XXIII

IT was immediately after this fatiguing episode that Mr. Prentice made his last urgent prayer to Mrs. Marsden. Complying with his request for an interview, she had come again to the panelled room in Hill Street. But on this occasion she chose a different chair, and sat with her back to the windows and her face in shadow.

"You see for yourself," said Mr. Prentice, with culminating plainness: "he is an unmitigated blackguard. Get rid of him."

"I can't."

"You can. Yates is still game—I mean, Yates has not forgotten anything. Yates will swear to everything that she remembers. . . . So far as Yates goes, her evidence may be all the better for the delay. It will be all the more difficult to shake it after the lapse of time. . . . Of course we shall be asked, Why have you sat down on your wrongs for so long? But we have our answer now. This is the answer. You put up with his ill-usage and infidelities until he befouled your home. A disgraceful affair with a servant girl under your own roof! That was the last straw—and it has driven you to the Court, to ask for the relief to which you have been entitled for years."

"Oh, no—impossible."

"I pledge you my word, we shan't fail. We shall pull it off to a certainty."

"No, I can't do it. And even if we succeeded, it would

be only a half relief. Divorce wouldn't end the business partnership."

"No. But when once your marriage is dissolved, we shall be able to make terms with him. Wipe him out as your husband, and he loses the tremendous hold he has on you. Get rid of your incubus. Think what it would mean to you. He would be gone—you would be alone again; able to pull things together, work up the business, nurse it back to life. On my honour, I think you are capable of restoring your fortunes even at this late day."

But Mrs. Marsden only shook her head, while Mr. Prentice continued to entreat her to act on his advice.

"Suppose you always have to go on paying him half of all you can make by your industry? Never mind. What does it matter? You'll pay it to him at a distance—you'll never have to see him—you will have swept him out of your life. My dear, the years will roll off your back; you'll be able to breathe, to *live*—you'll feel that you are your own self again."

"No—impossible."

"Yes. Leave it to me. I answer for everything, before and afterwards. I'll manage my fine gentleman—I'll cut his claws so that he'll be a very quiet sort of partner in the years to come. I'll work at it till I drop—but I swear I'll put you on safe ground, if only you'll trust me and let me tackle the job."

And Mr. Prentice, leaning forward in his chair, took her hand and pressed it imploringly.

"You are what you have always been to me, Mr. Prentice,—the best, the kindest of friends." She allowed him to retain her hand for a few moments, and then gently withdrew it. "But it is difficult for me to explain—so that you would understand me."

"I shall understand any explanation."

"I took him for better for worse. And once I promised him that I would hold to him until he set me free." She paused, as if carefully putting her thought into appropriate words. "It may come to it. . . . Yes, it is what I hope for—that he himself may give me back my freedom."

"But how?"

"He might consent to a separation—without scandal, without publicity."

"Why should he do that? While you've a shot in the locker, he'll stick to you."

Mr. Prentice's voice conveyed his sense of despair. She would not be convinced. He got up, sat down again, and vigorously resumed his appeal.

"Can't you see now the force of what I have told you so often? He will not only disgrace you, he will eat you up. It is what he is doing—has almost done. And when you have let him squander your last farthing, he'll desert you—but he won't desert you till then."

But Mrs. Marsden again shook her head, and once more fell back upon the vagueness that baffles argument if it cannot refute it.

"No—dear Mr. Prentice, I feel that I couldn't make any move now. Life is so complicated—there are difficulties on all sides—my hands are tied. . . . Perhaps I will ask you for your aid—but not now—and not for a divorce."

"But if you wait, no one will be able to aid you. The hour for aid will have passed for ever." And Mr. Prentice brought out all his eloquence in vain. "Try to recover your old attitude of mind. Consider the thing as a business woman. Tear away sentiment and feminine fancies. Make this effort of mind—you would have he

strong enough to do it a little while ago,—and consider yourself and him as if you were different people. Now—from the business point of view—and no sentiment! He is an undeserving blackguard."

"No. I can't do anything now. . . . I *have* considered it as a business woman. I have looked at it from every point of view. Believe me, I must go my own way."

This was the final appeal of Mr. Prentice. He said no more on the subject then, or afterwards. He had shot his bolt.

XXIV

EARLY in the new year Marsden had a serious illness. He caught a chill on a suburban racecourse, came home to shiver and groan and curse, and two days afterwards was down with double pneumonia.

He kept the hospital nurses, his wife, and the doctor busy for three weeks; and throughout this time there was no point at which it could be said that he was not in imminent danger of death.

Then the shop assistants heard, with properly concealed feelings of exultation, that a devoted wife, a clever doctor, and two skilled nurses had saved the governor's life. The governor had pulled through. Dr. Eldridge, as the shop understood, was able to make the gratifying pronouncement that the patient possessed a naturally magnificent frame and constitution, which had been but partially weakened or impaired by carelessness and imprudence. They need not entertain any further fear. The dear governor would last for a splendidly long time yet.

But his convalescence was slow; and after the recovery of normal health he passed swiftly into a third phase. He showed no inclination to rush about; his mental indolence had become so great that the mere notion of a train-journey fatigued him; he did his betting locally, and spent his days with the red-haired barmaid in the Dolphin bar.

At the Dolphin Hotel he had slid down a descending

scale of importance which emblematised, with a strange accurateness, his descent in the town of Mallingbridge and in the world generally. Once he used to come swaggering into the noble coffee room, and be flattered by the landlord and fawned on by the manager while he gave his orders for sumptuous luncheons and dinners à la carte, with champagne of the choicest brands, and the oldest and costliest of liqueurs. After that, a period arrived when the restaurant and a table-d'hôte repast, washed down with any cheap but strong wine, were good enough for him. Then he was seen only in the billiard-room; or in the small grill-room, where he would sit drinking for hours while relays of commercial travellers and minor tradesmen bolted their chops and steaks. Now he had descended to what was called the saloon bar; and here, since he had lost his club, he made himself quite at ease, and was listened to with some semblance of respect by the shabby frequenters, and always smiled upon by the barmaid—who was an old, and of late a very intimate friend. He could not drop any lower at the Dolphin, unless he went out to the stable yard and sat with ostlers and fly-drivers in the taproom beneath the arch.

At mid-day there were eatables of a light sort on the saloon counter; but, rejecting such scratchy fare, Mr. Marsden regularly came home for his solid luncheon. After lunching heavily he went back to the saloon, stayed there through the tea hour, and returned to St. Saviour's Court for dinner. He was regular in his attendance at meals, but except for meal-time the house never saw him. In fact he was settling down into stereotyped habits. When dinner was over he retired again—to take his grog in the saloon, to help the barmaid close the saloon,

and to escort her thence to her modest little dwelling-house.

Mrs. Marsden knew all about this barmaid, with her fascinating smiles and Venetian red hair—and indeed about her dwelling-house also. It was common knowledge that a few years ago she had been a parlourmaid in Adelaide Crescent; had somehow got into trouble; and somehow getting out of it, had risen to the surface as a saloon siren, and proved herself attractive to more persons than one. As to her place of residence, an illuminating letter had reached Marsden and Thompson and been duly opened behind the glass:—"re No. 16 New Bridge Road. We beg to remind you that your firm have guaranteed Miss Ingram's rent, and the same being now nearly a quarter in arrear, we beg, etc. etc. . . ."

Then it was to Number Sixteen that Mr. Marsden walked every evening, wet or fine. No one knew when he returned home again. But he was always ready for his late breakfast in his own bed.

Thanks to the regularity of these habits, Enid could now come and see her mother without risk of encountering her stepfather. That cruel threat of his had been often repeated, but never converted into an explicit order; he disapproved of Mrs. Kenion's visits, and if they were brought to his notice he would certainly prohibit them. But now the house was safe ground between luncheon and dinner; and there were few Thursday afternoons on which Enid did not come with her child to share Mrs. Marsden's weekly half holiday.

Little Jane was old enough to do without the constant vigilance of a nurse; and almost old enough, it sometimes seemed, to understand that she was her mother's only joy and consolation.

"You must always be a good little girl," Mrs. Marsden used to say, "and make mummy happy, and very proud of you."

And the child, looking at granny with such wise eyes, said she was always good, and never disturbed mummy in her room, or asked to be read to when mummy was crying. Really, as she said this sort of thing, she seemed to comprehend as clearly as her grandmother that there was misery, deepening misery in the ivy-clad farmhouse.

"Mummy mustn't cry," said Mrs. Marsden tenderly. "Mummy must remember that while she has you, she has everything. . . . Enid, don't give way."

For mummy was there and then beginning to do just what she mustn't do.

"Mother, I can't help it;" and Enid wiped her eyes. "I'm not brave like you. And I feel now and then that I can't go on with it."

Enid's barrier had fallen; she too abandoned the defence of an impossible position. Often she showed a disposition to plunge into open confidence, and tell the long tale of her trials and sorrows; but Mrs. Marsden did not encourage a confidential outbreak, indeed checked all tendencies in this direction.

She used to take the child on her lap; and, after a little fondling and whispering, Jane always fell asleep. Then, with the small flaxen head nestled against her bosom, she talked quietly to her daughter, endeavouring to put forward cheerful optimistic views, and providing the philosophic generalities from which in troublous hours one should derive stimulation and support.

"She's tired after the journey. How pretty she is growing, Enid! She will be extraordinarily pretty

when she is grown-up. She will be exactly what you were."

"No one ever thought me pretty, except you, mother."

"Nonsense, dear. Everyone admired you. You were enormously admired."

"Then there was something wanting," said Enid bitterly. "I had'n't the charms that have lasting power."

But Mrs. Marsden would not allow the conversation to take an awkward turn.

"And Jane looks so well," she went on cheerfully. "Such limbs—and such a *weight!* She is a glorious child. She does you credit, dear. You have every reason to be proud of her—and you will be prouder and prouder, in the time to come."

"I hope so—I pray so. I shall have nothing else to be proud of."

Once or twice, while the child was sleeping, Enid glided from obvious hints to a bald statement, in spite of all Mrs. Marsden's endeavours to restrain her.

"Mother, my life is insupportable;" and tears began to flow. "Mother dear, can't you help me?"

"My darling, how can I? I have told you of my difficulties—but you don't dream, you would never guess what they are."

"It isn't money now," sobbed Enid. "I'd never again ask you for money—and money, if you had thousands to give, would do me no good. . . . Oh, I'm so wretched—so utterly wretched."

"My dearest girl;" and Mrs. Marsden, in the agitation caused by this statement, moved uneasily and woke the little girl. "You tear me to pieces when you ask me to help you. My own Enid, I can't help you. I can't help you now. You must be brave, and carry your bur-

dens by yourself. . . . You say I am brave. Then be like me. I'm in the midst of perils and fears—my hands are tied; yet I go on fighting. I swear to you I am fighting hard. I've not given up hope. No, no. Don't think that I'm not wanting to help you—longing to help you—*meaning* to help you, when the chance comes."

Jane had extricated herself from the arms that held her; and, sliding to the floor, she went to her mother's side. The energy of granny's voice frightened her.

"I'll do my best," said Enid. "I'll try to bear things submissively, as you do."

"And don't lose hope in the future," said Mrs. Marsden, dropping her voice, and summoning every cheerful generality she could remember. "Be patient. Wait—and clouds will pass. You are young—with more than half your life before you. You have your sweet child. Go on hoping for happy days. The clouds will pass. The sun will shine again."

But before any gleam of sunshine appeared, the sombre clouds that lowered over Enid's head burst into a heavy storm.

One morning Mrs. Marsden was engaged with Mears on what had become a painful duty. They were stock-taking in the silk department; and, as the empty shelves sadly confronted them, Mears looked at her with dull eyes, opened and shut his mouth, but could not speak. He thought of what this particular department had once been, and of his own delight in especially fostering and tending it; of how it had improved under his care; of how he and Mr. Ridgway had built up quite a respectable little wholesale trade, as adjunct to the ordinary retail business, supplying the smaller shops and

steadily extending the connection. When he thought of these things, it was no wonder that he could not speak.

"Never mind, Mr. Mears," said Mrs. Marsden, in a whisper. Intuitively she knew what was passing in his mind. "It's no good looking backwards. We must look ahead."

"Yes, no doubt," said Mears blankly.

"I see what you mean. But we'll get an order through —before very long. Meanwhile, you must do some more of your clever dressing."

And it was just then—before Mr. Mears could promise to dress the empty shelves—that the house servant appeared, and told her mistress of the unexpected arrival of Mrs. Kenion.

It was not a Thursday; and Enid came only on Thursdays, and never before luncheon. Mrs. Marsden knew at once that something remarkable had occurred.

"Is Miss Jane with her?"

"Yes, ma'am. They're waiting for you upstairs in the drawing-room."

Mrs. Marsden hurried up to the first floor, and rushed through the door of communication.

"Enid, my dearest child."

"Oh, mother, mother! It's all over."

Enid was in a pitiable state of distress; the red circles round her eyes were absolutely disfiguring; she wrung her hands, and contorted her whole body.

"Enid dear—tell me. Don't keep me in suspense."

"He has gone—went to London this morning."

"Who went? Charles? Do you mean Charles?"

"Yes—and I don't believe he will ever come back to me."

"Wait a moment, my love," said Mrs. Marsden. "Jane

shall have a treat. Jane, you shall come and play in the pantry. Won't that be nice?"

And she took her grandchild by the hand, and led her from the room. Outside in the passage she smiled at the little girl, patted her cheek, stooped to hug and kiss her. Then she gave her over to the charge of the housemaid—an elderly woman with an ugly face and an austere manner—and walked briskly back to the dining-room.

"Eliza will amuse Jane," she said cheerfully. "Eliza is kind, although she seems so forbidding. . . . And now, my dear, you can tell me all about this news—this great news—this *astonishing* news of yours."

Enid told her tale confusedly. She was too much distressed to record events in their logical sequence. She worked backwards and forwards, breaking the thread with ejaculations, laments, and sad reflections, mixing yesterday with days that belonged to last year and the year before last year. But Mrs. Marsden soon grasped the import of the tale.

Mr. Kenion was the lover as well as the pilot of that rich hunting lady. Enid had suspected the truth for a long time, had been certain of the truth and suffered under the certainty for another long time—all that, however, belonged to the past days and was quite unimportant. Yesterday was the important day.

Yesterday there had been a lawn meet—whether at Widmore Towers or somewhere else, Mrs. Marsden did not gather. Mrs. Bulford's horse was there; but as yet Mrs. Bulford had not shown herself. Charles was there, dismounted for the moment, walking about among the gentlemen in front of the house, taking nips of cherry brandy and nibbling biscuits offered by the footmen with

the trays. All was jollity and animation—promise of fine sport; dull sky, gentle westerly breeze, dew-sprinkled earth; kindly nature seemed to proclaim a good scenting day.

And somebody, who has proved a very dull-nosed hound, is on the scent at last. Here comes stiff-legged Major Bulford, armed with a hunting crop although he only hunts on wheels, hobbling over the lawn among the gentlemen.

Hullo! What's up? Look! Bulford is wanging into Charlie, calling him names as he slashes him across the face with stick and thong, using a fist now,—hobbling after Charlie when Charlie has had enough,—trying with his uninjured leg to kick behind Charlie's back,—and tumbling at full length on the damp grass.

Mr. Kenion took his bleeding face home to be patched; and early this morning he had gone to London—where Mrs. Bulford was waiting for him.

"And, mother, he as good as said that I should never see him again. He confessed that he and Mamie had been very imprudent—and Major Bulford has discovered everything."

"But, my darling, why do you cry? Why aren't you rejoicing—singing your song of joy?"

"Mother!"

"All this is splendid good news—not bad news."

"Mother, don't say it."

"But I do say it. I say, Thank God—if this is going to give my girl release from her slavery." Mrs. Marsden had spoken in a tone of exaltation; but now her brows contracted, and her voice became grave. "Enid, we mustn't run on so fast. To me it seems almost too good to be true."

"To me it seems dreadful."

"Yes, at the moment. But later, you will know it is emancipation, *life*. Only, let us keep calm. This man—Bulford—may not intend to divorce her."

"Oh, he *will*."

"You think he will wish to cast her off?"

"Yes. Charlie as good as said so."

"But tell me this—You say they are very rich. Which of them has the money—the husband or the wife?"

"Oh, it is all Mrs. Bulford's—her very own."

"Ah! The man may not divorce her—but if he does, there is one thing of which you can be absolutely certain Kenion will stick to her, and give you your freedom."

It was nearly one o'clock. Mrs. Marsden, glancing at the mantelpiece, started. Her husband would soon return for his substantial mid-day meal.

"Enid dear, I must take you and Jane out to lunch. I know you won't care to meet Richard. Come! I shan't be a minute putting on my bonnet;" and she hurried from the room. "Eliza! If Mr. Marsden asks for me, tell him I shall not be in to luncheon. . . . That is all that you need say."

To avoid the chance of being seen by her husband in High Street, she led Enid and the little girl up the court instead of down it, round the churchyard, and through devious ways to Gorton's, the confectioner's. Here, at a small table in the back room, she gave them a comfortable and sufficient repast—chicken for Enid, and nice soup and milk pudding for Jane. She herself was unable to eat: excitement had banished all appetite. She cut up toast for the soup, carved the chicken, dusted the pudding with sugar; and smilingly watched over her guests.

But every now and then she frowned, and became lost in deep thought. Once, after a frowning pause, she leaned across the table and clutched Enid's arm.

"Enid," she whispered, with intense anxiety, "is this Bulford really an upright honourable man who will do the right thing, and cast her off; or is he a mean-spirited cur who will support his disgrace for the sake of the cash?"

They remained at the confectioner's until Mrs. Marsden could feel no doubt that her husband was now safe in his saloon; and then she took them back to the house.

She sent Mears a message to say that he and the shop must do without her this afternoon, and she sat for a couple of quiet hours hearing the remainder of Enid's grievous tale. Plainly it did Enid good to talk about her troubles: the longer she talked the calmer she grew; and while stage by stage she traced the history of her unhappy married life, Mrs. Marsden thought very often of her own experiences.

Jane, contented and replete, had fallen asleep upon granny's lap; and Mrs. Marsden softly rocked her to and fro, to make the sleep sweeter and easier.

Unhappy Enid! She recited all her pains and pangs and torments. She had loved the man, had thought him a fine gentleman, and had found him a cruel beast. She had dreamed and awakened. She had tried to reconstitute the dream, to shut her eyes to realities, and live in the dream that she knew to be unreal. But he would not let her. She had forgiven misdeeds, and even forgotten them; he had hurt her again and again and again; and each time she had healed her wounds, and presented herself to him whole and loyal once more.

While Mrs. Marsden listened, she was thinking, "Yes, that is the keynote, the apology, and the explanation. Love dies so slowly."

Now Enid had come to the end of her tale.

"Mother," she was saying, "I know I shall never see him any more;" and, saying it, she began to cry again. "He spoke to me so kindly when he was going from me. . . . And I looked at his poor face, all striped with the sticking-plaster, and I thought of what he had been to me. It all came back to me in a rush—the old feelings, mother,—and I begged him not to go. And I asked him at least to kiss me—and he did it—and I knew that he was sorry."

Very quietly and carefully Mrs. Marsden got up, and placed the sleeping child on her mother's lap.

"Enid, take what is left to you. Put your arms round her, and hold her against your heart. Hold her safe, and hold her close—for you are holding all the world."

Then, in great agitation, she walked up and down the room; and when she stopped, and stood by Enid's chair, her eyes were streaming.

"Never mind, my darling." An extraordinary exaltation sounded in her voice; and, as she struggled to moderate its tone, there came a queer vibration and huskiness. It seemed that but for dread of waking the little girl, she would have shouted her words. "Never mind. You have your child. Think of that. Nothing else matters. *I* have suffered; *you* have suffered—never mind. Perhaps we women were intended to suffer—and we have to bear some things so cruel that they must be borne in silence. If we spoke of them, they might kill. But it is all nothing compared with *this;*" and she stooped to kiss Enid's forehead, and very gently and

softly stroked the child's hair. "You and I have both made our link in the wonderful chain of life. We have given what God gave us. We carried the torch, and it has not been struck out of our hands and extinguished. . . . We will rear your child; and I shall see you in her; and she will grow tall and strong; and she will love—you most—the mother,—but me too, when she understands that you came to her from me. . . . And the sun shall shine again, and you shall be happy again—for God is kind, and God is *just*. . . . And then there will be no more tears—and a touch of your child's lips will destroy the memory of tears."