XIX

AT last Mrs. Marsden went to see hér daughter, and in the next few months she paid many visits.

Enid had written, asking her to come as soon as possible, and giving her a reason why she must not refuse this invitation. Enid had just discovered that she was going to have a baby. The happy event was not expected until the spring; but Enid said she longed to see her mother without an hour's avoidable delay.

Mrs. Marsden telegraphed her reply. She would come out to-morrow, Thursday—early closing day—directly after luncheon.

In the old days she would have driven in one of Mr. Young's luxurious landaus; but now she travelled by train, in a second class carriage, and walked the mile and a half from Haggart's Road station to the Kenions' converted farmhouse. The day was bright and fine; and the air felt quite mild, although there had been a sharp frost overnight.

She had hoped that Enid might feel up to walking, and perhaps meet her at the station—or somewhere on the road, if the station was too far. But she saw no friendly face on the straight road, along which she plodded with resolute vigour.

Two road-menders near a quaint little stone church directed her to the house. It was situated on sufficiently high ground, at the end of an accommodation lane; and,

as she passed through the gate and walked up the little carriage drive, she thought it all looked very nice and comfortable. The house itself seemed old and rather humble—less attractive than she had anticipated; but the large outbuildings gave the place a certain air of importance and gentility. She caught a glimpse of the capacious stableyard, saw a groom crossing it, and heard voices from an invisible saddle-room—Mr. Kenion's voice, as she believed, among the rest. The thick-growing ivy on the walls was pretty, but it would have been the better for cutting; and the garden, on this side of the house, appeared to be sadly neglected.

The front door stood open; and while she waited for somebody to answer the bell, she had an opportunity of glancing at the decorations of the hall. They had all been paid for by her purse, so she was fairly entitled to look at them critically if she pleased. She liked the appearance of the painted ceiling-beams, the panelled dado, the modern basket grate with the blue and white tiles; but she did not so much like the sporting prints, the heads and tails of foxes, the hats and coats lying so untidily on all the chairs, the immense number of whips and sticks, and the ugly glass case that held horses' bits and men's spurs and stirrups. *That* was a decoration more suitable to Mr. Kenion's harness room than to Mrs. Kenion's hall. She could hear the servants talking somewhere quite near; and yet they could not hear the bell, although she had rung it loudly enough three times.

Presently, as if by chance, a maid showed herself.

"Not at home," said the maid briskly.

Mrs. Marsden gave her name, and explained that the mistress of the house would certainly be at home to her.

"Very good, ma'am," said the maid, doubtfully. "Step this way, and I'll tell her. She's upstairs, lying down, I think."

Then Mrs. Marsden was shown into what she supposed to be the drawing-room, and left waiting there. There was something rather chilling and disappointing in the whole manner of her reception at the home that she had provided for Enid and her husband.

She was allowed plenty of time to examine more ceiling beams and blue tiles, to admire photographs in silver frames, or to read the sporting newspapers and magazines that littered every table. The room was pretty—but dreadfully untidy. She walked over to one of the windows, and looked out. There had been no greater attempt at gardening on this side of the house than on the other: the few shrubs were overgrown; the gravel paths had almost disappeared under moss and weeds.

Beyond iron railings she saw the grass fields that Enid had said were like a park. As a park they were completely disfigured by some ugly buildings with corrugated iron roofs—really hideous erections, which she guessed to be horse-boxes. In each meadow there was an artificially made jump for the horses; and, looking farther away, she saw that these sham obstacles together with the natural banks and hedges formed a miniature steeplechase course.

With a sigh she turned from the windows. Indoors and out of doors there was too much evidence of the husband's amusements, and not enough evidence of the wife's tastes and occupations. The whole place was altogether too much like a bachelor's home to please Enid's mother.

Suddenly the door opened, and Kenion slouched in. He had his hands in the pockets of his riding breeches; and he looked gloomy, worried, anything but glad to see the visitor. It was the first time that they had met since the wedding, and it proved rather an unfortunate meeting.

"How do you do—Mr. Charles?"

"Oh, you've come after all. You got the news, I suppose?"

"Yes, indeed I have."

"Beastly unlucky, isn't it?"

"What's that?"

"But I *am* unlucky."

"*Unlucky*, Mr. Kenion!" Mrs. Marsden had flushed; and her face plainly expressed the anger and contempt that she felt.

"No one can say I'm to blame," Kenion went on gloomily and grumblingly. "I'd have given fifty pounds to prevent its happening. It wasn't *my* fault. I knew she was as clever as a cat. I thought she *couldn't* make a mistake."

"Mr. Kenion," said Mrs. Marsden hotly, "if you aren't ashamed to speak like this, I am ashamed to listen to you."

"Eh—what?"

"Where is Enid?" And she moved towards the door. "I think your attitude is unmanly—mean—and *despicable;* and I wish—yes, I wish Enid's child was going to have a better father."

"Eh—*what?*"

"If you had a spark of proper feeling, you'd rejoice, you'd thank God that this—this great blessing was coming to her."

Kenion suddenly bent his thin back, and became completely doubled up with a fit of cackling laughter.

"It's too comic," he spluttered. "Best thing I ever heard—Ought to be sent to *Punch!*"

"If you were joking, Mr. Kenion, I'm sorry for your ideas of fun."

"No. No—don't be angry. You'll laugh when you see the joke. Of course you"—and again his own laughter interrupted him—"you—you were talking about Enid's baby. . . . Well, *I* was talking about Mrs. Bulford's mare."

Then he explained the disaster that had befallen them. A very valuable animal, the property of a friend, had been placed in his charge to train it for a point-to-point race; and this morning it had broken its back over one of the artificial jumps.

"And we were all so upset—Enid has been crying about it—that I sent you a telegram, telling you what had happened, and asking you not to come out to-day. But you never got it really?"

"No, it must have arrived after I started."

"Well, I'm glad you've come—for you have given me a good laugh. Though Heaven knows"—and he became gloomy again—"it isn't a laughing matter. I wonder I was able to laugh."

Then Enid came into the room. There were red rims round her eyes, and her nose seemed swollen: evidently she had shed many tears.

"Mother dear, isn't this dreadful?"

"Yes, dear."

"I'm so sorry for poor Charles."

"So am I, dear," said Mrs. Marsden. "But we must be glad that he himself escaped without injury."

"Oh, I wasn't riding her," said Charles.

"No," said Enid. "Tom was riding her—and he has broken his collar bone."

"Yes," said Charles, plunging his hands deep in his pockets and hunching his shoulders. "That's another bit of luck. My second-horseman laid up, just when I most wanted him."

"It was the frost in the ground," said Enid sadly. "All the frost seemed to be gone;" and she turned to her husband: "Charlie, it wasn't your fault. Mrs. Bulford *can't* blame you."

"No, I don't believe she will. She's a stunner . . . But Bulford may kick up a fuss."

"Oh, how can he? He knew that the mare had to be trained."

Mrs. Marsden made this first visit a very short one. The host and hostess were too much perturbed and agitated to entertain visitors.

Next time she came out, Enid was less preoccupied with her husband's affairs, and able to talk freely of her own hopes. She clung to her mother affectionately, and once again was the new Enid who had knelt by the sofa and sobbed her gratitude for past kindness.

Each kept up the pretence of being satisfied and contented in her married life. Enid never had a bad word to say of Charles; and Mrs. Marsden spoke of Richard with as yet unabated courage. In fact there was probably no one with whom she was so very careful to maintain a decorous appearance of connubial happiness as with the daughter who, by the light of her own experience, would most surely detect the imposture.

But behind the dual reticences there was an ever-in-

creasing sympathy. The hard facts which neither would admit were drawing them nearer and nearer together. So that it seemed sometimes that on all subjects except the two forbidden subjects they were now absolutely of the same mind.

When Enid noticed the careworn, harassed look in her mother's face, she used at once to think, "That brute has committed some fresh villainy during the week."

But what she said was something after this style: "Mother dear, I'm afraid you have been working too hard;" or "Mother dear, you ought to have had a fly from the station. I am afraid the walk has fatigued you."

And when Mrs. Marsden saw Enid's worried, nervous manner, the traces of more tears about the pretty grey eyes, she thought, "This selfish beast has been tormenting her again. I suppose he does everything short of beating her; and perhaps he'll do that before very long."

But she merely said, "Enid, my dear, I hope you have had no more bother about the horses. You mustn't let Charles's worries set you fretting—especially *now*."

The indications of Mr. Kenion's selfishness were so painfully plain that little penetration was required to understand the discomfort that they caused. No wife, however loyal, could feel any peace or comfort with such a self-centred, insensible, shallow-pated companion.

Whenever he appeared, he made Mrs. Marsden supremely uncomfortable. When indoors he was always restless. He wandered aimlessly about the house, coming in and out of rooms, fidgetting and bothering about trifles—behaving generally like the spoilt and rather vicious child who on wet days renders existence intolerable to all the grown-up people compelled to remain under the same roof with him.

"Hullo! More tea!" And he would come lounging after the maid who was bringing in the tea-things. "It seems as if you are having tea from morning to night. What? I tell Enid she drinks a lot too much tea—and it only makes her jumpy and peevish."

He himself drank very little tea; and Mrs. Marsden gathered that not the least of Enid's anxieties was occasioned by his intemperance. But this was a summer trouble. In the hunting season men who regularly ride hard can also regularly drink hard without apparently hurting themselves.

Once when Mrs. Marsden was about to set out for her lonely tramp to the station, Enid with some very pretty words asked her for a photograph.

"There's not one of you in all the house, mother—and I want one now badly. . . . If it is to be a girl, I want her to be like you—in all things, mother—and not like me."

Mrs. Marsden was more deeply touched by this request than she cared to show. She kissed Enid smilingly, patted her hand, and promised to send out a portrait.

There was one in the drawing-room at home, which no doubt Mr. Marsden could spare.

Then, while putting on her gloves and talking cheerfully, she glanced at Enid's collection of photographs in the silver frames.

"Who is that lady, Enid?"

"Oh, that's Mamie Bulford."

Several of the frames contained pictures of this important personage, who appeared to be a hard-visaged but rather handsome woman of thirty or thirty-five. She was enormously rich, Enid said, and madly keen about hunting; and she and her husband lived at a beautiful

place called Widmore Towers, two miles the other side of Linkfield village. This year Charlie was acting as her pilot in the hunting field; and four horses were kept at the Towers solely for the pilot's use.

"Charlie," said Enid, "is such a magnificent pilot—for anyone who means going. And Mamie *will* be there, or thereabouts, don't you know, all the time."

"Does not Mr. Bulford go out hunting?"

"Major Bulford! Yes, but he's crocked—stiff leg—so he hunts on wheels—follows in a dog-cart. That's rather fun, you know. You see a lot of sport that way."

"Yes, dear, I remember you said you were going to do that, yourself."

And Mrs. Marsden asked about the pony-cart that was to have been procured for Enid.

But the pony-cart had become impossible—and Enid vaguely hinted at hard times, difficulty of finding spare cash for expenses that were not urgently necessary, and so on. Besides, it was a perambulator and not a pony carriage that Mr. Kenion must now buy.

The baby—a girl—was born early in April.

Mrs. Marsden tried but failed to get a fly at Haggart's Road station, and almost ran for the mile and a half that still separated her from her daughter.

Everything was all right; mother and child were doing well; it was the finest and most beautiful infant that had ever been seen. The grandmother, eagerly scanning its tiny features, was gratified by recognising the mother's grey eyes and what might be taken for the first immature sketch of her long nose. She was, if possible, more pleased by her inability to trace the faintest resemblance to the father.

When in a few days she came again, it was to find Enid radiantly happy and picking up strength delightfully. And at this visit Mrs. Marsden's heart was made to overflow by the things that Enid said to her.

Amongst the things was the emphatic statement that the child should be called Jane, and that her grandmother should also be her godmother.

Mr. Kenion accepted his blessing phlegmatically.

"Pity it isn't a boy," he said to Mrs. Marsden.

Enid said he hid his delight. It was a pose. He was really revelling in the joy of being a father.

But he had not yet bought the perambulator. He asked his mother-in-law's advice—because, as he said, she was "up in that sort of thing." Did people hire perambulators, or buy them right out? Could one get a decent perambulator in Mallingbridge, or would one have to go fagging up to London?

Mrs. Marsden bought the perambulator, and sent it with her love in the carrier's cart; and Mr. Kenion told Enid that he hoped her mother hadn't given much for it, because it didn't look worth much.

Once, before the christening, Enid slightly attacked those diplomatic barriers of reserve that had been established by tacit consent between her and her mother.

She nervously and timidly asked if Mr. Marsden would mind not coming to the little feast.

But Mrs. Marsden was on the defensive in a moment. Even at this auspicious and sentimental time she could not permit any breach in her barrier. She said that her husband was generally considered very good company, and he would have no wish to go where he was not wanted.

"It is only," said Enid, "because I should be afraid of Charles and him not getting on well together—and I do

so want everything to go off happily. You know, he wrote Charles a very indignant letter about the County Club."

"He felt rather sore on that subject, dear—and so did I."

"Really, mother, Charles did all he could; but they made him withdraw the candidature. Of course it's absurd—but they are so severe with regard to retail trade."

"Well, be all that as it may," said Mrs. Marsden, "you need not disturb your mind about Richard. He could not have come in any case. I told him the date—and he is not free on that day."

But for Mr. Charles, it might have been a satisfactory christening.

He was a most uncomfortable host; continually getting up from the luncheon table, walking about the room, worrying the maid-servants; and wounding Enid by his facetiously disparaging remarks about the food.

"Our meals are always rather a picnic," he told the guests; "so you must look out for yourselves. . . . I say, how am I supposed to carve this? What? A pudding! What's the good of dabbing a lot of sweets in front of people, before they've had any meat? Enid, isn't there any fish? I thought you said there was curried sole;" and he got up, and rambled away to the sideboard.

"Charles," said Enid plaintively, "this is the curry—here."

"What? Then fire ahead with it. . . . But where's Harriet disappeared to?"

"She is fetching the cutlets—and the other things. Do sit down."

"Oh, Harriet, here you are. . . . Where the dickens

have you hidden the wine? This seems to be a very *dry* party;" and he gave his stupid cackling laugh just behind Mrs. Marsden's back. "Oh, here we are. Now then, ladies and gentlemen, hock, claret, whisky and soda? Name your tipple. And please excuse short-comings."

But in truth there were no short-comings. Poor Enid had tried so hard to have everything really nice—the best glass and china, pretty flowers, and dainty appetising food, sufficient for twenty people and good enough for princes. And she looked so charming at the head of the table—her face rounder and plumper than it used to be, her figure fuller, her complexion delicately glowing, her eyes shining softly,—the young mother, in what should have been the hour of her undimmed glory. Mrs. Marsden, as she listened to the cackling fool behind her chair and saw the shadow of pain take the brightness from Enid's face, bridled and grew warm.

"Whisky and soda, Mrs. B? . . . Father, put a name to it."

Mrs. Bulford—a hardy brunette, richly attired, and undoubtedly handsome, but older than she looked in her photographs—was to be the other godmother. She and the host were evidently on excellent terms, understanding each other's form of humour, possessing little secret jokes of their own—so that every time Charles cackled she had a suffocating laugh ready. The hostess called her "Mamie," and even "Mamie dear;" but Mrs. Marsden surmised that Enid did not really like her, and had not wanted her for a godmother.

Old Mr. Kenion—the vicar of Chapel-Norton—was white-haired, thin, and fragile; and Mrs. Marsden thought he seemed to be a good, weak, over-burdened man. His manner was mild, courteous, kindly. Mrs. Kenion was

shabbily pretentious, with faded airs of fashion and dull echoes of distinguished voices. They had brought one of their daughters with them—a spinster of uncertain age in a tailor-made gown and a masculine collar. The curate of the small stone church made up the party.

But old Mr. Kenion would read the christening service, and not this local clergyman.

"Yes," he said, mildly beaming across the table at Mrs. Marsden, "I am to have the privilege to hold my grandchild at the font."

And then presently, when the servant had poured out some hock for him, he addressed Mrs. Marsden again.

"May I advert to a practice that has fallen into disuse, and drink a glass of wine with you? . . . To our better acquaintance, Mrs. Marsden;" and he bowed in quite a pleasant old-world style.

"Bravo, governor," said Charles. "Fill, and fill again. Nothing like toasts to keep the bottle moving."

"Yes, I'm sure," said the vicar's wife, with patronising urbanity; "so very pleased to make your acquaintance—at *last*, don't you know. We only *saw* one another at the wedding." And while Charles and Mrs. Bulford took alternate parts in the telling of an anecdote, she continued to talk to Mrs. Marsden. "Of course I have known you in your *public* capacity for years. My girls and I have always been devoted to Thompson's. 'Get it at Thompson's'—that's what they always said." She was honestly trying to be agreeable. Indeed she particularly wished to please. "All my girls said it. Is it not so, Emily? . . . She does not hear. She is too much amused by her brother's story. . . . But that was always the cry. 'Get it at Thompson's!' And I'm sure we never failed at Thompson's."

"Oh, shut up, Pontius," said Mrs. Bulford, loudly. "You're spoiling the point. Let me go on by myself."

"Yes, that's what you often say—but you're glad to have me ahead of you when you think there's wire about."

"Will you be quiet, Pontius?"

And Mrs. Bulford was allowed to finish the anecdote in her own way. Then she suffocated, and Charles cackled; but no one else, not even Miss Kenion, could see the point of the little tale.

The local curate, a shy, pink-complexioned young man, had scarcely talked at all; but now he was endeavouring to make a little polite conversation with Enid. He said he hoped the church would be found quite warm; he had given orders that the hot-water apparatus should be set working in good time; and he thought they were, moreover, fortunate to have such genial bright weather. Sometimes April days proved treacherously cold. Then he inquired if the godfather was to be present at the ceremony.

"No," said Charles, answering for his wife, "I am to be proctor—proxy—what d'ye call it?—for Jack Gascoigne, a pal of mine. . . . You must teach me the business Mrs. B."

"All right, Pontius," said Mrs. Bulford gaily. "Copy me."

"You will not come to the church in that costume," said old Kenion, with sudden gravity.

"Why not? Ain't I smart enough? These are a new pair of breeches."

"Of course you must change your clothes, Pontius," said Mrs. Bulford. "I wouldn't be seen in church with you like that."

Then old Kenion asked a question which Mrs. Marsden would herself have wished to ask.

"Why do you call my son Pontius?"

"You'd better not ask her to tell you, father. She has been very badly brought up—and she'll shock you."

But Mrs. Bulford insisted upon telling the old vicar.

"I call him Pontius because he is my *pilot*. . . . Don't you see? Pontius Pilot! . . . There, I *have* shocked him;" and she gave her suffocating laugh, and Charles began to cackle.

His father looked distressed and confused; the curate, with the pink of his complexion greatly intensified, examined the design on a dessert plate; Mrs. Marsden frowned and bit her lip; old Mrs. Kenion opened a voluble discourse on the virtues of fresh air for young children.

"I hope, Enid, that you will bring up the little one as a hardy plant. Windows wide—floods of air! I beg of you not to coddle her. I never would allow any of my children to be coddled. . . ."

Charles sat dilatorily drinking port after luncheon; and, while he changed his clothes, everybody was kept waiting with the baby at the church.

That is to say, everybody except Mrs. Bulford. She stayed at the house, having promised to hustle Charles along as quickly as possible. But a shower of rain detained them; and it seemed an immense time before they finally appeared on the church path, walking arm in arm, under one umbrella.

When the service was over, and a group had assembled round the perambulator at the church gate, and all were offering congratulations to the proud mother, old Mrs.

Kenion gently drew Mrs. Marsden aside and spoke to her in urgent entreaty.

"Now that they've given you a dear little granddaughter, you *will* do something for them, won't you?"

"But I think," said Mrs. Marsden, rather grimly, "that I *have* done something for them."

"Yes, but you'll do a little *more* now, won't you?"

"I fear that your son must not rely on me for further aid."

"Oh, *do*," said Mrs. Kenion earnestly. "Poor Charles would not care to ask you himself. So I determined to take my courage in both hands, and speak to you with absolute candour. It *is* such a tight fit for him—and *now*, with nurses and all the rest of it! We would come to the rescue so gladly, if we could—but, alas, how can we? You do know that we would, don't you, dear Mrs. Marsden? . . . No, please, not a definite answer now. Only think about it. Your kind heart will plead for them more eloquently than any words of mine." . . .

Mrs. Marsden had given the nurse a sovereign. She hurried back to the church, and tipped the clerk and the pew-opener. Then she trudged off to the railway station; and went home, like Sisyphus or the Danaides, to take up her apparently impossible task.

XX

TWO years had passed, and the grand old shop was plainly going down.

It could not satisfy chance customers; it had begun to lose its staunchest supporters. Gradually and fatally, cruel words were going round the town and far out into the country villages. "It isn't what it used to be. . . . It has had its day. . . . Nothing lasts for ever."

Fewer and fewer carriages of the local gentry were to be seen standing outside its doors. Farmers' wives, who for more than a decade had driven into Mallingbridge and spent Saturday afternoons picking and choosing at Thompson's, now did all their shopping somewhere else. The whole world seemed to be discovering that you could get whatever you wanted quite as well and more cheaply somewhere else. And from somewhere else, your goods —no matter where you lived, whether far or near—were delivered free of charge, with marvellous celerity, and "returnable if damaged."

Inside the sinking shop every assistant too well knew that horrid expression, "Somewhere else."

It paralysed the tongues of the shop girls; it struck them stupid. Each time they heard it, their courage waned, their hopes drooped; they gave up struggling.

"Thank you, I won't trouble you any more."

"Not the least trouble, I assure you."

"No, you're very good—but I'm in a hurry. I'll try somewhere else."

"Very well, madam."

A lost customer—no more to be done.

Yet the assistants had before their eyes a fine example of unflagging courage. Of one of the partners at least, it could not be said that there was supineness, neglect, or bungling practices to account for the long-continued and increasing depression that all the employees were feeling so severely.

Of the other partner, the less said the better. They could not indeed find words adequate for the expression of their opinions in regard to *him*.

When Mrs. Marsden, bravely facing the situation and calmly acknowledging the logic of facts, had declared that it was imperatively necessary to reduce what in railway management are called running expenses, and at all hazards bring expenditure and receipts again to a proper working ratio, the dominant partner selfishly jumped at the idea, converted it into a fresh weapon of destruction, and used it with wicked force.

Cut down the staff? Yes, this is a luminous notion. Where there have been five assistants at a counter, let us have three—or only two. "We must weed 'em out, Mears. No more cats than can catch mice! I'll soon weed 'em out."

It seemed to the people behind the counters that he took a diabolical pleasure in the weeding-out process. Instead of getting through his dismissals as quickly as possible, he kept the poor souls in suspense—giving the sack to two or three every day; so that these black weeks were a reign of terror, during which one rose each morning with the dreadful doubt whether one would survive till night.

When at last the executions ceased, almost every one of the important heads had fallen. Why pay high

wages for subordinate chieftains when the over-lords can supervise for nothing? Mrs. Marsden received instructions to keep an eye on all departments; shop-walkers were made by giving counter-hands additional duties without additional pay; and Mr. Mears and Miss Woolfrey could respectively be considered as remaining in managerial charge of the whole ground floor and the whole first floor.

The gigantic basement was in charge of darkness, damp, and the cold spirit of failure. Marsden never spoke of it himself, and might not be reminded about it by others. He wished to forget the deep hole into which he had poured so much irretrievable gold.

Miss Woolfrey could not boast of having been promoted: she had merely survived: she obtained neither recompense nor praise for doing the extra work that a stern master had pushed into her way. If Mr. Mears had not been driven out into the street, it was because Marsden, whose selfish folly was sometimes tempered by a certain shrewd cunning, had definitely come to the conclusion that, bad as things were, they would be worse if he deprived himself of the help of this faithful servant. Mears had stood up to him; Mears had convinced him; Mears would never be dismissed, because Mears could never be replaced.

It was perhaps some slight comfort to Mrs. Marsden to know now that her oldest shop friend would be allowed to keep his promise, and to stick to her as long as he cared to do so.

Soon after the reduction of the staff, Marsden introduced another economy. Without warning he started an entirely new system of payment. Hitherto all wages had been at fixed rates, with progressive rises; and the

staff, feeling security in their situations and able to look to an assured future, had worked loyally without the stimulus of commission. But Marsden said these methods were antiquated, exploded; they did very well before Noah's flood, but they wouldn't do nowadays. Henceforth everybody's screw must depend upon the commissions earned: in other words, the basis for the calculation of wages must be the amount of the shop's receipts.

Mears, protesting but submitting, carried the new order into effect.

"I've no objection on principle," said Mears heavily; "but you have chosen a queer time to do it, sir—just when takings have dropped to their lowest, and there's no movement in any line."

Resentment, murmuring, discontent followed; half a dozen sufferers went into voluntary exile; then there was silence.

And then Marsden thought of a third economy. Thompson's had ever been famed for keeping a generous table. You were sure of good sound grub, and as much of it as you could stow away, to sustain you in your toil. The kitchens and dining-rooms were controlled by a man and his wife, with four cook-maids and three waitresses; and for many years these people had given the utmost satisfaction, both to their employer and her daily guests. Now Mr. Marsden swept the lot of them out of doors. He had entered into an agreement with the cheap and nasty restaurant in High Street; and henceforth the staff would be catered for at starvation prices—so much, or rather so little, per head per meal.

This was a fresh and a great misery—short commons bang on top of mutilated salaries,—almost more than one could bear.

Marsden, however, felt thoroughly pleased; and was willing to believe that by the aid of his drastic remedies he had cured the evil which afflicted him. For the end of each of these two years showed a substantial profit.

It was quite useless for Mrs. Marsden and Mears to point out the dangers that lay ahead, to hint that profits now were essentially fictitious, to warn him that what he had grasped at as income should more properly be described as realisation of capital, to sigh and shake their heads, and to plead for prompt renewal of diminished stock. He was too well contented with immediate results. To-day is to-day; to-morrow can take care of itself. He had given the business another ferocious squeeze; and, under the pressure, it had yielded what he wanted—some cash to keep him going.

The turf was again engaging his attention; but he pursued his amusement in a far less splendid manner than during those glorious days of fine clothes and full pockets after the honey-moon.

His nose had thickened, his whole face had become coarser and grosser; the flesh round his eyes showed an unhealthy puffiness, and his neck bulged large above an often dirty collar. He wore a brown bowler hat, a weather-proof overcoat, and heavy field boots; crumpled newspapers protruded from his breast, and a glass in a soiled and battered leather case was negligently slung over his shoulders. In fact he looked now like the typical racing man of the third or fourth class; and directly he reached London he mingled with and was lost in a crowd of exactly similar ruffians, hurrying together to make a train-load of disreputability and scoundrelism for Hurst Park or Kempton. But at Mallingbridge he was always noticeable. He produced

a wretched impression in the shop each time that, dressed for sport, he passed through it; he was its secret destroyer and its visible disgrace; his mere appearance was sufficient to send thousands of customers somewhere else.

While the cash lasted, the house saw little of him. As soon as the cash gave out, the house again groaned under his presence. Till he could set his hands on more cash, he must be lodged and boarded by the stay-at-home partner.

Many were the dark and dismal days to be remembered, if his wife ever made a retrospect of two years' suffering: humiliations, griefs—darkness with but few gleams of light. Visits from Enid with the child and her nurse—an hour rescued from a long month—formed spots of brightness to look back at. But, for the rest, there was black gloom, as of moonless, starless nights.

Perhaps his most malignant cruelty was the driving away of Yates. The doomed wretch struggled so hard not to be torn from the side of her beloved mistress. Mrs. Marsden knew that the struggle was futile, begged her to go; but still she tried to stay—accepting insults and abuse, and only piteously smiling at her persecutor.

A cruel, most cruel hour, when one evening the shabby old trunks stood corded and waiting at the foot of the stairs, and Yates in her bonnet and shawl came into the drawing-room to say good-bye. That was the final smashing of a home, for the mistress as well as for the maid. All that made the house endurable to Mrs. Marsden had now gone from it—no sound of a friendly voice to welcome her as she came through the door of communication; no solace after the exhausting day; a strange face to meet her, unfamiliar, clumsy hands to wait upon her at the lonely supper.

She never really learned to know the faces of her new

servants. They changed so often. No servant would stop with them for long. The work was heavier than it used to be; for after Yates had gone the mistress could not afford to keep a maid-housekeeper; in these hard times a cook and a housemaid must suffice for the establishment. Departing servants said the mistress gave little trouble; she was patient and kind; they had no fault to find with her—but the master was "a fair terror."

Yet he had promised, when consummating the sacrifice of Yates, that he would refrain from again upsetting the domestic arrangements. But what promises would he not make? What promise had he ever failed to break?

Once he promised not to parade his infidelity in Mallingbridge. This was after the scandal he had caused by taking a set of bachelor rooms in the new flats near the railway station, and bringing down a London woman to occupy them from Saturdays to Mondays. Every Sunday he made himself conspicuous by flaunting about the town with this brazen creature.

Probably he was tired of his Sabbath promenades by the time that Mrs. Marsden resolutely declared that, for the sake of the business as well as for her own sake, she would not support so glaring an outrage. Anyhow he said it should cease, and swore that he would for the future be more circumspect.

But he pretended to believe that his wife had given him a letter of license, full authority to resume the habits of bachelorhood, the freedom of manners that naturally accompanies a release from the closer bonds of the marriage state. He had never for a moment thought she would mind; but he vowed that what she was pleased to consider offensive and derogatory to the reputation of herself and the shop should never occur again.

Nevertheless, it was soon known to everybody but Mrs. Marsden that he was committing more local breaches of etiquette. On idle evenings he would prowl about the streets, accosting servant girls and shop girls, loitering at corners, and laughing and chaffing with any little sluts who consented to entertain his badinage. Sense of shame and the last remembrances of shop-propriety seemed to be deserting him. Soon his own young ladies met him talking to the girls that belonged to his great trade rival. That tow-haired huzzy who regularly came mincing up St. Saviour's Court to wait for the guv'nor, was—and the thing seemed so monstrous that it was recorded in an awed whisper—neither more nor less than *a ribbon girl from Bence's!*

Then, after a little while, the governor told Mears that he had engaged a new hand for the upper floor. She would come in on Monday morning, and Miss Woolfrey had better put her into China and Glass, and see how she got on there. She was good at anything, and would soon pick up the hang of everything.

But what a whisper ran round the shop when the new-comer was seen by the horror-struck assistants! The tow-haired minx from over the road!

It was an open and egregious scandal, shocking everybody except the unsuspecting female partner. The shop spoke of the new girl as "Miss Bence." The governor was always trotting upstairs to murmur and chuckle with Miss Bence. Someone saw him pinching Miss Bence's ear—and so on. It was another outrage that could not be permitted to continue.

Sadly and heavily old Mears told Mrs. Marsden all about it.

The disclosure threw her into a quite unusual agita-

tion. She seemed to be more terrified than disgusted. It was as if, in spite of all attempts to keep a bold front before the world, the mere name of their remorseless and overwhelming rival now had power to set her apprehensively trembling.

"I don't want any communications passing between Bence's and us." And she showed that this idea was sufficient in itself to frighten her. "The girl may be a spy. She may go back there."

"She won't do that," said Mears. "She was dismissed for misconduct."

Mrs. Marsden seemed relieved rather than shocked by hearing this.

"Besides," added Mears, "Bence never takes anyone back."

"I don't want people passing backwards and forwards —on any pretext. We mustn't allow communications. . . . Where is Mr. Marsden? I must speak to Mr. Marsden."

There was a terrific scene behind the glass, with Marsden, his wife, and Mears shut in together. Presently the cashier was summoned; books were fetched; accounts were examined. That afternoon Mrs. Marsden went round to the bank; and next day the tow-haired girl had disappeared.

In the evening Mr. Marsden left Mallingbridge. It was understood that he had gone to Monte Carlo. He would not be back for a fortnight at least.

Mears had said that Bence never allowed a discharged servant to return to him, and it was equally true that he never gave back a stolen customer. Bence's was the "somewhere else" to which Thompson and Marsden's

customers had nearly all repaired; and of the dozens, the hundreds, who, throwing off their old allegiance, crossed the road to the opposite pavement, not one was ever seen again.

Evidently the claims of those two bad brothers had somehow been satisfied. The leak was stopped; Bence had weathered the storm, and was going full speed ahead.

If there was any truth in the last story of the desperate plight to which he had been reduced, the crisis had long since passed and he had emerged from his difficulties stronger than ever. If one could attach any importance to the firm belief of that sagacious solicitor, Mr. Prentice, Bence must have found the money necessary to save him. Either he had discovered a backer, or he had never needed one. Who could say what was true or false in this connection? Sometimes of course a very little money boldly hazarded will decide the fate of the very largest enterprise; but in the business world it is precisely at such times that it is almost impossible to meet with anyone shrewd enough and courageous enough to risk a small loan on the off chance of making a splendid investment. Therefore Bence had been lucky, or had not really wanted luck.

He was safe now—obviously, too obviously safe, with money behind him and success before him. Employees at Thompson and Marsden's, with little else to do, watched him arrive of a morning. His twelve-year-old daughter drove him to business in a pretty basket car with a high-stepping, long-tailed pony; a smart groom who had been waiting on the pavement ascended the car in the place of the happy father, and Mr. Archibald stood smiling and kissing the tips of his fingers as the car drove away. It was a symbol of his greatness: a

triumphal car. He himself was neat and natty, perfumed and oiled, smelling of success—with a flower in his coat, new wash-leather gloves on his industrious hands, and a shining topper upon his clever bald head.

On window-dressing days he was up and down the street half the morning. He stood with his back to Thompson's, studying the glorious effect of his displays; ran quickly from window to window, and made imperative signs to those within. He put his head one side, twirled his moustaches, rubbed his small face with a rapidly moving paw—and looked now like a sleek, well-fed little rat who meant to nibble away all the cake that the town of Mallingbridge could provide.

And the windows when done—who could resist them? Is it straw hats for ladies? Do you wish one of the new fashionable Leghorns? . . . . Two windows have turned yellow; from ceiling to floor nothing but the finest straw; here are more Leghorns than you would expect to see at a big London warehouse, more than an ignorant person would have supposed that the city of Leghorn could manufacture in a year. . . . See! Already his Leghorns have caught the eye of the public; young women are bustling; nursemaids with their perambulators have stopped—there is a block on the pavement, and a constable has courteously requested people to keep moving.

There again, the constable is busy outside another window. Do you wish a blouse of the prevailing tint? Mauve blouses, nothing except mauve, all blouses, a window full of them—hardly to be described as for sale, almost literally to be given away.

On advertised bargain-days four policemen are required to regulate the traffic; for Bence opens his doors and

locks them—you must wait your turn to get inside. But on all days there is more or less of a crowd outside and inside the triumphant shop.

At eleven a.m. the first batch of red carts go whirling away, round the town and far out on the country roads. This is what Bence calls his mid-day delivery. There will be two more deliveries before the day is done.

If the afternoon proves foggy and dull, there comes a tremendous lightning flash along the extended frontage of Bence; and for a moment you are blinded, as you look towards his windows. Bence has turned on the electric. He makes no appointed hour for lighting up. He will have light whenever he desires it. With his outside arcs and his inside incandescents he makes a light strong enough to throw the shadows of Thompson and Marsden's window columns straight backward across the floor, even when their poor lamps are burning at their brightest.

And no longer can one say that all the goods of Bence are rubbish. High-class expensive articles are mingled with the cheap trash; solidity and lasting value have now a place in his programme; he caters for the large country house as well as for the restricted villa; he invites patronage from prince and peasant: it is his aim to be a universal provider.

Truly it was an appalling competition; and if it was dangerous to so big a rival as Thompson's, it was deadly to all the lesser powers. No small shop could live beside Bence; and it seemed that he could kill even at a considerable distance.

After the collapse of the saddler and the bookseller, their next-door neighbour, the ironmonger, failed; and the shell of him Bence also swallowed. The man now next to Bence was Mr. Bennett, the old-established

butcher; beyond him was Mr. Adcock, the dispensing chemist, and beyond him there were the baker and the auctioneer. Then came Mr. Newall, the greengrocer, whose shop faced the far corner of Thompson's.

One morning the greengrocer did not take down his shutters. He had flitted in the night.

"Well," said Mr. Mears, looking sadly at the shop, "it's fortunate it isn't alongside of Bence, or I suppose he'd grab that too."

Next day workmen erected a 'hoarding outside the derelict shop. Soon the boards were painted white, and curious saunterers lingered to read the black-lettered notice:—

"These premises are being fitted, regardless of expense, in a thoroughly up-to-date manner.

"They will shortly be opened again.

"But as what?

"Why, just what you want."

"That's a catch-penny vulgar dodge," said Mears, "if ever I saw one."

"I wonder what it is to be," said Miss Woolfrey. "I guess sweetstuff. It can't be a shooting-gallery. It isn't deep enough."

In a few weeks all knew what it was. Mr. Archibald himself came to see the last boards of the hoarding removed, and to watch the first customers troop into Bence's Fruit and Vegetable Market!

But for a gap of seventy feet made by four ancient traders, Bence now faced Marsden and Thompson for its whole length from end to end. Bence was irresistible, overpowering, deadly. The hearts of many people opposite sank into their boots.