VII

"YOU must 'a been a tremendous long walk," said Yates; "but you're looking all the better for it, ma'am—though you aren't brought back an appetite."

Mrs. Thompson was trifling with her supper—only pretending to eat. The electric light, shining on her hair, made the rounded coils and central mass bright, smooth, and glossy; the colour in her cheeks glowed vividly and faded quickly, and, as it came and went, the whole face seemed softened and yet unusually animated; the parted lips were slightly tremulous, and the eyes, with distended pupils, were darker and larger than they had been in the daylight. By a queer chance the old servant began to speak of her mistress's personal appearance.

"Yes," said Yates, "it's the fresh air you want.—Stands to reason you do, shut up in the shop all day. You look another woman to what you did when you went out;" and she studied Mrs. Thompson's face critically and admiringly.

Mrs. Thompson smiled, and her lips were quite tremulous.

"Another woman, Yates? What sort of woman do I look like now?"

"A very handsome one," said Yates affectionately. "And more like the girl Mr. Thompson led up the stairs such a long time ago—the first time I ever set eyes on

her, and was thinking however she and I would get on together."

"We've got on well together, haven't we, Yates?"

"That we have," said Yates, with enthusiasm.

"Yates, don't stare so;" and Mrs. Thompson laughed. "You make me nervous. And I don't want you to flatter me. . . . But tell me, candidly, supposing you met me now as a stranger—how old would you guess I was?"

Yates, with her head slightly on one side, scrutinised her mistress very critically.

"Why, I don't believe that anyone seeing you as I do now would take you for more than forty-two—at the outside."

"Forty-two! Three years less than my real age. Thank you for nothing, Yates." Mrs. Thompson laughed, but with little merriment in her laugh. "You haven't joined my band of flatterers. You have given me an honest answer."

Perhaps, if some faint doubt was lingering in Mrs. Thompson's mind, Yates had provided an answer to that as well as to the direct question.

The mistress did not invite the servant to sit at table this evening and help her through the lonely meal. Her thoughts were sufficient company.

At night she could not sleep. The contact with the fierce strong male had completely upset her—never in all her life had she been so handled by a man. And the extent of the contact seemed mysteriously to have multiplied the effect of its local violences; the dreaded grip of the powerful arms, the resistless pressure of the forcing hands, and the cruel hot print of his kisses, were the salient facts in her memory of the embrace; but

it seemed that from every point of the surface of her body while compelled to touch him a nerve thrill had been sent vibrating to her brain, and the diffused nerve-messages, concentrating there, had produced overwhelmingly intense disturbance.

And memory gave her back these sensations—the wide thrilling wave from surface to brain, and the explosion of the central nerve-storm flashing its rapid recognitions back to the outer boundaries. Lying in her dark room she lived through the experience again—was forced to suffer the embrace not once but again and again.

It was dreadful that a man, simply by reason of his sex, should have this power, dreadful that he should abuse his power in thus treating a woman,—and most dreadful that of all women in the world the woman should be herself.

And she thought of the late Mr. Thompson's timid and maladroit caresses—insipid, monotonous, stereotyped endearments, totally devoid of nervous excitation, dutifully borne by her, day after day, month after month, throughout the long years.

But memory, doing its faithful and accurate work, failed to restore to her that glow of angry protest, that recoil of outraged dignity which she had felt when the young man took her in his arms. She could feel his arms about her still, but the sense of shame had gone.

Here in the darkened room she could see him—she could not help seeing him. Hot tears filled her eyes, she writhed and twisted, she tossed and turned, as the mental pictures came and went; but nothing could drive him away. He had taken possession of her thoughts; and she wept because she understood that he had not achieved this tyrannous rule to-day or yesterday, but a

long time ago, a disgracefully long time ago. In imagination she was watching him among the china and glass, when Woolfrey and the others showed her plainly how dangerous he really was—and it had begun then. Why else should she have felt such a wrathful discontent at the idea of his courting all the silly girls? In imagination, she could see him among the carpets, trundling the great rolls, fascinating, enthralling the rude customer,—and it seemed to her that it had begun even then. She and the shrew were one in their weakness; both had been hypnotised together. Mears said all the women in the shop had submitted to the spell—but not the silliest, most feather-headed slut of them all had fallen into such idiotic depths as those in which their proud and stately chief lay weeping.

She dried her eyes, got out of bed and drank water, stood at the open window, turned on the light, turned off the light, lay down again and tried desperately to sleep.

In a moment her cheeks were burning.—She could feel the hot kisses; she could hear the hurried words. "A face made to be kissed—setting one's blood on fire. . . . You are a woman all through—you are ripe for love."

Ah, if only one could give way to such a dream of rapture; if one could believe that the lost years might be recovered, that all one has missed in life—its passionate sweetness and its satisfying fullness—might be won by a miraculous interposition of fate! Nothing less than a miracle can bring back the wasted past.

She did not sleep; but with the return of day she grew calmer. Thoughts of Enid helped her. A second marriage—even what the world would call a wise and fitting alliance—was utterly out of the question. It would be the death of her daughter's love; it would

render the story of her own life meaningless; it would destroy all the results of twenty-two years' maternal devotion. Enid had been all in all to her: Enid must remain what she had always been. If on the mother's part there was a brave renunciation of self, it belonged to the dim past; it was over and done with—a solid fact, not to be modified, far less overturned.

Least of all by such a marriage as this—laughter mingling with the sound of bells, coarse jokes to be thrown after them instead of pretty confetti, even the sacred words of the priest at the altar echoed by derisive words of rabble in the porch! Enid would never forgive her—were she ever to forgive herself.

In the broad light of day, in the cold light of logic, she saw that it was impossible. Her emotions might be roused, unsuspected sexual instincts might be partially awakened, beneath the matronly time-worn outer case a virginal mechanism might be stirring; but the whole intellectual side of her nature was strong enough to reinforce the special functions of her will. Too late to snatch at lost joys! Reason rejected the impossibility.

She is too old. The chance has gone years ago. The young man, even if she could believe that he loved her now—much as a romantic subject might fancy that he loved his queen,—would soon grow weary. Familiarity would rob her of all queenly attributes; at the best nothing would be left except disappointment, and at the worst disgust. And then she would suffer intolerable torment. She saw it quite clearly—the martyrdom of a middle-aged wife who cannot retain her young husband's love.

None of that. She rose after the sleepless night with her decision fortified.

VIII

BUT the fortifying of the decision had cost her much, and the after-effects of nerve-strain were easily to be perceived.

She was rather terrible in the shop, and all noticed a sudden and mysterious change. Of a morning she used to appear with dark circles round her eyes; her greetings, or acknowledgments of greetings, were less cordial; she moved more slowly; and in her stern glance it seemed that there was the certainty of finding something amiss, instead of the hope of seeing nothing wrong.

Rather terrible—easily irritated, impatient of argument, quick to resent advice: as the young ladies put it, ready to snap your head off at any minute. A whisper, somehow passing out of house to shop, said she was suffering from continued sleeplessness; and the loyal staff were eager to make allowances. But they wondered how long the change would last; they hoped that she would soon get a comfortable night, and wake up again as their kind and considerate mistress.

In fact, many little things that once would not have worried her now jarred upon tired nerves. She felt worried by Bence's, by her husband's stupid relations, by Mr. Mears; and by Mr. Prentice, the solicitor, who took the liberties permitted to an old friend. He and all other old friends worried her.

She was altogether unable to laugh as of old at the impudence of Bence. She frowned and stamped her foot

when, looking across the road, she first read the placard on the shuttered frontage of the ancient saddler and the bookseller. It was not in small print: you could read it from Thompson's without a telescope. "These Premises," said the poster, "will shortly be opened as the new Furniture department of Bence Brothers, and a long-felt want will be supplied by an extensive stock of high-class goods at reasonable prices." And this, if you please, immediately facing the two windows that from immemorial time had exhibited Thompson's solid oak chairs and polished walnut tables! The gross, large-typed piece of impertinence annoyed her excessively.

She had always been extraordinarily good to old Thompson's relatives, who were common and troublesome. They all hung on to her, called her Cousin Jenny, boasted about their prosperous connection by marriage; they received benefits with scant thanks, grumbled when they fancied themselves neglected; and they were all extremely jealous and watchful of one another. Yet till now they had never exhausted her patience and magnanimity.

One of them, John Edward Thompson, a grocer in a small way of business at Haggart's Cross, had often drawn heavily upon her for financial aid. He was a short, squat, bearded man; and he used to come into the shop unexpectedly, and meander about it aimlessly, to the trouble and confusion of the shop-walkers.

"What department, sir?"

He did not answer.

"What can I have the pleasure of showing you, sir?"

"Don't mind me, young man. Go on with your work. I'm just looking round to find my cousin."

"May I be of assistance, sir? If you will be good enough to tell me your cousin's name?"

"My cousin's name," said John Edward shortly, "is *Mrs. Thompson*. . . . There. Put that in your pipe and smoke it."

It nearly always happened that he found Mrs. Thompson with her back turned towards him. Then he would put two somewhat grubby hands on her shoulders, with cousinly playfulness pull her round the right way, and publicly kiss her. This was an act of affection, and a triumphant assertion of the relationship—something more for those foppish shop-walkers to put in their pipes and smoke.

"Cousin Jenny, how goes it?"

Then, after the kiss, he would look at her reproachfully, and begin to grumble.

"Cousin Jenny, you drove through Haggart's Cross last Thursday in your carriage and pair. *I* saw you. But you didn't see *me*. No, you didn't think of stopping the horses for half a minute, and passing the time of day to your cousin."

Mrs. Thompson used smilingly to lead him into the counting-house, give him kind words, give him good money. He took the money grumblingly, as if it was the least that could be offered as atonement for the neglectfulness of last Thursday; but he went home very happy.

He had done all this scores of times, and Mrs. Thompson had borne it all with unflinching generosity. But now, on a broiling July day, he did it once too often. He got as far as the public salute, and no further.

She was upstairs, standing near a desk, with her back towards China and Glass. He came behind her, playfully laid hold of her, kissed her. She gave a cry, turned upon him in a white fury, and, seeing who he was, snapped his head off.

That day he did not go home happy.

Other cousins were old Mrs. Price and her two daughters, who would all three have been in the workhouse but for Mrs. Thompson. Thanks to her, they were living comfortably at Riverdale, with a pleasant rent-free cottage, garden, and orchard. The Miss Prices made jam and brought it as a present to Mrs. Thompson, keeping up a baseless tradition that she loved their preserve—and taking immense gifts in exchange for it. They visited their cousin twice in July, first to say they would soon make the jam, secondly to bring the jam; and each time they spent a long day at Mallingbridge, coming in and out of house and shop, cackling and giggling, and almost driving Mrs. Thompson mad.

Then there was Gordon Thompson, a farmer at Linkfield, who sometimes came into town on market day, and ate his mid-day meal with his rich cousin in St. Saviour's Court. He used to open the house door without ringing the bell, and whistle a few notes as a familiar signal. "Cousin Jen-ny! Cousin Jen-ny." He would shout this with an ascending intonation, and then come clambering up the steep staircase.

"Any dinner to-day for a poor relation? . . . Ah, my dear, you're not the sort to turn a hungry man away from your table. Garr—but I can tell you I'm sharp-set."

He was a hale and hearty-looking fellow, full of noisy jests, with a great affectation of joviality; but in his twinkling eyes and about his pursed lips there was the peasant's wariness, astuteness, and greed. Truly he took all he could get from everybody, including his fortunate cousin. Enid said his hob-nailed boots were dirty as well as ugly, malodorous too; and she always fled at his approach, and did not reappear while Mrs. Thompson feasted him and made much of him.

Now, when Mrs. Thompson heard the well-known whistle in the hall, she followed her daughter's example; forsaking the luncheon-dishes, she fled back to the shop through the door of communication, and left Yates to entertain hungry Gordon.

Enid was at home, but she failed as a soothing and calming influence. If her mother turned to her, endeavoured to lean upon her for support in an unexpected need, she found a blank void, a totally inadequate buttress. Enid was self-absorbed, busy with her own little affairs, taking lessons from the new riding-master at Young's school, spending long hours away from the house. She seemed like a person who really has no intuitive sympathy to offer: a person locking up her life against intruders, keeping close guard over secret emotions, and neither willing to share her own hopes and fears nor to comprehend those of others.

Perhaps Enid's coldness—so often felt, but never till now admitted in the mother's thoughts—added to the hidden trouble of Mrs. Thompson.

She entered the China department as rarely as possible, and her intercourse with its head was of the most formal and distant character. The conduct of Mr. Marsden was irreproachable: he was composed, polite, respectful; and he never came down behind the glass. But he used his eyes—a mute yet deadly attack, whenever she encountered them. She dreaded the attack, braced herself for it when it could no longer be avoided; and these meetings, however brief, had painful consequences. They enervated her, sapped her energy, and left her with an incredible sense of fatigue, so that after each of them she walked downstairs to her room heavily and wearily, sat at the big desk breathing fast and trembling, feeling for a little

while quite unable to work—almost as if she had been worn out by another physical tussle, instead of by a mere exchange of glances.

She was sitting thus, breathless and perturbed, when Mr. Mears came bothering. Earlier in the day she had admonished the second in command very sharply, and it appeared that he could not bear her momentary censure. He said she had snapped at him as she had never, never snapped. The vast ponderous man was completely overcome; his voice shook, his hands shook, and tears trickled down his cheeks while he solemnly tendered his resignation.

"Resign? What nonsense are you talking, Mr. Mears?"

But Mears said it was not nonsense: he meant every word of it. Rather than suffer here, he would go out and brave the world in his old age.

"Sit down, Mr. Mears—and don't be so foolish."

"I don't recognise you these last weeks," said Mears sadly; and he told her of how intensely he had always venerated her. "Everything you did was right—it is almost a religion with me. And now I couldn't bear it—it would break my heart if I was to be pushed aside."

"You won't be pushed aside. No fear of that."

"Or if there was to be any great changes in the shop."

"There will be no great changes in the shop."

"Nor in your private life?"

Then Mrs. Thompson snapped again.

"What do you mean by that? What is my private life to you—or anybody else? What are you insinuating? . . . Answer me. What do you mean?"

He would not, or he could not say. Perhaps he really did not know what he meant; or some subtle instinct, telling him that a great peril to his peace and comfort

was drawing nearer and nearer, had enabled him to pierce the mystery and had prompted the words of the offending question. He sat gasping and gaping while she stormed at him.

"Understand once for all that I won't be watched and spied upon."

"I am no spy," he said huskily; "except when you've made me one."

The door was closed, but her angry voice rang out above the glass partitions. All through the offices it was known that the manager had put Mrs. T. into tantrums.

Suddenly the storm blew itself out. Mrs. Thompson paced the room, then stopped near the empty fireplace, with her hands clasped behind her back. Her attitude was altogether manlike. It was the big man, sitting huddled on the chair, wiping his cheeks, and blowing his nose, who displayed signs of womanish emotion.

"Mr. Mears, don't let's have any more of it. You and I must never quarrel. It would be too absurd. We are *friends*—we are *comrades*"; and she went over to the chair, and shook hands with her comrade. "That's right. You and I *know* each other; you and I can *trust* each other."

Then she again walked up and down the room, speaking as she moved.

"To show how absolutely I trust you, I'll say to you what I wouldn't say to anyone—no, not to my daughter. I am sorry if I have seemed fretful of late. But the reason is this. I have been passing through a mental struggle—a struggle that has tried me sorely." In her tone and the whole aspect of her face as she made this confession, there was something far above the narrow realm of sex, something that man or woman might be

proud to show—a generous candour, a fearless truth, a noble simplicity. "A hard struggle, Mr. Mears—and I'm a little shaken, but quite victorious. . . . Now this is between ourselves—and it must go no further."

"It never shall," said Mr. Mears earnestly.

"And not a word either about our tiff, or your unkind threat to resign."

"No—er, no. I shan't say another word about that."

But unfortunately Mr. Mears had already said a word or two about it to Mr. Prentice the solicitor; and very soon Mr. Prentice came, tactlessly blundering, to see Mrs. Thompson.

No one could admire her more than Mr. Prentice—truly his admiration was so obviously genuine that people sometimes wondered what Mrs. Prentice thought about it. Staunch friendship, skilled service, as well as the admiration, had won him many privileges; but he overstepped their limits now.

"I say. Is it all serene between you and Mears? Let me advise you—don't allow the breach to widen. I should consider it a great pity if you were to part with your right-hand man because of any trifling difference of——"

Mrs. Thompson cut him short.

"Mr. Prentice, there is one thing I cannot permit—even from you." She was dignified, but terrible. "I cannot, and I will not permit interference in what is my business, and my business only."

"Sorry—very sorry. . . . No idea I should put you out like this."

Mr. Prentice, with muttered apologies, hurried away, looking scared and abashed, carrying his square bowler all through the shop and into the street, as if in his confusion he had forgotten that it belonged to his head.