V

MISS ENID had again taken up riding, and she seemed unusually energetic in her efforts to acquire a difficult art. During this hot dry weather the roads were too hard to permit of hacking with much pleasure; but Enid spent many afternoons in Mr. Young's fine riding school. She was having jumping lessons; and she threw out hints to Mrs. Thompson that next autumn she would be able not only to ride to meets, but even to follow hounds.

"Oh, my darling, I should never have a moment's peace of mind if I knew you were risking your pretty neck out hunting."

"I could easily get a good pilot," said Enid; "and then I should be quite safe."

One Thursday afternoon—early closing day—Mr. Marsden, who happened to know that Enid would be at the school, went round to see his friend Mr. Whitehouse, the riding-master. He looked very smart in his blue serge suit, straw hat, and brown boots; and the clerk in Mr. Young's office quite thought he was one of the governor's toffs come to buy horses.

Mr. Marsden sent his card to Mr. Whitehouse; and then waited in a sloping sanded passage, obviously trodden by four-footed as well as two-footed people, from which he could peep into the dark office, a darker little dressing-room, and an open stable where the hind quarters

of horses showed in stalls. There was a queer staircase without stairs, and he heard a sound of pawing over his head—horses upstairs as well as downstairs. The whole place looked and smelt very horsey.

The riding-master's horse was presently led past him; the lesson was nearly over, and the young lady was about to take a few leaps. A groom told him that he might go in.

The vast hall had high and narrow double doors to admit the horses; and inside, beneath the dirty glass roof, it was always twilight, with strange echoes and reverberations issuing from the smooth plastered walls; at a considerable height in one of the walls there was a large window, opening out of a room that looked like the royal box of a theatre.

This hall had been the military school; it remained as a last evidence of the demolished barracks, and the town was proud of its noble dimensions—a building worthy of the metropolis.

"How d'ye do," said the riding-master, a slim, tall, elegant young man in check breeches and black boots. "Come and stand by us in the middle."

There was another tall young man, who wore drab breeches and brown gaiters on his long thin legs, and who was helping a stableman to drag the barred hurdle across the tan and put it in position against the wall.

"Now, Miss Thompson. . . . Steady. Steady—Let her go."

Enid on a heavily bandaged bay mare came slowly round, advanced in a scrambling canter, and hopped over the low obstacle.

"Very good."

She looked charming as she came round again—her usually cold pale face now warm and red, a wisp of her

dark hair flying, the short habit showing her neatly booted legs.

"Very good."

"I am lost in admiration," said Marsden; and the strange young man stared hard at him.

"Oh, is that you, Mr. Marsden?" said Enid. "I didn't know I had an audience."

Then she jumped again. This time, in obedience to the directions of Mr. Whitehouse, she rode at the hurdle much faster; the mare cocked her ears, charged, and she and Enid sailed over the white bar in grand style.

But the thud of hoofs, the tell-tale reverberations roused the invisible Mr. Young, and brought him to the window of the private box.

"Not so fast—not nearly so fast," shouted Mr. Young. "There's no skill or sense in that. . . . Mr. Whitehouse, I can't understand you. D'you want that mare overreaching herself?" And Mr. Young's voice, dropping in tone, still betrayed his irritation. "Who are these gentlemen? We can't have people in the school during lessons."

"All right," said the young man in the brown gaiters. "I've come to look at the new horse—the one you bought from Griffin."

"Very good, Mr. Kenion. I didn't see who you were. . . . But who's the other gentleman?"

"He is a friend of mine," said Mr. Whitehouse.

"Well, that's against our rules—visitors in lessons. You know that as well as I do."

"I am quite aware of your rules," said Mr. Whitehouse curtly. "But the lesson is finished. . . . That will be sufficient, Miss Thompson. Three minutes over your hour—and we don't want to tire you."

Mr. Young snorted angrily, and disappeared. The strange young man assisted Miss Enid to dismount and went out with her, the bandaged mare following them with the helper.

"Who," asked Marsden, "was that spindle-shanked ass?"

"Oh, he's not a bad boy," said the riding-master patronisingly. "And he can ride, mind you—which is more than most hunting men can."

"Is *he* a hunting man? What's his name?"

"Mr. Kenion. . . . Look here, don't hurry off. I want to have a yarn with you."

"But Mr. Young——"

"Oh, blast Mr. Young. I want to talk to you, my boy, about the ladies."

"Do you?" Marsden half closed his eyes, and showed his strong teeth in a lazy smile. "What do you think of *our* young lady?"

"Miss Thompson?" Mr. Whitehouse shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, not bad."

Then long thin Mr. Kenion returned.

"Let's try the new crock over your sticks," said Mr. Kenion languidly. "I suppose he *is* a crock—or he wouldn't be here?"

"I won't bias your judgment," said Mr. Whitehouse as he strolled across the tan. "See for yourself," and he rang a noisy bell. "But I must make you known to each other"; and he introduced Mr. Marsden as "one of the managers at Thompson's."

Mr. Young's new purchase was brought in, and Mr. Kenion rode it. The horse at first appeared to resent the silly jumping performance; but Marsden heard the work of the rider's unspurred heels on the animal's flanks,

watched the effective use Mr. Whitehouse made of his whip as he ran behind, and soon saw the hurdle negotiated in flying fashion, again and again—and faster and faster.

"*Not* so fast! God bless my soul, I think you must all be mad this afternoon." Old Young had come to his window, furious. "Mr. Kenion, I'm sapprised at you, yes, I am, sir."

"How can I judge of a horse without trying him?"

"Well, I don't want my horses tried like that. You may buy 'em or leave 'em."

"All right," said Mr. Kenion, laughing. "Come out and have a drink. You've stood me a ride, and I'll stand you a drink."

Mr. Kenion, Mr. Young, and the jumping horse all disappeared, and Marsden and the riding-master were left together on the tan. Here, in the dim twilight that the glass roof made of this bright June day, they had a long, quiet chat about women.

"Dicky," said the riding-master, "I'm going to talk to you like a Dutch uncle."

"Fire away."

"All for your own good. See? . . . Now I suppose when you want a mash, you don't think of looking outside the shop."

"I never have a mash inside it."

"Is that so?" Mr. Whitehouse seemed astonished. "Why, I thought you smart managers with all those shop girls round you were like so many grand Turks with their serrallyhos."

"Not much. That's against etiquette—and a fool's game into the bargain. You're safe to be pinched—and, second, you get so jolly sick of being mewed up with 'em

all day that you never want to speak to 'em out of hours."

"Then how do you get along? The customers?"

"Yes," said Marsden; and he stroked his moustache, and smiled. "Customers are often very kind."

"Not real ladies?"

"We don't ask their pedigrees. Go down St. Saviour's Court any fine evening, and see the domestic servants waiting in their best clothes. It'll remind you of Piccadilly Circus;" and both gentlemen laughed.

"There's a parlourmaid," continued Marsden, "out of Adelaide Crescent—who is simply a little lump of all right. Venetian red hair—a picture."

"Red hair," said Mr. Whitehouse reflectively. "They say with us, a good horse has no colour. That means, if the horse is a good 'un, never mind his colour;—and I suppose it's true of women. . . . I don't object to chestnut horses—or red-haired gells. . . . But, look here, Master Dick, I'll tell you frank, you're wasting your opportunities."

"You can't teach me anything, old man."

"Can't I? Never turn a deaf ear to a friendly tip—a chance tip may alter a man's life. That's a motto with me—and I'm acting on it this moment meself."

Then Mr. Whitehouse told his friend that he was about to leave Mallingbridge for ever. Mallingbridge was too small; he intended to throw himself into the larger world of London. He had very nearly fixed up an engagement with the big Bayswater people; it was practically a settled thing.

"That's why I cheeked the old bloke like I done just now. Mr. Young he twigs there's something up; but he doesn't know what's in store for him. The minute I've

got my job definite, I shall open my chest to him—tell him once for all what I think of him. 'E won't forget it;" and the riding-master laughed confidently.

"I'm sorry you're going."

"Thanks. But why am I lighting out so determined and sudden, instead of vegetating here half me life? Well—because I got a straight tip, and all by chance."

"How was that?"

"About a month ago a chap comes in here with a lady for a lesson. Captain Mellish—Meller—I forget the name. Anyhow, he was a son of a gun of a swell to look at—sploshing it about up at the Dolphin; and he brings in this actress from the theatre—not a chorus gell, mind you, but the leading performer—who was drawing her hundred quid a week, so they said. Well, he evidently fancied he was a bit of a horseman himself, and he keeps chipping in. When I told her to get her hands back, and hold her reins long, he says, 'Yes, but you'll want to hold a horse shorter by the head, if he balks at his fences.' I answered without hesitation, 'I'm very well aware of refusing horses,' I said, 'and also how easy it is to hang on by a horse's mouth when you land over a fence. . . . But,' I said, 'let me know who is giving the lesson—you or me. Wait, Miss,' I said, 'if the Captain has other directions to give you.' She rounded on him at once, asking him to shut his head. He turned it off with a laugh, and gave me a slap on the back. 'Have it your own way, Mr. Riding-Master.' You'll understand, he said that sneering.

"But I believe he thought the more of me before the lesson was over. Anyhow, when his tart had gone to the dressing-room to change her things, he and I got yarning

here—exactly as if it had been you and me—like we're doing now.

"Mind you, he was a wrong 'un. You couldn't talk friendly to him without twigging that. But, Holy Moses, he was fairly up to snuff. . . . We went yarning on, and presently he says, 'It beats me why a knowledgable young chap like you should bury himself as a mere servant. Take my tip,' he says. 'Get hold of a bit of money, and light out on your own.' . . . 'And how am I to get the money?' I asked him.

"'Get it from the ladies,' he says. 'Take my tip. I suppose you make love to all your pupils—you fellows always do. Well, make 'em pay.' I'm giving you what he said, word for word. 'You're wasting yourself,' he says. 'See? You're only young once. You've got something to bring to market, and you're letting it go stale every hour.'

"Then he run on about what women can do for a man nowadays—and he *knew*, mind you. He'd *been* there. Who makes the members of Parliament, the bishops, the prime ministers? Why, women. Leave them out of your plans—if you want to labour in the sweat of your brow till you drop. But if not, take the tip. It's the women that give a man his short-cut to ease and comfort. See?"

"Yes," said Mr. Marsden. "I see that—but I don't see anything new in it."

"Dicky," said Mr. Whitehouse solemnly, "it's a straight tip. . . . But you'll never profit by it, my boy, until you stop messing about with your dressed-up slaveys, and light out for something bigger."

"I have told you," said Marsden, smiling, "that you can't teach me anything."

"You're too cock-sure," said Mr. Whitehouse, almost sadly; "but you're just wasting yourself. . . . Here's the tip of a life-time. I've thought it all out, and I see my own line clear. Drop the gells—and go for the matrons. Pick your chance, and go for it hammer and tongs . . . It's what I shall do meself. Bayswater is full of rich Jewesses—some of 'em fairly wallowing in it. And I shan't try to grab some budding beauty. I shall pick a ripe flower."

"I wish you luck."

"Same to you, old pal. But you won't find it the way you're trying just now;" and Mr. Whitehouse laughed enigmatically. "I can't teach you anything, but I can give you a parting warning. . . . D'you think I don't twig what you were after to-day—wanting to see me especial—and coming round here,—and losing yourself in admiration of Miss Thompson? And I don't say you mightn't have pulled it off, if you'd started a bit earlier. But you're too late. Mr. Kenion has got there first."

"Is that true—bar larks?"

"You may bet your boots on it. He's here every time she comes. After the lessons he sees her home—by a round-about way. The only reason he didn't go with her this afternoon is because the shop is shut, and they're afraid of meeting the old lady. . . . No, my little boy, your Miss Enid is booked."

VI

ENID was away again, staying for a few days with some friends of the Salters; and during her absence her mother suffered from an unusual depression of spirits. In the shop it was noticed that Mrs. Thompson seemed, if not irritable, at least rather difficult to please; but all understood that she felt lonely while deprived of the young woman's society, and all sympathised with her. Assistants, who happened to meet her after closing time, taking a solitary walk outside the boundaries of the town, were especially sympathetic, and perhaps ventured to think that fashionable Miss Enid left her too much alone.

One evening after a blazing airless day, Dick Marsden, very carefully dressed in his neat blue serge, with his straw hat jauntily cocked, came swaggering through St. Saviour's Court, and attracted, as he passed, many feminine glances of admiration. The pretty housemaid from Adelaide Crescent ogled and languished; but he merely bowed and passed by. He could not waste his time with her to-night. There was bigger game on foot.

At the bottom of Frederick Street he hurried down the walled passage that leads to the railway embankment; thence through the vaultlike tunnel under the line, past the gas-works; over the iron bridge that spans the black water of the canal, and out into the open meadows.

These meadows, a broad flat between the canal and the

river, belonged to the railway company; and almost every gate and post reminded one of their legal owners. Notices in metal frames somewhat churlishly announced that, "This gate will be closed and locked on one day in each year;" "There is no right of way here;" "The public, who are only admitted as visitors, will kindly act as visitors and refrain from damage, or the privilege will be withdrawn." The public, enjoying the privilege freely but not arrogantly, ranged about the pleasant fields, played foot-ball in winter, picked buttercups and daisies in spring, and even provided themselves with Corporation seats—to be removed at a moment's notice if the Corporation should be bidden to remove them. On warm summer evenings like this, the public were principally represented by lovers strolling in linked pairs, looking into each other's eyes, and making of the railway fields a road through dreamland to paradise.

Marsden walked swiftly across the parched grass, moving with strong light tread, and gazing here and there with clear keen vision. As he moved thus lightly and swiftly, looking so strong and yet so agile, he seemed a personification of masculine youth and vigour, the coarse male animal in its pride of brutal health. Or, if one merely noticed the catlike tread, so springy and easy in its muscular power, he might suggest the graceful yet fierce beast of prey who paces through failing sunlight and falling shadows in search of the inoffensive creature that he will surely destroy.

A solitary figure moving slowly between the trees by the river—Mr. Marsden hurried on.

"Good evening, Mrs. Thompson"—he took off his hat, and bowed very respectfully.

"Oh! Good evening, Mr. Marsden."

"You don't often come this way?"

"Oh, yes, I do," said Mrs. Thompson rather stiffly. "It is a favourite walk of mine."

"I venture to applaud your taste." And he pointed in the direction of the town. "Old Mallingbridge looks quite romantic from along here. . . . But the gas-works spoil the picture, don't they?"

The town looked pretty enough in the mellow evening glow. Beyond the railway embankment, where signal lamps began to show as spots of faint red and green, the clustered roofs mingled into solid sharp-edged masses, and the two church towers appeared strangely high and ponderous against the infinitely pure depths of a cloudless sky. Soon a soft greyness would rise from the horizon; indistinctness, vagueness, mystery would creep over the town and the fields, blotting out the ugly gas-works, hiding the common works of men, giving the world back to nature; but there would be no real night. In these, the longest days of the year, the light never quite died.

The colour of her blue dress and of the pink roses in her toque was clearly visible, as Mrs. Thompson and the young man walked on side by side. For a minute she politely made conversation.

"I have often wondered," she said, with brisk business-like tones, "what use the railway company will eventually make of all this land."

"Ah! I wonder."

"They would not have bought it unless they had some remote object in view; and they would not have held it if the object had vanished. Sensible people don't keep two hundred acres of land lying idle unless they have a purpose."

"No"

"It has often occurred to me—from what I have heard—that they will one day convert it into some sort of depot. There is nothing in the levels to prevent their doing so. The embankment is no height."

"I should think you have made a very shrewd guess."

"If that were to happen, the question would arise, Will it prove an injury or a benefit to the town?"

Then Mrs. Thompson ceased to make conversation; her manner became very dignified and reserved; and she carried herself stiffly—perhaps wishing to indicate by the slight change of deportment that the interview was now at an end.

But Marsden did not take the hint. He walked by her side, and soon began to talk about himself. An effort was made to check him when he entered on the subject of the great benefits that a kind hand had showered upon him, but presently Mrs. Thompson was listening without remonstrance to his voice. And her own voice, when in turn she spoke, was curiously soft and gentle.

"As this chance has come," he said humbly, "I avail myself of it. Though I could never thank you sufficiently, I have been longing for an opportunity to thank you *somehow* for the confidence you have reposed in me."

"I'm sure you'll justify it, Mr. Marsden."

"I don't know. I'm afraid you'll think not—when you hear the dreadful confession that I have to make."

Mrs. Thompson drew in her breath, and stopped short on the footpath.

"Mr. Marsden"—she spoke quite gently and kindly—"you really must not tell me about your private affairs. Unless your confession concerns business matters—something to do with the shop—I cannot listen to it."

"Oh, it only amounts to this—but I know it will sound ungrateful . . . Mrs. Thompson, in spite of everything, of all you have done for me, I am not very happy down here."

"Indeed?" She had drawn in her breath again, and she walked on while she spoke. "Does that mean that you are thinking of leaving us?"

"Yes, I sometimes think of that."

"To better yourself?"

"Oh, no. I should never find such another situation."

With the permission conveyed by her question, he described at length his queer state of mind—a man on whom fortune had smiled, a man with work that he liked, yet feeling restless and unhappy, feeling alone in the midst of a crowd, longing for sympathy, yearning for companionship.

"That's how I feel," he said sadly, after a long explanation.

Mrs. Thompson had been looking away from him, staring across the river. She held herself rigidly erect, and she spoke now in another voice, with a tone of hardness and coldness.

"I think I recognise the symptoms, Mr. Marsden. When a young man talks like this, the riddle is easy to guess."

"Then guess it."

"Well," she said coldly, "you force me to the only supposition. You are telling me that you have fallen in love."

"Yes."

She winced almost as if he had struck her; and then the parted lips closed, her whole face assumed a stone-like dignity.

"Tell me all about it, Mr. Marsden—since you seem to wish to."

"Love is a great crisis in a man's life. It generally makes him or breaks him for ever."

"I hope that fate will deal kindly—in your case."

"He either fears his fate too much or his deserts are small . . . But, Mrs. Thompson, I do fear my fate. It isn't plain-sailing for me. There are difficulties, barriers—it's all darkness before me."

"I hope you haven't made an injudicious choice."

"Yes, I have—in one way. Shall we sit down here? It is still very warm."

It was as though the heated earth panted for breath; no evening breeze stirred the leaves; the air was heavy and languorous. Mrs. Thompson seemed glad to sit upon the Corporation bench. She sank down wearily, leaned her back against the wooden support, and stared at the darkly flowing water.

"So difficult," he murmured. "So many difficulties." He looked behind him at the empty meadows, and up and down the empty path. Then he took off his hat, laid it on the seat beside him; and, bringing a silk handkerchief from his sleeve, wiped his forehead. "There are almost insurmountable barriers between us."

"Have you given your heart to some married woman? Is she not free to respond to your affection?"

"No, she was married, but she's free now. . . . And I think it amuses her to encourage me—and make me suffer." He had taken one of the hands that lay listlessly in the wide lap. "She is *you*."

Mrs. Thompson snatched her hand away, sprang up from the seat, and spoke indignantly.

"Mr. Marsden, have you gone out of your senses?"

"Yes, I think I have. And who's to blame? Who's driven me out of them?" He was standing close in front of her, barring the path. "Oh, I can't go on with all this deception. I lied to you just now. I knew you were coming here,—and I followed you. I felt I must once for all be with you alone."

"Not another word. I will not listen. . . . Oh!"

Suddenly he had seized her. Roughly and fiercely he flung his arms round her, forced her to him, and kissed her.

"Mr. Marsden! . . . Shame! . . . How dare you? . . . Let me go."

She was struggling in his arms, her head down, her two hands trying to keep him off. Her broad bosom panted, her big shoulders heaved; but with remorseless brutal use of his strength he held her tightly and closely against him.

"There," he said. "Don't fight. You'll have to go through it now. . . . You women think you can play the fool with a man—set all his blood on fire, and then tell him to behave himself."

"Mr. Marsden, let me go—or I shall die of shame."

"No, you won't. Rot. D'you hear? Rot. You're a woman all through; and that face was made to be kissed—like this—like this. . . . There, this is my hour——"

"Will you let me go?"

"Yes, in a minute. . . . You'll dismiss me to-morrow, won't you? I better pack up to-night. But I shall always go on loving you. . . . Oh, my goodness, what is my life to be without you?"

And suddenly he released her, dropped upon the seat, and buried his face in his hands.

She walked fast away—and then slowly returned. He was still sitting, with his head down, motionless.

"Mr. Marsden! . . . You have insulted me in the most outrageous manner—and the only possible excuse would be the absolute sincerity of the feelings that you have expressed so brutally. If I could for a moment believe . . ."

"Why can't you believe?"

"Because it is too absurd. I am no longer young—the mother of a girl old enough herself to marry."

"I don't want any pasty-faced girls. I want *you*."

He spoke without looking up at her, and his face remained hidden by his hands.

"If I sit down and talk to you quietly, will you promise that you won't begin again?"

"Yes."

"You give me your word of honour that you won't—won't touch me?"

"Oh, yes," he said dejectedly, "I promise."

"When you began just now, you implied—you accused me as if you thought I had been—encouraging you. But, Mr. Marsden, you must know that such an accusation is unjust and untrue."

"Is it? I don't think you women much care how you lead people on."

"But indeed I do care. I should be bitterly ashamed of myself if I was not certain that I had never given you the slightest encouragement."

"Oh, never mind. What does it matter? I have made a fool of myself—that's all. Love blinds a man to plain facts."

He had raised his head again, and was looking at her. They sat side by side, and the dusk began to envelope them so that their faces were white and vague.

"At the first," he went on, "I could see that it was

hopeless. If social position didn't interfere, the money would prove a barrier there'd be no getting round. You are rich, and I am poor. At the first I saw how unhappy it was going to make me. I saw it was hopeless—most of all, because I'm not a man who could consent to pose as the pensioner of a rich wife. . . . But then I forgot—and I began to hope. Yes, I did really hope."

"What is it you hoped for?"

"Why, that chance would turn up lucky—that somehow I might be put more on an equality. Or that you would marry me in spite of all—that you'd come to think money isn't everything in this world, and love counts most of all."

"But, Mr. Marsden, how can I for one moment of time credit you with—with the love you will go on talking about?"

"Haven't I shown it to you?"

"I think—I am quite sure you are deceiving yourself. But nothing can deceive me. You mistake the chivalrous romantic feelings of youth for something far different."

"No, I don't mistake."

"The disparity in our years renders such a thing impossible. Between you and me, love—the real love—is out of the question."

"Yes, you can say that easily—because no doubt it's true on your side. If you felt for me what I feel for you—then it would be another story."

"But suppose I had been foolish enough to be taken with you, to let myself be carried away by your eloquence—which I believe was all acting!"

"Acting? That's good—that's devilish good."

"I say, suppose I had believed you—and yielded one

day, don't you know very well that all the world would laugh at me?"

"Why?"

"Why—because, my dear boy, I'm almost old enough to be your mother—and I have done with love, and all that sort of thing."

"No, you haven't. You're just ripe for love—I felt *that* when I was kissing you."

Mrs. Thompson rose abruptly.

"I must go home. . . . Come;" and they walked side by side through the summer dusk towards the lamp-light of the town.

"This must never be spoken of again," she said firmly; and before they reached the last field gate, she had told him many times that her rejection of his suit was final and irrevocable. Hers was a flat deliberate refusal, and nothing could ever modify it.

"Yes," he said sadly, "it's hopeless. I knew it all along, in my secret heart—quite hopeless."

But she told him that if he promised never to think of it again, she would allow him to remain in the shop.

"Frankly, I would much rather you should go. . . . But that would be a pity. It might break your career—or at least throw you too much on your own resources at a critical point. Stay—at any rate until you get a suitable opening."

"Your word is my law."

"Now leave me. I do not wish anyone to see us walking together."

He obeyed her; and she walked on without an escort, through the dark tunnel and into the lamp-light of Frederick Street.