XXVII

ANOTHER month had gone, and the end of all things was approaching.

"Jane," said Marsden, "we're beat. We'd better own it. We are beat to the world. It's no good going on."

"What do you mean?"

It was a dull and depressing afternoon—the sky obscured by heavy clouds, a little rain falling at intervals—so dark in the room behind the glass that Mrs. Marsden was compelled to switch on the electric light above the American desk. She had turned in her chair, and was watching her husband's face intently; and the light from the lamp showed that her own face had become extraordinarily pale.

"It's no good, Jane. You must see it just the same as I do. We're done—and the only thing is to consider how we are to escape a smash."

Then he told her that Bence had offered to buy them out. Bence was ready to swallow them whole. Bence was prepared to give them a fair price for their entire property—long lease of the premises, stock, fittings, assets, the complete bag of tricks. He would take it over as a still going concern, with all its debts and liabilities. If they accepted Bence's offer, they would merely have to put the money in their pockets, and could wash their hands of a bitterly bad job.

"Don't talk so loud. Someone may hear you."

"No," he said, "there's no one outside, except Miss O'Donnell; and you can hear her machine—so she can't be eavesdropping. . . . I'll give you my reasons for saying it's a fair price."

"Yes, please do. . . . You haven't mentioned the amount yet."

"I'm coming to it. I want to prepare your mind. Of course I don't know how it will strike you. . . ."

"Go on, please."

"First of all, I'll say I'm certain it's more than we should get from anyone else. I've gone to the root of everything. I have worked it out with plain figures. . . . Well, then—Bence will give us six thousand pounds."

"No, I won't accept the offer."

"It would be three thousand apiece."

"I refuse to agree to the sale."

"It will be ready money, you know—paid on the nail."

"Richard, I can't agree to it."

"Why not? Of course I know I can't jump you into it. I don't want to do so. I simply want to persuade you that it's our only course."

Then he began to argue and plead with her. He said that he considered it would be madness obstinately to decline such an opportunity, and she ought really to be grateful to him for cutting the knot of their difficulties. He explained that only two days after Bence's memorable visit, he had gone across the road and reopened negotiations on a wider scale. He owned that he had at first resented the approach of Bence as a gross insult; he had felt disposed to kick Bence; but *afterwards*, calmly thinking it over, he had come to the conclusion that Bence—"if properly handled"—might eventually prove

their best friend. In this softer, calmer mood, he had made his return call on Bence—had handled him magnificently, had bluffed him and jollied him, had slowly but surely screwed him up to make a splendid and a firm offer.

"But, Richard, supposing that we were to sell the business, what would happen to you?"

"I should go away—to California. I'm sick of this stinking town. It's played out for me. At Mallingbridge I'm a dead-beat—people don't believe in me—I've no real friends. But I should do all right out West—and I want a decent climate. Between you and me and the post, I funk another English winter."

"Do you mean that you want to desert me altogether?"

"Jane, what's the use of asking me that? You and I have got to the end of our tether, haven't we? What good can I do sticking here any longer? I can't help you—I can't help myself. We're done. You'd far wiser divide what we can grab from Bence, and let me go."

"But to a person of your tastes and habits, three thousand pounds is not an inexhaustible sum. Do you think that, as your entire capital, it would be enough for you?"

"Yes, I do," he said eagerly. "Life is cheaper out there. In that lovely climate one doesn't want to binge up. There aren't the same temptations. I should turn over a new leaf—put the break on—make a fresh start."

"And should I never see you again?"

"Oh, I don't say that. No—of course I should come back. I don't see what real difference it would make to you. We're a semi-detached couple, as it is."

"Yes, but not quite detached."

"Well, you'd let me go on a little longer string. That's all about it;" and he laughed good-humouredly. He believed that he would soon overcome her opposition. "I never meant any total severance, you know. We should be like the swells—Mrs. Marsden is residing at Mallingbridge; Mr. Marsden has gone to the Pacific Coast for the winter. We'd put it in the paper, if you liked."

"I see that you are very keen to close with—with Mr. Bence's proposal."

"Yes, I am—and I honestly believe you ought to be just as keen."

And again he extolled his personal merit in screwing up the proposer. Bence had pointed out that if he quietly waited until Thompson and Marsden were forced as bankrupts to put up their shutters, he would buy all he wanted at a much lower price. The premises, and the premises only, were what Bence wanted. After a bankruptcy he could buy the lease at the market price, and not have to give a penny for anything else. Bence said his offer was extravagantly liberal; but he frankly admitted that he felt in a hurry to clear up the street, and make it neat and tidy. He would therefore fork out thus handsomely to avoid delay.

"He said we were doing the street *harm*, Jane. And, upon my word, I couldn't deny that. I've often told Mears we have got to look more like a funeral than anything else."

"And you wish us to be decently buried?"

He laughed and shrugged his shoulders in the utmost good-humour. He felt sure now that she would yield; and with increasing eagerness he urged her to adopt his views.

"Very well," she said at last. "It is your wish?"

"Yes, it is."

"Then on one condition," and she spoke in a hard, matter-of-fact voice,—"on *one* condition, I'll consent."

"What's your condition?"

"When we wind up our business relations, we must wind up all our other relations. . . . It must be a total severance—I am using your own word—and no half measures. When you leave Mallingbridge you must leave it for ever. You must undertake—bind yourself never to set foot in it again."

"Oh, I say."

"You must execute a deed of separation."

He seemed greatly surprised; and for a little while hesitated, as if unable to express his thoughts.

"Look here, Jane. . . . You're talking big, old lady. What next? . . . Deed of separation! That's a very large order."

"You are taking freedom for yourself. You must give me freedom."

"Oh, no, you overdo that line," he said slowly. "I told you I would come back—some day or other. Yet now you take up this high and mighty tone—as though I had given you the right to cut me adrift altogether."

"Ah! I understand. You thought you'd have *your* three thousand to spend, and *my* three thousand to fall back upon. Then again I refuse the offer."

"Don't be hasty—and don't impute bad motives where none exist. No, you have struck me all of a heap by what you demand. I wasn't prepared for it—and it wants a bit of thought, before I can say yes or no."

And he began to bargain about the deed of separation.

He had seen an unexpected chance, and he meant to make the most of it.

"Let's be business-like, Jane. If I renounce all claims on you for ever—if I agree to make a formal renunciation, —well, surely that's worth *something* to you?"

"Do you mean, worth money? Are you asking me to pay you?"

"I want to start a new life out there—and I shall need all the money I can get. You told me so, yourself —three thou. is devilish little to face the world on."

"Yes," she said quietly, "and with another person dependent on you."

"What do you say?"

"I say, you are not going alone. . . . We must think of your companion, as well as of yourself."

"Jane, you're hard on me."

"Am I?"

And the bargaining went on.

Finally they came to terms. She was to give him half her share, in exchange for absolute freedom. He would thus have four thousand five hundred pounds as initial impetus for his new career.

"Do you say *done* to that?"

"Yes," she replied coldly and firmly, "I say done."

He sat down, drew out a dirty handkerchief, and wiped his forehead. His argumentative efforts had made him warm; but he smiled contentedly. He considered that "in the circs." it was a jolly good bargain.

"Dick;" and her voice suddenly softened. "Have you thought what *I* am to do? Fifteen hundred pounds isn't much for *me*—to start a new life with."

"You have money of your own. . . . I am certain that you have a tidy nest-egg still."

"If I were to tell you that I hadn't another penny in in the world?"

"I shouldn't believe it."

"If I convinced you that it was literally true, would it make any difference to you?"

"I don't follow."

"Would you still take half my share from me?"

"What's the good of talking about it?" And he looked at her thoughtfully. "Jane, the devil is driving me. I'm not the man I was. I funk dangers. My health is broken. . . . You'll be all right. You have friends. I have none. It's vital to me to know that we—that I shall have enough to rub along with out there."

Mrs. Marsden said no more.

"Yes, you'll be all right, old girl. Never fear;" and he got up, and stretched himself. "But I say! We've been jawing such a deuce of a time that it'll be too late to do anything to-day, unless we look sharp. . . . Will you give me a letter to Hyde and Collins, saying you accept?"

"No, I'll go there, and tell them by word of mouth."

"May I go with you?"

"No, that's unnecessary."

"But you *will* go, Jane? I mean, at once. You do intend to go—and no rot?"

"I have told you I am going."

"Yes, but hurry up then. They don't keep open all night."

"I'll tell them within an hour."

Within an hour she had spoken to Mr. Bence's solicitors and gone on to the office of Mr. Prentice.

"Now," she said to her old friend, "you see me in my need. The time has come. Help me now with all your power."

Then very rapidly she told him all that had happened.

"So there goes the end of an old song," said Mr. Prentice. "Mind you, I don't tell you that you are doing wrong. It may be—probably it *is*—the only thing to do. . . . Six thousand pounds!" It was obvious that Mr. Prentice had been astonished by the largeness of this sum. But he would not admit the fact. He spoke cautiously.

"It is more than anyone else would have given."

"Possibly! But I might have got you better terms from Bence. Let me take up the negotiations now. If he will give as much as six thousand, he may give more."

"No, I have told Hyde and Collins that we accept."

"That was premature. But you referred them to me?"

"No. I told them to prepare the conveyance at once."

"But—good gracious—they can't act for both sides."

"Of course they can. It will save time—it will save money. There is no difficulty *there*. We sell all we have. —A child could carry it through."

"Oh, but really, I don't know. Your interests must be guarded."

"No, no." She was nervous and excited, and she spoke piteously and yet irritably. "I have instructed them. They must attend to the sale. And *you* must attend to the deed of separation. Concentrate your mind—all your mind on it. . . . Don't you understand, don't you see that this is everything and the sale is nothing?"

"No, I don't see that at all."

"It is what I have been praying for night and day—it

is my escape. And he is granting it to me of his own consent—he consents to give me unmolested freedom."

And she implored Mr. Prentice to use his skill and sagacity to their uttermost extent.

"I want it to be a renunciation of all possible claims. It must be absolutely clear that this is the end of our partnership."

"Oh, as to that," said Mr. Prentice; "the partnership ends automatically with the sale of the business."

"But put it in the deed—explicitly. Make him surrender every claim—even if it seems to you only the shadow of a claim."

Then, without saying that she was to pay a price for Marsden's acquiescence, she repeated the agreed conditions of the separation. She became agitated when Mr. Prentice assured her that he would easily draft the deed,

"No, don't treat it as an easy task. Get counsel's opinion—the best counsel. Spare no expense—in this case. It is life and death to me. . . . Oh, Mr. Prentice, don't fail me *now*. Make the deed strong—make it so binding that he can never slip out of it."

"I won't fail you," said Mr. Prentice earnestly. "We'll make your deed as strong—as effective—as is humanly possible—a deed that the Courts will be far more inclined to support than to upset."

"Yes, yes," she said, as if now satisfied. "That's all I ask for—as strong as is humanly possible."

XXVIII

IT was a bright May morning and the sunshine streamed into Mr. Prentice's room gaily and warmly, lighting up the old panelled walls, flickering on the bunch of keys that hung from the lock of the open safe, and making the tin boxes show queer reflections of the windows, the tops of houses on the other side of Hill Street, and even of the blue sky above the chimney-pots.

A large table had been brought in for the occasion; a clerk had furnished it with newly-filled inkstands and nice clean blotting-paper; another clerk was ready to receive the visitors as they came upstairs. Mr. Prentice moved his armchair to the head of the table. He would sit here, and preside over the meeting. He glanced at the clock.—A quarter to twelve!

At noon Mr. Archibald Bence or his representative was to complete the purchase of Marsden and Thompson's by handing over cash; and at the same time the domestic affairs of Mrs. Marsden were to be wound up for ever.

Mrs. Marsden was the first of the interested parties to arrive on the scene. She looked care-worn and nervous; and, as she shook hands, Mr. Prentice noticed that her fingers trembled.

"Now, my dear," he said kindly, "there's nothing to

worry about. You sit by my side here, and take things quietly."

Mrs. Marsden, however, preferred to sit away from the table, on a chair between the windows, with her back to the light.

"Nothing to worry about now," repeated Mr. Prentice, confidently and cheerily. "It'll soon be over."

"But it won't be over without some unpleasantness."

"Why? Mr. Marsden has been quite pleasant so far —really quite easy to deal with."

"But he won't be to-day—I know it;" and she showed great anxiety. "You say he has made all arrangements for his voyage?"

"Yes. He tells me he sails on Thursday. And he goes to London to-night."

"I wonder if he truly means it."

"Of course he means it."

"I suppose he does. The things he packed at our house went straight to Liverpool. But—even now—he may change his mind."

"How can he? . . . Hush!"

There was a heavy footstep in the passage. The clerk opened the door, and announced Mr. Marsden.

"Am I late?"

"No, you are in excellent time," said Prentice; and, looking at him, he endeavoured not to manifest the thoughts aroused by his appearance.

It seemed that Marsden, bracing himself for the day, was trying to maintain a sort of buccaneering joviality. Evidently, too, he had made some attempts to render himself presentable in general company. He had visited the barber, and his bloated face was smooth and glistening after a close shave: a neatly cut piece of plaster

covered an eruption on the back of his neck; he wore a clean collar, and the cheap violet satin neck-tie conveyed the idea that it had been chosen by feminine taste. Probably his travelling companion had assisted in brushing and cleaning him, and sending him forth as nice as possible.

Yet, in spite of this unusual care, he looked most ruffianly as he lolled in a chair near the open safe, with the bright sunlight full upon him. His eyes were slightly blood-shot; and the gross, overfed frame suggested the characteristics of a beast of prey who for a long time had ceased to undergo the invigorating activities of the chase and been enabled without effort to gorge at will. Now he had come for his last greedy and unearned meal.

Mrs. Marsden, on the other side of the room, lowered her eyes, folded her hands, and sat silent and motionless.

Mr. Collins of Hyde and Collins, followed by his own clerk, was the next to arrive. He came bustling into the room, and immediately seemed to take possession of it.

"Good morning. Good morning. Here we are. Put my bag on the table. . . . Where are you sitting, Prentice? . . . Over there? All right. Then I'll sit here;" and he took the chair at the end of the table, opposite to Mr. Prentice. "You sit there, Fielding;" and he waved to his clerk. "Sit down. Don't stand."

Mr. Prentice disliked Collins rather more than he disliked Hyde. To his mind, Collins was everything that a solicitor should not be—impudent, unscrupulous, vulgar: a discredit to the profession. His ragged beard, his snout of a nose, his little ferret-eyes, shifting so rapidly behind steel-rimmed spectacles, were all obnoxious; but what made Mr. Prentice really angry was

his irrepressible familiarity, with the odious facetious manner that accompanied it. He said Prentice instead of *Mister* Prentice; and, refusing to recognise snubs, always pretended that they were on the best of terms with each other.

"Well," asked Marsden, "why don't we begin?"

"No hurry, is there?" said Collins. He was busy with his ugly black bag, getting out the important document, and unfolding some memorandum papers.

"Oh, *I*'m in no particular hurry," said Marsden. "But twelve o'clock was the hour named."

"Is it twelve? . . . Can you hear Holy Trinity clock from here, Prentice? We hear it plainly at our place."

Then dapper, smiling Mr. Archibald Bence was announced.

"Come in," said Collins patronisingly. "Here we are, all assembled. Be seated. Fielding, put a chair for Mr. Bence."

Mr. Archibald looked splendid in the sunlight. He shone all over, from his bald head to his patent leather boots. His black coat was beautifully braided, elegantly padded on the shoulders, tightly pulled in at the waist; his buff waistcoat exactly matched his wash-leather gloves; and with him there entered the room a pleasing fragrance shed by the moss roses in his button-hole. He bowed gallantly to the only lady present, had an affable word for Prentice and Collins, and nodded rather contemptuously to Marsden.

"Gentlemen," he said blandly, "it is the sort of day on which one is glad to be alive;" and he turned about, with a dandified air, to find a vacant spot for his brand-new topper.

"Take Mr. Bence's hat," said Collins; and his clerk did as he was bid.

Bence, declining a chair, went and leaned against the wall near Mrs. Marsden, and twirled his moustache.

"What are we waiting for?" asked Marsden.

"Only for one small trifle," said Mr. Collins facetiously. "But I don't suppose you'd dispense with it. Not quite a matter of form."

"What is it?"

"The money—the purchase money, my dear sir."

"What? Haven't you got it with you?"

"Oh, dear me, no," said Mr. Collins. "But it's coming—oh, yes, it's coming."

"I understand that a clerk is bringing it from the bank," said Mr. Prentice. He found the facetious manner of Mr. Collins utterly insufferable.

Marsden shrugged his shoulders, and crossed his legs. Archibald Bence was looking at him; Collins looked at him; old Prentice looked at him; and all at once he seemed to feel the necessity of asserting himself.

"I never understood the use of appointments unless they are punctually attended. It's waste of time asking people for twelve, if you don't intend to get to work till half an hour later."

Bence moved to the window, and looked out.

"A thousand apologies for keeping you waiting, Mr. Marsden." He spoke over his shoulder. "Ah, here the man comes;" and he pulled out his grand gold watch. "Then I've really only wasted three minutes of your valuable time."

"All right," said Marsden sulkily.

The bank clerk came in, and bowed to the company as he went to Mr. Collins's side at the table. Then he

opened his wallet and brought out the white sheafs of bank-notes.

"Will you go through them, sir?"

"Yes," said Mr. Collins. "Will you kindly check them with me, Prentice."

"I'll count them after you," said Mr. Prentice. It did not suit his dignity to leave his chair and go round the table to stand at Collins's elbow.

Mr. Collins found the total of the notes correct, pushed them across to Prentice, and signed the bank receipt.

"Then you won't want me any more," said the bank clerk.

"Wait," said Collins pompously, as if the bank, as well as Mr. Prentice's room, belonged to him. "Stand over there—or sit down, if you please. My clerk will go back with you."

Marsden had risen and approached the table. It was as if the bank-notes had irresistibly drawn him. Perhaps, though in his career he had dissipated so many notes singly or by small batches, he had never yet seen such a good show of them, all together, at one time. And such noble denominations!

"Twice three thousand," said Prentice. "Quite right." While counting, he had divided the notes into two piles; and now he slid them towards the middle of the table, and put an inkstand on top to prevent their blowing away.

Marsden stood over them. He could not leave the table now.

"Then here we are. All in order," said Collins, as he spread out his parchment and glanced at Mrs. Marsden. "I suppose, strictly speaking, it should be ladies first.

But as the pen is close to your hand, Mr. Marsden—will you, sir, open the ball?"

"Oh, that's the conveyance for the sale, eh? Where do I sign?"

"There—against the seal—over the pencil marks. . . . And I'll witness your signature."

Then Mr. Marsden duly signed his name, and repeated the formula as prompted by Collins.

"I deliver it as my act and deed. . . . Now, Jane!"

Mrs. Marsden had not stirred from her seat.

"Don't put down your pen, Richard. There's the other deed to sign. Mr. Prentice is ready for you."

"All right—but you come and sign the conveyance;" and he moved to Mr. Prentice's end of the table. "I ought to read this—but I suppose I may take it as read."

"Oh, yes, I think so," said Mr. Prentice.

"It's exactly the same as the draft that I passed?"

"Yes, of course."

"I may trust you not to have dabbed in something artful that I'd never heard of?"

"You had better read it," said Mr. Prentice curtly, "if you *can't* trust me."

"Oh, that's all right;" and Marsden laughed. "Now then—where do you want my autograph?"

Still chuckling, he affixed his signature; and he smiled good-humouredly while the witness filled the attestation space.

Mrs. Marsden had come to the table, and was pulling off a rusty black glove.

"There you are," said her husband. "The conveyance first, Jane."

"No," said Mrs. Marsden, looking at him resolutely. "I'll sign this deed first. It's the one I'm most interested

in;" and she turned to Mr. Prentice. "But I must try the pen. Kindly let me have a bit of paper."

Mr. Prentice fetched a half sheet of note-paper from his desk, and handed it to her.

"Thank you." Stooping over the table, she tested the pen by scribbling a few words. Then she executed the deed; and, while Mr. Fielding was being good enough to write his name and address as witness, she gave the half-leaf of paper to Mr. Prentice.

"Now then," said Marsden. "Look sharp. Don't be all night about it." He had gone to the other end of the table, and he waited anxiously to see the conveyance completed.

Mr. Prentice was reading Mrs. Marsden's scribbled words. He looked at her, and she pointed with her pen. She had written: "Lock the deed in your safe, and put the keys in your pocket."

"Now I am ready, Richard."

But still she did not sign. She was watching Mr. Prentice. The door of the safe shut with a faint, dull clank, and Mr. Prentice locked the door and took out the keys.

Then Mrs. Marsden signed the conveyance, and Fielding obligingly witnessed her signature.

"Thank you," she said; and, returning to her chair between the windows, she sat down again.

"That's done," said Collins; and he called to the bank clerk, who had been patiently waiting in a corner of the room. "Mr. Fielding will go back with you. This document is to be put away with Mr. Bence's papers. My compliments to the manager. He knows all about it."

"But," said Marsden, "doesn't Mr. Bence sign it?"

"It isn't necessary," said Collins.

"Are you sure?" And Marsden looked at Bence suspiciously.

"He can sign it at his convenience," said Collins, "if he ever wishes to do so. . . . Run along, young fellows. My compliments to the manager;" and he addressed Marsden with extreme facetiousness. "We pay on this—so you can be quite sure we are not deceiving you. The money *talks*. You can take it whenever you please. . . . Ah! I see—you're not slow about that."

And in fact, without waiting for Mr. Collins to conclude his invitation, Marsden had pushed aside the inkstand and picked up the notes. One bundle he unceremoniously thrust into the breast pocket of his coat; and now with a licked finger he was separating the edges of the other bundle.

"Stop," said Mr. Prentice. "What are you doing? Allow me, please;" and he held out his hand. "I will attend to this."

Marsden, without surrendering the notes, explained matters in a confidential whisper.

"Fifteen hundred goes to her, and the rest to me."

"Indeed it doesn't," said Prentice warmly.

"It's all right," said Marsden. "It was arranged between her and me."

"But I know nothing of any such arrangement. I can't permit it for a moment."

"*You* can't permit it!" said Marsden indignantly. "What the dickens has it got to do with you?"

Mr. Collins, with an assumption of tactful delicacy, had pushed back his chair. "Excuse me. This is a private conversation. I hasten to withdraw." And he went across to Archibald Bence and Mrs. Marsden, and talked to them in a rapid undertone.

Mr. Prentice went on protesting; and Marsden, cutting him short, called loudly to his wife.

"Jane, tell him that it is all right."

"Yes," she said. "Quite all right, Mr. Prentice."

"Do you mean that you are giving him a present of fifteen hundred pounds?"

"It's not a present," said Marsden.

"No," said Mrs. Marsden, "it was a bargain."

"Between ourselves, and concerning nobody else;" and Marsden glared at Mr. Prentice.

Nevertheless Mr. Prentice still expostulated. "I think it is highly improper. I would never have consented to——"

"Pardon me," said Collins, "if I intrude—but it has been impossible not to catch the gist of your discussion. Really it seems to me that it is too late for you, Prentice, to tender advice on the point—and that the lady's wish must decide the matter. If Mrs. Marsden announces that she wishes——"

"Just so, Mr. Collins;" and Marsden looked at him gratefully.

"Exactly," said Bence soothingly. "That's how it strikes me too."

Marsden looked at Bence with surprise and pleasure. They all seemed to be on his side. He appealed to his wife with a rather boisterous joviality.

"Jane, speak up for me. Tell them that you did wish it."

"Yes, I did wish it."

"Then there is no more to be said," continued Bence, smoothly and glibly. "On an occasion like this, one naturally wishes to avoid any acrimonious talk. Especially in a peculiar case like the present—when a gentleman

and a lady are parting,—there's no need for them to part other than as good friends. That, madam, I feel certain is also your wish."

"Yes," said Mrs. Marsden in a low voice, "I do greatly wish it."

"Thank you, Jane. I'm sure I do. But I don't know why we should make speeches about it, or get Mr. Bence to expound our sentiments."

"Forgive me," said Bence, "if I trespass. You are leaving us, Mr. Marsden—and I share Mrs. Marsden's desire that you should not leave us with any feeling of ill-will."

"Precisely," said Collins, picking up the word, almost as if taking his cue in a rehearsed dialogue. "That is what everyone must feel." He had reseated himself at the table; and he looked round with a comprehensive smile, as if assuming sole charge of everything and everybody. "Mr. Bence has touched the point very gracefully. . . . Pray be seated, Mr. Marsden."

"What, aren't we done?"

"Yes, yes, my dear sir," said Collins with consequential urbanity. "Our business is done. But spare us one minute for friendly chat. Do sit down. . . . Thank you. As I was about to say, following the line of our friend Bence—in the hour of separation, when two parties by mutual agreement are saying good-bye, it is always well that they should thoroughly understand the future situation."

"What's all this gas about?" said Marsden. "Are you trying to pull my leg? What are you getting at?"

"Mr. Marsden, you are retiring from trade, you are going to the other side of the world—I wish you health and prosperity."

"And I too," said Bence. "The best of luck, Mr. Marsden."

Marsden got up again. "Thank you for nothing, Mr. Archibald Bence. You're both trying to be funny, I suppose. Only I fail to see the joke. . . . Good morning;" and he moved towards the door. "Jane. Good-bye."

"But," said Mr. Archibald, "we've wished you luck. Don't go without wishing us luck."

"Yes," said Collins, "don't go without wishing your wife luck."

"Then here's luck, Jane;" and Marsden laughed.

"And luck to Bence's," said Collins blandly. "Wish luck to Bence's."

"No, I'll be damned if I do."

"But that," said Collins, with a grin, "invalidates your other good wish. You can't wish luck to your wife without wishing luck to Bence's;" and he bowed to Mrs. Marsden. "I think you should now explain. He will take it better from you."

"Richard," said Mrs. Marsden quietly and firmly, "*I* am Bence's."

For a few moments there was silence. Then Marsden came slowly to the table, leaned both hands on it, and stared across at his wife.

"What do you mean by that, Jane? Is this another joke?"

"Oh, no," said Mr. Archibald. "It is strictly accurate. Bence's, with all that's in it—including your humble servant—practically belongs to this lady."

"And we all felt," said Collins, "that you ought to know the facts before you started on your journey. We didn't want you coming back again to inquire—don't you know."

Marsden seemed not to hear. He stared at his wife,

with his blood-shot eyes widely distended; and he spoke only to her.

"Jane, answer me. Is it true?"

"Yes, Richard."

"But *how*?"

"You asked me what I did with my money—the remainder of my own money. You were always asking me. Well, I gave it to Mr. Bence."

"How much was it?"

"Not very much," said Mrs. Marsden deprecatingly; "but he has done very well with it."

"But that was treachery—a damnable betrayal."

"Richard, don't use strong words. It was no betrayal. It was common sense. Remember, desperate diseases need desperate remedies."

"You went over to my enemy. You helped him to destroy our business."

"I didn't," said Mrs. Marsden earnestly. "I gave him my money; but I gave you my work. I never ceased fighting him. Isn't that true, Mr. Bence?"

"Strictly accurate," said Bence. "She fought gamely to the bitter end."

"You shut your head," said Marsden fiercely. "Don't interfere between me and my wife. I must have this out with her first. I'll talk to you directly."

"I'll be ready for you," said Bence. "But till then, please moderate your language;" and he moved to a window, and looked down into the street.

"So that's what you did, Jane, eh? Sneaked off behind my back, and sold yourself to the enemy!"

"I continued to serve you faithfully. Success or failure lay in your hands, not mine. I never ceased working for the firm."

"Oh, that's easy to say, isn't it?"

"It's the truth."

"It's a lie—and you know it."

"Will you moderate your language," said Bence. "Gentlemen, I beg your support. This lady must be protected from insult."

But the attention of Marsden and his wife was so entirely concentrated on each other that neither of them seemed to hear the interruption.

"Richard, don't go on like this—don't force me to say unkind things which I shall regret later."

"I knew there was some infernal mystery at the bottom of our troubles. But, by Jove, I never guessed that it was *you* who'd played false."

"Richard, don't abuse me."

"Abuse you? I shan't waste breath on abusing you. You have cheated me—or you've *tried* to cheat me. For I'm not going to let you;" and he turned towards the others. "Take notice, all of you, that I shan't submit to this. Prentice, do you understand? You were always hostile to me. I suppose you helped to hatch this plot."

Mr. Prentice was looking so absolutely bewildered that his face should have been sufficient proof of his innocence.

"No," he said feebly. "All this has come upon me as a complete surprise."

"Then you, Mr. Collins—understand it's all mighty fine, but it won't wash."

"Won't it?" said Collins.

"No, I don't allow myself to be cheated—even by my wife."

"Richard," said Mrs. Marsden, "don't call me a cheat again."

"You there—Bence—take notice. I'll bring you to account for this. I'm not the sort to be tricked and fooled by any little swine that gets plotting with my wife. No, not if I know it. Cheating people is very clever, but——"

Mrs. Marsden sprang up from her chair by the wall.

"How dare you call me a cheat?"

Her eyes were blazing. She had clenched her fists; and, trembling with passion, she came to the table and faced her husband.

"What have you ever given me in exchange for all I gave you—except shame and sorrow?"

"I'm not going to listen to your yelling and——"

"I gave you my love, and you trampled on it—I gave you my home, and you polluted it—I gave you the work of my life, and you pulled it to pieces before my eyes. Yet still I was true and loyal to you. I could have divorced you, and I wouldn't do it. I promised you that I'd hold to you till you yourself consented to set me free; and I kept my promise. You were a liar—but I respected your words. You were a thief—but I dealt with you as if you had been an honest man. I fed and clothed you when you were well, I nursed you when you were sick—I hid your crimes, I sheltered you from their consequences. At this minute I am keeping you out of the prison that is your only proper place. . . . And yet—great God—he has the audacity to say that I am cheating him!"

And then Mrs. Marsden, shaking in excitement and anger, went back to her chair and sat down.

"You asked for that," said Collins, with renewed facetiousness, "and you got it."

Bence was looking out of the window; and he whistled

and gently clapped his hands, as if applauding the passionate force of Mrs. Marsden's unexpected tirade.

"I don't know what she means," said Marsden hoarsely. "And I dare say she doesn't know, herself." He had been staggered by his wife's attack; and at her last words he recoiled from the table, as if suddenly daunted, almost cowed. Now he was pulling himself together again. "Who cares what a woman says?" And he cleared his throat, and spoke loudly and defiantly. "I don't, for one."

"Richard," murmured Mrs. Marsden, in a still tremulous voice, "I'm sorry I said it."

"All right. That's enough. . . . But now, if you please, we men will talk;" and he looked from one to another. The veins showed redly on his forehead; his glistening jaw was protruded; and he squared his huge shoulders pugnaciously. "I tell you, once for all, I'm not going to stand any damned rot. As to the sale—Mr. Clever Bence,—I repudiate it utterly. It was obtained under false pretences, and I'll have it set aside. As to the separation—I'm speaking to you, Prentice,—that bargain falls through with the other. . . . And to show you what I think of it—I am now going to tear up the deed."

"Oh no, you're not," said Collins.

"I warn you all," said Marsden furiously: "if anyone touches me, he'll be sorry for it. Now, Prentice, fetch out your deed again. You shoved it away in that safe, didn't you? Well, out with it." And he moved to the side of Mr. Prentice, and stood over him threateningly. "Out with it—d'you hear?"

Bence and Collins had both begun to clap their hands loudly. And with this noisy applause other sounds were mingling. Mr. Prentice, as he rose to confront Marsden,

heard quick footsteps in the passage. The door was abruptly opened, and two policemen came into the room.

"This way, officers," said Collins pompously. "You are just in time to prevent a breach of the peace. There's your man—keep your eyes on him."

Marsden, turning hurriedly, saw the two uniforms and helmets solemnly advance, and showed a craven dissatisfaction at the sight.

"What are you up to now?" he asked glumly.

But Collins, ignoring the question, continued to talk pompously to the new arrivals.

"As I told your superintendent, he is a dangerous character. He has been threatening us with assault and battery—but we do not wish to give him in charge, if we can help it. Your presence will probably be sufficient to restrain him."

"Very good, sir."

"He is the same man who made the disturbance at the Red Cow—and I think he has been charged once or twice as a drunk and disorderly."

"You needn't introduce him so carefully," said Bence, with a snigger. "Mr. Marsden is already well known to the police."

"Yes, Mr. Bence," said one of the policemen, "*we* know the gent."

"Very well," continued Collins, with the air of a magistrate presiding over a crowded court. "He is leaving the town to-night—for ever,—and I shall ask for a constable to see him off. From the mayor down to the humblest citizen, Mallingbridge is tired of him—so he is going to the western states of America. He will be more at home among the desperados of some mining camp than he can be in a peaceful humdrum town like

this." And Mr. Collins turned to Marsden, as though haranguing the prisoner. "Now, sir, will you behave yourself, and let us finish our conversation quietly and decently?"

"Oh, you can finish your chin-music in any tune you like." Marsden growled this out; but the voice was heavy and dejected, altogether lacking in animation. Very obviously the arrival of the police had crushed his spirit.

"So be it," said Collins. "Then I think, officers, that will do. You may safely leave us for the moment. But please wait outside the door, to protect us if necessary."

"Yes," said Bence, "we'll give you the same signal, if you're wanted again."

"All right, Mr. Bence."

And the policemen left the room. To their eyes the famous Mr. Bence was the natural chieftain of any assemblage, no matter how pompously anybody else talked. Here, they were at his service, detailed for Bence's, just as much as if it had been a sale day and they and their mates were regulating the traffic in front of the shop.

"Now," said Collins, with a change of manner, and speaking in a conciliatory if argumentative tone, "we can pick up our little debate. Mr. Marsden, come now, after all, what is this fuss about?"

Marsden laughed; but his laughter was dull and spiritless.

"Go on—jabber, jabber."

"Really now. What is the grievance? You have sold your business and been paid for it. Of your own free will, you have parted with your interests. You have renounced all claims upon your wife."

"Yes—but I've been tricked into doing it."

"Where's the trick?"

"She made me think we were done."

"So you were. You came to her and told her so. You prevailed on her to agree to the sale. It wasn't her proposition, but yours."

"I shouldn't have made it if I had known."

"You thought you had got all you could out of her—and that was the fact. You thought she was poor; and you find that she has made a good investment—with her own private funds, mark you,—and she is therefore not poor, but rather the reverse. Where's your quarrel with that?"

"I am entitled to my share in her investment."

"Oh, bosh! That's simply absurd."

Marsden was standing up, resting his red hands on the back of a chair. Now he moved the chair to Mr. Prentice's end of the table, sat down, and spoke in an eager whisper.

"Prentice, hostile or not, you *are* honest. I call on you to see fair play. She can't do this, can she?"

"She *has* done it," said Prentice feebly.

"But tell her it isn't fair. She knows you're straight, and above board. It's all mighty fine to bowl me out—and perhaps you don't think I deserve any pity. But still, speak for me. She can't round on me like this—she can't say 'Your firm is killed, and I've transferred myself across the road to the firm that killed it.' Surely the law wouldn't allow her to spoof me like that?"

But sharp-eared Mr. Collins had heard the whisper.

"Prentice, don't answer him. Mr. Marsden, I'll answer that question. I answer for the law. I am your wife's legal adviser in all this. Please address me, sir."

Marsden turned with a final burst of fierce rage.

"Then I say, curse you, I'll have the law on it."

"Now look here, Marsden," and Mr. Collins's voice changed once more—to an uncompromisingly ugly tone. "If you want the law, we'll give you your bellyful of the law."

"A good deal more than you'll like," said Bence, failing to ask for moderation of language.

"Your wife," Collins went on, "dropped a plain hint just now; and I was very pleased to hear it, because I thought you'd understood. But I see I must amplify it for you. Mrs. Marsden has been good enough to entrust to my care all her private papers—that is, papers she has kept private to oblige you."

"I—I don't in the least follow—what you're driving at."

"Oh, you know what I'm talking about. Specimens of your handwriting, and so on—papers that the law would call incriminating documents,—papers that the law would call conclusive evidence,—papers that the law would call forgeries."

"Prentice! Don't believe him."

"Never mind Mr. Prentice. Attend to me. . . . Ah-ha, —you're beginning to look rather foolish. . . . Now, how much law do you want?"

"I think," said Bence, "if he has time to get safely out of the country, that's all the law he ought to ask for."

Marsden was cowed and beaten. He sat heavily and limply on his chair, sprawling one red hand across the table, and nervously fingering his lips with the other hand.

"Well," said Collins mockingly, "what are you going to do—keep your bargain, or go to law with us?"

Marsden was thoroughly cowed and beaten. He cleared his throat several times, and even then spoke huskily.

"I must say a word or two to my wife;" and he rose from his chair slowly. . . . "Of course, when a man's down, everyone can jump on him."

And he went over to Mrs. Marsden, stooped, and whispered.

Collins tapped his nose jocosely, and smiled at Mr. Prentice—seeming to say without words, "What do you think of that, old boy? That's the way Hyde and Collins tackle this sort of troublesome customer."

Little Bence, resuming his dandified air and ostentatiously leaving Mrs. Marsden and her husband to whisper together, picked up his glossy hat, and dusted it with a neatly folded silk handkerchief.

"Jane," said Marsden pleadingly, almost whimperingly, "you come out on top—and I mustn't bear malice. But you *have* been hard—cruelly hard."

"Dick," said Mrs. Marsden, in a shaky whisper, "don't reproach me."

"But don't you think you have been a *little* hard."

"No. Or it is *you* who have made me hard. I wasn't hard—once. And remember this, Dick. Even at the end, I tried to get one word of tenderness from you—to make you say you cared just a little for what happened to me. But no——"

"I *did* care."

"No. You hadn't one kind word—or one kind thought. You and your—your companion were going to new scenes, new hopes; and I might be left to starve."

"Jane, I swear I thought you were all right. I said so, again and again. And now, you're rich—you're really

rolling in money; and it is I who may starve. Jane—for auld lang syne—do a bit more for me."

"No;" and she shook her head resolutely.

"Jane! Be like yourself. . . . I'm not grasping or avaricious. But at least I ought to get as much as the business fetched. Let me have that extra fifteen hundred."

"Well—perhaps. I'll think about it."

"Do it now—hand over now, or they'll only persuade you not to."

"No—but I'll give it you later. I promise. I'll send it to your address in California—as soon as I am sure that you have really arrived there."

"All right. Thanks. Jane—I'll say it once again. I wish you luck. You're a good plucked 'un—I always knew that."

Then the meeting broke up.

Marsden was the first to go. His wife watched him as he went slouching down the street. When he disappeared she did not immediately turn from the window. She had furtively produced her pocket handkerchief, and the gentlemen heard her blow her nose loudly and strenuously; but no one saw her wipe the tears from her eyes.

Mr. Collins, on the threshold of the room, was dismissing the policemen with pompous thanks, and promising to drop in upon their superintendent shortly.

"By the way," he said, looking round; "shall we let them escort Mrs. Marsden home?"

"No," said Mr. Archibald gallantly—"that shall be my honour and pleasure. And there's no danger of his molesting her now."

"I agree with you," said Collins. "We've fairly knocked the bounce out of *him*." And he spoke to Mrs. Marsden with sentimental solicitude. "There will

be a plain-clothes constable in St. Saviour's Court, watching your door till the evening. But you needn't be afraid. Our friend won't venture to go there."

Mr. Prentice sat at the head of his table, looking dazed and confused. He and his whole house were taken possession of by Collins; policemen walked in and out; astounding things happened—the morning's work had been almost too much for him.

With an effort he got upon his legs to bow and smile at Mrs. Marsden, as she and Bence went out.

"Well now," said Collins; and he shut his black bag. "I don't think that, under the peculiar conditions of the case, anything could have been more satisfactory—do you?"

"Of course," said Mr. Prentice, sitting down again, "you know, as well as I do, that what Marsden said was true. He could make her account to the firm for all her profits in Bence's. Such an investment isn't allowed—it isn't lawful."

"I'll tell you what it is," said Collins, enthusiastically blinking behind his spectacles. "It's *great*—that's what it is; and I'm proud to have carried it through for her."

Mr. Prentice really did not know what to say.

"And I'll tell you something more. If it isn't law, it's *justice*. I've never been such a stickler as you for mere outward form. Here were two people in terrible difficulty—Bence and Mrs. Marsden. She saw the way to save them both, and had the grit to take all risks and do it. That was good enough for me. As I say, I'm not so formal as you. I don't let a string of red tape trip up a brave woman when she's running for her life—that is, if I can prevent it. . . . Good morning, Prentice. Good morning to you."