," she suggested.

"Well, that bein' the next best thing, I will, and thankful."

"I suppose you came to see the show."

"Yes, I came——" Mrs Hickory stopped short and Tabitha was surprised to see her hard-set lips and other signs of an inward struggle. And then Mrs Hickory suddenly burst out:

"No, miss, it wouldn't be fair to you to walk along by the side of a shameless untruth; and besides the blessin' o' Gawd would be ashamed to look after an undertakin' what started off with a lie. I didn't come to see the show—I came o' purpose to see you; there you 'ave it!"

"To see me—on purpose?" asked Tabitha, still in the dark.

"And what's more, I've been plannin' it out day by

day and night by night—'ow to get 'old on you, settin' a trap for you, like, which I 'ope the Lord and you will forgive me for it. And then suddently this mornin' it came to me as the only thing 'ud be to meet you at that there place, which I could never get it over my 'eart to enter; and all day I've been in a fear and a quake and a shiver not knowin' what might be the outcome of it all. But seein' and hearin' what 'ad 'appened I felt like as though the Lord 'ad sent down 'is own patent steam-roller to make the way level for me, so that I could walk along without stumblin'; and if I didn't take the hint now I should p'r'aps be wastin' a stroke o' luck what another body 'ud only be too glad of. And that 'ud be worse nor thievin'."

Tabitha began to see and to get frightened.

"But calm yourself, Mrs Hickory," she said soberly; "there's really no reason to be upset about—about anything."

Mrs Hickory ran her handkerchief across her forehead and cheeks, where her trepidation had oozed out in shining beads.

"Thank you, miss, for tellin' me as I'm makin' a guy o' myself, gettin' into a flurry when I could do the same thing in a whisper," she went on more quietly; "I'll behave myself better nor a parson in the preach-box; but you'll listen to me, dear, won't you?"

"Of course I will," said Tabitha unresistingly. That concluding appeal was the first genuine endearment she had received from a stranger since she could remember.

"Tell me yer first name—then it'll seem like talkin' to an old friend," said Mrs Hickory.



Tabitha told her.

"Yes, Tabitha, it was you I came to see; I can't a-bear it no longer to 'ave a live ghost stalkin' about the 'ouse. Tabitha, I can't get 'im to talk, and I can't get 'im to eat. Yesterday I put 'alf a roast capon before him and 'e jist pecks at it, and pushes the plate away, lookin' at me with 'is eyes as much as to say: 'Kate 'Ickory, you're tormentin' me.' Now, Tabitha, I'm a lone widder woman, and 'e, leastways what there is of 'im, is all I've got; that's why 'e's worth sich a lot to me, Tabitha dear, and that's why I want to keep 'im like what 'e is, because I'm afeard that if 'e gets more tight drawn about the mouth and more 'ollower in the cheeks, there might come a day when I'll fail altogether to know 'im for my son Ted. And that'll be an ill day for me, Gawd knows."

"I'm sure I'm very sorry, Mrs Hickory, but perhaps you're making it out worse than what it is," said Tabitha in vague distress.

"P'r'aps I am, but even the bad of it is bad enough; and all the while, mussy on me for a stoopid, you may be wonderin' what it is I'm makin' sich a whine about."

"I know," said Tabitha.

"I doubt if you do. You think I'm askin' yer pity for 'im, but I ain't—I'm askin' it for myself."

"It's the same thing, to be sure," said Tabitha gently.

"It isn't, Tabitha; think on it. I've never set eyes on you afore to-night, nor you on me. But for a certain thing we'd both 'ave gone to our graves one not knowin' that the other ever lived; and yet the first time

I'm 'avin' speech with you I make so bold as to ask you for as great a favour as one woman ever asked of another. That'll show you 'ow strong my need is."

Tabitha gazed at her pensively. This woman was indeed making a bold claim—nothing less than to cure her own heartache by a stranger's self-sacrifice. It was truly the deification of selfishness. She was surprised at herself for not turning round on her and requiting such importunity with words of angry chiding; she was surprised at having given ear to her story so patiently, and had even felt her heart vibrating in response. Then it came upon her in a flash: she knew why she had been so helpless in her hands. This woman reminded her of her mother; like this, her mother would have looked and spoken had she lived. She brought back to her echoes of a time when the world was yet warm with love and affluent with kindly words, when it offered a refuge against cold and neglect, when it was not a mere emptiness of ineffectual striving and doubtful attainment. For this, the woman had deserved and had been given that consideration, to which her own inconsiderate demand had not entitled her.

And more than that. Tabitha became suffused with a great longing to incorporate this new and yet so familiar element into her self-divided soul; perhaps that was what she required in order to put a truce to her conflicts and exorcise the turbulent spirits of discontent and passion which of late had been inveigling her heart, her brain, her senses, into dire sedition. She thought of Phœbe; no, Phœbe was not adequate

to the task. She was too much of an accident, a still uncomprehended accident, to serve any rational end. But from this woman emanated a strength and sanity, and a sense of loving mastery, which promised Tabitha balm and healing. True, she asked for hire, but that, perhaps, would only put a greater efficacy into her method of cure.

Tabitha looked at her again, very hard this time, before making her decision.

"Mrs Hickory, I'll help you," she said.

"You'll 'elp me? What in?"

"In getting you back your son."

"Are you sure you mean what you're sayin'?" cried Mrs Hickory, seizing her hand, "because the one way of gettin' me back my Ted is——"

"Yes?"

"By takin' 'im yerself. Tabitha, it's better to be a hunchback's darlin' nor a straight man's slave."

Tabitha reft her hand loose and put it to her heart.

"No, no, Mrs Hickory, I didn't say that; you mustn't bind me to it," she panted, "or I'll go away where nobody 'll ever find me. I'll try and——"

She stopped incoherently.

"You said you'd 'elp me," put in Mrs Hickory sullenly; "what did you give me that twinge of 'ope for, if you meant yer words only for empty breath?"

Tabitha was again resolute. "No, you shan't say that of me. I know what I can do, and I'll do it. You're afraid for him because of—of his foolish fancy for me; that's all the trouble. I'll watch my chance, and when I get him by myself again I'll make it my

business to talk it out of his head. Will you be satisfied with that?"

"I'll 'ave to be," said Mrs Hickory slowly, "if you can't do nothing better for me nor that; but I'm thinkin' as my way 'ud 'ave been the more surer one."

"If you want my help, Mrs Hickory, you must take it on my own terms."

"And I'm willin', quite willin', for to agree to it," said Mrs Hickory quickly; "do it yer own way. There's only one thing I want yer word for."

"Let me hear," said Tabitha.

"That you'll do it thoroughly, that you won't shilly-shally about it or stop 'alf way. Take 'im in 'and, tight as you can and give 'im the len'th' o' yer tongue till you've argyfyed yerself out of 'is 'ead. And if you can't do it by once, do it in twice or three times, till I say: 'Thank you—now it's all right again.' Now, will you promise, Tabitha?"

And Tabitha promised, glad of a compromise by which she could give solace to this pleading woman, from whom she was going to exact so much herself, without being forced to victimise her own feelings. As to the possible trend and bearing of her promise she did not call on her discernment to make an effort. How was she to know that the cunning of foxes is as the maunderings of a dotard to the cunning of a mother's heart at bay?

"And when will you begin?" asked Mrs Hickory.

"Soon—I can't say when."

"Why soon? Why not straight away?"

"What—to-night?" And Tabitha shook her head.

"Not to-night, but to-morrow, say. It's Sunday, you see, and the better the day, the better the deed."

"I can't, I'm going out."

"Anywhere partickler?" enquired Mrs Hickory, disappointed.

"No, only a little way into the country. I've hardly seen what it looks like this summer—that is, if it's fine."

"With anybody?" There was much apprehension in the question.

Tabitha strove to work herself into resentment. Had she really abdicated all her power of will in favour of this woman? And before she knew it, she had answered:

"No, quite by myself."

Then, of course, as she might have expected, came the natural corollary to her admission, Mrs Hickory's request that Ted might be allowed to accompany her.

It was here that the full sedative force of her companion's influence asserted itself on Tabitha. She was going to meet Mr Dacre—that she might miss him, considering the vagueness of her information, she had not taken into account. But something in Mrs Hickory's manner attenuated her sanguineness to misgiving, and her misgiving to absolute doubt, convincing her finally of the futility of her hope.

And that being so, would it not be more profitable to convert what was likely to be a fool's errand into a mission of charity, and restore a son to his mother? So Mrs Hickory prevailed that Ted should call for Tabitha the following afternoon to begin treatment for his abnormal prepossession, and it was arranged at

Tabitha's suggestion, that she and Mrs Hickory should meet for periodical consultations as to the progress of the cure.

Then the two women parted. Mrs Hickory did not dream for an instant, as she and Tabitha clung to each other with mutual assurances of affection, that she herself had been that night invested with high medicinal virtues; else she would have been considerably perplexed how to justify her diploma.

But she knew she had achieved half her purpose—the other half must be left to achieve itself.

And so she hurried back, sped by the exultancy of the messenger who is sure of a welcome for his tidings.

Arrived at the "Falstaff," the population of which was by this time woefully decimated, she found that Ted was gone. He had, however, left a message that he had returned home. Chafing with the delay, Mrs Hickory reached the shop in, for her, record time. Ted had resumed his apron and was assisting the old woman from next door, whose services had been chartered for the evening, in ministering to the various patrons of the establishment.

He did not look up when his mother entered, and only answered with a short nod to her, as she said:

"Come to the parlour when you've done."

He came five minutes after and brought his sinister mien with him.

"You ain't waxy with me for givin' you the slip?" asked Mrs Hickory smilingly.

"No," was his curt reply.

"Well, you won't be when I tell you what I've done."

She paused in the midst of untying her bonnet-strings, and glanced at him radiantly.

"I've been along with 'er—talked to 'er."

"Needn't 'ave told me," said Ted suddenly; "I knew what you was comin' to the 'Falstaff' for; maybe you'll now leave off worritin' me about it, knowin' that the game's up."

"But it ain't up," broke in his mother quickly; "I got 'er to promise——"

"Got 'er to promise?" interrupted Ted, his sullenness flaring up into anger; "I don't care what you got 'er to promise. No, mother, I ain't got as low as all that; I ain't yet crawlin' on the ground altogether like a bloomin' worm; I'll do my own lovin' and my own sorrowin' the same as every man 'as a right to, and don't want nobody to do it for me. If I can't walk into 'er 'eart bold and honest by the front-door like, I don't want to get smuggled in by any backway. That's done it, mother; if I ever 'ad the weeniest bit of a chance, that's done it. What'll she think of a feller what's sent 'is mummy like a sort o' beggin'-letter on two legs to wheedle 'er into doin' for the love o' Gawd what she don't want to do for love o' the man? And if she promised ten times, I don't believe nothing, mother; likely as not she'd say yes to anything you asked 'er only to get clear o' you the quicker."

Mrs Hickory had plumped down heavily, and sat staring at him in a tremor of bewilderment which held her mute long after Ted's outburst had spent itself.

"Whatever else you may be right in, Ted, you've gone wide o' the mark this once," she said finally; "she

couldn't lie to me like that—I'd 'ave found 'er out, and you'll be o' the same mind as me when you see 'er to-morrer."

"See 'er to-morrer? Who said I was goin' to?"

"She did. You're to come round after dinner and take 'er out."

"And I s'pose you went down to 'er on yer knees for it," said Ted bitterly; "say yerself, mother—think it's goin' to be a 'oliday for me, knowin' 'ow it's come by?"

"Yes, but you ain't goin' for your pleasure; you're goin' for mine."

"I ain't good at guessin'," said Ted curtly.

"I've told you all you ought to know. What's the good o' livin' on if we're as wise to-day as we'll be to-morrer? Tell me, Ted, will you go?"

"Yes, mother, if you say it's for your sake. I've got something to make good to you."

"Why, what?"

"My rough words o' before. What was the use o' spittin' my misery into yer face? Gawd's truth, you ain't the kind o' mother to deserve it."

Silently Mrs Hickory allowed him to stroke her hand; it was as though an angel were caressing her soul.

"And now, Ted, I want to give you a caution aginst to-morrer. Maybe she'll say things to you which you won't know 'ow to take; maybe she'll be tryin' to make you in doubt with yerself, and sayin' that something is all rot, and you'd be better without. But don't you let 'er—jist 'old on to yerself, and 'old on to her; stick out like a man, and then we'll see what'll 'appen."

“But what’s it all about, mother?”

“It’s about a favour she’s to do me, and I want ’er to do it my way. That’s all—no, that’s all,” she iterated almost fiercely, as she saw Ted’s lips framing themselves into a question; “I won’t say another word about it to-night. Come, let’s go and look after the trade.”

CHAPTER XV

MRS HICKORY kept to her resolve, a thing made easy for her by Ted's obedient conformation to her ruling. He did not even attempt to lift the veil of the mystery by being his own hierophant. He asked no questions of the darkness which hemmed in his sleeplessness, and under cover of which he might have spied safely right into the very heart of things. And yet his indifference was no mere apathy ; it seemed born rather of a rare sense of security, of guarantee that matters were as they should be. He wondered if he would have felt like that, if at the end of the night's vista, there had not loomed luminously the knowledge of to-morrow's appointment. He called up for comparison the memory of other nights, and quickly thrust it from him again. Yes, it was better so.

The sun woke him with but little calling. Ted gave him welcome as one greets a solicitous friend who has come a long way to see you safely through an anxious trial. The morning was absurdly long and heavy ; even such things as a scanty, though dawdled-out, breakfast, the blacking of boots, brushing of clothes, and other toilette operations pushed it on but cumbrously, and dinner seemed planted ahead, a veritable five-

barred gate, which it would never gather sufficient impetus to leap.

But at last Ted had it all behind him, had said good-bye to his mother, whose mien and manner were curiously uncoloured by any recollection of yesterday, and was mounting the staircase of Montague Dwellings. He mounted it as a sinner might climb the ladder to Paradise, expecting it at every rung to be jerked away from under him.

He was received by Jimmy and Towzer with enthusiasm; he did not know why it pleased him to ascertain from Jimmy's remarks that his coming was expected. Tabitha also gave him a matter-of-fact greeting, which at once set at rest any doubts he might still have entertained as to the authenticity of his mother's message.

"Why, Ted, you're gettin' scarce and scarcer; looks like one o' these days you'll disappear altogether," said Jimmy cheerily.

Ted mumbled some perfunctory explanation for his rarity, and glanced at Tabitha for his cue. To his surprise she was furnishing it in a most unmistakable manner, by putting on her hat and gloves. Then he looked almost apprehensively at Jimmy.

"Oh, it's all right, Ted," said the latter with a knowing smile; "you ain't my visitor to-day. Tabby's goin' to march you out, or you 'er—makes no difference which, eh?"

"No," said Ted, flushing at his falsehood. Did it not make all the difference in the world with which of the two lay the initiative?

In a minute or two Tabitha was ready. Jimmy was glad to see that to-day her attire had not taken its cue from the weather; it was sober almost to drabness, and, on the whole, the effect was more in accordance with his canons of taste.

"There, trip along, children," he cried gaily, "you're in my way—I've got a lot o' hextra thinkin' to do to-day."

He waved them out of the room, cutting short Ted's somewhat deprecatory adieus. He was a good deal mystified by the whole affair. Tabitha had told him of the intended outing, but her manner of telling had disinclined him from enquiring further into the matter, for fear of hearing something detrimental to his optimism.

"Shakin' yer 'ead, are you?" he addressed Towzer, the faithful; "yes, it is a queer bizness—oh, it's the flies, you say? Well, I'm troubled by 'em too: they keep on buzzin' inside my 'ead, and calls themselves puzzles. Very queer biz, indeed. Should 'ave thought it meant something good, their pairin' it off like that; but bless me, what I can see by Ted's face, it sez: 'Kill us off quick somebody—there's a good chap.' Now, Towzer, I'll find out whether you've really got so much sense as you always pretend to 'ave. If you give tongue before I've finished countin' ten, it's all right. So, mind what you're about."

With the expression of a lion tamer, Jimmy set about compelling the recalcitrant roar from Towzer's throat. But Towzer had recently partaken of a sumptuous feast, and seemed gorged with peace and goodwill to the

whole world. Jimmy was counting very slowly, allowing a whole breath between each numeral; but even thus he had already reached eight, and Towzer was still exasperatingly silent. Then Jimmy had an idea.

"Nine—cats," he said with special stress on the final sibilant.

Towzer leapt up, all quiver and bristle, giving vent to a ululatory volley, in which the immemorial hatred of his race for the feline tribe found adequate expression.

"Ten," said Jimmy quickly. He was satisfied, but not for long; having regard to the adventitious help he had given to Towzer's powers of vaticination, he felt uneasily that the question at issue had not yet attained to the security of an undebatable fact.

Ted and Tabitha had meantime boarded a bus and were speeding Cityward.

"Sorry I made you come out of your way," she said; "but I hadn't quite made up my mind where I was going. Somehow, I've got a fancy for Richmond way."

Ted protested against her apologies, and proceeded to prove that the shortest route between Clerkenwell and Mansion-House Station was *via* Walworth, which, in the great highways of the world, would correspond to a journey from St Petersburg to Bagdad, taking in Madagascar on the road.

Tabitha professed attention by an occasional nod. In reality she was her own audience for the time being. Once more she recapitulated. She had spoken the truth. On leaving Mrs Hickory the night before, she had practically renounced her Teddington plan for

its hopelessness. However, with the increase of distance between her and Mrs Hickory it regained something of its original possibility ; yet this possibility, instead of gratifying her, as she had expected, only alarmed her. What if she did meet Mr Dacre? Had she not yet sufficient proof of his ascendancy over her, and would she not only augment it by this insensate recklessness of hers?

That was her fear ; and then her truer judgment told her that in this fear lay her greatest danger—that, if she allowed it to take root in her soul, she would find it a more virulent canker than even her love. To follow in his track was despair ; but to run from him would be ruin. And therefore she went to meet the danger, deriving solace all the time from the fact that the chances of an encounter were happily remote.

“Wonder if we’ll jist catch a train?” broke in Ted on her meditations.

“Let’s hope for the best,” said Tabitha.

“Think that’s the best thing to do?” asked Ted gloomily.

“So they say.”

“And that’s why there’s sich a lot o’ disappointment in the world, I s’pose.”

“Perhaps you’re right ; then, what’s your idea?”

But Ted’s philosophy was not equal to suggesting a remedy, and as Tabitha did not press him, the solution of the problem still remains for great master-minds to exercise themselves upon. At all events Tabitha’s hopefulness was brilliantly vindicated, for after a minute’s wait on the platform the train steamed into the station.

"What, second class?" exclaimed Tabitha.

"Looks like it—think it'll break me?" he asked, almost resentfully.

He sat down opposite her but kept his gaze studiously out through the window. This was the first time that he had her entirely to himself, without having to give tithe of her to the curiosity of the world. Before yesterday the thought would have lifted him heaven-high; but now he cramped it into the furthest corner of his heart. He knew it was to his mother's intervention, not to any merit of his own, he owed the privilege. And now he was waiting momentarily to be told the purpose of it all.

But Tabitha did not speak, at least nothing but commonplaces, and at the third station their privacy was encroached upon by a couple of ascetic-looking ladies, who seemed somewhat displeased at the idea of playing propriety to such an uninteresting couple. Further on the compartment filled to its full capacity. Ted rose and offered his seat to its eleventh occupant, a stylishly-dressed young lady. She looked at him and refused it, immediately after accepting that of an elegant young man in rowing attire. With a face like beetroot Ted glanced at Tabitha; but Tabitha was studying the knob of her parasol and seemed to have noticed nothing.

"Richmond—all change!" cried the guard.

"Am feeling quite stiff," said Tabitha, as they made their way into the crowded street; "ain't you?"

"Yes, very good o' you to ask," replied Ted.

"Dear me! one would think I was asking after your health," said Tabitha with half a smile.

"It's very kind o' you to ask me anything," said Ted stubbornly.

"Then you can have some more of my kindness : are you fond of the water?"

"Yes, for washin' and drinkin'."

"I mean to row on."

Ted hung his head. "Never learned 'ow to row."

"Well, are you good for a walk to Teddington?"

"Twice as far."

"We'll see."

As they started along the tow-path, Ted's heart began to beat very much faster. Here at last they had enough and to spare of the isolation which omnibus and train had refused them ; and the revelation, which was the main object of the afternoon, could not be very far distant.

"This is a day for you, if you like," said Tabitha, looking round her with luxuriating eyes.

"Yes," assented Ted ; he did not know of what portentous information the innocent-sounding remark might be the introduction. Something like a sword seemed hanging over his head.

"The river looks as if you'd just like to take it in your arms and hug it," continued Tabitha.

Ted wished miserably that he might resemble the river, but he remarked instead : "Leastways, 'e appears to be more of a gennelman than 'e is round about London Bridge."

"That's just as it ought to be ; he knows his place, you bet. Down the town he's only a servant, doing all manner of hard dirty work, and not grumbling once. But as soon as he gets past the business stretch, he gives

himself a proper sluish, puts on a clean coat, and walks out into the country like a lord, knowing he's got a right to enjoy himself like everybody that's done their work decently. Good luck to him—what do you say?"

"To 'im and all that do like 'im, I says."

"Right you are—don't let's leave them out. What's that?"

"Sounds like a thrush," answered Ted, giving ear to a sudden snatch of woodland music close by.

"Can you make out what he's saying?"

"No—'ow could I?"

"I can; he says he's better off than his brother in Shoreditch bird-market."

Ted gave her a quick side-long glance. This passed his comprehension altogether; she talked as a child might—yes, and her face looked very young, much younger than he had ever seen it. Perhaps she was even going to play some prank on him.

It almost seemed like it from her next words.

"If there weren't so many people about, I'd race you," she said.

"Or climb up a tree," added Ted incredulously.

"I will, if you dare me to," replied Tabitha, stopping and turning on him suddenly. And then she broke into a laugh which changed his bewilderment into dismay.

"Well, I do believe I've frightened you," she said, quite out of breath.

"I didn't know for the moment 'ow to take you," admitted Ted.

Aye, that was it; he did not know how to take her, and his own mind was too sobered by nameless appre-

hension to grasp that the sunshine is the strongest intoxicant known, being, indeed, of God's own vintage, which is the oldest on record. And Tabitha was drinking it in thirstily, and already it had got into her head.

"What a lot of happy people there are in the world," she said a little further on.

"There are," replied Ted, grinding his teeth grimly, as he watched the multitudinous flotilla of crafts conveying their cargoes of exuberant and laughterful life.

"I think happy people are very much to be pitied," said Tabitha thoughtfully; "look how frightened they must be that it isn't going to last all the time they want it to."

She was vaguely thinking of herself; what would happen when the sunshine was gone?

Ted, the pessimist, readily concurred with her, the drift of his concurrence being something about improvident fools, and the proverbial uncertainty of man's fate. But does not the fable of the fox and the sour grapes figure large in the heart-history of the world?

Strangely enough, however, his corroboration restored Tabitha to her elateness. Perhaps it reminded her that it was all the wiser to take a blessing without measuring to a hair's breadth how far it would reach. It also warned her that moral reflections were a pitfall, and that the rope, which was to haul you out, might, by some mischance, strangle you. So she talked about things that lay more on the surface of their lives—about Jimmy, and how he would have enjoyed the prodigal beauty of the scene, about the vandalism of the County Council

in connection with the "Falstaff," about the brutal murder of the night before, which had set the hair of the locality on end. Once only she made a momentary return to her more fanciful mood, and that was when she stopped to gather some daffodils, "because," she said, "she was too kind-hearted to see such pretty things go begging."

But all the time not a word about the impending unknown. Even Ted's mother did not come in for mention, although she would have provided a convenient gradient, if such were required, to approach the subject; and Ted did not ask any questions, being tremblingly grateful for the respite. Presently Teddington rose to view. Ted himself had an idea that it had come half-way to meet them. Tabitha, too, seemed a little surprised at its sudden immediateness—one would almost have said, disquieted. Her eyes took to themselves a roving look, which swept her surroundings with a kind of stealthy unrest, and her conversation—it had really been a monologue—rambled away into disjointed jerks.

Then Ted came to the rescue with the practical suggestion of tea.

"It's a shilling a head," said Tabitha dubiously, inspecting the legend on the window before which they had made a halt.

"Glad there's somebody what thinks my 'ead worth a whole bob," said Ted drily.

Tabitha laughed and followed him in. They secured a table to themselves, right in the corner, too. The tea proved nectar in disguise, the bread and butter fresh, the milk and sugar plentiful, the watercress tolerably

depopulated, and the cake not of more than eight days' baking. Tabitha did justice to the fare; Ted, despite her urging, favoured it only with his theoretical approbation.

However, he took his money's worth out of the twopenny toilette which succeeded the meal.

"Let's come and sit on the bank," said Tabitha as they rejoined each other.

Ted was nothing loth. They appropriated a comfortable grass-patch just vacated by another couple, from which they could survey the hurly-burly congested near the lock. The day had reached its apex of perfection; the sun had mounted as high as he could, seemingly in order to take one last comprehensive look at his handiwork before his inveterate enemy, night, brought her shadowy phalanx to demolish it. The whole life of the river flared up, as it were, in a fierce transport of exultation, which, it appeared to Tabitha, shouted defiance at the fortuitousness of the future. Yes, what would happen after the sunshine? She could only surmise and keep silent.

A suppressed cry from Ted interrupted her.

"Look," he exclaimed, and following the direction of his finger she saw how a little further to their right a canoe had laid to against the level bank, and a man was lifting a girl on to the dry. He had his back to Tabitha, and the sun was hot in her eyes; but, of course, she recognised him, and from the laugh of the girl at the sudden lurch of the little craft she also became aware who his companion was.

Almost without knowing it she had scrambled to her

feet, and Ted had followed suit. So they stood in the path of the approaching couple.

"Why, Tabitha, of all people—and here is Ted as well," said Maud Marshall, breaking into a run.

Dacre came up more leisurely, his smile cheery and benevolent.

"Having a good time, Miss Ventnor? This is better than the "Falstaff" on a Saturday night, eh? More room and ventilation."

"Very much more, Mr Dacre," replied Tabitha, returning his look frankly.

"You haven't been to see me for ages," said Maud cordially.

"I've often wanted to, but you know I can't get away any time I like."

"Of course, there's that brother of yours ; how is he?"

"Just the same, I think, Maud."

"What brother?" enquired Mr Dacre.

"Tabitha's brother met with an accident a couple of years ago," explained Maud fluently, "and he's been laid up ever since. Something wrong with his back."

"Oh, indeed," said Mr Dacre with a reflective turn of voice.

"A very decent chap, sir—draws pictchers something beautiful," testified Ted, stepping a little forward.

"Indeed?" commented Mr Dacre again, this time with more emphasis ; "well, we must hurry on—there's the man taking our canoe over the rollers. Good-bye, Miss Ventnor—'bye, Ted."

"And you'll be sure to come and see me ; same place, you know, Tabby," said Maud.

"For certain—as soon as I can," replied Tabitha.

She did not watch them going off, turning her face the other way. An instant after she heard Mr Dacre calling to Ted.

"Yes, sir," said Ted hurrying up.

"Is a dollar any good to you?"

"No, thank you," was Ted's prompt reply, "no offence, sir, I 'ope."

"Not at all, Ted—I like your independence; but it stands to your account any time you want it. So long."

When Ted returned to Tabitha, he found she had resumed her seat; he did likewise.

"Why didn't you take the money?" she asked, gazing straight in front of her. So it was that she did not notice Ted's blush.

He hesitated with his answer till she had to prompt him.

"You won't mind my tellin' the truth?" he asked.

"Mind? Of course not."

"Well, I want you to think that you've come out with me for my own money, and not for—for nobody else's."

Tabitha nodded as though she found the explanation perfectly natural; and Ted, despite her preliminary assurance, felt relief at her manner of taking it. It was the boldest thing he had said to her yet—perhaps the boldest he ever would say. And then again it struck him that he was wrong in taking credit for his courage. If she had not shown umbrage, it was probably only because she gave no thought to what he had said. Her thoughts, no doubt, were in the canoe on the other side of the rollers, unfelt, invisible passengers, painfully conscious of their intrusiveness. And at that his pity

for her overwhelmed his own pitiableness, and his desire to comfort her made him something of a hero.

"I've 'eard say there's nothing partickler between them two," he said, pointing vaguely in the direction of the canoe.

"I didn't ask if there was," she replied quite gently.

That emboldened him to proceed. "You asked me some time ago, and I said yes. Leastways nobody 'as 'ad word as there was anything comin' off; and they've known each other a good while. What if 'e does take 'er^a up the river? It's no more nor what 'undreds do with other gals, and mean nothing by it."

She sat up in surprise. "Really, Ted, one would think I was swearing myself black in the face that it was the other way. It's no concern of mine whether it comes off or don't."

Ted's face fell; he cursed his clumsiness which had so signally defeated his ends. Of course, why should she not prevaricate? She presumed on his supposed ignorance, and he dared not tell her that he knew. And now that he had made her angry, she would revenge herself by launching at him the long-delayed hurt his mother had been portending.

"I could sit here all my life," she said suddenly.

"What about meals?" was Ted's anxious query.

She laughed a little; he was glad to hear even that little.

"Now you've spoilt it all; I was just beginning to feel—what shall I say? Phœbe would call it kind of 'romantic.'"

But the word was not in Ted's vocabulary, and he asked for a definition.

"Well, it's a sort of creeps," she said.

"Oh, I know, jist like when you're readin' about ghosts."

"Hardly that—not the cold-water creeps with a slimy draggle down your back. It just comes over you warm and cosy, and makes you feel good, till you don't know yourself, with just a dash of longing after you couldn't say what for the life of you; and on top of it all you'd give half the world to find out what on earth you want to be crying about."

Ted sat awed at the complexity of the sensation.

"Then it seems like it aches a bit," he said at last.

"I suppose it does, but somehow that's the best part of it."

"Well, it seems a very good feelin' to keep about you, and I'm very sorry I spoke; but it is true about the meals, ain't it?"

In the face of this obstinate materialism, Tabitha found it impossible to continue her abstractions both of speech and manner; and presently her everyday talk had got into brisk swing again, leaping from topic to topic, while the rose-rippled river at their feet was softly murmuring to itself like a happy child on the verge of slumber; and the anxious sun overhead was consulting his time-table lest he should be too late for the Antipodes.

Tabitha shivered slightly.

"Hasn't it got dark all at once," she said rising.

"And a bit chill too," added Ted. "I've got a silk 'andkerchief, quite clean—if you like——"

"Thanks," said Tabitha, accepting without requiring

further pressure. Hastily she tied it about her neck ; it made her feel quite warm again. Now she knew why she had shivered ; at the time she was uncertain whether it meant the breath of the evening, or whether it was her heart quivering with apprehension. For now the sunshine was gone ; and of the stimulant which had vitalised her then, there remained nothing now but its lees, the darkness.

Yes, she had fared better than she had a right to expect. Her intemperate exultancy was followed by no abasing abjectness, nor, by what was worse, a hollow nerveless stupor, conscious neither of cause nor effect. Her mind was serenely clear, nothing was blurred or distorted. She knew that after one convulsive throb at sight of Mr Dacre, everything had suddenly become inertly calm within her. Perhaps that one throb had overstrained the machinery of her soul and body and had broken the mainspring. Would it ever again mend and become capable of working her emotions into fever-heat? For the present she did not care ; she could even think with indifference of him and her gliding along in the smooth river groove, while the night looked on, finger on lip.

But she also thought of something else, and her deep joy thereat might have told her that her feelings were perhaps not so much out of gear after all. It was a sense of completeness, of having fulfilled herself in a certain thing, the lack of which might have been a slur on her womanhood. She had obtained at least one man's love ; and that had set her on a level with all other women, living or dead. The knowledge of it she

had acquired long ago ; but the understanding of it had come to her only that afternoon.

And yet she had undertaken to deprive herself of this great possession, and leave herself poorer than before. Why should she? Because she did not know what to do with it? Perhaps she would learn one day, and till then she must not give it out of her keeping. True, it smacked of rank selfishness ; but why should she not be selfish in that for which, once sacrificed, nothing on earth or in Heaven might ever recoup her?

So it came that her promise to Ted's mother remained unredeemed. He himself was waiting for it till the last moment, when they stood at the omnibus terminus. There she insisted on his accompanying her no further, and on his saving himself the weary drag back from Walworth to his home.

"Will you do me a favour?" he stammered.

"If it's not too hard," she said smilingly.

"Let me kiss yer 'and."

She stepped into the shadow of the nearest doorway and silently accorded him his wish.

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Mrs Hickory was a prudent woman. She troubled her son with no questions, making his appetite her oracle. The answer seemed highly satisfactory. But Ted himself was still in the dark.

"Mother, what is it you said I'd better do without?" he asked all at once ; "she didn't breathe a word about it."

"Didn't she?" Mrs Hickory's eyes flashed triumph ; "well, then, you'd better do without questions till it's quite safe to give you answers."

CHAPTER XVI

THE weather did not keep faith in its promise of good behaviour ; apparently it had only waited to make the excursion of Ted and Tabitha a success as far as its own efforts were concerned. After that it suddenly lost count of its bearing on the state of mind of other holiday-makers, and wrought havoc by river, and lake, and sea, with disastrous results to the immaculateness of the English language. In town it effected a certain amount of good by producing a self-congratulatory thankfulness in those who had already rivered, and laked, and sea-sided, and by reconciling to their lot others who could not afford to do likewise. It, however, reacted adversely on trade—especially open-air trade, and in particular that sub-division of it which Phœbe had made her own. For the rain rendered dust-pails and such-like difficult of analysis.

But proverbial wisdom had provided the situation with a saving clause in the shape of an adage to the effect that one man's, or woman's, loss is another's gain. For so it came that the otherwise solitary Jimmy was supplied with more articulate company than the estimable, if monotonous, Towzer afforded him ; and the weather knew that that was one of the few results

which redeemed it from the charge of being "a nasty spiteful old thing."

"I don't mind the rain, if only it wouldn't wash the light away," Jimmy was saying.

Before him lay the square foot of cardboard on which Tabitha's counterfeit was being called into existence. This was the fifth attempt, and as it had had the advantage of two or three sittings of the original, to whom its ultimate purpose was still a secret, it was at last developing into something more than a guess.

"Lay it by a bit," said Phœbe, looking whether the blind was up all its height; "I daresay it will clear up presently. You've got the whole day before you yet; don't suppose it's more than ten."

"Can't wait, Phœbe; something's pushing me on. Maybe I've got the whole day before me—but 'ow many more besides?"

"Oh, about twenty thousand," replied Phœbe at a venture.

"God keep me from it!" said Jimmy with genuine horror. "I thought you was a friend o' mine, Phœbe."

"Of course I am."

"Well, you made me feel like I was standin' up in the dock and the beak was jist givin' me a lifer. Why, the only thing what keeps me alive is the 'ope o' goin' to glory 'allelujah before I'm very much rottener."

"Jimmy, you are wicked."

"Well, if I am, I'll do something to deserve my reputation. Damnation and 'ell-blazes, curses and crickelorums on toast and devils, and damnation again, and——"

But Phœbe had rendered herself deaf with both hands, and when he saw it, his tongue grew lame.

"Jimmy, will you please remember my ears are not dustbins," she said, looking at him with a distressed smile.

Jimmy's voice struggled between contrition and anger as he answered: "I've never made 'em that before—but it came over me quite suddenly, and I couldn't keep it back. You needn't be surprised, 't ain't the first time I've done it—oh no, but never before when any one was listenin', which seemed I was only thinkin' it; and I wanted to know badly 'ow it sounds."

"Not exactly like the language of flowers; what put it into your head?"

"That's a fool's question, Phœbe, and you know it. Ain't there sich a thing as human nayture? Well, I've got my fair share of it. You see I've got plenty o' time to eggsercise it, bein' nothin' but a cripple by occupation. Phœbe, Phœbe—you've looked right into the 'eart o' the world, and you're blinder nor a mole to a miserable little thing like me. Because I mostly laid quiet and didn't do much in the way o' squirmin', you thought I felt jist like a baby angel suckin' 'is first lollypop. It never struck you as the old Jimmy o' two years ago might still be livin' on inside me, and was fightin' desp'rit 'ard to go a bit faster and forrader than this rag-and-patch carcass o' mine 'ud let 'im. Yes, Phœbe—there has been more fightin' done in this room nor there's been on many a small-sized battle-field."

"And with no chance of its getting into the papers, which, however, makes it more glorious," said Phœbe

with shimmering eyes. "Jimmy, the world never gets to know its truest heroes, and that's what makes it such a weak and cowardly affair—so much of a boiled vegetable-marrow. If it could only pass by your bedside, and such as yours, it might become more marrow and less vegetable. You would be a moral to millions—if they only knew; isn't that any comfort to you, Jimmy, dear?"

"You're tryin' yer level best to make it so, but it isn't. I don't want to be a bloomin' moral—I want to be a man. Do you know, Phœbe, I sometimes feel that selfish I wouldn't care if every livin' thing on earth was crippled and back-broken, and I the only one left walkin' about on two legs for to nurse the whole show—and so 'elp me, I wouldn't mind the fag—'ello, what's that?"

"What's what?" asked Phœbe, startled by the abrupt turn.

"Can't you 'ear people talkin' on the stairs? Fancied I caught something about the Jupps."

Phœbe shook her head dubiously; but Jimmy insisted, for the senses have no better whetstone than solitude. Thereupon Phœbe opened the door.

"Golly—it's a bobby come to ask about Towzer's license—somebody's split on us," exclaimed Jimmy, hurriedly tucking the astounded Towzer under the blanket.

"I don't think so—there are two of them, with high hats on," retorted Phœbe, having reconnoitred over the balustrade.

"P'r'aps it's only some blokes come to take the

furniture for last week's rent," said Jimmy with a breath of relief.

At this moment, Phœbe retreated into the room before two pairs of ascending footsteps, and slammed the door with the vague intention of constituting herself a garrison of barricade. Presently the footsteps paused outside, and there was a firm yet gentle tap demanding admission.

"It's a gentleman's knock—I can feel it; shall I open?" she whispered, turning to Jimmy as the only available commander-in-chief.

"Poke yer 'ead out," were the latter's instructions.

"Miss Tabitha Jupp lives here, I'm told," said one of the callers.

"She's not at home," replied Phœbe curtly.

"That's all right, madam," continued the speaker politely. "We've come to see her invalid brother; he's at home, I presume?"

And with the slightest possible pressure he forced the door back. But here Jimmy remonstrated.

"Don't let 'em in, Phœbe—they're chaps from the 'ospital come to mess me about, like they did at first; can't you wait at least till I'm cold meat? Then you can cut me up more comfortably."

By this time both visitors were receiving the discharge of Jimmy's wrath full in their faces.

"Sounds healthy that, doesn't it, Algy?" said the considerably older of the two, the one with the clean clear look in his eyes.

"Very glad you think so, Mac," replied Mr Dacre; then addressing himself to the speechless Jimmy, he

continued good-humouredly : "permit me to put before you the circumstances of our call, Mr Jupp. I got interested in your case through a mutual friend of mine and your sister's; and so I have taken the liberty of bringing to you Dr Andrew Macmichael of Harley Street, and would like you to give him the honour of curing you."

"Sir Andrew Macmichael? Why, he's the greatest English specialist for diseases of the spine," said Phœbe, turning eagerly to Jimmy.

"How do you know that?" asked Dacre, facing her sharply.

Phœbe flushed and paled at the sudden interpellation.

"I—I read it in the papers," she stammered.

But Jimmy stared stiffly at his visitors; then he asked with the same stiffness in his voice : "For Gawd's sake, gennelmen, you're not havin' a lark with me?"

For answer Sir Andrew directed Phœbe to be good enough to turn her face to the wall for a few minutes, and began his diagnosis, accompanying the same by a running string of queries bearing on the case, and occasionally nodding approval at the intelligence of the replies he received. And presently Phœbe was permitted to face round again, which signified the close of the examination.

"Case of simple caries, aggravated by neglect and unconscientious treatment," said Sir Andrew in an undertone to Dacre, who had been dividing his attention between the patient and the obverse of Phœbe—as much as he could see of it sideways.

"Any hope?" he whispered back,

"Tons of it—in fact, I can pretty well guarantee."

"And that's saying a lot for you, Mac."

"All right, my lad," said Sir Andrew, taking up his hat and smiling at Jimmy; "make yourself ready for getting on your stumps again, as you say hereabouts. A little operation—a bit unpleasant, perhaps—a leisurely after-cure with good food, etcetera, and then you must see what you can do to catch up the two years you've lost."

"Gawd, sir, you don't mean to say——" began Jimmy hoarsely.

"I do, and my first prescription is, no excitement. I can't be here again before this day fortnight—must take my holiday, rain or no rain. Till then——"

"Easy there for a minute," broke in Dacre. He had picked up the cardboard which had fallen to the ground face downwards, and was holding it up to the light.

"You did this, didn't you?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," quavered Jimmy.

"Meant for your sister, eh? Very good attempt. Look at it, Mac."

Sir Andrew looked; his father had been a great painter. And then turning to Jimmy he said: "I'll come to-day week instead—this deserves it."

Phœbe had kept well in the background, startled by her previous want of caution, which might have directed unwelcome curiosity to her. But at Dacre's pointed adieu to her, she could not but come forward, recoiling, however, quickly at his keen scrutiny.

"Very glad you brought me," said Sir Andrew, as they reached his carriage, from which they had to

dislodge nine urchins, who had basely taken advantage of the fat old coachman's "forty winks"; "very glad indeed. Yesterday morning I was treating a young marquis for curvature, but it wasn't half as interesting. Perhaps I shall be the means of giving the country another Leighton."

"You want to pay yourself too big a fee," laughed Dacre; "but, seriously, it's been a good morning's work, even for two men. Still, the lad does not make up the sum total of it."

"What else?"

"The woman; did you——?"

"Ah, yes, I noticed her—something quite unlocal; a beautiful wreck, isn't she?"

"I've seen what she was like before the wreck."

"What? You couldn't have known her then?"

"I've seen her for the last two years at Prescott's offices—in oil. Prescott & Hind, you know—the people that do my agreements between my clients and self. Well, it appears they're holding over a lot of money for her, left her by a relative—not her husband, by the way—and they've got this portrait of her, done thirty years ago, prominent in the ante-room, on the chance of one of their hundreds of callers knowing something of the original. It's the finest advertisement for themselves they could have. Seems they tracked her some time or other down to Bermondsey where she went by the name of Phœbe—Phœbe—let me think, yes, Phœbe Gallagher."

"Well?"

"She dodged them, and since has kept herself sub-

merged. But it's she, right enough ; the caricature runs the picture too close for doubt. And then young Jupp called her Phœbe—didn't you notice?—and further, there's her accent, and besides, she knows who you are, which betokens an acquaintance—don't get vain—with the higher walks of life not common among the natives. Jerusalem! won't old Prescott jump! If you'll drop me at the first post-office we pass, I'll wire to him. I might make a hundred or so out of it; but I don't care to—it would be like taking blood-money."

"Dear me, what a coincidence!" exclaimed Sir Andrew.

"I didn't expect you to say that, Mac. Ascribing things to coincidences is the refuge of the analytically destitute. However, that's too subtle a question to discuss now, and here's the post-office. Thanks very much for obliging me."

"Nonsense, Algy—you know there's nothing I would not do for your mother's son," said Sir Andrew as the carriage drew off.

Sir Andrew was a bachelor.

Mr Dacre's telegram took effect, bringing that same afternoon another surprise to Montague Dwellings in the person of a portly old gentleman, rubicund and perspiring. His bodyguard of two he left outside.

"Prescott, of Prescott & Hind—co-executors of the late Lieutenant-Colonel Marchbank's last will and testament," he informed Phœbe whom he found polishing the fire-place. "You're—ahem!—Mrs Phœbe Gallagher, I believe?"

Phœbe leant against Jimmy's bed-post, not for pose, but for support.

"What if I am?" she jerked out.

"Phœbe Gallagher, of course, is only an alias," said the lawyer insinuatingly.

"Gawd bli'me, guv'nor, 'ow d'you expec' me to talk French?" came from Phœbe. The idiom was correct enough, though it was somewhat discounted by the accent.

Mr Prescott, as befitted his calling, was a man of business-like habits and direct action.

"It's perfectly useless for you to prevaricate, Mrs Talbot," he said—"yes, Mrs Talbot, because you probably are aware you have a right to the appellation, seeing that your husband broke his neck in the hunting-field before the petition came on for hearing. So you see I am in possession of your somewhat painful history, and if you will permit me, I will go into more details about the object of my call."

Phœbe stood silent; her head swam. But she saw clearly enough she was no match for this man's decisiveness.

"Very good, then," continued Mr Prescott, taking her silence for consent; "your brother John, the above-mentioned Colonel Marchbank, of whose death two years ago you seem to be apprised——"

"Yes—Lloyd's," breathed Phœbe, nodding.

"Made you his heiress in token of forgiveness for your—well, you know—blot on the family 'scutcheon and all that sort of thing; excuse me, but the facts of the case must be stated. To proceed then. The will

makes it incumbent on the executors to continue search for you during a period of five years, after which, or if in the meantime undeniable proof of your demise had been obtained, the property was to be thrown into Chancery. Some time ago we got scent of you in South-east London, to the extent of ascertaining the alias you had adopted—I suppose alias is not French or Greek to you now, Mrs Talbot?—but after that— However, for further explanations you must be patient till to-morrow. There ought to be no difficulty about proving your identity; there are two means of that—either family papers in your possession or confrontation with——”

“I have all necessary papers, Mr Prescott,” interrupted Phœbe quickly.

“Very well, then. I should think the affluence in which you will once more be placed will be very welcome to you, especially considering the evidently delicate health of your son.”

“My son?” broke in Phœbe, following his glance at Jimmy. Then she shook her head.

“Dear me,” exclaimed Mr Prescott, with a sheepish look, “I had that impression all the time—jumped to a rash conclusion, in fact, not unnatural, considering the precipitate course of events; or else I should not have discussed your affairs with such unreserve. However, will you do me the honour of calling at our offices, 4 P.M. to-morrow—my card, allow me—when we shall go into the matter thoroughly. Meanwhile an interim payment—bless me!—I’ve nothing more than a sovereign—wait, I’ll ask my clerks.”

“Don't trouble, Mr Prescott—a sovereign will do very well,” interposed Phœbe.

Then, after another admonition to remember the appointment, Mr Prescott left, and his place was usurped by a tongue-tied silence. Phœbe had fallen into a reverie from which Jimmy felt it would be sacrilege to wake her. But it was some time before her thoughts gained sufficient stability to stand on their feet; her crowding emotions threatened to jostle them prostrate. This was the first direct message she had received from that other world, as it were, which she had forfeited, if not forgotten. The dead voice of her brother Jack was calling to her from it. How harshly, albeit not unjustly, they must have judged her, seeing that even he, with all the love he had borne her in the old days, had waited for the grave to swallow up his malice before he tendered her his forgiveness.

But the happiness she would derive from his gift—she derived none yet, because her feelings had not yet regained edge—was not the knowledge that at length she was to be taken from her gutter-wallow, from the refuse and scavenger life to which she had been condemned this long eternity. It was not the prospect of physical comfort, because she was afraid her body had lost its attribute of fruition. No, it was the premonition that now perhaps she was arriving within reach of her redemption, and for that reason God had sent her the means to prepare herself for it by outward cleanness and the self-respect which would return through her abstraction from those beast-like offices to which she had been ministering. And beneath it

all there ran a thread of curious self-congratulation on the instinct which had driven her from Bermondsey, because it had told her she was being searched for, and because she thought the emissaries emanated from certain of her old associates who wanted to thrust upon her the commiseration she feared. It was the same fear which had suggested to her that puny attempt at dissimulation before Mr Prescott.

Well, now she was safe against everything. She would take Jimmy and Tabitha—or at least Jimmy—away with her to some country snugery, where she would use sparingly of her wealth, because she would succumb to anything more than a little of it. And then, as God pleased. . . .

“What do you think of it, Jimmy?” she asked suddenly.

“I’m thinkin’, Phœbe,” faltered Jimmy, “that if you come into more than five quid, whether you’d lend us seven and a tanner for Towzer’s license, so that ’e can run about a bit. ’E’s gettin’ to look quite pale; ’ope ’e’s not goin’ into a decline.”

CHAPTER XVII

THE following afternoon witnessed another professional conclave between Josh and Mr Bunker in the latter's kitchen. Mr Bunker was again holding forth from topographical notes he had collected.

"Now, there's a tidy little viller on Wandsworth Common, with its left-'and neighbour stark empty. The job's the softest thing I've yet come acrost—boiled pap simply! You—that is, beg pardon—we gets in through the empty, works our way over the backyard wall into next door, and there you are. The only thing is, that this same backyard wall stands a bit 'igh—seven foot, I should think, which it's rather risky to swing acrost it for a 'eavy-weight like me, because the brick-work, you know, might come down with a clatter, seein' as we live in the days o' Queen Victoria and the jerry-builder. But a spider-leg like you 'll go over like a puff, and then—well, as I said, there you are! Apperiently there's nothing inside but females, except a pickaninny of a buttons, and"—here Mr Bunker laid his fore-finger impressively alongside his nose—"no dorg. 'Ow did I find that out? I knocked, and said I was travellin' for a firm o' patent muzzles, which their object in life was to protect the poor bow-wows against the croolties o'

Parlyment ; so the buttons grins, and sez they kept no dorgs, only seven Ang'ry cats ; and a fox terrier, what dropped in by mistake a week ago, left the 'ouse by instalments ; from the which you can see as—eh, what are you goin' to remark ?”

Mr Bunker, having surmounted the main difficulty in the scheme, by demonstrating his inability to do the same by the above backyard wall, was proceeding voluminously when a peculiar look from Josh pulled him up.

“What I was goin' to remark, Bunker ?” echoed Josh, with ominous deliberation ; “thankee kindly for askin' me to put in my spoke. Now, I'll jist say this to you : you've talked a lot o' blitherin' rot, but you ain't managed to confuddle me a quarter as much as you reckon for. I know yer game—make me a cat's-paw, and, when I've fetched the chestnuts out o' the fire, you'll come and 'elp me munch 'em, eh ? That's why you've wobbled about all the time like a jelly with the St Vitus', waitin' till I got down on my beam's ends and made a dash for it on my own, with you standin' round the corner curin' yer bacon ; and if it comes off all right you'll want yer whack, or—no, old pard, if there's any walls to be jumped anywheres, you'll 'ave to do the jumpin' along o' me. So the sooner you start trainin' down yer overweight, the sooner we can get to bizness.”

Mr Bunker had made several attempts to interrupt Joshua's violent denunciation ; but each time he had been beaten down by the latter with table-thumps of tremendous emphasis, and now, when he might have taken his turn without demur, he elected to wrap him-

self in majestic silence, and the humble kitchen chair whereon he sat became a pedestal for speechless dignity.

Josh was awed in spite of himself; the further home-truths he had intended launching remained fast to their moorings. Gradually Mr Bunker's expression and attitude veered round to unutterable pain tempered by reproach.

"'E said I'd want my whack, or——" he murmured, as though in soliloquy; "what did 'e mean by that 'or'? Good graciousness! 'e couldn't take me for a copper's nark—me, Bertie Bunker? Well, well, I ought to be used to it. Right through my born days I've been misunderstood—like all great men. But when it comes to talk o' narkin'——"

"There, Bunker, I owns up I've been a bit hasty, but you'll own you've been dratted slow," said Josh, afraid he had gone too far.

"Fast or slow, it kills when you get stabbed to the 'eart by a friendly 'and," continued Mr Bunker, skilfully-perverting the point at issue; "I don't mind everything else. I don't mind the 'ungry days and the sleepless nights so as I might set you up in life honest and respectable, seein' as you're booked for to be my daughter's 'usband. But this is crool, Josh—crool! Look, you don't trust me, though you've give me nothing I might do you out of; but me—look at me! Ain't I trusted you with the best bit o' my 'eart—with my one and only che-ild?"

Here Mr Bunker became distinctly lachrymose, and, though he felt that his reference to Nancy somehow struck a false note, he hoped that its pathos would

carry it through. At any rate it made Josh set his teeth very grimly. In a matter-of-fact tone he advised Mr Bunker not to worry any more, but Mr Bunker had got astride his pet hobby—that of playing injured innocence.

“Do you think I ain’t got as much to lose as you by waitin’?” he continued; “damn this ’and-to-mouth bill o’ fare! ’Ow I made both ends meet so long is more nor I can tell. When I went to dig up the swag what I turned my cropper over, I found I’d come second; somebody ’ad been there before. They say time’s money; but it’s no jam to yer bread to know the other bloke ’ad the money and you ’ad the time.”

Mr Bunker appeared plunged in gloomy retrospect, but on Josh dawned a sudden light; he understood now whence Mr Bunker derived the sinews of war which had enabled him so long to pursue his policy of masterly inactivity. This was his first allusion to a buried nest-egg—of which he had been despoiled. But Josh knew that what Mr Bunker had hidden, only God or Mr Bunker would find again. Moreover, his complaint about the ascetic frugality of his mode of living was very much at variance with the substantial dinners at which Josh had surprised him once or twice in the neighbouring chop-house; and even Nancy’s earnings did not account for the cigars he was continually smoking.

Josh’s chest heaved at the duplicity practised upon him, and for a moment it occurred to him, as an act of righteous retribution, to make Mr Bunker the victim of his own devices. The idea was of course absurd,

and only served to show him the extremity of his need. He had promised to escort Nancy that evening to the new melodrama, and to withdraw from his undertaking might, considering his plain talk to her father, mean nothing less than the irreparable. All in all he possessed eightpence, which divided into two pit-stalls didn't go; and that was not counting *obiter* expenses between the acts. To make up the sum total of his resourcelessness, he had mortgaged his credit to the hilt by loans from every available quarter, and his progress among his associates was a constant gauntlet-running of duns. However, he felt a morbid satisfaction at the resolve that the first man who pestered him with his liability, while Nancy was present, should go away with a severe jaw-ache, whatever might happen thereafter.

Meanwhile, Mr Bunker droned on, mingling rebuke with self-exculpations, while Josh felt the sweat starting from his every pore at the little time left him to solve his financial difficulties. It must be five o'clock at least; Nancy was coming back at half-past five for her toilette, and they were to leave at six, because the theatre in question had no "early doors," and it was a case of first come first served.

Suddenly Josh started up, taking Mr Bunker's breath away by the act. He had it—what a fool he was not to have thought of it before; but, of course, with that old humbug Bunker jabbering one's head off. . . .

"Now, mind you, Bunker," he said at the door, "I'm comin' round in the mornin', and then we'll go at it slap-dash and no mistake—d'you twig?"

Mr Bunker twigged, and vowed that the next day

should be the pivot of momentous developments. Josh was already out in the street when a recast of the time at his disposal brought him back.

“I say, Bunker, I can’t manage to be back ’ere by six; so you’d best tell Nancy to meet me top o’ Vauxhall Bridge the ’alf hour after. Now you won’t forget?”

Mr Bunker solemnly assured him he would not forget, and Josh made a second start which eventually deposited him at N. Block Montague Dwellings.

Jimmy was not so utterly overwhelmed by his appearance—which, by the way, produced the customary scarcity of Towzer—in as much as Josh had of late not been quite so sparing of his presence. But his visit at a time of day, when he knew Tabitha would not be available for purposes of extortion, gave it an air of disinterestedness which pleased Jimmy greatly. Perhaps Josh had, for once in a way, come to see him for his own sake, and for this he rewarded him with the joyful intelligence of the saviour who had come to him yesterday.

“Goin’ to make you quite well agin, is ’e? Good luck to ’im!” said Josh heartily.

Apart from more fraternal considerations, Jimmy’s recovery and consequent return to a wage-earning condition, would furnish Josh with another string to his bow in time of distress.

“Yes, Josh, only think on it. When I told Tabby of it last night she fainted for ’alf an hour—you know she’s not very strong; and then she wanted to run off to the gent what brought the doctor bloke up, but

presently she thinks better of it, and sits down to write 'im a letter instid. And, Josh, boy, I couldn't sleep a wink all night, 'alf from 'appiness and 'alf from thinkin' on you——”

“On me?” asked Josh sharply.

“Well, yes,” replied Jimmy, a little awkwardly; “you see, Josh—now don't get yer choler up, there's a good chap!—you don't seem exac'ly to be doin' what I'd like in a brother o' mine, and maybe you're makin' father and mother upstairs worrit that a son o' their'n might be goin' jist a wee bit off the straight road—no offence, Josh. I've been a cripple so long that, with nothing else to do, I've got a few queer fancies into my 'ead. . . .”

Josh stared out of the window, as if to convince himself that his parents were not actually peeping at him out of heaven with anxious eyes; then he shook his head, Jimmy did not know whether in despair or in defiance.

“No, Jim, I don't say as you ain't right to be a bit ashamed o' me, and maybe, if you could 'ave been a bit more about my tracks, as you mightn't 'ave done me some good; but it's late now—too late, Jim.”

“I swear it ain't, Josh; you 'ave a try for yerself till I can come to 'elp you, and between us——”

This time Josh laughed grimly. “You say you'll do for me what I can't do for myself; now, you watch and see for yerself the kind o' crooked stick you want to bend straight.”

Resolutely he stepped up to the corner cupboard which did duty for wardrobe; it was locked, but with a savage jerk he pulled it open. Then he began to

remove the various articles of clothing, which hung inside, from their pegs, and slung them across his arm; after which he snatched off the table-cloth, and bundled them up therein.

Jimmy watched him, terror-stricken.

"What on earth are you doin' of, Josh?" he asked.

"Can't you see, cocky? I'm takin' the fust lesson 'ow to become a better cove, and, while I'm on the job, I'm takin' these 'ere trifles to uncle, because me and my gal's goin' to the theaytre to-night, and, not 'avin' a free pass in, I've got to pay up like every hindependent Briton."

"But they're Tabby's best things, and she'll cry 'er eyes out."

"Which is a nicer way o' losin' them than to get 'em scratched out—which is what my sweet hangel 'ud do for me. By-bye, Jimmy."

"For Gawd's sake, stop a minute!" called Jimmy after him.

Josh turned round, his hand on the latch. Jimmy struggled with himself for a moment, and then he broke out: "I was goin' to tell you, Josh, as something else 'appened yesterday—it's Phœbe come into some money."

"Eh?" asked Josh quickly.

"She did," went on Jimmy recklessly, once he had started; "I don't know 'ow much it is, but maybe it's a matter o' five quid or more, and I'm thinkin', if you wait till she comes, you might pop them things to 'er instid o' the reg'lar uncle. P'r'aps she'll give you enough for 'em

to take you through the evenin' ; you know she's a good sort."

"That she is—damned if she isn't!" asseverated Josh, forgetting the heartless affronts he had heaped upon her more than once ; "I think it's a good idea. The only thing is, she may not be 'ere till to-morrer, eh?"

"She went to the lawyer's at four, and said she'd be back at six to give me my tea, and when she says six, or nine, or twelve, you can take yer davy it'll be six or nine or twelve."

Josh stood hanging his head in thought ; then he let it droop a little lower, which converted his attitude into one of utter contrition. He stepped slowly back into the room.

"Jimmy, you've touched me on my soft spot ; you've showed me what a bally blackguard I am with yer sayin' as a stranger 'ud deal kindlier by my sister nor I would myself. You've done me, boy."

He placed the bundle on the floor. "And what's more," he continued, "I ain't goin' to take no money from poor old Phœbe—good soul! I daresay she wants it 'erself. And now I'm off. I couldn't a-bear for you to look at me with yer eyes. But I want you to do one thing for me, Jimmy—which is, not to breathe a word to nobody as I've been 'ere. Now, you swear it—oath of a Christian."

Jimmy readily took the required oath, because he found it natural that Josh should want to conceal his would-be trespass on Tabitha's belongings ; he saw in it an additional sign of grace.

"'Ang the things up again, else she'll know," he suggested.

"Clever boy!" said Josh, acting on the suggestion with alacrity. The broken lock could be explained away by ascribing it to Tabitha's clumsiness.

And then with a hurried "Good-night, Jimmy—mum's the word!" Josh took himself off.

Jimmy was very glad to see him go; it was with extreme reluctance that he had broken the news of Phœbe's good-fortune to his brother. But this reluctance had been overcome by the necessities of the case; still he was very pleased to see things turn out as they had done. He was afraid that if Josh had awaited Phœbe's return, he might have been tempted to drive too advantageous a bargain.

But Jimmy, in the guilelessness of his heart, was no match for the fox-wiles of his brother Joshua; he would certainly have wondered to see Josh loitering about outside the quadrangle instead of hurrying to inform his lady love that untoward circumstances compelled the postponement of the theatre. Josh was prepared for a bold, and, if need be, desperate stroke. How chance would fashion it was not his concern; it sufficed him that he was resolved.

Anxiously he peered ahead through the fast-gathering gloom; the rain had congested the air into a murky haze. A neighbouring clock struck six. His whole body quivered with impatience; how was he going to be at Vauxhall Bridge in time, with so much to do in between? Then he gave a jump—there she came; he recognised her by her walk, for she had a waterproof

over her, and carried an umbrella. So it was quite true, about the money.

Just as she turned into the gate he ran up to her breathlessly.

"Been lookin' for you everywhere—ran for a moment up into Number 16—Jimmy was asleep, and I didn't care to wake him; oh, it's terrible!"

"What's terrible?" asked Phœbe in a flutter.

"It's Tabitha—she's dyin'; she come to-day dinner-time to see Mr Bunker, what's my gal's father, 'e 'avin' sent for 'er to fix a day for the weddin' what 'ud suit all parties, and jist as she walks out, she goes off into a faint—jist like a dead 'un, and the doctor what we called in, 'e sez it's overwork, and it was only proper nourishment and kind nussin' what could save 'er. So I come for you, Phœbe."

"Wait a minute," quavered the latter, "I only want to run upstairs——"

"Yes, and while you 'obbles up that darned staircase she might be givin' up the ghost. Come along!" said Josh savagely.

"Let's get a cab," said Phœbe.

"Take us 'alf an hour to find one 'ereabouts—'t ain't very far either—for Gawd's sake, come!"

And Phœbe went, breaking into a trot to keep up with Josh's frantic pace. She did not see where she was going; she was quite intent to follow him on his errand of relief and rescue, and the snatching of her own dear Tabitha from the jaws of death.

Overwork—need of nourishment and tending! God! how glad she felt that it was in her power, in the power

of her little finger, to give her all these! Bitterly she reproached herself; she ought not to have let her go to-day to that deadly workshop, especially after that severe fainting fit of yesterday. Would they never get there? How dreary these streets looked, like faces without eyes, because they consisted of warehouses with their frontage all turned the other way; and somehow that made her recall with joy that she had carried out, despite the lawyer's advice of procrastination, the first resolve which had come to her at yesterday's tidings—the settling of those five hundred pounds on her darling Jimmy.

And the next moment her head had struck the kerbstone with a thud, which seemed to rive it in halves; things tore and snapped inside her temples, millions of golden spots danced before her eyes, and a ruthless hand was ravaging among her clothes—ah, yes, no doubt for the roll of sovereigns the lawyer had handed her at parting . . .

And then one last thread of intelligence quivered among the tattered network of her brain, and the death-quivering lips breathed forth audibly: “Josh—kiss—Tabitha—for—me!”

.

When P.C. X205 flashed his bull's-eye on her, twenty minutes afterwards, he remarked, previous to blowing his whistle, that “the bloke what did this 'ere job ain't no fit party to teach Bible at a Sunday-school.”

CHAPTER XVIII

NANCY came in punctually at half-past five ; it was a Saturday, which accounted for her finishing work early. She received the information of the change in Josh's arrangements with the same listlessness with which she had taken life in general during the past two or three weeks. Hastily she gulped down a somewhat anæmic cup of tea, and then, having washed under the open tap, sat down before a fragment of mirror to "do" her hair. Mr Bunker watched the long, shimmering tresses unwind, previous to being re-gathered into artistic coils, and his heart was stirred to admiration.

"Lor' lummy, Nance, I ain't 'alf as proud o' you as I ought to be."

Nancy shrugged her shoulders dispassionately in answer to the compliment ; she could not do otherwise, her mouth being full of hairpins.

"You're a darned fine gal, and I bet you know it," continued Mr Bunker ; "quite right, too. A gal what don't know she's pretty when she is, is as much use as a hen what's laid a hegg and don't cluck to tell you she's done it."

"Lot o' good it's been to me, too," Nancy remarked through the hairpins.

"Well, no—'e ain't much of a catch," said Mr Bunker,

following her train of thought, "but you must 'ang on to 'im a little longer, for my sake."

"Oh, I'll 'ang on to 'im right enough—there's nobody dyin' to take me off 'im."

The bitterness in her tone brought a genuine grief to the otherwise hide-bound Mr Bunker. He came and stood near her.

"Nancy, there's some things a gal 'ud sooner tell 'er mother than 'er father; maybe I make a bad substitoot, but it's better nor nothing. Out with it. It ain't all Josh, I know."

Her answer made him step back aghast, for it manifested itself in a violent rush of tears, which went far to undo the loyal ministrations of the mirror. Mr Bunker regarded his work with the feelings of a man who inadvertently has dropped a spark on to a gun-cotton trail running into a basin of nitro-glycerine. When the worst was over, he took courage to repeat his injunction.

"No, it ain't Josh," replied Nancy, her sobs coming suddenly to a dead halt, "it's Bill Pretty."

"Bill?"

"Yes; I took on with 'im while you was—was away," explained Nancy, now almost matter-of-fact; "we kep' on for two years, and then 'e chucked me."

"Beast!" commented Mr Bunker.

"That ain't all, though. Three weeks ago 'e came back to me—leastways, 'e sent for me one night for to beg me pardon, promisin' to be good and all, and that's the last I've seen of 'im. I've wrote to 'im three times—'e never answered; and I daren't go about to

look for 'im, for fear Josh might get wind of it, and then there'd be the devil to pay. But my 'eart's breakin' for all that."

This last was no complaint. It was a downright statement, with a terrible ring of truth about it.

Bunker meditated.

"Well, so it's a man's job after all," he said finally.

"What d'you mean, dad?"

"A sort of elder-brother job," continued Mr Bunker.

"You're not goin' to come it rough over 'im?" enquired Nancy anxiously.

"Oh no—don't you fret. I'll only 'unt 'im up, and ask 'im kindly to eggsplain 'imself. I've got a kind o' right to it, ain't I?"

"I'm sure it ain't 'is fault," said Nancy half aloud.

"Never said so myself, but it 'ud be jist as well to find out whose it is."

"You'll be very careful with 'im, though?" pleaded Nancy.

"Blasted careful! I'll wait for the eggsplanation fust—I promise you that much, Nance. And now, tit for tat: I want you to swallow Josh for jist another week or two, then I'll be done with 'im altogether."

"Dad, mind yerself; you don't want to make me a horphan for another stretch o' five? It 'ud be nine this time."

"Bless yer 'eart, che-ild, if there's any 'broad arrows' in the case they won't be on my back; you can guess on whose else's. I'll only say so much, there ain't a wusser turn a chap can do 'imself than to find out the other bloke's game; because 'is conceit for bein' that cute

jist swells 'im up like a wind-bag, and then the other bloke can puff 'im anywhere 'e pleases."

Then Mr Bunker, having obtained the desired counter-promise from Nancy, took himself off, ostensibly in quest of the truant Bill, but in reality to fulfil an engagement as umpire at a "terrier-tease," where he soon forgot all about his daughter's heart troubles.

Nancy, however, was destined to receive her information sooner than she thought, and that from a totally unthought-of quarter. A few minutes after her father's departure, the kitchen door was thrust open, and a perky urchin's face peered in.

"If you's at 'ome, you's to come out at once," said the perky face.

Nancy was so busy making up for lost time in the manipulation of her hairpins, that she scarcely caught the drift of the message.

"Who wants me?" she asked, with a strange hope, on having the message repeated.

"Ums said I wasn't to tell," replied the messenger mysteriously; "ums give me a farvin', and ums is goin' to give me annover farvin' if I didn't let out which ums was."

Nancy finished her toilette in half the anticipated time; her hope grew almost to a certainty. Of course it could be none other than Bill—hence the furtiveness of the communication. He had probably waited to see her father leave; now, too, she grasped the reason of his silence to her letters. He was doubtless afraid of their falling into wrong hands; perhaps he had spied for her outside the house time and again—oh, if she had only known!

The envoy of "ums" was prancing about the passage; a few moments more and Nancy was ready to follow him. Eagerly she swept the length of the street left and right; it contained nobody bearing any resemblance to Bill. But, as she reached the bottom, a young woman, carefully shawled, stepped up to her, with traces of considerable diffidence in her gait.

"Peg!" exclaimed Nancy, turning white in the bitterness of her disappointment.

"Yes, it's only me," owned Peg modestly.

"Why didn't you let the kid say so?"

"For one thing, I was afraid yer dad might be about, and, for another, I thought you mightn't come if you knew. 'Ere's yer other farthin', brat," she said, handing it to the trusty and impatient messenger.

"Must be something very important if you go chuckin' yer money about like that," observed Nancy, with a touch of sarcasm.

"Well, it is, in a way," replied Peg, her eyes gleaming malice. "I've 'ad something on my conscience this last month or so, and it ain't left me no rest. I've done you a great wrong, Nancy."

"Oh?" said Nancy indifferently.

"I've called you names, and thought 'ard things o' you. I 'ad an idea all along as you'd stole my Bill away from me."

"Well, dear, what if I did? I was only takin' back what was mine by rights," replied Nancy, with apparent complacency. "I s'pose you've come to congrat'late me for gettin' 'im back? Thanks very much, dear."

“ Yes, dear, but you ain’t got ’im,” replied Peg, sweetly venomous.

Nancy was staggered.

“ Well, then, who has ? ” she asked.

“ Somebody else ; that’s all.”

Nancy recovered ; the whole thing was only a trick of Peg’s.

“ Yes, I’ve lent ’im away for a little time,” she said, “ the same way I lent ’im to you, you know.”

“ No lendin’ about it this go,” replied Peg overtly triumphant ; “ ’e’s given away for good and all.”

“ Given away ? ”

“ Beg pardon—that’s the wrong word ; they says that only of the bride ; p’r’aps you know what they calls it in the man when ’e gets married.”

She stepped back to a safety distance to survey her effect ; it surpassed even her most sanguine expectations. Nancy’s lips puckered pitifully, her fingers twined in entreaty.

“ Peg, for the love of ’eaven, don’t say ’e’s married ! ” she whimpered.

“ Think I’d be comin’ all the way from Croydon, and chuckin’ my money about in ’andfuls, for the fun o’ shovin’ a lie down yer throat ? ” said Peg eagerly.

A moan broke from Nancy ; slowly she lifted her eyes to read confirmation in Peg’s face. Then she suddenly stiffened, and her hands clenched ; malice she could bear, but commiseration——

Peg again stepped back hastily.

“ Now, then, Nancy, none o’ yer larks ; I ’ad enough o’ you last time——still got the bald patch on my ’ead. If

you so much as lay a finger on me, strike me lucky I'll 'ave you up! Fine state o' things we're comin' to if people's to get their scalps tore off only for tellin' o' the truth."

"But I can't believe it, Peg."

"No more could I; but it's right enough, though. And, what's more, I'll put you on the way to findin' out for yerself."

"Why—'ow?"

"I'll take you to 'im."

"Peg, Gawd 'elp you if you're foolin' me! Where is 'e?"

"I s'pose same place where I saw 'im an hour ago. You know the 'Pig and Whistle,' Bridly Street?"

"Yes."

"That's 'is'n now; got it by way of a weddin' present."

"Come!" gasped Nancy.

And while they hurried on, Peg rattled off her account of how she had come into possession of the above facts. Her source of intelligence was Mr Nat Crocker—the same Mr Crocker who had already rendered her an important service on a previous occasion. Him she had commissioned, relying on her claims of relationship, to discover what and who had brought about Bill's desertion. That very morning, Mr Crocker had sent her information to the effect that Bill had made a conquest of a Miss Louisa Butcher, daughter of the proprietor of the said "Pig and Whistle," and other kindred establishments, and that Miss Louisa Butcher, in the glamour of her infatuation, and for fear of losing such a paragon among men, had insisted on the marriage being solemnised by

license. This accordingly happened the Wednesday before, and Bill Pretty now lorded it as the owner of the highly lucrative "Pig and Whistle," which his wife had brought him for dowry.

All this Peg narrated, and, in conclusion, offered to read Nancy Mr Crocker's letter in proof of her veracity. But Nancy waved her off.

"I'd rather find out from 'imself," she said wearily.

A sharp turn of the road brought them fronting the "Pig and Whistle."

"Look, there 'e is!" pointed Peg.

Nancy raised herself on tip-toe to peer through the window, so as not to show herself at the open door. Yes, there he was, certain enough, her Pretty Bill, her——

But she could contain herself no longer; with a quick, gliding movement she slipped in. As it was yet early in the evening, the bar was tolerably empty. Before Bill could guess her identity, she stood before him.

"Bill, dear—dear Bill, 'tain't true—you ain't married nobody else?" came from her in a whisper.

Bill looked at her very hard for a moment or two, but his glance became stone as he said: "Don't know you—'ere, Jack, serve this lady."

And then he turned on his heel, and strode slowly into the private room at the back.

"Seems she's 'ad enough already—golly! wouldn't mind, though, treatin' 'er to another myself," said Jack, the potman, as he watched her reel out into the street.

"Well?" asked Peg, after a few yards of silence.

"Damn you! leave me alone, can't you?" shouted Nancy, turning on her savagely.

This time, however, Peg did not flinch.

"Well, you ain't goin' to let it pass over like that?" she asked.

"What d'you mean?" asked Nancy in turn.

"See 'ere, Nance," said Peg, with a great show of frankness, "you might ask why I've come at all to bother you with the biz, seein' as you've been quits of 'im for a long time, and the shame and sore of it belonged only to me. But I was thinkin', as 'e's done wrong by both of us, and if there was any punishin' to be done, I wasn't goin' to be selfish, but let you 'ave 'alf the relish of it. Can't say as 'e ever spoke very kindly o' you, though, in course, you never gave 'im no call for complaint; but 'e said to me, times over and over agin, as 'e'd only to lift one finger and you'd come slinkin' up to 'im like a bloomin' dorg!"

Nancy listened and walked on stolidly, torpidly. Why should the truth anger her? Yes, it was quite true—he had just lifted his finger and she had crawled to his side like a cur. Peg looked at her once or twice sidelong and impatiently.

"Well, what's to be done?" she resumed at last.

"Yes, what's to be done," said Nancy, not so much in echo of Peg's question, as in expression of her heart's blank perplexity.

"I've 'eard say as in France oil o' vitri'l is good for that sort o' thing," said Peg reflectively.

"What's it good for?" asked Nancy absently.

“For eatin’ the eyes out, rottin’ the skin off the face. . . .

But she stopped short, with an involuntary shudder, as she caught Nancy’s eyes fixed on her, their pupils dilated by terror. For a moment or two, the latter seemed fighting with her breath, then she moaned: “Oh, you crool, ’orrid devil! that’s what you’ve come for, eh? That’s what you want me to do—burn out my darlin’s beautiful brown eyes? Jist because they’ll never give me another lovin’ look, they’re never to look any more at all? O Bill, my pretty Bill! I’d sooner ’ave that other woman kiss yer mouth off, sooner than my ’and should take the least little dab o’ red out o’ yer lips! Bill, darlin’, the other woman can’t take you away from me, do what she like, because she can’t stop me lovin’ you till I die!”

“Block’ead!” muttered Peg.

“Block’ead, you says? No, Peg, I ain’t sich a silly as you take me for; ain’t you richer if you lose a thing that’s still worth ’avin’ rather than a thing what you’ve took all the value away from? Peggy Jones, go away, ’cause, if you don’t, you ain’t p’r’aps got so long to live as you think for.”

Peg took the hint. With a defiant toss of her head, and sarcastically wishing Nancy “better luck next time, old gal!” she disappeared up the next side-turning.

Nancy slouched on, feeling aimless and irresponsible. For a moment she was inclined to call Peg back, if only to rid herself of the necessity of spontaneous action. Ay, what was she to do now? Nothing, it seemed; and yet the world was as large and multifarious of scope

as ever ; perhaps it was because her vision was growing so dark that she did not see what she might do to drive the gnawing ache out of her heart. Surely she would go mad if time continued much longer to loom so dismally ahead of her. Could she not do something—something ?

Ah ! she remembered now ; she was to meet Josh, and in his company she was to dawdle the evening—and herself—dead. She asked a passer-by for the way to Vauxhall Bridge ; to her surprise she found she was within a few minutes of it—apparently the “ Pig and Whistle ” lay in its route. No doubt Josh would be fuming and cursing for having been kept waiting so many hours. A glance at the nearest clock showed her it was only twenty-five to seven. Her senses were indeed playing strange pranks on her.

And presently she had reached the approach of the bridge, where, according to her father’s message, she was to await her lover. She glanced round listlessly ; evidently he had not yet arrived.

She walked on, till she came mid-way of the bridge, and wearily rested her elbows on the parapet, and looked down into the black, swirling depth below. As those waters, so would be her future—dark, full of conflicts, bottomless in its misery. And then there was Josh—Josh, the hateful and exacting, insatiable in his kisses, devouring her with the flame of his odious passion, while she quailed and writhed in speech-reft repugnance. Yes, Josh was her future—perhaps not this particular Josh, but a different Josh under another name and guise. But the result would be just the same ; she

would never feel alive as she did while her pretty Bill had been the present, and unless she could do that, was it worth while . . . ?

A loud shout interrupted her. She lifted her head and looked. Yes, there he was—there was the future she feared and hated, striding down upon her, and the air of exultant joy in its face meant that it had knowledge of the disaster which had come upon her, that it knew her heart was broken, and now it was hurrying up to gather the pieces with its ruthless hands.

But she would foil it; the fierceness of her agony seemed to lift her over the parapet without an effort of her own. And once she was over, it carried her headlong out of everybody's reach into the freedom towards which she panted—oh, how cold this freedom was, how gaspingly, chokingly, deadly cold—

Josh reached the spot, whence she had taken her leap, just in time to hear the splash. For an infinitesimal moment he stood rooted to the ground. No, she was not to escape him after all, not now that he had so much gold—enough gold to give her her heart's desires, and by its sheen to blind her into an hour of love for him, however transient and fragmentary. . . .

And there he was below, groping about him in the treacherous undulating obscurity in which he floated desperately; why, this must be the very spot, almost to the inch, where he had seen her sink, and—yes, a gurgle of triumph broke from his lips—he was clutching an arm—he was holding her—she was gasping to him to save her, and just then he became aware of the bulk-heavy monster which came lumbering down upon them

from the gloom beyond, heaving, quivering, snorting, out-trumpeting his frenzied cries with its funnel-throat. One breath more, and it had hurled itself on top of them, and then there was a vortex of nothingness which swallowed up everything. . . .

Clumsily the steam-tug laboured on, and the helmsman, as he turned off the signal-throttle, peered shiveringly through the dripping dreariness around him, and thanked God that at least his wife and little ones were spared the anxieties and discomforts of the night.

CHAPTER XIX

THE summer had hurried to a close, and folks were beginning to consider whether their two-year old overcoats were still game for another's winter's wear. Through the sulky autumn evening, down the City Road, walked Tabitha, clothed in black, but with cheerfulness evident in gait and mien.

As she turned in the doorway of the coffee-shop owned by Mrs Hickory, the latter quickly rose and came forward to meet her with an anxious: "Well?"

"Glorious!" replied Tabitha radiantly; "the doctors declare they've never known an operation of the kind to be so successful. He's quite out of danger, and his getting well is only a matter of weeks."

"Thank Gawd!" said Mrs Hickory, folding her hands reverently; "won't Ted be pleased. 'E 'ad to be early at the 'Falstaff' to-night, you know. I've a good mind to send somebody round to tell 'im."

"Don't trouble, Mrs Hickory, I'm going round there myself later on," said Tabitha.

"That's better still, Tabby; then 'e'll get it from fust 'and. Meanwhiles, you'll give me 'alf an hour o' yerself, won't you?"

"An hour—I'm not in a hurry. I don't want to get there before half-past eight or nine."

"Good luck!—wait a minute while I run in for Mrs Bates next door to take my place."

And presently she returned with her substitute, gave her a few curt directions, and took Tabitha into the sitting-room behind.

"I won't blame you for 'avin' kep' yerself so scarce o' late," she said, "knowin' from my poor dear 'usband—rest 'is soul!—what it is to 'ave an invalid on yer 'ands. I s'pose it was as much as you could manage to give Ted a few minits' talk when 'e come to enquire. But now you'll tell me all about everything nice and comf'table."

Thus exhorted, Tabitha began her narrative of events, starting with Phœbe's mysterious murder, and the death of her hero brother Josh, who had sacrificed himself to save his drowning sweetheart. His body had been recovered two days afterwards, but not before some miscreant had rifled it of everything save the barest means of identification. Then came the change of domicile, on which Sir Andrew had insisted, for Jimmy's sake, and the news of Phœbe's legacy to the latter, which enabled Tabitha to give up the workshop—at least for a time—in order to devote herself to the recruiting of his strength, without which the trial that was in store for him would be attended by unnecessary jeopardy. A month afterwards the operation had taken place, and to-day, three weeks later, Tabitha was able to bring the gladsome tidings which was the burden of her errand.

Mrs Hickory listened attentively. When Tabitha finished, she looked up and asked: "And is that all?"

"Yes, that's all," replied Tabitha, complacently brushing a shred of fluff from her sleeve.

Mrs Hickory looked disappointed. "I thought you was goin' to tell me something else to finish off with," she said slowly.

Tabitha started as she grasped her meaning.

"Now, listen, Tabby dear," continued Mrs Hickory; "maybe you're thinkin' that this isn't the right time for me to come worritin' you about this bizness of our'n. Daresay yer 'eart's been full enough o' sorrow and joy these last few weeks to crowd out all thoughts o' me and 'im. But I ain't got the stren'th in me to 'old out much longer. Tabitha, ain't you got nothing to tell me?"

"Mrs Hickory——" began Tabitha.

"Wait one moment," interrupted Mrs Hickory eagerly, "afore you give me yer answer, maybe I ought to be puttin' the case to you over again. You was goin' to do something for me; you was goin' to give me back my son Ted—in your way. You promised me that. Well, the fust chance you 'ad 'o keepin' that promise you let slide, and I blessed you for it! After that there was other opportunities; you saw 'im once and twice—not for long, it's true, but time enough to make a beginnin'. You didn't; though, it seems like, on the contrary, you've been treatin' 'im with a little more favour, because I can't eggsplain in no other way 'ow 'e's got 'old o' that look o' fearful hope which sits more terrible-like on his face nor any amount o' desperateness. What am

I to think, Tabitha? If you're playin' fast and loose with 'im, tell 'im so, so as 'e might kill 'imself quickly, because I'd rather see him dead than a loonatic."

"No, I'm not playing with him," replied Tabitha, without hesitation; "and if I ain't kept my promise to you it's because—because—I shall tell you, Mrs Hickory. In the long hours I've been watching by Jimmy I had to have something to think of, so I thought of Ted. I thought of him kindly, very kindly, and I've nearly made up my mind to make him his old self—the way *you* want me to."

"Tabitha!" cried Mrs Hickory, rushing upon her.

But Tabitha gently thrust her back.

"I said 'nearly,' which is, that you mustn't expect me to give you my answer at once."

"When will you?" breathed Mrs Hickory.

"After to-night—to-morrow, perhaps." She rose to go.

"Won't you come with me?" she went on to ask Mrs Hickory.

The latter shook her head.

"No; I want to sit at home and think on what you've said, and, when I've taken it in, I want to go down on my knees, all by myself, and ask Gawd to bless you for it!"

"Leave that till after to-night; suppose I, after all, obtain your prayers on false pretences?"

And Tabitha smiled tremulously.

"P'r'aps, then, there 'ud be double reason that I should pray for you," answered Mrs Hickory, watching her with a dubious look which spoke her apprehension.

Tabitha hurried out, as though she were afraid that by stopping longer she would demolish the laboriously

reared fabric of Mrs Hickory's hopes. She knew very well why she would not give her an irrevocable answer there and then. She had still a test before her, and without having submitted herself to it, she could do nothing. That night she was going to see once more Mr Dacre, for the first time since many weeks. She would find out to what extent the insidious bondage, which at one time had threatened to take her whole life in its grasp, still held sway over her. God knew she had done nothing to strengthen it! She had striven her best to keep him at arm's length from her thoughts. Even at the first overwhelming outburst of gratitude for his kindness to Jimmy, she had kept her self-control, and had written him her thanks instead of making them a pretext for seeking his presence. She had torn up the two or three brief notes of enquiry as to Jimmy's progress as soon as she received them, because she feared lest they should exhale some perniciously magnetic influence of the writer.

And now—she trembled as she admitted it to herself—she believed that she had succeeded. Whatever doubts there might still be, she was going to set at rest now, immediately. She owed that to herself; she owed it to Ted; she was too honest to do otherwise. If she was to give herself to him, she must give herself wholly and entirely, without making him pay toll of her to any other man.

She reached the "Falstaff"; an overflow crowd hung about outside, for this was the night of the re-opening, and everybody was keen on judging for himself or herself with what degree of thoroughness the proprietor had

carried out the Draconian injunctions of the County Council.

Tabitha, as an *habituée*, found no difficulty in passing the watchful janitor. The programme was already on its way. As Tabitha elbowed along the back-row of seats to find herself comfortable standing-room in the right-hand gangway, she came face to face with Ted, hurrying about in the discharge of his duties. She noticed his eyes did not light up as they usually did at sight of her.

"I've got a message for you," he said, without the preliminary of a "good-evening"; "Mr Dacre wants to see you. 'E'll come and speak to you durin' the interval."

"Wants to see me?" asked Tabitha, taken aback; "what for?"

"Oh, 'e'll tell you all about it 'imself. Excuse me—I'm drefful busy."

Before Tabitha could gauge sufficiently her surprise at Mr Dacre's message, and Ted's strange delivery of it, she found herself being swooped down upon by the Jingle trio, who greeted her with cordial effusiveness, albeit there seemed a leak somewhere in their customary high spirits. It was Jane who unburdened their trouble to Tabitha.

"Oh yes, we're good enough when there's only a 'owlin' mob what nearly smells you dead; but when you gets a 'ouseful o' toffs, and any amount o' noos-paper chaps about the 'all, what might do you some real good, then it's: 'Very sorry, my dears, but you're crowded out.' And, in course, you've got to knuckle

under—what else is a feller to do? O Cinders, this is a wicked, wicked world!”

“A rotten shame it is!” corroborated Betsy; “as if we ain’t as good as any of ’em, if we only gets our chance! And, Cinders, I don’t mind tellin’ you in confidence—because then I know it won’t go no further—it’s only last week I gave my ’air a new coat o’ paint what cost me one-and-eight the two bottles, thinkin’ as at last I was goin’ to make a bit of a splash. Sez Mr Whittaker: ‘Only paid professionals to-night, gals.’ See if one day I won’t go and marry an earl, and then I’ll come and poke his eyes out with my di’mind coronet!”

Emma expressed her disgust with things in similar terms.

“You’ve chucked up the whole biz for good and all, Ted told us,” said Jane.

Tabitha assented curtly though decisively; she wished the chatterboxes elsewhere. But they were only too glad to have got hold of a capacious receptacle for the story of their wrongs, and were not inclined to let it go away empty.

The descent of the curtain, and the precipitate withdrawal of a large portion of the audience to the bar, gave notice of the interval. Tabitha waited, not for long. For presently Ted brought Mr Dacre up to be assailed by the remonstrances of the indignant Jingles. But Mr Dacre made short work of them by an emphatic reminder that the arrangements for the evening were due to Mr Whittaker.

“Have you a moment for me?” he continued, turning to Tabitha.

Without a word she followed him to the mouth of the stage corridor.

"First of all, let me congratulate you on your brother's recovery. I saw Sir Andrew yesterday, and he told me he was as good as well."

"I know whom I've got to thank——" began Tabitha.

"That's a minor detail," he interrupted; "I shall be wanted in a tick, so I must be brief. The fact is, that the caretaker of my office in Stamford Street died suddenly, and I'm in a bit of a fix to find her successor. Then it struck me that perhaps you might care for the post; it's easy work and pretty good pay—twenty-five shillings a week, with two nice little rooms thrown in gratis. It would be just suitable for you, especially when your brother is able to get about again; and, with his legacy properly invested, you can manage very nicely between you. In any case, I'm determined to keep my eye on him, and put him in the way of cultivating his undoubted talent. No, don't look so troubled about it; I won't press you to decide at once. Perhaps you have other arrangements in view. Call on me Monday morning, and then we can settle one way or another. I must get back; so long, then."

Mechanically Tabitha's hand responded to his, and the next moment she was alone, with only a vague sense of her whereabouts. Somebody brushed hurriedly past her. It was Ted; for an instant it seemed he was going to speak to her, and then his hurry doubled almost into flight.

Tabitha returned to her former stand. The Jingles were perambulating the hall in quest of the iron-hearted

Mr Whittaker. Amid the din and the turmoil around her Tabitha felt strangely unmoved and self-possessed, and for that she was devoutly grateful, because here she had to wrestle with a peril against which only the steadiest effort of thought and the most matter-of-fact equanimity could be of avail. She had come within consummation of what, not so long ago, had appeared to her all her earthly desire. She was actually to live under one roof with him, almost to breathe the same air he breathed; there would be the tie of daily companionship, the intercourse of personal service, the thousand and one opportunities of speech and sight. They were hers now, and she did not know what to do with them. They seemed posthumous births, and the Tabitha, who once upon a time would have cradled them in her bosom, did not know whether to give them welcome. For she had learned they were dangerous guests, and yet they whispered to her, with honied tongues, of delights for which she would erstwhile have forfeited half the remainder of her life. They said nought—perfidious advocates that they were!—of the stings and stabs and the ineffectual agonies of which they were but the harbingers. These it was left to Tabitha to espy for herself from the look-out of her prudence. There was no justice in fate; it might have given her a clear field for gaining self-knowledge, for self-reconcilement to-night, and not have set up, in this new temptation, a sky-towering obstacle. And then it came upon her that it was perhaps she who was unjust to fate. This obstacle was but the culmination of her latter-day past, of the calamitous, havocful past, from which she was

seeking escape. Now fate had placed her in front of it, and was saying: "Leap, and you will be safe." Ah! but did she have the strength? Perhaps with some little favour, with some vaulting-board to lend her impetus. . . .

She looked round as though she expected to find it within reach of her arm. The house had settled back in its seats; the Jingles had resumed position near Tabitha determined to wait to the bitter end, which was to be made still more bitter for Mr Whittaker.

The lengthy programme was discharging itself without a hitch; but the audience, for all the approbation they meted out to it, seemed permeated by a vague impatience, like that of children waiting for the apotheosis of dinner in the shape of pudding. And so when, punctually at eleven, Mr Dacre rose and announced: "Ladies and gentlemen, I have much pleasure in calling on Miss Maud Marshall," the announcement was taken up by a tremendous volley of applause.

Mr Dacre remained standing, but allowed it vent for half a minute; then he lifted his hand, demanding and obtaining silence. A quiet smile played about his lips as he continued: "I was about to add, the prospective Mrs Algernon Dacre."

The Jingles looked at one another in silence, because they knew that for the time being it was futile to attempt spoken intelligence to one another. Then at the earliest opportunity Jane inquired the meaning of "perspective."

"Was jist goin' to ask you myself," replied Betsy.

"Seems to me it means she's goin' to be Mrs Dacre

till 'e gets 'old o' somebody that's more worth 'is while," suggested Emma thoughtfully.

"You're silly!" retorted Jane; "think 'e'd be sich a mug as to let the whole world know that? Let's ask Cinders—she always was a bit of a grammerarian."

"What it means?" said Tabitha, looking up at them, when she had shaken herself awake; "why, only that he's going to marry her."

"What, for ever and ever?" asked Emma with much anxiety.

"For ever and ever," responded Tabitha almost solemnly. Her hands were clasped as though in thanksgiving. She could take her leap now. . . .

She was conscious of nothing more till the outsallying throng took her in its vortex. The uselessness of searching for Ted in the hubbub and confusion around was obvious to her. She allowed herself to be hustled forth into the street. There she stopped, because she had not mapped out any further plan of action. What was she to do? To go home, or call in again on Mrs Hickory? The latter seemed to her almost out of the question in view of the advanced hour; and yet, if she went home, he would learn what there was to learn from his mother—at second hand, as it were. And, woman-like, she was jealous that he should know the news which affected both their destinies so signally from any lips but her own. So she determined to wait till he came out. He would probably be a little later that night, because of the unusual stress of business. The next instant she felt him at her elbow.

"I was waiting for you," she said, turning on him.

"No, I was waitin' for you," he said, with the sullen look he had worn all the evening. "I've got something to tell you."

"Well?" she prompted smilingly.

"I don't think it'll please you, though," he said, falling into step with her; "but I can't 'elp sayin' it—and you can slap my face for it afterwards. No woman what's got any respect for 'erself will go and make a servant of 'erself to a man—although 'e calls it 'ousekeeper or caretaker—when she's got a chance o' keepin' 'ouse in 'er own right. I'd 'ave gone on bein' friends with you through everything, till one day I'd 'ave got choked by the lump that gets into my throat each time you talk to me; but I couldn't 'ave the 'eart to look you straight in the face, knowin' 'ow little you think o' yerself. And that's all, Tabitha."

"Tabitha?" she caught him up, smiling as before.

He flushed. "I forgot—I oughtn't to call you that. But it'll be the last time as it was the first."

"Ted, it needn't be the last time—unless you want it to," said Tabitha stopping.

"Needn't be?" he asked, bewildered; "why, what d'you mean?"

"Only this," answered Tabitha.

She bent forward, and kissed him full on the mouth; had she not determined that he was to learn the news from her own lips?

THE END



