XXV

ANOTHER year had slowly dragged b; Enid was still living with her chil at the farmhouse; but all the personal property of th child's father, all those numerous signs of too engrossing amusements, had disappeared. Horses and grooms, breeches and boots, spurs and bridles—all were gone. In the suit of Bulford *v.* Bulford and Kenion, the petitioner obtained a decree nisi; and soon the decree will be made absolute. Another undefended suit—that of Kenion *v.* Kenion—is down for hearing. Very soon now Enid will be free.

Meanwhile the big looking-glasses on the stairs and at department entrances of Thompson and Marsden's shop had been growing tarnished, dull, and spotted. They showed nothing new in their misty depths—emptiness and desolation; unused space so great that it was not necessary to multiply it by reflection; and a grey-haired, black-robed woman passing and repassing through the faint bluish fog, with shadowy, ghostly lines of such sad figures marching and wheeling at her side.

But there was no space for fog in the establishment across the road. During these twelve slow months the visible, unmistakable prosperity of Bence had been stupendous.

He had bought out Mr. Bennett the butcher. He would buy the whole street. He had enlarged his popular market, adding Flowers to Fruit and Vegetables. The old auctioneer had retired, in order to make room

for this addition; and where for half a century there had been no objects more interesting than sale bills and house registers and dangling bunches of keys, beautiful unseasonable blossoms now shed their fragrance throughout the year. Plainly there was nothing too old, or too hard, or too large for Bence to swallow.

And the reputation of Bence's, as well as its mere success, had steadily been rising. It seemed as if the remorseless and triumphant Archibald had not only stolen the entire trade of his principal rival, but had also borrowed all the methods that in the old time built up the trade. In his best departments the goods were now as solid and as real as those which had made the glory of Thompson's at its zenith. But beyond this laudable improvement of stock—a matter that no one could complain of—Bence betrayed a cruel persistence in imitating subsidiary characteristics of Mrs. Thompson's tactical campaign.

Gradually Bence had won the town. It was Bence who now feasted and flattered the municipal authorities, exactly as Mrs. Thompson had done years ago. Dinners to aldermen and councillors; soirées and receptions for their wives; compliments, largesse, confidential attentions flowing out in a generous stream for the benefit of all—high and low—who could possibly assist or hinder the welfare of Bence! Last Christmas—by way of inaugurating his twentieth grand annual bazaar—he gave a ball to four hundred people, with a military band and a champagne sit-down supper.

The ancient aldermen were nearly all gone; the council nowadays professed themselves to be advocates of modern ideas; they said the conditions of life are always changing; and they were ready to admit the new style of trade

as fundamentally correct. Then, making speeches after snug Bence-provided banquets, they said that their host represented in himself and his career the Spirit of the Age. They raised their glasses in a toast which all would honour. "Mr. Archibald Bence, you are a credit to the town of Mallingbridge; and speaking for the town, I say the town is proud of you, sir. . . . Now, gentlemen, give him a chorus—'For he's a jolly good fellow'" . . .

Bence never stopped their music. He sat at the head of the table, twirling his waxed moustache, fingering his jewelled studs, and smiling enigmatically—as if he considered the adulation of his guests quite natural and proper, or as if he felt amused by vulgar praise and a homage which could be purchased with a little meat and drink.

"Gentlemen," said Bence, rising to return thanks, and addressing the assemblage in the usual tone of mock modesty, "I am overwhelmed by your good-nature. I lay no claim to merit. The most I ever say of myself is that I do work hard, and try my best. But I have been very lucky. Anybody could have done what I have done, if they had been given the same opportunity —and the same support."

"No, no," cried the noisy guests. "Not one in a million. No one but yourself, Mr. Bence. That's why we're so proud of you."

And just as the town had turned towards Bence in his prosperity, so it had turned away from Mrs. Marsden in her adversity. These people worshipped success, and nothing else. The old shop was dying fast; its legend was already dead. The ancient triumph of the brave young widow was thus in a few years almost totally forgotten. It was a fabled greatness that faded before

her present insignificance. There were of course some who still remembered; but they could not trouble to sustain or revive her name and fame.

Did she know how they spoke of her—these few who remembered?

A pitiful story: a poor wretch who posed for a little while as a good woman of business, and got absurd kudos for what was sheer luck. Just clever enough to make a little money in propitious times; but without staying power, unable to adapt herself to new methods—a *stupid* woman, really! That was the kindest talk. Others, who should have been grateful and did not care to pay their debts, spoke of her as a criminal. "I never forgave her that disgraceful marriage. I endeavoured to prevent it, and warned her what would be the consequence of her—say her folly; but I think one would be justified in using a stronger word. Well, she has made her bed; and she must lie upon it."

On a cold winter evening, when she had walked to the railway station with Enid and was finding her a seat in the local train, a porter officiously pointed out Bence.

"There! That's Mr. Bence, ma'am. Mr. Bence—the small gentleman!"

The local train was on one side of the platform, and on the other stood the London express. And Bence, in fur coat and glossy topper, surrounded with sycophantic inspectors and ticket-collectors, was approaching the Pullman car. He was off to London, to buy fresh cargos of Leghorn hats or whole warehouses of mauve blouses.

The local train, with Enid in it, rolled away; and Mrs. Marsden, a shabby insignificant black figure, remained motionless, waving a pocket handkerchief and

staring wistfully at the receding train. Then, as Bence came bustling from the Pullman door to the book-stall at the end of the platform, he and Mrs. Marsden met face to face.

It was a strange encounter. Intelligent onlookers, if there had been any on the platform, might have found food for much thought in studying this chance meeting between the Spirit of the age and the Ghost of the past.

There was nothing of the conqueror's exultant air in Bence's low bow. He uncovered his bald head and bowed deeply, with ostentatious humbleness and almost excessive respect—as if magnanimously determined to show that greatness though fallen was still greatness to him.

And there was nothing of the conquered in Mrs. Marsden's dignified acknowledgment of the passing courtesy. Bowing, she looked at Bence and through Bence; and her face seemed calm, cold, dispassionate: as absolutely devoid of trouble or resentment as if one of the ticket-collectors whom she used to tip had touched his hat to her.

None of these greedy ruffians did salute her. In all the station, through which she used to pass as a queen, only little Bence showed her a sign of respect to-night.

In her deserted shop there were still faithful hearts; outside the shop, in all Mallingbridge, it seemed as if she could not count more than one true friend.

Prentice was true as the magnet to the pole. For a long time he had asked her no questions, given her no advice; and she told him nothing of her affairs, either commercial or domestic. But he guessed that things were going from bad to worse. He knew that she was more

and more frequently at the offices of Hyde and Collins. He saw her entering their front door almost as often as he saw Bence entering it; and he interpreted these visits as a certain indication that they were still raising money for her. She had probably sold the last of her stocks and shares, and now they were helping her to get rid of the small remainder of her possessions. He knew of two or three houses in River Street, and of a moderate mortgage on this property. Hyde and Collins might effect a second mortgage perhaps; and then the houses would be practically gone, as everything else had gone—into the bottomless pit. They would not care how quickly she beggared herself. When she was squeezed dry, they would just shut the door in her face. Insolent, unscrupulous brutes! And he thought with anger of how cavalierly they would treat her even now, before the end: breaking their appointments, telling her to call again, leaving her to wait in outer rooms while they kow-towed to their best client, their only prosperous client, the omnipotent Bence.

To the mind of loyal Prentice the utter downfall of Mrs. Marsden was abominable and intolerable. He could not bear it—this wreck of a life that had been so noble. His hope of saving something from the wreck was cruelly frustrated. He had tried again and again; but she would not listen, she would not be guided.

He thought sadly of the bright past, of her talent and genius; and, above all, of her tremendous intellectual strength. In those days, when he began to unfold a matter of business, she stopped him before he had completed half a dozen sentences. It was enough—she had grasped the whole position, sent beams from the search-light of her intelligence flashing all round it, shown him essential points that he had not seen him-

self. Difficulties never frightened her; she was subtle in defence, swift in attack. Give her but a hint of danger, and in a moment she was armed and ready. Before you knew what she would be at, she had sprung into decisive action; and before you could hurry up with your feeble reinforcements, the danger was over, the battle had been gained.

But now she was weak as water—helpless, yet refusing help, hopeless and making hope impossible, just drifting to her fate. At night Mr. Prentice sometimes could not sleep. He lay awake, thinking of what it would come to in the end—bankruptcy, her little hoard squandered, her last penny gone in the futile effort to satisfy her husband and sustain the shop.

And then? She was so proud that perhaps she might not allow Enid to supply her simplest daily needs. He tossed and turned restlessly as he thought of Enid's marriage settlement; and, remembering some of its ill-advised clauses, he felt stung by remorse. He had bungled the settlement. He ought to have stood firm, and not have permitted himself to be over-ruled by the idiotic whims of a love-sick girl who was being generous at another person's expense. He blamed himself bitterly now for the manner in which funds had been permanently secured to Enid's worthless husband. Of course the Divorce Court, exercising its statutory powers, might wipe out the entire blunder, and handsomely punish the offender by handsomely benefiting the wife; but he had small hope that this would happen. No, the rascal Charles Kenion, when disposed of, will still enjoy his life interest. The money that should come back now to the hand that gave it is gone. Enid will not have more than she wants for herself and her child.

He could not sleep. The thought of Mrs. Marsden's pride made him shiver. No prouder woman ever lived: famine and cold would not break her pride. He had thought of her in the workhouse, or an almshouse, finishing her days on the bread of charity. But no—great Heaven!—she would never consent to do that. She would rather sell matches in the street. And he imagined her appearance. An old woman in rags—creeping at dusk with bent back,—pausing on a country road to hold her side and cough,—lying down on the frozen ground beneath a haystack, and dying in the winter storm.

He knew—only too well—that these are the things that happen: the inexorable facts of the world. But never should they happen in this case—not while he had one sixpence to rub against another.

He could not go on thinking about it without doing something. So he woke up his invalid wife. That seemed the only thing he could do just then;—and he told Mrs. Prentice that she must be kind to Mrs. Marsden; she must begin being kind the first thing in the morning; she must write a letter, pay a call, do *something* to cheer and gladden his poor old friend.

Mrs. Prentice, an amiable nondescript woman, readily obeyed her husband; and after this nocturnal conversation she used frequently to wait upon Mrs. Marsden, often persuade her to go out for a drive, and now and then entice her to come and dine in a quiet friendly fashion without any fuss or ceremony. These pleasant evenings must have made bright and warm spots amidst the cold dark gloom that now surrounded Mrs. Marsden. At Mr. Prentice's comfortable private house she was treated with an honour to which she had been long un-

accustomed; there was nothing here to remind her of her troubles; and she really appeared to forget them when chatting freely with her kind host and hostess.

"My dear Mrs. Prentice, it is too good of you to let me drop in on you like this."

"No, it is so good of you," said Mrs. Prentice, "to give us the pleasure of your company."

"It is a great pleasure to *me*," said Mrs. Marsden; "and I always thoroughly enjoy myself."

Mrs. Prentice liked her better in her adversity than in her prosperity. She found it easy to join her husband in his admiration of the fortitude and dignity of Mrs. Marsden as an ill-used wife and a broken-down shopkeeper —now that the fable of her colossal brain-power was finally shattered. Perhaps Mrs. Prentice's naturally kind heart had never opened to Mrs. Marsden till the day when Mr. Prentice said that his idol was acting like a fool.

Their guest used to eat sparingly, although the hostess pressed her to taste of every dish; and she scarcely drank more than half a glass of wine, although the host had brought out his most highly prized vintage; but she talked so cheerfully, so calmly, and so wisely, that her society was as charming as it was welcome. Mr. Prentice, beaming on her and listening with deference to her lightest words, was especially delighted each time that he recognised something like a flash of the old light.

Once they were discussing a rumour that had just reached Mallingbridge. It was said that the War Office had purchased a tract of land on the downs, and proposed to establish a large permanent camp up there.

"Half a dozen regiments, with all their followers—an invasion!"

"It will be dreadful for the town," said Mrs. Prentice. "Utterly destroy its character."

"That's what I think," said Mr. Prentice. "Do no good to anybody."

"Do you know," said Mrs. Marsden, "I am inclined to disagree. Since the soldiers came to Ellerford, trade—I am told—has picked up wonderfully."

"Ah, yes," said Prentice. "But that's a trifling affair—a very small camp, compared with what this would be."

"But, Mr. Prentice," and Mrs. Marsden smiled; "if a small camp does a little good, why shouldn't a large camp do a lot of good?"

It sounded quite simple, and yet only she would have said it. Mr. Prentice laughed. It reminded him of the old way she had of going straight to the point and flooring you by a question that seemed childishly naïve until all at once you found you could not answer it.

Mrs. Prentice continued to lament the many degradations that Mallingbridge had already undergone.

"The Theatre Royal turned into a music hall! The Royal! That is the last blow. *Three* music halls in the place, and not one theatre where you can go and see a real play. . . . I used to love the Royal. It seemed a *part* of Mallingbridge."

"My dear Mrs. Prentice," said the guest, calmly and philosophically, "the town that you and I loved has gone. It was inevitable—one can't put back the clock. Time won't stand still for us."

"No, but they're making the new town so ugly, so vulgar. Whenever they pull down one of the dear old houses, they do build such gimcrack monstrosities."

"I fancy," said Mrs. Marsden, "that the distance from London decided our destiny. It was just far enough off

to reproduce and copy the metropolis. Nowadays, the little places that remain unchanged are all close to the suburban boundary."

When she talked in this style, Prentice thought how effectually she gave the lie to people who said of her, that she had failed because she lacked the faculty of appreciating altered conditions.

"Did you happen," she asked him, "to read the report of the general meeting of the railway company?"

"No—I don't think I did."

"The chairman mentioned Mallingbridge."

"What did he say about it?"

"He said that they might before long have to consider the propriety of building a new station, and putting it on another site."

"Why should they do that?"

"Why?" And again Mrs. Marsden smiled. "Why indeed? It set me thinking—and I read the speech carefully. Later on, the chairman spoke of the scheme for moving their carriage and engine works out of the London area. Well, I put those two hints together; and this is what I made of them. I believe that the company intend at last to develop all that land of theirs—the fields by the river,—and I prophesy that within three years they'll have built the new carriage works there."

She said this exactly as she used to say those luminously clever things that he remembered in the past. He listened wonderingly and admiringly.

But when the ladies left him alone to smoke his cigar or finish the wine that the guest had neglected, he sighed. She could give these flashes of the old logic and insight; she could talk so wisely about matters that in no way concerned her; but in the one great matter of her own

life, where common sense was most desperately required, she had behaved like a lunatic.

He let his cigar go out, and he could not drink any more wine. Rain was pattering on the windows, and the wind moaned round the house—a sad, dark night. He rang the bell, and told the servant to order a fly for Mrs. Marsden at a quarter to ten.

The fly took her home comfortably; and when she alighted at the bottom of St. Saviour's Court and offered the driver something more than his fare, he refused it.

"Mr. Prentice paid me, ma'am."

"Oh! . . . Then you must accept this shilling for yourself."

"No, ma'am. Mr. Prentice tipped me. Good-night, ma'am."

XXVI

ENID was free. The farmhouse stood empty, with the ivy hanging in festoons and long streamers about the windows, the grass growing rank and strong over the carriage drive, and a board at the gate offering this eligible modernised residence to be let on lease. Its sometime mistress had gone with her little daughter to the sea-side for eight or ten months. After her stay at Eastbourne she would return to Mallingbridge, and take furnished apartments—or perhaps rent one of the tiny new villas on the Linkfield Road. She wished to be near her mother, and she apologised now for leaving Mrs. Marsden quite alone during so many months; but, as she explained, Jane needed sea air.

"Never mind about me," said Mrs. Marsden. "Only the child matters. Build up her health. Make her strong. I shall do very well—though of course I shall miss you both."

She was getting accustomed to solitude and silence. Truly she had never been so entirely isolated and lonely as now. In the far-off days when Enid used by her absence to produce a wide-spreading sense of loss, there had been the work and bustle of the thriving shop to counteract the void and quiet of the house. And there had been Yates. Now there was nobody but the plain-faced grim-mannered Eliza, who had become the one general-servant of the broken home.

Mr. Marsden still lunched and dined at the house, but

he was never there for breakfast. He did not go upstairs to his bedroom and dressing-room once in a week. Sometimes for a fortnight he and his wife did not meet at meals. His voracious appetite manifested itself intermittently; there were days on which he gorged like a boa-constrictor, and others on which he felt disinclined to eat at all. Then he required Eliza to tempt him with savoury highly-spiced food, or to devise some dainty surprise which would stimulate his jaded fancy and woo him to a condescending patronage. He would toy with a bird—or a couple of dozen oysters—or a bit of pickled mackerel. Now and then, after he had been drinking more heavily than usual, he would himself inspire Eliza.

"Eliza, I can't touch all that muck;" and he pointed with a slightly tremulous hand at the dinner table. "But I believe I could do with just a simple hunk of bread and cheese, and a quart of stout. Run out and get some stout—get two or three bottles, with the screw tops. You know, the large bottles."

Then perhaps he would find eventually that this queer dinner-menu was a false inspiration. The bread and cheese were more than he could grapple with—and he asked for something else to assist the stout.

In a word, he was rather troublesome about his meals; and Mrs. Marsden fell into the habit of taking her scanty refreshment at irregular hours. He did not upbraid her for keeping out of his way. Eliza looked after him in a satisfactory manner; and he never upset or frightened Eliza. Grim Eliza ran no risk of receiving undesired attentions.

Everybody knew that Mr. Marsden often drank too much. One night when he failed to appear at dinner time, he was found—not by Eliza but by the Borough

constabulary—in a state of total intoxication on the pavement outside the Dolphin.

After this regrettable incident the Dolphin dismissed him and his barmaid together. The attendance at the saloon had been dropping off. A siren cannot draw custom, when you have a great hulking bully who sits in the corner and threatens to punch the head of every inoffensive moderate-sized gentleman upon whom the siren begins to exert her spell. The Dolphin was very glad to see the backs of Miss Ingram and her friend.

Miss Ingram secured an engagement at the bar of the Red Cow, and Mr. Marsden faithfully followed her thither. The Red Cow was the disreputable betting public-house of which the town council were so much ashamed; people went there to bet, and it was likely to lose its license; but Marsden was content to make it his temporary club, and indeed seemed to settle down there comfortably enough.

He still occasionally came to the shop. All eyes were averted when he swung one of the street doors and slouched in. He seemed to know and almost to admit that he was a disgrace and an eyesore, and though he scowled at the shop-walker swiftly dodging away and diving into the next department, he did not bellow a reprimand. He hurried up the shop; and it was only when he got behind the glass that he attempted to display anything like the old swagger and bluster.

"Well, Mears, what's the best news with you? . . . You all look as if you were starting for a funeral—as black as a lot of mutes. How's business?" And he began to whistle, or to rattle the bunch of duplicate shop-keys that he carried in his trousers pocket. "I say, Mears, old pal —I'm run dry. Can't you and the missus do an advance

—something on account—however small—to keep me going?"

A few shillings were generally produced, and the advance was solemnly entered in the books, to the governor's name.

Then he nearly always announced that he had come to the shop for the purpose of keeping a business appointment.

"Look here. I'm expecting a gentleman. Show him straight in."

These gentlemen were more dreadful to look at than the governor himself. He gave appointments to most terrific blacklegs—the unwashed rabble of the Red Cow, book-makers and their clerks, racecourse touts,—inviting them to the shop in order to establish his credit, and prove to these seedy wretches that he was veritably the Marsden of Thompson and Marsden's.

For such interviews he used to turn his wife out of the room. At a word she meekly left the American desk and walked out.

"That you, Rooney? Come into my office. Here I am, you see. Sit down."

The Red Cow gentlemen were overcome by the grandeur of Mr. Marsden in his own office; the size and magnificence of the establishment filled them with awe and envy; it surpassed belief.

"Blow me, but it's true," they said afterwards. "Every word what he told us is the Gospel truth. He's the boss of the whole show I witnessed it with my own eyes."

Yet if his visitors had possessed real business acumen, the shop would have impressed them with anything but confidence.

To a trade expert one glance would have sufficed. The

forlorn aspect of the ruined shop told the gloomy facts with unmistakable clearness. So few assistants, so pitiably few customers, such a beggarly array of goods! Those shelves have all been dressed with dummies; those rolls of rich silk are composed of a wooden block, some paper, and half a yard of soiled material; within those huge presses you will find only darkness. Emptiness, desolation, death!

And what could not be seen could readily be guessed. Behind the glass only two people—a man laboriously muddling with unfilled ledgers, a girl at a type-writing machine—only one type-writer, a sadly feeble clicking in the midst of vast unoccupied space; not a sound in the covered yard; no horses, no carts; no purchased goods to be handled in the immense packing rooms; no stock, no cash, no credit, no nothing!

When a customer appeared, the shop seemed to stir uneasily in the sleep that was so like death; a faint vibration disturbed the heavy atmosphere; shop-walkers flitted to and fro; assistants yawned and stretched themselves. What is it? Yes, it *is* another customer.

"What can we show madam?"

"Well, I wanted—but really I think I've made a mistake;" and the stranger looked about her, and seemed perplexed. "My friends said it was in High Street—but I see this isn't it. Yes, I've made a mistake. Good morning."

"*Good* morning, madam."

The bright spring sunshine pouring in at the windows lit up the threadbare, colourless matting, showed the dust that danced above the parquet after each footfall; but it could not reach the great mirror on the stairs. The mirrors were growing dimmer and dimmer. As the

black figure passed and repassed, the first reflected Mrs. Marsden was scarcely less vague and unsubstantial than the line of Mrs. Marsdens walking by her side.

Mr. Mears and Miss Woolfrey, disconsolately pacing the lower and the upper floor, seemed like captains of a ship becalmed—like honest captains of a water-logged ship, feeling it tremble and shiver as it settled down beneath their feet, knowing that it was soon to sink, and thinking that they were ready to go down with it. When they paused in their rounds of inspection, it was because really there was nothing to inspect. They turned their heads and looked, from behind the dusty piles of carpets or the trays of fly-blown china, at the establishment over the way—looked from death to life; and for a few minutes watched the jostling crowd and the brilliant range of colours on the other side of the road.

No dust there. Here, it was impossible to prevent the dust. The dust-sheets were in tatters; the brooms and sprinklers were worn out; there were not enough hands to sweep and rub. Mears himself looked dusty.

And when the sunlight fell upon him, he looked very old, very grey, and rather shaky. He never blew out his cheeks or swished his coat-tails now. The voluminous frock-coat seemed several sizes too large for him; it was greasy at the elbows, and frayed at the cuffs. The salary of Mears was hopelessly in arrear. For a long time Mears, like the governor, had found himself obliged to crave for something on account—just to keep going with.

One sunny April day Marsden entered the shop about noon, went into the office; and, not discovering his wife there, ordered the type-writing girl to fetch her immediately.

"What is it, Richard?" said Mrs. Marsden, presently appearing.

"Oh, there you are—at last. You never seem to be in your right place when you're wanted. I've been waiting here five minutes—and not a soul on the look out to receive people."

"I am sorry."

"Anybody could walk in from the street and march slap into this room, without being asked who he was or what his business was. And a nice idea it would give a stranger of our management."

"I am sorry. But was that all you had to say to me?"

"No. Look here," he went on grumblingly. "Bence, if you please, has asked me for an appointment."

"Will you see him?"

"Yes—I think so."

"Very good."

"Yes, I've told the little bounder I'll see him."

"Do you wish me to be present at the interview?"

"No—better not."

A quarter of an hour afterwards Mr. Archibald Bence was coming up the empty shop. It was years since he had crossed the threshold; and certainly his eyes were expert enough to see now, if he cared to look about him, the dire results of his implacable rivalry. But he showed nothing in his face: smugly self-possessed, smilingly imperturbable, he followed the shop-walker straight to the counting-house.

The shop-walker announced him at the door of the inner room, and he marched in. He bowed low, as Mrs. Marsden, with a slight inclination of the head, passed out. Then Marsden shut the door.

But upstairs and downstairs the dull air vibrated

as if electric discharges were passing through it in all directions; the whole shop stirred and throbbed; the whispering assistants quivered. "Did you see him?" "I couldn't get a peep at him." "I just saw the top of his hat." Bence had come to call upon the governor. Bence was in the shop. That great man was behind their glass.

Soon they heard sounds of the noisy interview—at least, Marsden was making a lot of noise. The minutes seemed long; but there were only five or six of them before the counting-house doors opened and Bence reappeared. He was perfectly calm, talking quietly and politely, though the governor bellowed.

"All right, Mr. Marsden, don't excite yourself. I only asked a question."

"Yes, a blasted impertinent one."

"Well, no bones broken, anyhow;" and Bence smiled. "If you should ever change your mind—come over the road, and let me know."

"I'll see you damned first."

Nothing, however, could ruffle Bence.

"Just so. But, as I was saying, if you ever *should* care to do business—well, I'm not far off. Good morning to you."

Mrs. Marsden, when she returned to the inner room, found her husband standing near the desk, sullenly scowling at the floor.

"I was a fool to swear at him. I ought to have kicked him down the shop. . . . Can you guess what he came about?"

"I'm not clever at guessing. I'll wait till you tell me."

"He wanted us to close more than half the shop, and

sublet it to him for the remainder of the lease." And Marsden sullenly and growlingly described the details of this impudent proposal. Bence suggested that the yard and the new packing rooms could be used by him as a warehouse; that all departments to the west of the silk counter might be transferred to the eastern side; that he would build a party wall at his own expense, and use all this western block "for one thing or another." Bence's question in plain words, therefore, was, Would they now confess to the universe that their premises were about four times too big for their trade?

"Not to be thought of," said Mrs. Marsden.

"No. I suppose not;" and Marsden glanced at her furtively, and then rattled the keys in his pockets. "We won't think of it."