MRS. THOMPSON

I

IT was early-closing day in the town of Mallingbridge; and Thompson's, "established 1813," had begun to hide its wares from the sunlight of High Street. Outside its windows the iron shutters were rolling down; inside its doors male and female assistants, eager for the weekly half-holiday, were despatching the last dilatory customers, packing their shelves, spreading their dust-sheets, and generally tidying up with anxious speed.

Mrs. Thompson, the sole proprietress, emerging from internal offices and passing through her prosperous realm, cast an attentive eye hither and thither; and, wherever she glanced, saw all things right, and nothing wrong. System, method, practised control visible in each department. Carpets, Bedding, Curtains, House Furnishing, all as they should be—no disturbing note, no hint of a dangerous element in the well-ordered working scheme of Thompson's.

Managerial Mr. Mears, a big elderly man, took his hands from beneath the skirts of his frock-coat; smiled and bowed; and spoke to the proprietress confidentially on one or two important matters.

"By the way," said Mr. Mears, "about Household Crockery—is it to be a promotion, or do you still think

of getting someone in? Of course there's a lot of talk—must be while the appointment remains open. But you haven't made up your mind yet, have you?"

"Oh, yes," said Mrs. Thompson, arranging her reticule, and not looking at Mr. Mears. "I shall appoint Mr. Marsden."

"Young Marsden! Never?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Thompson firmly.

"You surprise me. I admit it."

"You don't think," said Mrs. Thompson, "that he is old enough for the responsibility. But, Mr. Mears, he has *brains* and he likes *work*. Tell the others that the appointment is made."

And big Mr. Mears did then what everyone in Thompson's always did—that is to say, he immediately obeyed orders; and before the last shutter was down, the news had flashed all through the restricted space of the old-fashioned shop.

"Dicky Marsden! Oh, drop me off a roof . . . Marsden up again! Well, I'm bust!" Thompson's young gentlemen, murmuring their comments, expressed astonishment and a certain amount of envy. "Marsden over all our heads! This is a rum go, if you like."

"Fancy! What next? Would you believe it?" Thompson's young ladies, after being breathless, became shrill. "Why, o'ny six months ago he was Number Three in the Carpets."

"He'll be prouder than ever."

"I shan't dare so much as speak to him."

"He always treated one as dirt under his feet," said a dark-haired anæmic young lady. "And *now!*"

"With the increased screw," said a pert, blonde young lady, "he'll be able to buy more smart clothes, and he'll

look more fetching than ever. Yes, and you'll all be more in love with him than you are a'ready."

"Speak for yourself."

"Well, say I'm as bad as you. We're all a lot of fools together."

Of course there must be talk. The Napoleonic rise of this fortunate shopman had been sufficiently rapid to stir the whole of his little shop-world. Starting thus, to what heights might he not attain in Thompson's? There would be talk and more talk.

But not within the hearing of Mr. Mears.

"Jabber, jabber," said Mr. Mears with unusual severity. "Less of it. You're like so many cackling hens in some back-yard—instead of ladies who know how to behave themselves in a high-class emporium."

Evidently Mr. Mears was not pleased with the appointment. He stamped off; and the girls observed the characteristic swish of the coat tails, the manner in which he puffed out his chest, and the faint flush upon his bearded face.

Meanwhile Mrs. Thompson had passed onward and upward, through many departments, to the door of communication on the first floor that led from her public shop to her private house.

Outwardly it was quite an old-fashioned shop, still encased with the red-brick fabric of Georgian days; but inwardly its structure had been almost entirely modernised. The birdcage art of steel-girdering had swept away division-walls, opened out the departments to the widest possible extent, and given an unimpeded run of floor area where once the goods used to be stored in rooms the size of pigeon-holes. The best shop-architects had gutted the place, and, so far as they were permitted, had "brought it

up to date"; but in all recent improvements the style of substantial respectable grandeur was preserved. The new mahogany staircases were of a Georgian pattern; there were no fantastic white panellings, no coloured mosaics, no *étagères* of artificial flowers. Really the vast looking-glasses were the only decoration that one could condemn as altogether belonging to the vulgar new school. The mirrors were perhaps overdone.

So, as Mrs. Thompson ascended the short flight of stairs out of Bedding, etc., a pleasant middle-aged woman in stately black with pendent chatelaine, climbed opposing steps to meet her face to face on the landing. As she moved on she was moving in many glasses, so that nearly all the assistants could see her or her reflected image: a procession of Mrs. Thompsons advancing from Woollens and Yarns, another converging column of Mrs. Thompsons from Cretonnes and Chintzes, reinforcements coming forward in the big glass opposite the entrance of Household Linen; while the young men behind the Blankets counter raised their eyes to watch the real Mrs. Thompson march by with a company of false Mrs. Thompsons stretching in perfect line from the right—innumerable Mrs. Thompsons shown by the glasses; some looking bigger, some looking slighter; but all the glasses showing a large-bosomed, broad-hipped woman of forty-five, with florid colouring and robust deportment; a valiant solid creature, seeming, as indeed she was, well able to carry the burden of the whole shop on her firm shoulders.

Then the glasses were empty again: Mrs. Thompson had disappeared through the door of communication.

On this side of the door lay all her working life, the struggle, the fight, the courageous plans, and the un-

flagging labours; on the other side of the door lay the object for which she had toiled, the end and aim of every brave endeavour.

"Enid, my darling, are you there? . . . Yates, is Miss Enid in?"

"Yes, ma'am, Miss Enid has lunched, and is upstairs—dressing for the drive."

Yates, the old servant, maid, housekeeper, and faithful friend, came bustling and smiling to the welcome sounds of her employer's kind voice.

Mrs. Thompson sat for a few minutes in the vacated dining-room, talking to Yates and hearing the domestic news.

The headache of Miss Enid, Yates reported, was much better; but she had not been out this morning. She seemed to be rather languid, and, as Yates guessed, perhaps felt a little dull and moped after the gaieties and excitements of the country-house visit from which she had just returned.

"Ah, well," said Mrs. Thompson cheerfully, "our drive will do her good. And now that the summer is coming on, she shall not want for occupation and amusement."

All through the snug little box of a house, filched out of the block of shop premises, there was evidence of the occupations and amusements of Miss Enid. Bookcases with choicely bound volumes of romance and poetry, elegant writing-desks, various musical instruments, materials for painting in oil or water colour, new inventions for the practice of miniature sculpture, the most costly photographic cameras, tennis rackets, hockey sticks, and other implements of sport and pastime—on

this floor as on the upper floors, in dining-room, drawing-room, boudoir, as well as bedroom and dressing-room, were things that should provide a young lady with occupation and amusement.

The rooms were comfortably furnished and brightly ornamented, and all had a homelike soothing aspect to their busy owner. To other people they might seem lacking in the studious taste by which the rich and idle can make of each apartment a harmonious picture. Here money had been spent profusely but hurriedly, at odd times and not all together: whatever at the moment had appeared to be desirable or necessary had been at once procured. So that comfort and luxury rather jostled each other; the Sheraton cabinets which were so charming to look at were apt to get hidden by the leather armchairs which were so soothing to have a nap in; and the Chelsea china in the glass-fronted corner cupboard completely lost itself behind the Japanese screen that guarded against draughts from the old-sashed window.

"Enid, may I come in?" Mrs. Thompson tapped softly at the door of her daughter's dressing-room.

"Mother dear, is that you?" The door was opened, and the two women embraced affectionately.

Miss Thompson, in her fawn-coloured coat and skirt, feathered hat and spotted veil, was a tall, slim, graceful figure, ready now to adorn the hired landau from Mr. Young's livery stables. Her hair was dark and her complexion naturally pallid; with a long straight nose in a narrow face, she resembled her dead father; but what was sheep-like and stupid in him was rather pretty in the girl;—altogether, a decent-looking, fairly attractive young woman of twenty-two, but not likely to obtain

from the world at large the gaze of admiring satisfaction with which an adoring mother regarded her.

"The carriage isn't there yet," said Mrs. Thompson, "and I promise not to keep you waiting. I'll change my dress in a flash of lightning."

"What do you think of wearing this afternoon?"

Mrs. Thompson proposed to put on her new mauve gown and the hat with the lilac blossoms; but her daughter made alternative suggestions.

In the shop Mrs. Thompson carried a perpetual black; outside the shop she was perhaps unduly fond of vivid tints, and it was Enid's custom to check this rainbow tendency.

"Very well," said Mrs. Thompson, "it shall be the brown again;" and she laughed good-humouredly. "I bow to your judgment, my dear, if I don't endorse its correctness."

"You look sweet in the brown, mother."

"Do I? . . . But remember what Miss Macdonald says. With my high complexion, I *need* colour."

Yates soon braced and laced her mistress into the sober brown cloth and velvet that Enid considered suitable for the occasion; a parlourmaid with light rugs went forward to the carriage; and mother and daughter came down the steep and narrow flight of stairs to their outer door.

There was no ground floor to the dwelling-house—or rather the ground floor formed an integral part of the shop. The street door stood in St. Saviour's Court—the paved footway that leads from High Street to the churchyard,—sandwiched with its staircase between the two side windows that contained basket chairs and garden requisites. The court was sufficiently wide and

sufficiently pleasant: a quiet, dignified passage of entry, with the peaceful calm of the old church walls at one end and the stir and bustle of the brilliant High Street at the other end.

Enid and her mamma, following the neat and mincing parlourmaid, made a stately procession to the main thoroughfare, where the really handsome equipage provided by Mr. Young was awaiting their pleasure.

The liveried coachman touched his hat, idle loungers touched their caps, prosperous citizens uncovered and bowed.

"There goes Mrs. Thompson." People ran to upper windows to see Mrs. Thompson start for her Thursday drive.

"There she goes."

"Who?"

"Mrs. Thompson."

"Oh!"

The genial May sunshine flashed gaily, lighting up the whole street, making both ladies blink their eyes as the carriage rolled away.

"What a crowd there is outside Bence's," said Miss Enid. "How mean it is of him not to close!"

The first shop they passed was Bence's drapery stores, and Mrs. Thompson glanced carelessly at the thronged pavement in front of these improperly open windows.

"Mr. Bence's motto," said Mrs. Thompson, "is cheap and nasty," and she laughed with an amused scorn for so mean a trade rival. "His method of doing business is like the trumpery he offers to the public. I have a rather impudent letter from him in my pocket now, and I want——"

But then Mrs. Thompson's strong eyebrows contracted,

and she shrugged her shoulders and looked away from Bence's. She had just noticed two of her own shop-girls going into Bence's to buy his trumpery. Something distinctly irritating in the thought that these feather-headed girls regularly carried half their wages across the road to Bence's!

Throughout the length of High Street there were too many of such signs of the vulgar times: the ever-changing trade, old shops giving place to new ones—an American boot-shop, a branch of the famous cash tobacconists, the nasty cheap restaurant opened by the great London caterers, Parisian jewellery absorbing one window of the historic clocksmiths,—everywhere indications of that love of tawdriness and glitter which slowly atrophies the sense of solid worth, of genuineness and durability.

Yet everywhere, also, signs of the old life of the town still vigorous—aldermen and councillors taking the air; Mr. Wiseman, the wealthy corn-merchant; Mr. Dempsey, the auctioneer-mayor; Mr. Young, owner of a hundred horses besides this pair of gallant greys that were drawing Mrs. Thompson.

Everyone of the solid old townsfolk knew her; all that was respectably permanent bowed and smiled at her. The drive was like a royal progress when they swept through the market square, past the ancient town hall now a museum, under the shadows thrown by the new municipal buildings, and the other and bigger church of Holy Trinity, out beneath the noble gatehouse, and up into the sunlit slope of Hill Street. Hats off on either side, broad masculine faces smiling in the sunlight. All the best of the town knew her and was proud of her.

Her story was of the simplest, and all knew it.

Mr. Thompson had been the last and most feeble representative of a powerful dynasty of shopkeepers; at his death it became at once apparent that the grand old shop was nothing but an effete, played out, and utterly exhausted possession; his widow was left practically penniless, with an insolvent business to wind up, and an orphaned little girl to support and rear. And young Mrs. Thompson was ignorant of all business matters, knew nothing more of shops than can be learned by any shop-customer. Nevertheless, with indomitable energy, she threw herself into business life. She did not shut up Thompson's; she kept it going. In two years it was again a paying concern; in a few more years it was a stronger and more flourishing enterprise than it had ever been since its establishment in 1813; now it was immensely prosperous and a credit to the town.

They all knew how she had toiled until the success came, how generously she had used the money that her own force and courage earned—a large-minded, open-handed, self-reliant worker, combining a woman's endurance with a man's strength,—and only one weakness: the pampering devotion to her girl. She was making her daughter too much of a fine lady; she had extravagantly worshipped this idol; she had *spoiled* the long-nosed Enid. The town knew all about that.

Bowing to right and to left, Mrs. Thompson drove up Hill Street, and then stopped the carriage outside the offices of Mr. Prentice, solicitor and commissioner of oaths.

"Only two or three words with him, Enid. I promise not to be more than five minutes."

Mr. Prentice came to the carriage door; and was asked to read the letter from Mr. Bence the fancy draper.

"Don't you think it's rather impertinent?"

"Of course I do," said Mr. Prentice. "I wouldn't answer it. Throw it into the waste-paper basket."

"Oh, no, I shall answer it. . . . I can't allow Mr. Bence to suppose that I should ever be afraid of him."

"Afraid of him!" And Mr. Prentice laughed contemptuously. "*You* afraid of such a little bounder! . . . Look here. Shall I go round and kick the brute?"

Mrs. Thompson laughed too. "No, no," she said, "that would scarcely be professional."

"I'll do it after office hours—in my private capacity—and of course without entering it to your account."

Mr. Prentice was a jolly red-faced man of fifty, with healthy clean-shaven cheeks, and small grey whiskers of a sporting cut. Altogether the most eminent solicitor in Mallingbridge, he had clients among all the country gentlefolk of the neighbourhood; he rode to hounds still, and kept his horses at Young's stables; he stood high in the masonic craft, and could sing an excellent comic song. He was at once Mrs. Thompson's trusted legal adviser, her staunch friend, and, as he himself declared, her admiring slave.

"One more word," said Mrs. Thompson. "It is time that I gave another dinner at the Dolphin. There are two new men on the Council—and there will be more new men next November. I shall want your help to act as deputy host for me. Will you think it out—draw up a list of guests—and arrange everything."

"It is for you to command, and for me to obey," said genial Mr. Prentice. "But, upon my word, I don't know why you should go on feasting people in this way."

"I like to stand well with the town."

"And so you do. So you would, if you never gave

them another glass of champagne. . . . I think your mamma is far too generous."

But Miss Enid, who seemed unutterably bored, was staring out of the carriage in the other direction. She had not been listening to Mr. Prentice, and she did not hear him when he addressed her directly.

"Then good-bye. Drive on, coachman. . . . There," and Mrs. Thompson turned gaily to her daughter. "That's more than enough business for Thursday afternoon, isn't it, Enid?"

They drove along the London road, through the pretty village of Haggart's Cross, as far as the chalk cliffs beneath the broad downs; and then descending again, through beech woods and fir plantations to the valley where the river Malling runs and twists beside the railway line all the way home to the town.

The world was fresh and bright, with the May wind blowing softly and the May flowers budding sweetly. Cattle in the green fields, birds in the blue sky, pinafored children chanting a lesson behind the latticed panes of their schoolhouse, primroses peeping from grassy banks, and, far and near, the white hawthorn shedding its perfume, giving its fragrant message of spring, of hope, of life—plenty of things to look at with pleasure, plenty of things to talk about, though one might often have seen them before.

But Enid was somehow languid, listless, even lumpish, and Mrs. Thompson did nearly all the looking and talking.

"I always think that is such an imposing place. The entrance seems to warn one off—to tell one not to forget what a tremendous swell the owner is."

They were passing the lodge gates of a great noble-

man's seat, and one had a rapid impression of much magnificence. Stone piers, sculptured urns, floreated iron, massive chains; and behind the forbidding barrier a vista of swept gravel and mown grass, with solemn conifers proudly ranked, and standard rhododendrons just beginning pompously to bloom—no glimpse of the mansion itself, but an intuitive perception of something vast, remote, unattainable.

Enid looked through the bars at my lord's gravel drive attentively, almost wistfully, perhaps thinking of the few and august people to whom these splendours would be familiar—of the lucky people who are brought up in palaces instead of in shops.

"It is a meet of hounds." Miss Enid broke a long silence to give her mother this information. "And when I was staying at Colonel Salter's, I met a man who had once been to a ball there."

"Ah, well," said Mrs. Thompson, with cheerful briskness, "now you mention hunting, that reminds me. We must get you on horseback again. . . . You do like your riding, don't you?"

"Oh, yes," said Enid listlessly.

"Mr. Young said you were making such good progress. And," added Mrs. Thompson gently, "it is a pity to take up things and drop them. It is just wasted effort—if one stops before reaching the goal."

The road, turning and crossing the railway, gave them a well-known view of Mallingbridge—the town quite at its best, four miles away in the middle of the broad plain, smoke and haze hanging over it, but with tempered sunlight glistening on countless roofs, and the square tower of St. Saviour's and the tall spire of Holy Trinity rising proudly above the mass of lesser buildings. There,

stretched at her feet, was Mrs. Thompson's world, the world that she had conquered.

In another mile they passed a residence that to her mind formed a pleasant contrast with the oppressive splendour of the nobleman's domain. Here there were white gates between mellow brick walls, easy peeps into a terraced garden, stables and barns as at a farm, pigeons settling on some thatch, friendly English trees guarding but not hiding a dear old English country house.

"Look, Enid," and Mrs. Thompson pointed to the broad eaves, the white windows, and the solid chimney stacks, as they showed here and there between the branches of oak and maple. "There. That's a place I fell in love with the first time I saw it. . . . I would like a house just like that—for you and me to live in when I am able to give up my work . . ."

"What were you saying, mother?" Enid, not listening or absorbed by her own thoughts, had not heard.

"I was only saying, that's the sort of house I should like for us two—when I retire."

"Mother, I sometimes wish that you had retired years ago."

"Well, my dear," said Mrs. Thompson meekly, "retiring is all very well—but you and I wouldn't be sitting here driving so comfortably if I had been afraid of my work and in a hurry to get done with it."

II

IN her marriage she had sacrificed all the natural hopes and inclinations of a healthy young woman. She and her widowed mother were very poor, quite alone in the world; and it seemed a proper and a wise thing to marry Mr. Thompson for his money. No one could guess that the money was already a phantom and no longer a fact. The man was middle-aged, feeble of body and mind, a stupid and selfish person; but it seemed that he would assure the future of his wife and provide a comfortable home for his mother-in-law.

Then after five years the man and his money were gone for ever; the mother for whom the sacrifice had been made was herself dead; only the wife and her little child remained. Five years of dull submission to an unloved husband; five years spent in the nursing of two invalids, with the vapid meaningless monotony of wasted days broken sharply by the pains of child-birth, the agonised cares of early motherhood, and the shock of death;—and at the end of the years, a sudden call for limitless courage and almost impossible energy.

Quiet unobtrusive Mrs. Thompson answered the call fully. Deep-seated fighting instincts arose in her; unsuspected powers were put forth to meet the exigencies of the occasion: the hero-spirit that lies buried in many natures sprang nobly upward.

At first she possessed only one commercial asset, the

reputation of Thompson's. For so many years Thompson's had been known as a good shop that here was a legend which might counterbalance debts, exhausted credit, antiquated stock, and incompetent staff.

The town and the country during generations had come to Thompson's for good things—not cheap things, but the things that last: dress fabrics that stand up by themselves, chairs and tables that you can leave intact to your grandchildren, carpets that unborn men will be beating when you yourself are dust.

Mrs. Thompson, in her widow's weeds, went round the big supply houses, telling the great trade chieftains that the legend was still alive, though the man who already owed them so much money was dead; saying in effect to all the people who held her fate in their hands, "Don't let old Thompson's go down. Don't smash me. Help me. Give me time to secure you twenty shillings in the pound, instead of the meagre seven and sixpence which you can get now."

The wholesale trade helped her. Little by little all the world came to her aid. Mr. Prentice the solicitor was a skilful ally. As soon at it could be seen locally that she was keeping her head above water, friends on the bank began to beckon to her. Rich aldermen, advised that there was now small risk, lent her money; and these loans rendered her independent of Trade assistance. Soon she could get whatever sums she required for the restoration and expansion of the business.

In all her dealings she won respect. The confidence that she inspired was her true commercial asset, her capital, her good-will, her everything; and it was always growing. "Very remarkable," said travellers, reporting at head-quarters, "how that Mrs. Thompson has pulled

the fat out of the fire at Mallingbridge. What she wants now is some sound business man for partner—and there's no knowing what she mightn't do."

Then some other and more philo- phic traveller, impressed by the swift revivification of Thompson's, said enthusiastically, "The best business head in this town is on a woman's shoulders." The saying was quoted, misquoted, echoed and garbled, until it concreted itself into an easy popular formula which the whole town used freely. "The best man of business in Mallingbridge is a woman." Everyone knew who that woman was. Mrs. Thompson. And the town, speaking on important occasions through the mouth of its mayor, aldermen, and councillors, for the first time said that it was proud of her.

And then the town began to ask her hand in wedlock.

In these days, at the dawn of her success, Mrs. Thompson was not without obvious personal attraction. She was fair and plump, with light wavy hair, kind grey eyes beneath well-marked eyebrows, and good colour warmly brightening a clean white skin;—she "looked nice" in her widow's black, smiling at a hard world and so bravely tackling her life problem. Quite a large number of well-to-do citizens were smilingly rejected by the buxom widow. Pretenders were slow to believe in the finality of her refusals; as the success became more patent, they tried their luck again, and again, but always with the same emptiness of result. Indeed it was a town joke, as well as an unquestionable fact, that old Chambers the wine-merchant regularly proposed three times a year to nice-looking Mrs. Thompson.

She wanted no second husband. The fight and the child were enough for her. Those deep and unsapped springs of love that might have gushed forth to make a

fountain stream of happiness for Alderman Brown or Councillor Jones flowed calmly and steadfastly now in a concentrated channel of motherly affection. To work for the child, to love and tend the child—that was henceforth her destiny. And she felt strong enough to watch in her own face the blurring destructive print of time, if she might watch in her girl's face time's unfolding glories.

For the cruel years took from her irrevocably those physical seductions of neatly rounded form and smooth pinkness and whiteness. The colour that had been sufficient became too much, plumpness changed to stoutness—once, for a year, she was fat. But she tackled this trouble too, bravely and unflinchingly,—went to London for Swedish exercises; banted; brought herself down, down, down, until Dr. Eldridge told her she must stop, or she would kill herself. After that she settled to a steady solidness, a well-maintained amplitude of contour; and the years seemed to leave her untouched as the wide-breasted, rotund-hipped, stalwart Mrs. Thompson of a decade—red-cheeked, bright-eyed, gallant and strong.

Yet still she had suitors. The physical charm was gone, but other charm was present—that blending of kindness and power which wins men's hearts, if it does not stir their pulses, gave her a dominating personality, and made the circle of her influence exactly as large as the circle of her acquaintance. People at the circumference of the circle seemed to be surely drawn, by a straight or vacillating radius, to its centre. The better you knew her, the more you thought about her. So that old friends after years of thought now and then surprised her by suggesting that friendship should be exchanged for a closer bond; pointing out the advantages of a common sense union, the marriage of convenience, sympathy, and

mutual regard, that becomes appropriate when the volcano glow of youth has faded; and inviting her to name an early day for going to St. Saviour's Church with them.

In the shop, among all grades of employees, there had ever been a dread of St. Saviour's Church and wedding bells. They got on so well with their mistress that the idea of a master was extraordinarily abhorrent to them. But one day, a day now long past, Mrs. Thompson told Mr. Mears authoritatively that joy bells would never sound for her again; Mr. Mears, by permission, or in the exercise of his own discretion, passed on the glad tidings; and the only dark thought that could worry a contented staff was removed.

"No, Mr. Mears, I don't say that I have never contemplated the possibility of such an event; but I can say emphatically I have decided that in my case it *is* impossible."

That was sufficient. What Mrs. Thompson said Mrs. Thompson meant. A decision with her was a decision.

Of all her trusty subordinates none had served her so loyally as big Mr. Mears. His whole life had been spent in Thompson's. Once he had been boy messenger, window-cleaner, boot-blacker; and now, at the age of sixty, he had risen to managerial rank. He was the acknowledged chief of the staff, Mrs. Thompson's right-hand man; and he was as proud of his position and the culminating grandeurs of his career as if he had been a successful general, a prime-minister, or a pope. Mrs. Thompson knew and openly told him that he was invaluable to her. Such words were like wine and music: they intoxicated and enchanted him. Truly he was whole-hearted, faithful, devoted, with a deep veneration

for his mistress; with an intense and almost passionate esteem for her skill, her comprehension, her vigour, and her herself—perhaps too with a love that he scarcely himself understood.

Anyhow, this heavy grey-haired shopman and his employer were very close allies, generally thinking as one, and always acting as one, able to talk together with a nearly absolute freedom on any question, however intimately private in its character.

"You see, Mr. Mears, if I ever meant to do it, I should have done it ages ago. Now that my daughter is growing up, her claims for attention become stronger every day."

Mr. Mears and the rest of the staff were more than satisfied. Perhaps they blessed the idolised Enid for an increasing capacity to absorb every energy and volition that Mrs. Thompson could spare from the shop.

Whatever Enid wished for her mother provided. She racked her brains in order to forestall the child's wishes. But the difficulty always was this, one could not be quite sure what Enid really wished. She accepted the pretty gifts, the conditions of her life, the plans for her future, with a calm unruffled acquiescence.

When Mrs. Thompson regretfully decided that it would be advisable to dismiss the expensive governesses and send the home pupil to an expensive school, Enid placidly and immediately agreed. Mrs. Thompson thought that school would open Enid's mind, that school would give her an opportunity of making nice girl-friends. Enid at once thought so too.

"But, oh, my darling, what a gap there will be in this house! You'll leave a sore and a sad heart behind you. I shall miss you woefully."

"And I shall miss you, mamma."

Then, when Enid had gone to the fashionable seminary at Eastbourne, with the faithful Yates as escort, with a wonderful luncheon-basket of delicacies in the first-class reserved compartment, with several huge boxes of school trousseau in the luggage van, Mrs. Thompson began to suffer torment. Was it not cruel to send the brave little thing away from her? Might not her darling be now a prey to similar yearnings and longings for a swift reunion? The torment became agony; and after two days Mrs. Thompson rushed down to see for herself if the new scholar was all right.

Enid was entirely all right—playing with the other girls at the bottom of the secluded garden.

"Is that you, mummy?" This was a form of greeting peculiar to Enid from very early days. "I am so glad to see you," and she kissed mamma affectionately.

She was uniformly affectionate, whether at school or at home, but never explosive or demonstrative in the manifestations of her affection. There was more warmth in her letters than in her spoken words. "My own dearest mother," she used to write, "I am so looking forward to being with you again. Do meet me at the station." But when the train arrived and Mrs. Thompson, who had been pacing the Mallingbridge platform in a fever of expectation, clasped the beloved object to her heart, she experienced something akin to disappointment. It was a sedately composed young lady that offered a cool cheek to the mother's tremulous lips.

Now and then a school-friend came to stay with Enid. A Miss Salter, whose parents proved large-minded enough to overlook the glaring fact of the shop, was a fairly

frequent visitor. During the visit one of Mr. Young's carriages stood at the disposal of the young hostess and her guest all day long; breakfasts were served in bed; a private box at the local theatre might be occupied any evening between the cosy dinner and the dainty little supper; and Mrs. Thompson arranged delightful expeditions to London, where, under the guardianship of Yates, larger sights and more exciting treats could be enjoyed than any attainable in Mallingbridge.

The condescending guest returned to her distinguished circle laden with presents, and frankly owned that she had been given a royal time at the queer shop-house in St. Saviour's Court.

Enid in her turn visited the houses of her friends, and came home to tell Mrs. Thompson of that pleasant gracious world in which people do not work for their living, but derive their ample means from splendidly interred ancestors. With satisfaction, if not with animation, she described how greatly butlers and footmen surpass the art of parlourmaids in waiting at table; how gay an effect is produced by young men dining in red coats, how baronets often shoot with three guns, how lords never use less than two horses in the hunting field, and so on. And Mrs. Thompson was happy in the thought that her daughter should be mingling with fine company and deriving pleasure from strange scenes.

She was careful to obliterate herself in all such social intercourse. Courteous letters were exchanged between her and Enid's hosts; but the girl and Yates were despatched together, and Mrs. Thompson refused even a glimpse of the Salters' mansion.

"Later on," she told Enid, "when we have done with the shop, I shall hope to take my place in society by my

pretty daughter's side. But for the present I must just keep to myself. . . . The old prejudice against retail trade still lingers—more especially among the class that used to be termed *county* people."

Enid dutifully agreed. Indeed she told her mother that the old prejudice was much more active than anyone could guess who had not personally encountered it. The shop was, so to speak, a very large pill, and needed a considerable amount of swallowing.

"I found that out in my first term at school, mother dear."

"Mother dear" was now Enid's unvaried mode of address when talking to her mamma. All her friends addressed their mammas as Mother dear. School was over in these days. Miss Thompson had been finished; she did her country-house visiting with a maid of her own, and no longer with old Yates; as much as she appeared to like anything, she liked staying about at country-houses; she never refused an invitation—except when she was previously engaged.

Something perhaps wanting here in the finished article, as polished and pointed by Eastbourne school-mistresses; something not quite right in Enid's placid acquiescences and too rapid concurrences; something that suggested the smooth surface of a languid shallow stream, and not the broad calm that lies above deep strong currents! Perhaps Mrs. Thompson would have preferred a more exuberant reciprocity in her great love; perhaps she secretly yearned for a full response to the open appeal of her expansive, generous nature.

If so, she never said it. She was generous in thoughts as well as in deeds. In big things as in small things she seemed to think that it was for her to give and for others

to receive. From the vicar craving funds for his new organ to the crossing sweeper who ostentatiously slapped his chest on cold mornings, all who asked for largesse received a handsome dole. At the railway-station, when she appeared, ticket-collectors and porters tumbled over one another in their rush to dance attendance—so solid was her reputation as a lavishly tremendous tipper.

"She is making so much money herself that she can afford to be free with it." That was the view of the town, and her own view too. So all the tradesmen with whom she dealt flagrantly overcharged her—dressmakers, livery stable keepers, wine-merchants, florists, everyone of them said it was a privilege to serve her, and then sent in an extortionate bill. And she paid and thanked with a genial smile.

Donations to the hospitals, subscriptions to the police concert, the watermen's regatta, the railway servants' sports—really there was no end to the demands that she met so cheerily. Christmas turkeys for the Corporation underlings; cigars for the advertisement printers; small and big dinners, with salvos of champagne corks threatening the Dolphin ceilings, for aldermen, councillors, and all other urban magnates—really it was no wonder that the town had a good word for her.

Mr. Prentice, the solicitor, always tried and always failed to curb her liberality. Mr. Prentice kept himself outside of the Corporation's affairs, and expressed considerable contempt for the municipal representatives and the local tradesmen. When Mrs. Thompson spoke with gratitude of the kindness of friends who helped her by loans in her early struggle, Mr. Prentice mocked at these spurious benefactors.

"They did nothing for you," said Mr. Prentice.

"Oh, how can you pretend that?"

"They lent you money on excellent security and took high interest; and you have been feasting them and flattering them ever since."

"I do like to feel that I am on good terms with those about me."

Then Mr. Prentice would laugh. "Oh, well, you have certainly got the Corporation in your pocket. You make them your slaves—as you make me and everyone else. So I'll say no more. No doubt you know your own business best."

And she did. That well-used formula of the town might have been a high-flown compliment at the beginning, but it was sober truth now. No man in Mallingbridge could touch her. The years, taking so much from her, had also brought her much. With ripening judgment, widening knowledge, and the accumulated treasure of experience, her business faculty had developed into something very near the highest form of genius. She had insight, sense of organisation, the power of launching out boldly and accepting heavy risks to secure large gains; but she had also caution, concentration of purpose in minor aims, and rapid decision in facing a failure and cutting short consequent losses. In a word, she possessed all the best attributes of your good man of business, and the little more that makes up greatness.

She could always do that which very few men consistently achieve. She mastered the situation of the moment, struck directly at the root of the difficulty that confronted her, and, sweeping aside irrelevancies, non-essentials, and entanglements, saw in the cold bright light of logical thought the open road that leads from chaos to security.

And no man could have been a more absolute ruler. Every year of her success made her dominion more complete. Womanlike, she ruled her world by kindness; but manlike, she enforced her law by a show of strength, and weight, and even of mere noise. Not often, but whenever necessary, she acted a man's violence, and used bad language. When Mrs. Thompson swore the whole shop trembled.

The swearing was a purely histrionic effort, but she carried it through nobly.

"Have you heard?" A tremulous whisper ran along the counters. "Mrs. T. went out into the yard, and damned those carters into heaps. . . . Mrs. T. 'as just bin down into the packing room, and given 'em damson pie—and I'm sure they jolly well deserved it. . . . Look out. Here she comes!"

The brawny carters hung their heads, the hulking packers cleared their throats huskily, the timorous shop-hands looked at the floor. Mrs. Thompson passed like a silent whirlwind through the shop, and banged the counting-house door behind her.

When Enid was away from home the counting-house was sometimes occupied to a late hour. Staff long since gone, lights out everywhere; but light still shining in that inner room, fighting the darkness above the glass partitions. The night watchman, pacing to and fro, kept himself alert—a real watchman, ready with his lantern to conduct Mrs. Thompson through the shrouded avenues of counter, and upstairs to the door of communication.

When Enid was away the house seemed empty; and the empty house, curiously enough, always seemed smaller. It was as though because the life of the house had contracted, the four walls had themselves drawn nearer

together. Yet the little rooms were just big enough to hold ghosts and sad memories.

"You look thoroughly fagged out, ma'am. You overdo it. Let me open you a pint of champagne for your supper."

"No, thank you, Yates. . . . But sit down, and talk to me."

The old servant sat at the table, and kept her mistress company through what would otherwise have been a lonely meal. In Miss Enid's absence she had no house news to offer, so Mrs. Thompson gave her the shop news.

"I swore at them to-day, Yates."

"Did you indeed, ma'am?"

"Yes."

"What drove you to that, ma'am?"

"Oh, the packing-room again—and those carters. I informed Mr. Mears that I should do it; and he kept his eyes open, and came up quietly and told me when . . . . Mr. Mears was delighted with it. He told me at closing time that things had gone like clockwork ever since."

In her comfortable bedroom Mrs. Thompson shivered.

"Yates, I feel cold. I suppose it is because I'm tired."

"Shall I make you a glass of hot grog to drink in bed?"

"No. . . . But come in again when I ring—and stay with me for a few minutes, will you, Yates?"

The old servant sat by the bedside until her mistress became drowsy.

"I'll leave you now, ma'am. Good-night, and pleasant dreams."

"Yates—kiss me."

Yates stooped over her lonely mistress, and kissed her. Then she softly switched off the light, and left Mrs. Thompson alone in the darkness.