III

WHEN old employees looked out of Thompson's windows they sometimes had a queer impression that this side of the street was stationary, and that the other side of the street was moving. Six years ago Bence the fancy draper had been eight doors off; but he had come nearer and nearer as he absorbed his neighbours' premises one after another. Now the end of Bence just overlapped Thompson. For three or four feet he was fairly opposite.

Just as Thompson's represented all that was good and stable in the trade of Mallingbridge, Bence's stood for everything bad and evanescent. A horrid catch-penny shop, increasing its business rapidly, practising the odious modern methods of remorseless rivalry, Bence's was almost universally hated. They outraged the feelings of old-established tradesmen by taking up lines which cut into one cruelly: they burst out into books, into trunks, into ironmongery; at Christmas, in what they called their grand annual bazaar, they had a cut at the trade of every shop throughout the length of High Street. But especially, at all seasons of the year, they cut into Thompson's. The marked deliberate attack was when they first regularly took up Manchester goods. Then came Carpets, then Crockery, and then Garden requisites.

But Bence, in the person of Mr. Archibald, the senior partner, always announced the coming attack to Mrs.

Thompson. He said she was the superior of all the other traders; he could never forget that she was a lady, and that he himself was one of her most respectful yet most ardent admirers; he desired ever to treat her with the utmost chivalry. Thus now he came over, full of gallant compliments, to make a fresh announcement.

Mrs. Thompson always treated Bence and his dirty little tricks as a joke. She used to laugh at him with a good-humoured tolerance.

"Of course, Mrs. Thompson, I don't like seeming to run you hard in any direction. But lor', how can *I* hurt you? You're big—you're right up there"—and Mr. Bence waved a thin hand above his bald head—"a colossal statue, made of granite. And *I*, why I'm just a poor little insect scrabbling about in the mud at your feet."

"Oh, no," said Mrs. Thompson, smiling pleasantly, "you're nothing of the sort. You are a very clever enterprising gentleman. But I'm not in the least afraid of you, Mr. Bence."

"That's right," said Bence delightedly. "And always remember this. I am not *fighting* you. Any attempt at a real fight is simply foreign from my nature—that is, where *you* are concerned."

"Never mind me," said Mrs. Thompson once. "But take care on your own account. Vaulting ambition sometimes o'erleaps itself."

"Ah," said Bence. "There you show your marvellous power. You put your finger on the sore spot in a moment. I *am* ambitious. I might almost say my ambitions are boundless. Work is life to me—and if I was by myself, I don't believe anything would stop me. But," said Bence, with solemn self-pity, "as all the

world knows, Mrs. Thompson, there's a *leak* in my business."

Mrs. Thompson perfectly understood what he meant. This working Bence was a sallow, prematurely bald man with a waxed moustache and a cracked voice, and he toiled incessantly; but there were two younger Bences, bluff, hearty, hirsute men, who were sleeping partners, and eating, drinking, and loose-living partners. While Mr. Archibald laboured in Mallingbridge, Mr. Charles and Mr. George idled and squandered in London.

"That's the trouble with me," said Mr. Archibald sadly. "I'm the captain on his bridge, sending the ship full speed ahead, but knowing full well that there's a leak down below in the hold. . . . Never sufficient money behind me. . . . Oh, Mrs. Thompson," cried Bence, in a burst of enthusiasm, "if I only had the money behind me, I'd soon show you what's what and who's who. But I'm a man fighting with tied hands."

"Not fighting *me*, Mr. Bence. You said so yourself."

"No, no. Never *you*. I was thinking of the others."

Well then, Bence had come across the road once more. In the letter which Mrs. Thompson, when showing it to her solicitor, had described as impertinent, Bence presented his compliments and begged an early appointment for a communication of some importance. Mr. Bence added that "any hints from Mrs. Thompson in regard to his proposed new departure would be esteemed a privileged favour." Mrs. Thompson considered the suggestion that she should advise the rival in his attack as perhaps something beyond the limits of a joke. Nevertheless, she gave the appointment, and smilingly received the visitor in her own room behind the counting-house.

"May I begin by saying how splendidly well you are looking, Mrs. Thompson? . . . When I came in at that door, I thought there'd been a mistake. Seeing you sitting there at your desk, I thought, 'But this is *Miss* Thompson, and not my great friend *Mrs.* Thompson.' Mistook you for your own daughter, till you turned round and showed me that well-known respected countenance which——"

"Now Mr. Bence," said Mrs. Thompson, laughing, "I can't allow you to waste your valuable time in saying all these flattering things."

"No flattery."

"Please sit down and tell me what new wickedness you are contemplating

Then Mr. Bence made his announcement. It was Furniture this time. He had bought out two more neighbours—the old-fashioned saddler and the bookseller; and he proposed to convert these two shops into his new furniture department.

Mrs. Thompson's brows gathered in a stern frown; only by a visible effort could she wipe out the aspect of displeasure, and speak with careless urbanity.

"Let me see exactly what it means, Mr. Bence. . . . I suppose you mean that your Furniture windows will be exactly opposite mine."

"Well, as near as makes no difference."

"That will be very convenient—for both of us, won't it? I think it is an excellent idea, Mr. Bence"; and Mrs. Thompson laughed. '"Customers who can't see what they want here, can step across and look for it with you."

"Oh, I daren't hope that we should ever draw anybody from your pavement, Mrs. Thompson."

"You are much too modest. But if it should ever

happen that you fail to supply any customers with what they desire, you can send them across to us. You'd do that, wouldn't you?"

"Of course I will," said Bence heartily. "That's what I say. We don't clash. We *can't* clash."

Mrs. Thompson struck the bell on her desk, and summoned a secretary.

"Send Mr. Mears to me."

The sight of Bence always ruffled and disturbed old Mears. Seeing Bence complacently seated near the bureau in the proprietorial sanctum, his face flushed, his grey beard bristled, and his dark eyes rolled angrily.

When Mrs. Thompson told him all about the furniture, he grunted, but did not at first trust himself to words.

"Well, Mr. Mears, what do you think about it?"

"I think," said Mears gruffly, "that it's *like* Mr. Bence."

"I was remarking," said Bence, nodding and grinning, "that we cannot possibly clash. Our customers are poor little people—not like your rich and influential clientele. Our whole scheme of business is totally different from yours."

"That's true," said Mears, and he gave another grunt.

"You know," said Mrs. Thompson, "Mr. Bence is not *fighting* us. He is only carrying out his own system."

"Yes," said Mears, "we are acquainted with his system, ma'am."

"Then I think that no more need be said. We are quite prepared for any opposition—or competition."

"Quite, ma'am."

"Then I won't detain you, Mr. Mears."

"Good morning, Mr. Mears," said Bence politely. But Mr. Mears only grunted at him.

"What a sterling character," said Bence, as soon as Mr. Mears had closed the glass door. "One of the good old school, isn't he? I do admire that sort of dignified trustworthy personage. Gives the grand air to an establishment. . . . But then if it comes to that, I admire all your people, Mrs. Thompson;" and he wound up this morning call with sycophantically profuse compliments. "Your staff strikes me as unique. I don't know where you get 'em from. You seem to spot merit in the twinkling of an eye. . . . But I have trespassed more than sufficient. I see you wish to get back to your desk. *Good* morning, Mrs. Thompson Ever your humble servant;" and Mr. Bence bowed himself out.

IV

CERTAINLY, if Mrs. Thompson could not accept the bulk of Archibald Bence's compliments, she might justly pride herself on being always anxious to spot merit among her people. Unaided by any advice, she had quickly spotted the young man in the Carpets department.

Making her tour of inspection one day, she was drawn towards the wide entrance of Carpets by the unseemly noise of a common female voice. Looking into Carpets, she found the shrewish wife of an old farmer raging and nagging at everybody, because she could not satisfy herself with what was being offered to her. Half the stock was already on the floor; Number One and Number Two were at their wits' ends, becoming idiotic, on the verge of collapse; Number Three had just come to their rescue.

"Oh, take it away. . . . No—not a bit like what I'm asking for." And the virago turned to her hen-pecked husband. "You were a fool to bring me here. I told you we ought to have gone to London."

"But madam knows the old saying, One may go farther and fare worse. I can assure you, madam, there's nothing in the London houses that we can't supply here."

"Oh, yes, you're glib enough—but if you've got it, why don't you bring it out?"

"If madam will have patience, I guarantee that we will suit her—yes, in less than three minutes."

The young man spoke firmly yet pleasantly; and he looked and smiled at this ugly vixenish customer as though she had been young, gracious, and beautiful.

Mrs. Thompson did not intervene: she stood near the entrance, watching and listening.

"Now, madam, if you want value for your money, look at this. . . . No? . . . Very good. This is Axminster—genuine Axminster,— and very charming colouring. . . . No? . . . What does madam think of *this*? . . . No?"

He spun out the vast webs; with bowed back and quick movements of both hands he trundled the enormous rollers across the polished floor; he ran up the ladders and jerked the folded masses from the shelves; he flopped down the cut squares so fast that the piled heaps seemed to grow by magic before the customer's chair.

Doubtless he knew that he was being observed, but he showed no knowledge of the fact. As he hurried past Mrs. Thompson, she noticed that he was perspiring. He dabbed his white forehead with his handkerchief as he passed again, trundling a roll with one hand.

Mrs. Thompson felt astounded by his personal strength. Mr. Mears was strong, a man of comparatively huge girth and massive limbs; he could lift big weights; but Mears in his prime could not have shifted the carpet rolls as they were shifted by this slim-waisted stripling.

Two minutes gone, and the querulous, nagging tones were modulated to the note of vulgar affability. Two minutes—thirty seconds, and the customer had decided that her carpet should be one of the three which she was prodding at with her umbrella. She asked Mr. Marsden to help her in making the final selection.

Mr. Marsden was standing up now, Numbers One and

Two clumsily hovering about him, while he talked easily and confidentially to the mollified customer. And while he talked, Mrs. Thompson scrutinised him carefully.

He could not be more than twenty-seven—possibly less. He was gracefully, although so strongly built, of medium height, with an excellent poise of the head. His hair was brownish, stiff, cut very short; his small stiff moustache was brushed up in the military fashion; his features were of the firmest masculine type—nose perhaps a shade too thick and not sufficiently well modelled. She could not see the colour of his eyes.

But his manner! It was the salesman's art in its highest and rarest form. He had charmed, fascinated, hypnotised the troublesome customer. She bought her carpets, and two door mats; she smiled and nodded and prattled; she seemed quite sorry to say good-bye to Mr. Marsden.

"I shall tell my friends to come here," and then she giggled stupidly. "And I shall tell them to ask for you."

Without entering Carpets, Mrs. Thompson walked away. She did not utter a word then; but she had determined to promote Number Three, to give him more scope, and to see what she could make of him.

She moved him through the Woollens, the Cretonnes; and then again, upstairs into Crockery.

Crockery, which had of late betrayed sluggishness, was one side of a large department. Beginning with common pots and pans, it shaded off into glass and china; and on this side ran up to the big money which was properly demanded for the most delicate porcelain and ornamental ware—such as best English dinner services and modern Sèvres candelabra. Young Marsden was given charge of

the cheaper and quicker-selling stuff, while Miss Woolfrey, a freckled sandy lady of forty, remained for the present in control of the expensive side. But she was not a titular head; Mears and Mrs. Thompson herself superintended her, allowing her little discretion, and instructing her from day to day.

After a week, Marsden, the new-comer, got a distinct move on the sluggish earthenware; and, after three weeks, Mears rather grudgingly confessed that the whole department appeared to be brisker, livelier, more what one would wish it to be.

On the whole, then, Mrs. Thompson was well pleased with her protégé. She spoke to him freely, encouraged him by carefully chosen words of approval.

One day, while talking to a desk-clerk, she saw him in an adjacent mirror that gave one a round-the-corner view of Glass and China. He was standing with a trade catalogue in his hands, surrounded by Miss Woolfrey and three girls. He seemed to be expounding the catalogue, and the women seemed to exhibit a docile attention.

Mrs. Thompson went in and talked to them.

There had been an accident, and Mr. Marsden was looking up the trade price of the destroyed article. Poor Miss Woolfrey had broken a cut-glass decanter—she got upon the steps to fetch it down, and it was heavier than she expected.

"Why," inquired Mrs. Thompson, "didn't you ask someone to help you?"

"I never thought till it was too late, and I'd found out my mistake."

There was no need to offer apologies to the proprietress, because all breakages of this character were made good out of an insurance fund to which all the employees sub-

scribed. The whole shop was therefore interested in each smash, since everybody would pay a share of the damage.

"Mr. Marsden," said Miss Woolfrey, "has so very kindly priced it for me. He will send on the order at once. So it shall be replaced, ma'am, without delay."

The three interested girls lingered at Mr. Marsden's elbows; they watched his face; they hung upon his words. Miss Woolfrey continued to thank him for all the trouble he was taking.

Mrs. Thompson walked away, thinking about Mr. Marsden. These women were too obviously subject to the young man's personal fascination; their silly glances were easy to interpret; and middle-aged Miss Woolfrey and the three immature underlings had all betrayed the same weakness. This implied a situation that must be thought out. Lady-killers, though useful with the customers, may cause a lot of trouble with the staff.

There was no indication of the professional heart-disturber in the young fellow's general air. Mrs. Thompson had found his manner scrupulously correct—except that, as she remembered now, there was perhaps something too hardy in the way he kept his eyes fixed on her face. She attributed this to sheer intentness, mingled with juvenile simplicity. Most of the older men instinctively dropped their eyes in her presence.

After a little thought she called Mears behind the glass, and interrogated him. "Behind the glass" was a shop term for all the sacred region masked by the glass partitions, and containing counting-house, clerks' and secretary's office, managerial and proprietorial departments.

"If you want the plain fact," said Mr. Mears, "there's little difference in the pack of 'em."

"Do you mean they are *silly* about him?"

"Yes," said Mears scornfully. "Spoony sentimental—talking ridiculous over him."

"But is *he* all right with the girls? What is *his* attitude? . . . Find out for me."

Mrs. Thompson was always wisely strict on this most important point of shop discipline. No playing the fool between the young ladies and young gentlemen under the care of Mrs. Thompson.

"I will not permit it," she said sternly; and she laid her open hand upon the desk, to give weightier emphasis to the words. "We must have no condoning of that sort of thing. If I catch him at it—if I catch anyone, out he goes neck and crop."

In the course of a few days Mr. Mears reported, still grudgingly, that young Marsden's demeanour towards the young ladies was absolutely perfect. Stoical indifference, calm disregard, not even a trace of that flirting or innocently philandering tone which is so common, and to which one can scarcely object.

"Good," said Mrs. Thompson. "I'm glad to hear it—because now I shan't be afraid of advancing him."

"But," said Mears, "you *have* advanced him. You aren't thinking of putting him up again?"

"I am not sure. Something must be done about Miss Woolfrey. I will think about it."

It was not long before Mears, young Marsden, and Miss Woolfrey were all summoned together behind the glass. The type-writing girl had been sent out of the room; Mrs. Thompson sat in front of her bureau, looking like a great general; Mr. Mears, at her side, looked like a glum aide-de-camp; the young man looked like a soldier who had been beckoned to step forward from the ranks. He stood at a respectful distance, and his bearing was

quite soldier-like—heels together, head well up, the broad shoulders very square, and the muscular back straight and flat. His eyes were on the general's face.

Sandy freckled Miss Woolfrey merely looked foolish and frightened. She caught her breath and coughed when Mrs. Thompson informed her that Mr. Marsden was to be put in charge of the whole department.

"Over my head, ma'am?"

"It will make no difference to you. Your salary will be no less. And yours, Mr. Marsden, will be no more. But you will have fuller scope."

Miss Woolfrey feebly protested. She had hoped,—she had naturally hoped;—in a customary shop-succession the post should be hers.

"Miss Woolfrey, do you feel yourself competent to fill it? Hitherto you have been under the constant supervision of Mr. Mears. But do you honestly feel you could stand alone?"

"I'd do my best, ma'am."

"Yes," said Mrs. Thompson cordially, "I'm sure you would. But with the best will in the world, there are limits to one's capacity. I have come to the conclusion that this is a man's task;" and she turned to the fortunate salesman. "Mr. Marsden, you will not in any way interfere with Miss Woolfrey—but you will remember that the department is now in your sole charge. If I have to complain, it will be to you. If things go wrong, it is you that I shall call to account."

Nothing went wrong in China and Glass. But sometimes Mrs. Thompson secretly asked herself if she or Mears had been right Had she acted wisely when pushing an untried man so promptly to the front?

During these pleasant if enervating months of May and June she watched him closely.

Somehow he took liberties. It was difficult to define. He talked humbly. His voice was always humble, and his words too—but his eyes were bold. Something of aggressive virility seemed to meet and attempt to beat down that long-assumed mastership to which everyone else readily submitted. In the shop she was a man by courtesy—the boss, the cock of the walk; and she was never made to remember, when issuing orders to the men who served her, that she was not really and truly male.

All this might be fancy; but it made a slight want of ease and comfort in her intercourse with Mr. Marsden—a necessity felt only with him, an instinct telling her that here was a servant who must be kept in his place.

Once or twice, when she was examining returns with him, his assiduous attention bothered her.

"Thank you, Mr. Marsden, I can see it for myself."

And there was a certain look in his eyes while he talked to her—respectfully admiring, pensively questioning, familiar,—no, not to be analysed. But nevertheless it was a look that she did not at all care about.

The eyes that he used so hardily were of a lightish brown, speckled with darker colour; and above them the dark eyebrows grew close together, making almost an unbroken line across his brow. She saw or guessed that his beard would be tawny, if he let it grow; but he was always beautifully shaved. High on his cheeks there were tiny russet hairs, like down, that he never touched with the razor.

All through May China and Glass did better and better. Miss Woolfrey, meekly submitting to fate, worked loyally under the new chief. "If anyone had to

be put above me," said poor Miss Woolfrey, "I'd rather it was him."

When a truly excellent week's returns were shown in June, Mrs. Thompson took an opportunity of praising Mr. Marsden generously. And again, after he had bowed and expressed his gratification, she saw the look that she did not care about.

She read it differently now. It was probably directly traceable to the arrogance bred of youth and strength—and perhaps a fairly full measure of personal conceit. Although so circumspect with the other sex, he had a reliance on his handsome aspect. Perhaps unconsciously he was always falling back on this—because hitherto it might never have failed him.

It was Enid who made her think him handsome. Till Enid used the word, she would have thought it too big.

One morning she had brought her daughter to the China department in order to select a wedding-present for a girl-friend. Miss Woolfrey was serving her, but Mr. Marsden came to assist. Then Mrs. Thompson saw how he looked at Enid.

Some sort of introduction had been made—"Enid, my dear, Mr. Marsden suggests this vase;" and the girl had immediately transferred her attention from the insipid serving-woman to the resourceful serving-man. Mr. Marsden showed her more and more things—"This is good value. Two guineas—if that is not beyond your figure. Or this is a quaint notion—Parrots! They paint them so natural, don't they?" And Mrs. Thompson saw the look, and winced. With his eyes on the girl's face, he smiled—and Enid began to smile too.

"What is the joke, Mr. Marsden?" Mrs. Thompson had spoken coldly and abruptly.

"Joke?" he echoed.

"You appear to be diverted by the idea of my daughter's purchase—when really it is simply a matter of business."

"Exactly—but if I can save you time by—"

"Thank you, Miss Woolfrey is quite competent to show us all that we require;" and Mrs. Thompson turned her broad back on the departmental manager.

Enid, when leaving China and Glass, glanced behind her, and nodded to Mr. Marsden.

"Mother," she whispered, "how handsome he is . . . But how sharply you spoke to him. You quite dropped on him."

"Well, my dear, one has to drop on people sometimes; and Mr. Marsden is just a little disposed to be pushing."

"Oh," said Enid, "I thought he was such a favourite of yours."

Alone in her room, Mrs. Thompson felt worried. A thought had made her wince. This young man carried about with him an element of vague danger. Of course Enid would never be foolish; and he would never dare to aspire to such a prize; still Enid should get her next wedding present in another department—or in another shop, if she must have china.

It was only a brief sense of annoyance or discomfort, say five minutes lost in a busy day. Mrs. Thompson dismissed it from her mind. But Mr. Marsden brought it back again.

Towards closing time, when she was signing letters at the big bureau, he came behind the glass and entered her room.

"What is it?" said Mrs Thompson, without looking up.

"Mrs. Thompson, I want to make an apology and a request."

At the sound of his voice she perceptibly started. His presence down here was unusual and unexpected.

"I have been making myself rather unhappy about what happened when you and Miss Thompson were in my department."

"Nothing happened," said Mrs. Thompson decisively.

"Oh yes, ma'am, and I offer an apology for my mistake."

"Mr. Marsden," said Mrs. Thompson, with dignity, "there is not the slightest occasion for an apology. Please don't make mountains out of molehills."

"No—but I am in earnest. It is your own great kindness that led me to forget. And I confess that I did for a moment forget the immense difference of social station that lies between us. A shopman should never speak to his employer—much less his employer's relatives—in a tone implying the least friendliness or equality."

"Mr. Marsden, you quite misunderstand."

"You were angry with me?"

"No," said Mrs. Thompson firmly. "To be frank, I was not exactly pleased with you—and I took the liberty of showing it. That is a freedom to which I am accustomed."

"Then I humbly apologise."

"I have told you it is unnecessary. . . . That will do, Mr. Marsden;" and she took up her pen again.

"But may I make one request—that when I am unfortunate enough to deserve reproof, it may be administered privately and not in public?"

"Mr. Marsden, I make no conditions. If people are discontented with my methods—well, the remedy lies in their own hands."

"Isn't that just a little cruel?"

"It is my answer to your question."

"I don't think, ma'am, you know the chivalrous and devoted feeling that runs through this shop. There's not a man in it to whom your praise and your blame don't mean light and darkness."

Mrs. Thompson flushed.

"Mr. Marsden, you are all very good and loyal. I recognise that. But I don't care about compliments."

"Compliments! . . . When a person is feeling almost crushed with the burden of gratitude——"

"But, Mr. Marsden, gratitude should be shown and not talked about."

"And I'll show mine some day, please God."

Mrs. Thompson turned right round on her revolving chair, and spoke very gently. "I am sorry that you should have upset yourself about such a trifle."

Then Mr. Marsden asked if he might come down behind the glass for direction and orders when he felt in doubt or perplexity. A few words now and then would be helpful to him.

Mrs. Thompson hesitated, and then answered kindly.

"Certainly. Why not? I am accessible here to any of the staff—from Mr. Mears to the door boy. That has always been a part of my system."

After this the young man appeared from time to time, craving a draught of wisdom at the fountain head. The department was doing well, and he never brought bad news.

But he was a little too much inclined to begin talking about himself; telling his story—an orphan who had made his own way in the world; describing his efforts to improve a defective education, his speaking at a debating society, his acting with the Kennington Thespian Troupe.

"Your elocution," said Mrs. Thompson, "no doubt profited by the pains you took. . . . But now, if you please——"

Mrs. Thompson, with business-like firmness, stopped all idle chatter. A hint was enough for him, and he promptly became intent on matters of business.

He worked hard upstairs. He was the first to come and the last to go. Once or twice he brought papers down to the dark ground floor when Mrs. Thompson was toiling late.

One night he showed her the coloured and beautifully printed pictures that had been sent with the new season's lists.

"There. This is my choice."

She laid her hand flat on a picture; and he, pushing about the other pictures and talking, put his hand against hers. He went on talking, as if unconscious that he had touched her, that he was now touching her.

She moved her hand away, and for a moment an angry flame of thought swept through her brain. Had it been an accident, or a most monstrous impertinence? He went on talking without a tremor in his voice; and she understood that he was absolutely unconscious of what he had done. He was completely absorbed by consideration of the coloured prints of tea and dinner services.

Mrs. Thompson abruptly struck the desk bell, drew back her chair, and rose.

"Davies," she called loudly, "bring your lantern. I am going through. . . . Don't bother me any more about all that, Mr. Marsden. Make your own selections and get them passed by Mr. Mears. Good-night."