XXIX

HOWEVER he might demur at first, Mr. Prentice soon came to the conclusion that it was truly great.

Perhaps at first he was so completely flabbergasted by the surprise of the thing that he could not really take it all in; his numbed brain, only partially working, fixed upon technical objections to the conduct of affairs by Hyde and Collins; and then, with awakening comprehension of a masterly coup, the sense of having been left out in the cold diminished his delight. But this soon passed, and he began to glow joyously.

Yes, *great!* No other word for it! Magnificent justification of all that he had ever said and thought of her!

Not weak, but strong—as strong as she used to be; no, stronger than at any time. And he thought of her, overwhelmed with misfortunes, hemmed round by insurmountable difficulties, brought lower and lower, until she was apparently so impotent and negligible a unit in the town's life that she had become an object of contemptuous pity to the very crossing-sweepers. He thought of what the scientists say about the conservation of energy and the indestructibility of matter. Great natural forces cannot be wiped out. Just when they seem gone, you get a fresh manifestation—the same force in another form. And so it was here. Mrs. Marsden, seemingly abolished, bursts out in another place, explodes

the débris of ruin that was holding her down, changes direction, and rises in blazing triumph on the other side of the street.

Wonderful! "Not now; but perhaps later, when the time comes"—he remembered her words. "I must do things my own way." Yes, her own way was right—because her way is the way of genius. A veritable stroke of genius—no lesser term will do,—seeming so simple to look back at, although so impenetrable till it was explained! She had seen the only means by which she could successfully extricate herself from an impossible situation. Only she could have escaped the imminent disaster. Only she could have turned an overwhelming defeat into a transcendent victory.

"Talk about giving women the vote," cried Mr. Prentice noisily. "That woman ought to be prime minister."

Mrs. Prentice, rejoicing at the good news, wished that her husband could have told it less vociferously. It happened that this evening she was the victim of a bilious headache, and she lay supine on a sofa, unable to sit up for dinner. The slightest noise made her headache worse, and the mere smell of food was distressing.

Mr. Prentice, banging in and out of the room, let savoury odours reach her; and his exultant voice set up a painful throbbing. "I told you so all along. . . . What did I say from the beginning? . . . Colossal brain-power! No one like her!"

This really was the substance of all that he had to say, and he had already said it; yet he kept running in from the dinner table to say it again.

A bottle of the very best champagne was opened; and he brought the invalid a glass of it, to drink Mrs.

Marsden's health. Mrs. Prentice, staunchly obeying, drank the old, still wine, and immediately felt as if she had stepped from an ocean-going liner into a dancing row-boat.

In the exuberance of his rapture, Mr. Prentice also invited the parlourmaid to drink Mrs. Marsden's health.

"There, toss that off—to the most remarkable lady *you*'ve ever seen."

"Yes, sir. She *is* a nice lady, sir—and always speaks so sensible."

"*Sensible!* Why, bless my soul, there's no one in the length and breadth of England that can hold a candle to her for sheer——" But he could not of course talk freely of these high matters to a parlourmaid. So he trotted off to the other room, to tell Mrs. Prentice once again.

As he walked to the office next morning, he hummed one of the comic songs that he had not sung for years, and snapped his fingers by way of castanet accompaniment. He felt so light-hearted and joyous that he would have willingly thrown his square hat in the air, and cut capers on the pavement.

He could not work. For two or three days he was quite unable to attend to ordinary business. When clients came to talk about themselves, he scarcely listened; but, giving the conversation a violent wrench, began talking to them about Mrs. Marsden.

Then one afternoon he was taken with a burning desire for a quiet chat with Archibald Bence. If he could get hold of little Archibald and ply him with questions, he would obtain all sorts of delightful explanatory details concerning Mrs. Marsden's splendid mystery.

He hurried down High Street, and, approaching the old shop, was puzzled by a strange phenomenon.

The pavement in front of Marsden and Thompson's seemed to be blocked by a dense crowd. The blinds were drawn on the upper floor; the iron shutters masked the windows and doors on the ground floor: the whole shop was closed—and yet there were infinitely more people lingering outside it than when it had been open.

White bills on all the shutters showed the cause of the phenomenon. "Astonishing Bargains"—these two portentous words headed each white placard in monstrous red capitals;—"Bence Brothers, having acquired this old-established business, will clear the entire stock, together with surplus and slightly soiled goods from their own house, at heart-breaking reductions on cost;" —"Opening 9 a.m. Monday next. Come early. This is not an ordinary bargain sale, but a forced sacrifice by which only the public can benefit." And the public, eager for the benefit, wishing that it was already Monday, pressed and strove to read and reread the white and red notices on the iron shutters.

"Don't push," said one nursemaid to another. "Take your turn. I've just as much right to see as you have."

Mr. Prentice laughed heartily and happily. He thought, as he crossed the road and entered Bence's, "What a dog this Archibald is—to be sure!"

He found the grand little man in his private room, and was affably received by him.

"Oh, yes," said Archibald, sniggering modestly. "We hope to make rather a big thing of our clearance sale. . . . How long shall we keep it going? Well, that depends. It wouldn't last long, if we'd nothing to dispose of beyond what's left over there; but we shall clear this side at the same time."

And Bence rattled on glibly, as though Mr. Prentice had come to interview him for an article in an important newspaper.

"The ancient notion was that this kind of special selling took the cream off one's ordinary trade. But experience has taught us that such is not the case. We find that trade breeds trade. And you can't *tire* your public—you can't over-stimulate them. It is the excited public that is your best *buying* public."

Mr. Prentice listened respectfully; and then, after the manner of a good interviewer, begged the host to pass from general views to personal reminiscences.

"What is it you wish to know?"

"About you and her," said Prentice. "I should enormously like to know the inward history of it."

"Well, now that the secret's out," said Archibald, rubbing his chin, and wrinkling the flesh round his bright little eyes, "I suppose there's no harm done in speaking about it."

"Certainly not to me," said Prentice. "Although I wasn't in her confidence about this, I am a real true friend of hers."

"I know you are," said Bence cordially. "She has said so a hundred times."

"Tell me how it began—the very beginning of things."

A gloomy cloud passed over Bence's animated face.

"Upon my word, I don't care to look back upon those days. I *was* in such bitter trouble, Mr. Prentice."

"When did you think of going to her?"

"I never thought of it. *She* came to me. I couldn't believe my ears when she opened the matter."

"What did she say?"

"Oh, she didn't beat about the bush. She said, if it

was really true that I wanted money, she might supply it —on certain terms."

"Yes, yes—and tell me, my dear fellow, what were her terms?"

"Mr. Prentice," said Bence solemnly, "her terms were terrible—it was just buying me at a knock-out price."

"You don't say so?"

"The fact. . . . This is as between masons, isn't it? . . : I may consider that we are tiled in."

"Yes, yes—as brother to brother."

And then Bence, who was never averse from hearing the sound of his own voice when safe and suitable occasions offered, talked with unchecked freedom and confidence.

"You know, I'd always entertained the highest and most genuine respect for her. When they used to say she was the best man of business in Mallingbridge, there was no one more ready to admit it than I was. I regarded her as right up there," and he waved his hand towards the ceiling. "Right up—one of the largest and most comprehensive int'lects of the age."

"Just so—just so."

"And I don't mind confessing I was always a bit afraid of her. Years ago—oh, I don't know how many years ago—when I was passing compliments to her, she'd look at me, not a bit unkind, but inscrutable—yes, that's it—inscrutable, and say, 'You take care, Mr. Bence. Don't jump too big, or one day you'll jump over yourself.'"

"Meaning your various extensions?"

"Yes. It always made me uncomfortable when she spoke like that—though I just laughed it off. Anyhow, it seemed to show how clear she saw through one."

"Yes, nothing escaped her."

"So I thought I knew what she was—but I never did really know what she was, till we came to fair handy grips over this. . . . Mr. Prentice, I flattered her—no go. I tried to bluff her—ditto. Then I sued to her for mercy. I said, 'Madam, I'm like a wounded man on a field of battle asking for a cup of water.' But she said, 'If I understand the position correctly, Mr. Bence, you are more like a dead man; and you ask to be brought to life again.' . . . And it was true. I was dead—down—done for. . . .

"It was my brothers—God forgive them—who had frustrated me—not bad luck—or any faults of mine. Take, take, take—whatever my work produced, out it went. . . . Well then, I was what she described—lying at her feet, and praying for life. So I said I'd take it—on her own terms. . . .

"But when it was over, oh, Mr. Prentice, the relief! I had lit'rally come to life again. I was *safe*—with money behind me—with *driving* power behind me. I went home that night to Mrs. Bence and cried as if I'd been a baby—and after I'd had my cry, I *slept*. What's that proverb? Sleep, it is a blessed thing! I hadn't slept sound for years. Don't you see? I was certain we should go on all right now—now that the burden was on *her* shoulders."

And then Bence had his idiosyncratic touch of self-pity.

"I don't know whether you were aware of it, Mr. Prentice—these things got about when one is more or less a public man,—but the incessant worry had given me kidney disease. Well,—will you believe it?—from that hour I got better. The doctors reported less,—

less again,—and at last, not a trace of it. I was simply another man."

"But, Bence, my dear fellow, what fills me with such amazement and admiration is the rapidity of your success from that point. You seemed to be on the crest of the wave instantaneously."

"Ah! That was the magician's wand. Instead of having our earnings snatched out the moment they reached the till, the profits were being put back into the concern. I was working on a salary—a very handsome one—with my commission; and she never took out a penny more than was absolutely necessary. There was the whole difference—and it's magic in trade. I was given scope, capital, an easy road—with no blind turnings."

"But I suppose you did it all under her direction?"

"Well, I don't know how to answer that;" and Bence grinned, and twirled his moustache. "No. I suppose I ought to say no. I had full scope—and was never interfered with. . . . We used to meet at Hyde and Collins's; and I reported things—just reported them. She used to look at me in that inscrutable way of hers, and say, 'I can't advise. I have nothing to do with your business—beyond having my money in it: just as I might have it in any other form of investment. But speaking merely as an outsider, I think you are going on very nice. Go on just the same, Mr. Bence.' Sometimes she did drop a word. It was always light. . . . Oh, she's unique, Mr. Prentice—quite unique."

Bence grinned more broadly as he went on.

"Of course it was by her orders—or I ought to say, it was acting on a hint she let fall, that I made myself so popular with the authorities. You never came to one of

my dinner-parties? . . . No, I did ask you; but you wouldn't come. . . . Well, you're acquainted with Mallingbridge oratory. After dinner, when the speeches began, they used to butter me up to the skies; and I used to tell them straight—though of course they couldn't see it—that I was only a figure-head, a dummy. 'Don't praise *me*,' I told 'em, 'I'm nobody—just the outward sign of the enterprise and spirit that lays behind me.' Yes, and I put it straighter than that sometimes—it tickled me to give 'em the truth almost in the plainest words. . . . And I knew there was no risk. *They*'d never tumble to it."

After this delightful conversation Mr. Prentice went across the road again. He felt that he could not any longer refrain from calling upon Mrs. Marsden; and, as the afternoon was now well advanced, he thought that she might perhaps invite him to drink a cup of tea with her.

In St. Saviour's Court the house door stood open; men from Bence's Furniture department were busily delivering chairs and sofas; and the narrow passage was obstructed by further goods. Mr. Prentice heard a familiar voice issuing instructions with a sharp tone of command.

"This is for the top floor. Front bedroom. Take this up too—same room. . . . Who's that out there? . . . Oh, is it you, Mr. Prentice?"

"What, Yates, you are soon on duty again!"

Old Yates laughed and tossed her head. "Yes, sir, here I am. . . . That's for the top floor—back. Take it up steady, now."

"You seem to be refurnishing—and on a large scale."

"Oh, no," said Yates. "We're only putting things straight. We're expecting Mrs. Kenion and the young

lady up from Eastbourne to-night—and it's a job to get the house ready in the time."

"Ah, then I am afraid visitors will hardly be welcome just now."

"No, sir, not ordinary visitors—but Mrs. Thompson never counted you as an ordinary visitor—did she, sir? I'll take on me to say *you*'ll be welcome to Mrs. Thompson. Please go upstairs, sir. She's in the dining-room."

And truly this visitor was welcomed most cordially.

"My *dear* Mr. Prentice. How kind of you—how very kind of you to come! I have been wishing so to see you."

Yates without delay disengaged herself from the furniture men, and brought in tea. Then the hostess seated herself at the table, and insisted that the visitor should occupy the easiest of the new armchairs—and she smiled at him, she waited upon him, she made much of him; she lulled and soothed and charmed him, until he felt as if twenty years had rolled away, and he and she were back again in the happiest of the happy old days.

"I trust that dear Mrs. Prentice is well. . . . Ah, yes, it *is* headachy weather, isn't it? I have ventured to send her a few flowers—and some peaches and grapes."

It seemed incredible. But she *looked* younger—many years younger than when he had seen her in the shadow cast by his office wall less than a week ago. Her voice had something of the old resonance; she sat more upright; she carried her head better. She was still dressed in black; but this new costume was of fine material, fashionable cut, very becoming pattern; and it gave to its wearer a quiet importance and a sedate but opulent pomp. Very curious! It was as if all that impression of shabbiness, insignificance, and poverty had been caused

merely by the shadow; and that as soon as she came out of the shadow into the sunlight, one saw her as she really was, and not as one had foolishly imagined her to be.

This thought was in the mind of Mr. Prentice while he listened to her pleasantly firm voice, and watched the play of light and life about her kind and friendly eyes. The shadow that had lain so heavy upon her was mercifully lifted. She had been a prisoner to the powers of darkness, and now the sunshine had set her free. This was really all that had happened.

"I am so particularly glad," she was saying, "that you came to-day, because I want your advice badly."

"It is very much at your service."

"Then, do you think there would be any objection—— would you consider it might seem bad taste if henceforth I were to resume my old name? I have an affection for the name of Thompson—though it isn't a very high-sounding one."

"I noticed that Yates called you Mrs. Thompson."

"Yes, I mentioned my idea to Yates; but I told her I shouldn't do it without consulting you. I did not think of dropping my real name altogether, but I thought I might perhaps call myself Mrs. Marsden-Thompson—with or without a hyphen."

And she went on to explain that she was doubtful as to the legal aspects of the case. She did not wish to advertise the change of name, or to make it a formal and binding change. She just wished to call herself Mrs. Marsden Thompson.

"Very well, Mrs. Marsden-Thompson, consider it done. For there's nothing to prevent your doing it. Your friends will call you by any name you tell them to use—with or without a hyphen."

"Oh, I'm so glad you say that. I was afraid you might not approve. . . . And now I want your advice about something else. It is a house with a little land that I am most anxious to buy, if I can possibly manage it—and I want you to find out if the owners would be inclined to sell."

Mr. Prentice advised her on this and several other little matters. Indeed, before his third cup of tea was finished, he had made enlightening replies to questions that related to half a dozen different subjects.

"Thank you. A thousand thanks. Some more tea, Mr. Prentice?"

But Mr. Prentice did not answer this last question. He put down his empty cup, and began to laugh heartily.

"Why are you laughing like that?"

"Mrs. Marsden-Thompson," he said jovially. "For once I have seen through you. All things are permissible to your sex; but if you were a man, I should be tempted to say you are an impostor—an arch-impostor."

"Oh, Mr. Prentice! Why?"

"Because you don't really think my advice worth a straw. You don't want my advice, or anybody else's. No one is capable of advising you. You just do things in your own way—and a very remarkable way it is."

"But really and truly I ——"

"No. Not a bit of it. You fancied that my feathers might have been rubbed the wrong way by recent surprises; and ever since I came into this room, you have been most delicately smoothing my ruffled plumage."

"Oh, no," said Mrs. Marsden-Thompson demurely. "I assure you——"

"Yes, yes. But, my dear, it wasn't in the least necessary. I am just as pleased as Punch, and I have quite forgiven you for keeping me so long in the dark."

"On my honour," she said earnestly, "I wouldn't have kept you in the dark for *one* day, if I could have avoided doing so. It was most painful to me, dear Mr. Prentice, to practise—or rather, to allow of any deception where *you* where concerned. . . . But my course was so difficult to steer."

"You steered it splendidly."

"But I do want you to understand. I shall be miserable if I think you could ever harbour the slightest feeling of resentment."

"Of course I shan't."

"Or if you don't believe that I trust you absolutely, and have the greatest possible regard for your professional skill. . . . You may remember how I *almost* told you about it."

"No, I'll be hanged if I remember that."

"Well, I tried to explain—indirectly—that the whole affair was so complicated. . . . There were so many things to be thought of. There was Enid. I had to think of *her* all the time. . . . Honestly, I put her before myself. Until Enid could get rid of Kenion, it didn't seem much use for me to get rid of poor Richard. . . . And if either of them had guessed, everything might have gone wrong—I mean, might have worked out differently. And of course it made *secrecy* of such vital importance. You do understand that, don't you?"

"Yes," said Mr. Prentice, laughing contentedly, "I do understand. But now I wonder—would you mind telling me when it was you first thought of the Bence *coup?*"

"Well, I fancy that the germ of the idea came to me

in church;" and Mrs. Marsden-Thompson folded her hands, and looked reflectively at the tea-cups. "I was thinking of Richard, and of Mr. Bence—and then some verses in a psalm struck me most forcibly. One verse especially—I shall never forget it. 'Let his days be few; and let another take his office.'"

"How did that apply?"

"Well, I suppose I thought vaguely—quite vaguely—that if Richard was bad at managing a business, Mr. Bence was rather good at it. . . . Then, that very evening, you so kindly came in to supper, and told me as a positive fact that Bence was nearly done for. And then it struck me at once that, in the long run, Bence's failure could prove of advantage to nobody, and that it ought to be prevented;" and she looked up brightly, and smiled at Mr. Prentice. "So really and truly, it is *you* that I have to thank. You brought me that *invaluable* information. *You* inspired me to do it."

Mr. Prentice got up from the easy chair, and playfully shook a forefinger at his hostess.

"Now—now. Don't drag *me* into it. I'm too old a bird to be caught with chaff."

"But I am truly forgiven?" And she stretched out her hand towards him. "Not the smallest soreness left? You will still be what you have always been—my best and kindest friend?"

Mr. Prentice took her hand; and, with a graceful old-world air of gallantry that perhaps the headachy lady at home had never seen, he raised it to his lips.

"I shall be what I have always been—your humble admiring slave."

XXX

ONE of the oldest of her dreams had become partially true. She had bought that pretty country-house, and was living in it with Enid. Not the total fulfilment of the dream, because she had not retired from business. She was busier than ever.

Many things foretold by her had now come to pass. The military camp on the downs, with its twenty thousand armed men and half as many thousand followers, had brought increased prosperity to the neighbourhood; the carriage and locomotive works established by the railway company had added to the old town another town that by itself would have been big enough to sustain a mayor and corporation; builders could not build fast enough to house the rapidly swelling population; the well-filled suburbs stretched for two long miles in all directions from the ancient town boundaries; and by platform lecturers, by members of parliament, by writers of statistical reviews, the growth of Mallingbridge was cited as one of the most remarkable and gratifying achievements of the last decade.

In a word—the cant word—Mallingbridge had boomed. And right at the top of the boom, rolling on to glory, was Bence's.

The prodigious success of Bence's made the world gasp. Nothing could hinder it. People fancied that the rebuilding might prove a dangerous, if not a fatal crisis in its affairs; but the proprietress accomplished the colossal operation without even a temporary set-back. She moved

Bence's bodily across the road, squashed it into the confines of old Thompson's, and left it there for eighteen months while the new Bence palace was being erected. The magnificence of these modern up-to-date premises surpassed belief—façade of pure white stone; gigantic caryatids, bearing on their heads the projected ledge of the second floor, and holding in their hands the sculptured brackets of the monstrous arc lamps; fluted columns from the second floor to the fourth; and above the deep cornice, just visible from the street, the cupola on top of the vast dome that was the crowning splendour of the whole.

Then directly the shop had been moved back into this ornate frame, down went the old red-brick block of Thompson's; and on the site still another palace for Bence began to rise. It seemed no less magnificent than the other; and it was finished off—by way of balance to the dome—with a stupendous clock-tower. The local press, in a series of articles describing this useful monument, said that the four-faced time-piece was an exact replica of Big Ben at Westminster; the base of the numeral twelve was one hundred and thirty-two feet above the pavement; the small hand was as long as a short man, and the long hand was longer than an excessively tall man;—and so on. The author of the articles also stated that the architectural effect of Bence on both sides of the street was very similar to the *coup d'œil* offered by the dome and tower of the cathedral at Florence.

Customers scarcely knew on which side of the street they were doing their shopping: they went into one of the two palaces, and surprised themselves by emerging from the other. You entered a lift, and, as it swooped, the crowded floors flashed upward. "Which department, madam? Parisian jewellery? . . . Boots and Shoes

Step this way." You passed through a long, narrow, and brilliantly illuminated department, such as Sham Diamonds or Opera Cloaks, where artificial light is a necessity for correct selection; you went up a broad flight of shallow stairs; and there you were, in Boots and Shoes. But the thing you didn't know, the funny thing, was that all unconsciously you had been through a sub-way under the road. Just when you stood to gape at the sparkling ear-rings or to finger the rich soft cloaks, the heavy traffic of High Street was bang over your head.

And truly there was nothing that you could not buy now at Bence's—on one side of the road or the other. Ball dresses for as much as fifty guineas, tailor-made walking costumes for as little as eighteen shillings, a thousand pound coat of Russian sable, or a farthing packet of pins, palm trees for the conservatory or Brussels sprouts for the kitchen—whatever the varied wants of the universe, it was Bence's proud boast that they could be supplied here without failure or delay.

Sometimes when business had taken Mrs. Marsden-Thompson to London and she and Yates were driving through the streets in a four-wheeled cab, she studied the appearance of the great metropolitan shops, and mentally compared them with what she had left behind her at Mallingbridge. Once, when the dusk of an autumn day was falling and she chanced to pass the most world-famous of all emporiums, she told the cabman to let his horse walk; then, as they crawled by the endless frontage, she measured the glare of the electric lamps, counted the big commissionaires, estimated the volume of the crowd outside the glittering windows; and, critically examining the thing in its entirety, she felt a supreme satisfaction. To her eye

and judgment it was no bigger, brighter, or more impressive than Bence's. In all respects Bence's was every bit as good.

Each morning, fair or foul, at nine-thirty sharp, she left her charming and luxurious home, and came spinning in her small motor-car down the three-mile slope that now divided house from shop. The car, avoiding High Street, wheeled round through Trinity Square, worked its swift way to the back of Bence's, swept into a quiet, stately court-yard, and delivered her at the perron of a noble architraved doorway. This was the private or business entrance to the domed palace.

A porter in sombre livery was waiting on the marble steps to receive her, to carry her shawl or reticule, to usher her to the golden gates of the private lift.

In a minute she had majestically soared to an upper floor.

This managerial side of the building would not unworthily have formed a portion of a public department, such as the Treasury or India Office: it was all spacious, silent, grand. She passed through a wide and lofty corridor, with mahogany doors on either hand—the closed doors of the managers' rooms; and no sound of the shop was audible, no sign of it visible.

Her own room, at the end of the corridor, was very large, very high, very plainly decorated. Mahogany book-cases, with a few busts on top of them; one table with newspapers of all countries, another table with four or five telephonic instruments—but absolutely no office equipment of any sort; not so much as a writing desk, Yankee or British. She scarcely ever writes a letter now; even marginal notes are dictated. Time is too precious to be wasted on manual labour, however rapid.

Time is capital; and it must be invested in the way that will yield the highest interest.

"What is the time?" and she glanced at the clock on the carved stone mantelpiece.

"It wants seven minutes of ten."

All clocks are correct, because they are carefully synchronised with the clock in the tower; and that *must* be correct, because time-signals from Greenwich are continually instructing it—and the whole town works by Bence time.

"Good. Then I am not late."

"No, madam."

She came earlier now than she used to do a little while ago. But since Mr. Archibald finally withdrew from affairs, she had been in full charge of the mighty organisation. She could not refuse to let Archibald enjoy his well-earned rest. Though still under fifty years of age, he was a tired man, worn out by the battle, needing repose. And why should he go on working? Thanks to the liberality of his patron, he possessed ample means—almost one might say he was opulent.

"I am ready."

"Yes, madam."

Then the day's toil begins.

First it is the solemn entry of the managers, one after another succinctly presenting his report. Then it is the turn of head clerks and secretaries, who have gathered and are silently waiting outside the door. After that, audience is given to buyers who have returned from or are about to leave for the marts of the world.

And with the fewest possible words she issues her commands. She sits with folded hands, or paces to and fro with hands clasped behind her back, or stands

and knits her brows; but not a word, not a moment is squandered. She says, Do this; but very rarely explains how it is to be done. It is their duty to know how. If they don't know, they are inefficient. It is for her to give orders: it is for subordinates to carry them into effect. The general of an army must be something more than a good regimental officer; the admiral of the fleet cannot teach common sailors the best way to polish the brass on the binnacle.

With surprising rapidity these opening labours are completed. Well before noon the last of the clerks has gone, and Mrs. Marsden-Thompson stands in an empty room—may take a breathing-pause, or, if she pleases, fill it with tasks of light weight.

Perhaps now an old friend is announced. It is Miss Woolfrey from China and Glass. May she come in? Or shall she call again? No, ask Miss Woolfrey to come in.

And then time is flagrantly wasted. Miss Woolfrey has nothing to say, can put forward no valid reason for bothering the commander-in-chief. Miss Woolfrey giggles foolishly, gossips inanely, meanders with a stream of senseless twaddle; but she is gratified by smiles and nods and handshakings.

"Well, now, really—my dear Miss Woolfrey—you cheer me with your excellent account of this little storm in a tea-cup. . . . Yes, I'll remember all you say. . . . How kind of you to ask! Yes, my daughter is very well."

And Miss Woolfrey goes away happy. She is a licensed offender—has been accorded unlimited privilege to waste time. Incompetent as ever, and totally unable to adapt herself to modern conditions, she enjoys a

splendid sinecure in the new China and Glass. She has clever people over her to keep her straight, and will never be deprived of her salary until she accepts a pension in exchange.

Sooner or later during the forenoon, Mrs. Marsden-Thompson rings her bell and asks for Mr. Mears.

"Is Mr. Mears in his room?"

"I believe so, madam."

"Then give Mr. Mears my compliments, and say I shall be glad to see him if it is convenient to him—only if convenient, not if he is occupied."

It was always convenient to Mr. Mears. His convenience is her convenience. Almost immediately the door opens, and he appears—and very grand he looks, bowing on the threshold; massive and strong again; no shaky dotard, but a vigorous elderly man, who might be mistaken for a partner in a bank, a president of a chamber of commerce, a member of the Privy Council, or anybody eminently prosperous and respectable.

"Good morning, Mr. Mears. Please be seated."

And then she discusses with him all those matters of which she can speak to no one else. Mears is never a time-waster; he, too, makes few words suffice; long practice has given him quickness in catching her thought.

"Mr. Mears, what are we to do about Mr. Greig? Frankly, he is getting past his work."

"I admit it," says Mears.

"It will be better for all parties if he retires."

"He won't like the idea."

Mr. Greig, the obese chieftain of Cretonnes in the days of old Thompson's, is threatened with no real peril. If he ceases working to-morrow, he will continue to receive his working wage till death; but the difficulty

is to remove him from the sphere of action without a wound to his feelings.

"Will you talk to him—introduce the idea to him gradually, bring him to it little by little, so that if possible he may come to think that it is his own idea, and that he himself wants to retire."

And Mears promises that he will deal thus diplomatically with the faithful old servant.

They are nearly all here—the old servants; from chieftains like Greig and Ridgway to lieutenants like Davies the night watchman, each has found his snug billet. All who shivered with her in the cold are welcome to warmth and sunshine. She has forgotten no one: she could not forget old friends.

Sometimes, of course, her bounteous intentions have been rendered nugatory by fate. A few friends are gone beyond the reach of help; others it has been impossible to discover. Even now Mears has occasionally to tell her of someone raked out of the past. For instance, this morning he brings with him a small bundle of papers, and speaks to her of such an one.

They have only now found Mr. Fentiman, the lanky and sententious lord of Thompson's Woollens.

Mr. Fentiman had sunk very low—never knew that she was Bence's, never saw her advertisements in agony columns, never guessed year after year that a munificent protector was seeking him. But he has been found at last, in a wretched little hosier's at Portsmouth—ill and weak and pitifully poor.

"Are you quite sure that he is our Fentiman?"

"Quite," said Mears; and he laid the Fentiman dossier on the table.

When Mears had left her she fetched an ink-pot from

the mantelpiece, opened a drawer, and extracted pens and note-paper. This morning it was necessary to write a letter in her own hand. Secretaries could not assist her with the task, and time must no longer be nicely measured.

"My dear Mr. Fentiman, I am so glad to hear of you again, and so sorry to learn that your health is not what it should be." Then she invited him to resign his present situation and come to Mallingbridge, where it would doubtless be easy to offer him an opening more suited to his experience and capacity. If he would kindly advise Mr. Mears as to the arrival of his train, Mr. Mears would meet him at the railway station and conduct him to apartments. "Before you plunge into work again, I must beg you to take a complete rest; and as soon as you feel strong enough, I particularly wish you to spend a holiday in Switzerland. I expressed this wish many years ago, one night when you had kindly given me your company at dinner; but although you tacitly allowed me to understand that you would comply with it, circumstances prevented its fulfilment. If you are still of the same mind, it will afford me the utmost pleasure to arrange for your Swiss tour."

Having written so far, she laid down her pen, picked up a telephone receiver, and spoke to the counting-house.

She was writing again, and did not raise her eyes, when a clerk came into the room.

"Put them down."

And the clerk placed the bank-notes on the table, and silently retired.

"Meanwhile," she was writing, "I must ask you to accept my small enclosure, and to believe me to be, Yours with sincere regard, Jane Marsden-Thompson."

Then she sealed the envelope, rang a bell, and told someone to despatch her letter by registered post.

Fentiman had mopped up a lot of time—but no matter. Nevertheless, she moved with quick footsteps as she went from the room, and passed along the lofty, silent corridors. Presently using a master-key, she opened a fire-proof door, and entered a narrow passage. In this passage the silence was broken by a vague murmuring sound—like the ripple of sea waves heard echoing in a shell.

She opened another door, and immediately the sound swelled to a confused roar. Through this second door she had come out into a circular gallery just beneath the huge concave of the dome. Looking downward, she could see the extraordinary inverted perspective of circles, floor below floor, each circle apparently smaller than the one above; she could see long strands of gauze and lace, artfully festooned in void space from the gilt rails of the Curtain department, like streamers of white cloud; and beneath the pretty cloud she could see the rainbow colours of delicate satins and silks; and still lower she could see the stir of multitudinous life concentrating at this focal point of the busy shop.

But she scarcely looked: she listened. Perched high in her dome, solitary, motionless, august, she was like the queen-bee in the upper part of a hive attentively listening to the buzz of industry. And it seemed that the sound was sufficient: her instinct was so fine—she knew by the quality of the humming note that Bence's was working well.