IX

SHORTLY after this unlucky visit Mr. Prentice wanted to tell Mrs. Thompson some startling news, but he did not dare. He consulted Mr. Mears, and asked him to tell her; but Mears did not dare either. Mears advised the solicitor to take Yates into his confidence, and let Yates tell her.

So then at last Mrs. Thompson heard what so many people knew already—that Enid was carrying on with a young man in a very unbecoming fashion. Scandalised townsfolk had seen Enid at the school with him, in the museum with him, in the train with him;—they had met her at considerable distances from Mallingbridge, dressed for riding, with this groomlike attendant, but without a horse.

The news shocked and distressed Mrs. Thompson—during her first surprise and pain, it seemed to her as cruel as if Enid had driven a sharp knife into her heart. But was the thing true? Yates thought it was all true—none of it exaggerated.

Mrs. Thompson made a few discreet inquiries, ascertained the correctness of the facts, and then tackled Enid.

"Mother dear," said Enid, with self-possession but slightly ruffled, "no one could help liking Charles. I'm sure you'll like him when you see him."

"Why haven't I seen him? Why have you left me to learn his name from the lips of servants and busybodies?

Oh, Enid," said Mrs. Thompson indignantly, yet very sadly, "didn't you ever think how deeply this would wound me?"

"But, mother dear, you must have known that it would happen some day—that sooner or later I should fall in love."

"Yes, but I never guessed that, when the time came, or you fancied it had come, you would keep me in the dark—treat me as if I was a stranger, and not your best friend."

"Charlie didn't wish me to tell you about it just yet."

"And why not?"

"He said we were both old enough to know our own minds, and we ought to be quite sure that we really and truly suited each other before we talked about it. But we are both sure now."

"I think he has behaved very badly—almost wickedly."

"How can you say that, mother?"

"I say it emphatically. He is a man of the world—and he had no right to allow you to act so foolishly."

But Enid appeared not to understand her mother's meaning. She could not measure the enormity of her conduct when indulging in those train-journeys and museum-wanderings. She admitted everything; she was ashamed of nothing.

"Surely," said Mrs. Thompson, "you could see that a girl of your age cannot do such things without malicious people saying unkind things?"

"When one is in love, one cannot trouble to think what malicious people will say."

In fact Enid seemed to believe that she and Mr. Kenion had created a small universe of their own, into which no one else had any right to thrust.

"Mother dear;" and for the first time she spoke pleadingly and anxiously. "Please—please don't try to come between us. I could never give him up."

It was a turn of the knife with which she had stabbed her mother. The words of appeal would have been appropriate in addressing a harsh and obdurate guardian, instead of an adoring parent.

"If," said Mrs. Thompson sadly, "he is worthy of you, I shall be the last person in the world who will ask you to give him up."

Enid seemed delighted.

"Mother dear, he is more than worthy."

"We shall see. . . . But it all hangs on that *if*—a big *if*, I am much afraid. . . . You must pull yourself together, Enid, and be a good and brave girl—and you must prepare yourself for disappointment. So far, I do not receive satisfactory reports of him."

"No one on earth ought to be believed if they bring you tales against him."

And then little by little Enid told her mother of Mr. Kenion's many charms and virtues, and of how and why he had won her love so easily.

He came to dinner at the Salters', and he wore a red coat. She had never seen him till she saw him dining in pink, with brass buttons and white silk facings. He was a magnificent horseman—rode two winners at Cambridge undergraduate races;—had since ridden several seconds in point-to-points;—even Mr. Bedford, Young's new riding-master, confessed that he had a perfect seat on a horse. And he belonged to one of the oldest families in England. Although old Mr. Kenion was only a clergyman, he had a cousin who was an English marquis, and another cousin who was an Irish viscount—if six

people had died, and a dozen people hadn't legally married, or hadn't been blessed with children, Charles himself would have been a lord.

Even if Mrs. Thompson had heard nothing to his disadvantage, the plain facts of the case would have convinced her that he was a bad lot. As a woman of business, she had little doubt that she was called upon to deal with a worthless, unprincipled adventurer. His game had been to force her hand—by compromising the girl, insure the mother's consent to an engagement. If not interrupted in his plan, he would bring matters to a point where the choice lay between an imprudent marriage and the loss of reputation. When Mrs. Thompson thought of her cowardly adversary, anger made the blood beat at her temples. If she had been a father instead of a mother, she would have bought one of the implements of the chase to which he was so much addicted, and have given Mr. Kenion a wholesome horsewhipping.

But when she thought of Enid all her pride smarted, and anger changed to dolorous regret. It was indescribably mortifying to think that Enid, the carefully brought up young lady, the highly finished pupil of sedate private governesses and a majestically fashionable school, should forget the ordinary rules of delicacy, modesty, propriety, and exhibit less reticence in her actions than might be expected from one of Bence's drapery girls. Enid had been pointed at, laughed at, talked about. It was horrible to Mrs. Thompson. It struck directly at her own sense of dignity and importance. In cheapening herself, Enid had lowered the value of everybody connected with her. Enid, slinking out of the house, furtively hurrying to her lover, clandestinely meeting him, and lingering at his

side in unseemly obliviousness of the passing hours, had been not only jeopardising her own good fame, but robbing her mother of public esteem.

Yet far worse than the wound to her pride was the bitter blow to her affection. Half her life had been spent in proving that her greatest wish, her single aim was her child's happiness; but all the years counted for nothing. Trust and confidence extinguished; no natural impulse to pour out the heart's secrets to a mother's ear —"Charlie didn't wish me to tell you." Enid said this as if it formed a completely adequate explanation: she must of course implicitly obey the strange voice. The mother who worshipped her had sunk immediately to less than nothing. A man in a red coat, a man in gaiters, the first man who whistled to her—and Enid had gone freely and willingly to exchange the dull old love for the bright new one. There lay the stinging pain of it.

What to do? One must do something. Mrs. Thompson took up the business side of it, and determined as a first step to tackle the young man. Purchased horsewhips impossible; but carefully chosen words may produce some effect.

She told Enid—after several conversations on the disastrous subject—that she desired an interview with Mr. Charles Kenion. Enid might write, inviting him to call upon her mother, or Mrs. Thompson would herself write.

Enid said she would write to him without delay; but she begged that he might be received at the house, and not be asked to enter the shop. She seemed to dread the idea of bringing so fine a gentleman into close touch with the common aspects of mercantile existence.

"No," said Mrs. Thompson firmly. "Let him come to

me in my shop. It is purely a business interview, and I prefer to hold it in a place of business."

It was a most unsatisfactory interview.

Mrs. Thompson hated the young man at the very first glimpse of him as he came lounging into her room. He was tall and skinny; his dark, straight hair was plastered back from a low forehead; he had no moustache; and his teeth, which showed too much in a narrow mouth, were ugly, set at a slightly projecting angle, as with parrots. No reasonable being could call him handsome; but of course his general air and manner were gentlemanlike—Mrs. Thompson admitted so much at once, and disliked him all the more for it. Gentlemanlikeness was his sole stock in trade: he would push that for all it was worth, and she was immediately conscious that in his easy tone and careless lounging attitude there was a quiet, steady assumption of his social value as the well-bred young gentleman whose father is related to the peerage.

"Please be seated, Mr. Kenion."

"Thanks."

She had ignored his obvious intention of shaking hands, and he was not apparently in the least disconcerted by her refusal of the friendly overture.

"I feel sure, Mr. Kenion, that if we have a good talk, you and I will be able to understand each other."

"Er—yes, I hope so."

"I think it is important that you and I *should* understand each other as soon as possible."

"Thanks awfully. I'm sure it's very good of you to let me come. I know how busy you are."

He was looking at various objects in the room, and a slow smile flickered about his small mouth. He looked

especially at some files on the desk, and at the massive door of one of the big safes standing ajar and displaying iron shelves. He looked at these things with childish interest; and Mrs. Thompson felt annoyance from the thought that the smile was intended to convey the inference of his never having seen such things before, and of his being rather amused by them.

But she permitted no indication of her thoughts to escape her. The governing powers of her mind were concentrated on the business in hand; her face was a solid mask, expressing quiet strength, firm resolution, worldly shrewdness, and it never changed except in colour, now getting a little redder now a little paler; she sat squarely, so that her revolving chair did not turn an inch to one side or the other; and throughout the interview she seemed and was redoubtable.

"My daughter tells me that you have proposed to her."

"Yes—I may as well say at once that I'm awfully in love. . . . And Enid has been good enough to—er—reciprocate. I'm sure I don't know what I've done to deserve such luck."

"Nor do I as yet, Mr. Kenion."

"Exactly. Of course Enid is a stunner."

"But it was about you, and not my daughter, that I wished to talk. Perhaps it will save time if I ask you a few questions. That is usual on these occasions, is it not?"

"Well, as to that, I can't say," and he laughed stupidly. "This is the first time I've been bowled over."

"As a question to begin with—what about your prospects, in whatever career you have planned?"

"My plans, don't you know, would depend more or less on Enid."

"But you can give me some account of your position in the world—and so forth."

"Oh, well, that's pretty well known—such as it is. Not brilliant, don't you know. . . . But I relied on Enid to tell you all that."

"No, please don't rely on her. Only rely on yourself, Mr. Kenion."

Something of the quiet swagger had evaporated. The sunshine came streaming down from a skylight and fell full upon him. Mrs. Thompson had put him where he would get all the light, and she scrutinised him attentively.

His suit of grey flannels, although not of sporting cut or material, suggested nothing but stable and horses; and beneath his casual air of gentlemanly ease there was raffishness, looseness, disreputability. In the bright sunbeams he looked sallow and bilious; his eyelids drooped, an incipient yawn was lazily suppressed; and she thought that very likely he had been drinking last night and would soon be drinking again this morning.

Mentally she compared him with another young man. In her mind she carried now at all times the vividly detailed picture of a masculine type; and it was impossible not to use it as a standard or measure. Mr. Kenion seemed very weak and mean and valueless, when set beside her standard.

"What is your profession, Mr. Kenion?"

He had no profession: as she well knew, he was what is called a gentleman at large. With vague terms he conveyed the information to her again.

"Really? Not a professional man? Are you a man of property—landed estates, and so on?"

No, Mr. Kenion was acreless.

"But you are expecting property at your father's death? Is it entailed upon you? I mean, are you sure of the succession?"

Mr. Kenion smilingly confessed that his father's death would not bring him land.

"But you are assured that he can supply you with ample means during his lifetime?"

Oh, no. Mr Kenion explained that the vicar of Chapel-Norton was in no sense a capitalist.

"My governor couldn't do anything more for me—and I shouldn't care to ask him. He has done a good deal for me already—it wouldn't be fair to my brothers and sisters to ask him to stump up again;" and he went on to hint plainly that in his opinion the fact of his being a gentleman—a real gentleman—should counterbalance such a trifle as the deficiency of material resources.

Mrs. Thompson refused to comprehend the hint.

"Surely, Mr. Kenion, if a young man proposes to a young lady—and asks her to engage herself to him without her mother's knowledge, that should imply that he is prepared to take over all responsibilities?"

She had not uttered a single reproach, or even by innuendo upbraided him for the improper course that he had pursued when persuading Enid to defy the laws of chaperonage and go about with him alone. Her pride would not permit her to make the slightest allusion to the girl's folly. Besides, that would be to play his game for him. By her silence she intended to show him that he had not scored a point.

"Don't you admit as much as that, Mr. Kenion? If I were to countenance the suggested engagement, how do you propose to maintain such a wife suitably—in the manner in which she has been brought up?"

"Well, of course I couldn't promise to open a shop for her;" and he laughed with fatuous good humour, as if what he had said was rather funny, and not an impertinence.

"There are worse things in the world than shops, Mr. Kenion."

"Exactly;" and he laughed again. "As to ways and means—Of course I haven't made any inquiries of any sort. But Enid gave me to understand—or I gathered, don't you know, that money was no object."

"Indeed it is an object," said Mrs. Thompson warmly. "I might almost say it has been the object of my life. I know how difficult it is to earn, and how easy to waste. . . . But I doubt if anything can be gained by further discussion. Your answers to my questions have left me no alternative. I must altogether refuse my sanction to an engagement."

"You won't consent to it?"

"No, Mr. Kenion, the man who marries my daughter with my consent must first prove to me that he is worthy of her."

"But of course as to that—Well, Enid tells me she is over twenty-one."

"Oh, yes. I see what you mean. A man might marry her without my consent. But then he would get her—and not one penny with her. . . . That, Mr. Kenion, is quite final."

He seemed staggered by the downright weight of this final statement.

"Of course," he said, rather feebly, "we are desperately in love with one another."

Contempt flashed from her eyes as she asked him still another question or two.

"What did you expect—that I should welcome your proposal and thank you for it?"

"Well, Enid and I had made up our minds that you wouldn't thwart her wishes."

"But, Mr. Kenion, even if I had agreed and made everything easy and pleasant for you, surely you would not be content to live as a pensioner for the rest of your days?"

She was thinking of what Dick Marsden had said to her in the dusk by the river. "I could not pose as the pensioner of a rich wife." It seemed to her a natural and yet a noble sentiment; and she contrasted the proper manly frame of mind that found expression in such an utterance with the mean-spirited readiness to depend on others that Mr. Kenion confessed so shamelessly. Marsden was perhaps not a gentleman in the snobbish, conventional sense, but how much more a man than this Kenion!

"Don't you know," he was saying feebly; and, as he said it, he stifled another yawn; "I should certainly try to do something myself."

"What?"

"Well, perhaps a little farming. I think I could help to keep the pot on the boil by making and selling hunters —and a good deal can be done with poultry, if you set to work in the right way. . . . Enid seemed to like the notion of living in the country."

Mrs. Thompson turned the revolving chair round a few inches towards the desk, and politely told Mr. Kenion that she need not detain him any further.

He had come in loungingly, and he went out loungingly; but he was limper after the interview than before it. He probably felt that the stuffing had been more or less knocked out of him; for he presently turned into a

saloon bar, and sought to brace himself again with strong stimulants.

No doubt he complained bitterly enough to Enid of the severely chilling reception that he had met with in the queer back room behind the shop. Anyhow Enid complained with bitterness to her mother. Indeed at this crisis of her life Enid was horrid. Yates begged her to be more considerate, and committed a breach of confidence by telling her of how her unkind tone had twice made the mistress weep; but Enid could attend only to one thing at a time. She wanted her sweetheart, and she thought it very hard that anybody should attempt to deprive her of him.

"And it will all be no use, mother—because I never, never can give him up."

Thus the days passed miserably; and a sort of stalemate seemed to have occurred. Kenion had not retired, but he was not coming on; and Enid was horrid.

In her perplexity and distress Mrs. Thompson went to Mr. Prentice, and asked him for advice and aid.

Mr. Prentice, delighted to be restored to favour after his recent disgrace, was jovial and cheering. He poohpoohed the notion that Enid had in the smallest degree compromised herself; he talked of the wide latitude given to modern girls, of their independence, their capacity to take care of themselves in all circumstances; and stoutly declared his belief that among fashionable people the chaperon had ceased to exist.

"Don't you worry about that, my dear. No one is going to think any the worse of her for being seen with a cavalier dangling at her heels."

Nevertheless he heartily applauded Mrs. Thompson for

her firm tackling of the indigent suitor; he offered to find out everything about Kenion and his family, and promised that he would render staunch aid in sending him "to the right-abouts."

When Mrs. Thompson called again Mr. Prentice had collected a formidable dossier, and he read out the damaging details of Mr. Kenion's history with triumphant relish.

"Now this is private detective work, not solicitors' work—and I expect a compliment for the quick way I've got the information. . . . Well then, there's only one word for Mr. Kenion—He's a thorough rotter."

And Mr. Prentice began to read his notes.

"Our friend," as he called the subject of the memoir, was sent down from Cambridge in dire disgrace. He had attempted an intricately dangerous transaction, with a credit-giving jeweller and three diamond rings at one end of it, and a pawnbroker at the other. The college authorities heard of it—from whom do you suppose? *The police!* Old Kenion paid the bill, to avoid something worse than the curtailment of the university curriculum. Since then "our friend" had been mixed up with horse-dealers of ill repute—riding their horses, taking commissions when he could sell them.

"He gambles," said Mr. Prentice with gusto; "he drinks; he womani—I should say, his morals with the other sex are a minus quantity. . . . And last of all, I can tell you this. I've seen the fellow—got a man to point him out to me; and there's *blackguard* written all over him."

"Then how *can* respectable people like the Salters entertain him?"

"Ah," said Mr. Prentice philosophically, "that's the

way we live nowadays. The home is no longer sacred. People don't seem to care who they let into their houses. If a fellow can ride and can show a few decent relations, hunting folk forgive him a good deal. And the Salters very likely hadn't heard—or at any rate didn't *know* anything against him."

At his own suggestion, jumped at by his client, Mr. Prentice returned with Mrs. Thompson to St. Saviour's Court, and told Miss Enid that it would be madness for her any longer to encourage the attentions of such a ne'er-do-well.

"If you were my own daughter," said Mr. Prentice solemnly, "I should forbid your ever seeing him again. And I give you my word of honour I believe that before a year has passed you'll thank Mrs. Thompson for standing firm now."

But Enid was still horrid. She seemed infatuated; she would not credit, she would not listen to, anything of detriment to her sweetheart's character. She spoke almost rudely to her mother; and when Mr. Prentice took it on himself to reprove her, she spoke quite rudely to him. Then she marched out of the room.

"I am afraid," said Mr. Prentice, "there'll be a certain amount of wretchedness before you bring her to reason."

There was wretchedness in the little house—Enid pining and moping, assuming the airs of a victim; her mother trying to soften the disappointment, arguing, consoling, promising better fish in the sea than as yet had come out of it. Enid refused to go away from Mallingbridge. Mrs. Thompson herself longed for change, and the chance of forgetting all troubles; there was nothing to keep her here now, although her presence would be

required in September; but Enid seemed tied by invisible strings to the home she was making so very uncomfortable.

She would not go away, and she would not undertake to refrain from seeing or writing to Mr. Kenion. She did give her word that she would not slink out and marry him on the sly. But she could safely promise that, because, under the existing conditions of stale-mate, it was very doubtful if Mr. Kenion would abet her in so bold a measure. Probably she was aware that Mr. Kenion's courtship had been successfully checked; and the knowledge made her all the more difficult to deal with. Mr. Kenion was neither retiring nor coming forward: he was just beating time; and perhaps Enid felt humiliated as well as angry when she observed his stationary position.

A pitiful state of affairs—mother and daughter separated in heart and mind; on one side increasing coldness, on the other lessening hope; an estrangement that widened every day.

Then at last Enid consented to start with her mother for a rapid tour in Switzerland. Mr. Kenion, it appeared, had crossed the Irish Channel on some kind of horse-business; and so Lucerne and Mallingbridge had become all one to Enid.

They stayed in many hotels, visited many new scenes; and Mrs. Thompson, looking at high mountains and broad lakes, was still vainly trying to recover her lost child. Enid was calm again, polite again, even conversational; but between herself and her mother she had made a wall as high as the loftiest mountain and a chasm as wide as the biggest of the lakes.

X

THE books of Thompson's were made up and audited at the end of each summer season, and in accordance with an unbroken custom the proprietress immediately afterwards gave a dinner to the heads of departments. Printed invitations were invariably issued for this small annual banquet; the scene of the entertainment was the private house; and the highly glazed cards, with which Mrs. Thompson requested the honour of the company of Mr. Mears and the others in St. Saviour's Court at 6.45 for 7 o'clock, used to be boastfully shown along the counters by the eight or ten happy gentlemen who had received them.

During the course of the dinner—the very best that the Dolphin could send in—Mrs. Thompson would thank her loyal servants, give her views as to where the shop had failed to achieve the highest possible results, and discuss the plan of campaign for the next twelve months. The heads of departments, warmed with the generous food, cheered with the sparkling wine, charmed and almost overwhelmed by Mrs. Thompson's gracious condescension, said the same things every year, made the same suggestions, never by any chance contributed an original idea. But the dinner was doing them good; they would think better and work harder when it was only a memory. At the moment it was sufficient for them to realise that they were here, sitting at the same

luxurious table with their venerated employer, revelling in her smiles, seeing her evening robe of splendour instead of the shop black; admiring her bare shoulders and her white gloves, her costly satin and lace, her glittering sequins or shimmering beads; and most of all admiring her herself, the noble presiding spirit of Thompson's.

Jolly Mr. Prentice was always present—acting as a deputy-host; and at the end of dinner he always gave the traditional toast.

"Gentlemen, raise your glasses with me, and drink to the best man of business in Mallingbridge. That is, to Mrs. Thompson . . . Mrs. Thompson . . . Mrs. Thompson!"

Then little Mr. Ridgway of Silks used to start singing.

"For she's a jolly good fellow . . ."

"Please, please," said Mrs. Thompson, picking up her fan and rising. *Without* musical honours, please;" and the chorus immediately stopped. "Gentlemen, I thank you;" and she sailed out of the room, always turning at the door for a last word. "Mr. Prentice, the cigars are on the side table. Don't let my guests want for anything."

Now once again the night of this annual feast had come round, the champagne corks were popping, the Dolphin waiters were carrying their dainty dishes; and Mrs. Thompson sat at the top of her table, like a kindly queen beaming on her devoted courtiers.

Yates, standing idle as a major-domo while the hirelings bustled to and fro, was ravished by the elegant appearance of the queen. Yates had braced her into some new tremendous fashionable stays from Paris, and

she thought the effect of slimness was astonishing. Truly Mrs. Thompson had provided herself with a magnificent dress—a Paris model, of grey satin, with lace and seed pearls all over the bodice; and her opulent shoulders, almost bursting from the pretty shoulder-straps, gleamed finely and whitely in the lamp-light. Her hair made a grand full coronet, low across the brow; her face seemed unusually pale; and there were dark shadows about her glowing eyes.

"Yes, Mr. Mears—as you say, travelling opens the mind. But I fear I have brought home no new information."

"What you have brought home," said Mr. Ridgway gallantly, "is a pleasure to see—and that is, if I may say so——" The little man had intended to pay a courageously direct compliment, by saying that Mrs. Thompson had never looked so attractive as she did now after the brief Continental tour; but suddenly his courage failed him, nervousness overcame him, and, floundering, he tailed off weakly. "You have, I hope, ma'am, brought home replenished health and renewed vigour."

"Thank you, Mr. Ridgway;" and the nervousness seemed to have communicated itself to Mrs. Thompson's voice. "A change of scene is certainly stimulating."

"I've always had a great ambition," said Mr. Fentiman of Woollens, "to get a peep at Switzerland before I die."

"Then you must arrange to do so," said Mrs. Thompson, with kindly significance. "Some autumn—I'm sure it would be easy to arrange."

"I figure it," said Mr. Fentiman sententiously, "as a gigantic panorama—stupefying in its magnitude—and, ah, in all respects unique."

"It is very beautiful," said Mrs. Thompson; and she

glanced at Enid, who was pensively playing with her breadcrumbs.

"The Swiss," said Mr. Mears, "are reputed a thrifty race. Did you, madam, observe signs of economic prosperity among the people?"

Mr. Prentice chimed in boisterously from the bottom of the table.

"What no one will ever observe among the Swiss people is a pretty girl. Did you see a pretty girl on all your travels, Mrs. Thompson—except the one you took with you?" And Mr. Prentice bowed to Enid, and then laughed loudly and cheerfully.

"Is that a fact?" asked Mr. Ridgway. "Are they really so ill-favoured?"

"Plainest-headed lot in Europe," shouted Mr. Prentice.

"And do you, madam, endorse the verdict?"

"Oh, no. Far too sweeping;" and Mrs. Thompson laughed nervously, and attempted to draw her daughter into the conversation. "Enid, Mr. Ridgway is asking if we saw no pretty girls in Switzerland."

But Enid was dull. She had volunteered to join the party, but she would not assist the hostess in making it a success. She need not have been here; and it was stupid or unkind of her to come, and yet not try to be pleasant.

"Didn't we, mother? I don't remember."

All this strained talk about Switzerland was heavy and spiritless. One heard the note of effort all through it. In the old days they would have been chattering freely of the shop and themselves. Mrs. Thompson felt painfully conscious that there was something wrong with the feast. No gaiety. Some influence in the air that proved alternately chilling and nerve-disturbing. She knew that Mr. Prentice felt it too. He was endeavouring to make

things go; and when he wanted things to go, he became noisy. He was growing noisier and noisier.

She looked at her guests while Mr. Prentice bellowed in monologue. They were eating and drinking, but somehow failing to enjoy themselves.

Big Mr. Mears, sitting beside her, ate enormously. He wore a black bow tie, with a low-cut black waistcoat and his voluminous frock-coat—he would not go nearer to the conventional dress-clothes, not judging the swallow-tail as befitting to his station in life, or his figure. Scrubby little Mr. Ridgway, on the other side, emptied his glass with surprising rapidity. Mr. Fentiman, a tall skinny man, ate almost as much as Mr. Mears. He had cleared his plate and was looking at the ceiling, with his long neck saliently exposed above a turn-down collar, as he dreamed perhaps of next year's holiday and a foreign trip financed by a liberal patroness. Wherever she turned her eyes, she saw the familiar commonplace faces—bald heads glistening, jaws masticating, hands busy with knife and fork; but nowhere could she see any light-hearted jollity or genuine amusement and interest.

She looked at the head of China and Glass last of all. On this occasion Mr. Marsden made his initial appearance at the hospitable board. It was, of course, impossible to leave him out of the gathering; but great, very great trouble of mind had been aroused by the necessity to include him. She had feared the meeting under the relaxed conditions of friendly informal intercourse. Perhaps, so far as she was concerned, all the nerve-vibrating element in the atmosphere was caused by his quiet unobtrusive presence.

He wore faultless evening-dress, with a piqué shirt, a white waistcoat, and a flower in his button-hole; and,

sitting at the other end of the table, near Mr. Prentice, he was very silent—almost as silent as Enid. Not quite, because he spoke easily and naturally when anybody addressed him. And his silence was smiling and gracious. Among the other men he seemed to be a creature from a different world—so firm in his quiet strength, so confident in his own power, so young, so self-possessed, and so extraordinarily, overbearingly handsome.

The dinner was more than half over; the Dolphin waiters were carving and serving some savoury game; Mrs. Thompson exerted herself as a watchful and attentive hostess.

"Mr. Greig, you mustn't refuse the grouse. It was specially sent from Scotland for us."

"Really, madam," said Mr. Greig, the obese chief of Cretonnes, etc., "your menoo is that ample I find it difficult not to shirk my duties to it. But still, since you're so kind as to mention it—Yes, I thank you."

"That's right, Mr. Greig."

"Greig, my good friend," said Mr. Prentice, "you'd make a poor show at the Guildhall or the Mansion House, if you can't stay the course without all these protestations and excuses."

"I've never dined with the Lord Mayor," said Mr. Greig; "but I cannot believe his lordship offers the most distinguished company a more ample menoo than this."

"Enid," said Mrs. Thompson, "do have some grouse."

"No, thank you, mother."

It was Enid who cast a chill upon everything and everybody; all the cold and depressing influence issued from her. She looked pretty enough in her pink and silver frock, and she ought to have been a charming and welcome addition to the party; but she would not put

herself to the trouble of talking and smiling. She made no slightest effort to set these more or less humble folk at their ease. She showed that she was absent-minded, and allowed people to guess that she was also bored. Now Mr. Prentice was rallying her with genial, paternal freedom—and she would not even answer his questions. He turned away, to bellow at Mr. Fentiman; and obviously felt crushed by his failure to make things go.

The point had been reached when it was customary to begin their friendly business talk; but to-night it seemed impossible for them to speak comfortably of the shop. The presence of the fashionable outsider tied all their tongues.

Old Mears ponderously started the ball; but no one could keep it rolling.

"Well, ma'am," said Mr. Mears, "another year has come and gone. We are in a position to look behind us; and, as usual, before we commence to look ahead of us, any words that fall from your lips will be esteemed a favour."

"Hear, hear," said Mr. Ridgway, shyly and feebly.

"Really, gentlemen," said Mrs. Thompson, "I don't know that I have any words likely to be of value."

"Always valuable—your words," said fat Mr. Greig.

"But I take this opportunity," and Mrs. Thompson looked nervously at her daughter—"this opportunity of thanking you for all you have done for me in the past, and of assuring you I place the fullest confidence in you —in you all—for the future."

Enid had thrown a blight over the proceedings. She made them all shy and uneasy. Even Mrs. Thompson herself could not speak of the shop without hesitating and stammering.

"So, really," she went on, "that is all I need say,

gentlemen. But, as always, I shall be—shall be glad—extremely glad if you will give me your candid views on any subjects—on all subjects. . . . Have you any suggestions to make, Mr. Mears?"

Mr. Mears coughed, and hummed and hawed before replying.

"We must adhere to our maxims—and not get slack, no matter how good business may be."

"That's it," said Mr. Ridgway. "Keep up the high standard of Thompson's, whatever else we do."

"Any suggestions from *you*, Mr. Greig?"

"No more," said Mr. Greig, "than the remarks which my confreers have passed. I say the same myself."

She asked them each in turn, hurrying through her questions, scarcely waiting to hear the unusually imbecile answers.

"Mr. Marsden—have you any suggestions to make?"

"None," said Marsden, firmly and unhesitatingly. "Unless, madam, you would authorise me to break the neck of Mr. Archibald Bence."

This sally was received with universal applause and laughter.

"Bravo," cried Mr. Prentice. "Take me with you, my boy, when you go on that job."

"And me too."

"And I must be there—if it's only to pick up the remains."

"And to bury 'em decently."

"Which is more than Master Bence deserves."

They were all laughing heartily and happily, all talking at once, gesticulating, pantomiming. Even old Mears beat upon the table with a fork to express his satisfaction, and his agreement with the general feeling.

All the tongues were untied by the seasonable facetiousness of Mr. Marsden. The hostess flashed a grateful glance at him; but he was not looking in her direction. He was courteously listening to Mr. Prentice, who had lowered his voice now that things had begun to go of their own accord.

And things continued to go well for the rest of the dinner. The name of Bence had acted like a charm; they all could find something to say about the hated and unworthy rival, and their hitherto frozen tongues now wagged unceasingly.

"Did you ever see such wretched little starveling girls as he puts into the bazaar at Christmas?"

"It's a disgrace to the town, importing such waifs and strays."

"They tell me he gets 'em out of a place in Whitechapel—and they're in charge of a couple of detectives all the time."

"Yes, you bet. Two upon ten, or the poor little beggars would prig his gimcracks as fast as he put them out."

"I don't vouch for it—but I believe it myself: they had three cases of pocket-picking in an hour. And it was one of his shop-girls who done it."

"That's a nice way of doing business! 'Step this way, miss, and look at our twopenny 'a'penny toys'—and pick the customer's pocket as you are serving her."

While they talked so cheerily and pleasantly, Mrs. Thompson several times glanced down the table at her youngest manager. She need not have dreaded the meeting. He had made it quite easy for her. He had proved that he possessed the instincts of a true gentleman—not a make-believe gentleman; he had displayed consideration, tact, good breeding; and by his ready wit he had

come to her aid and dissipated the dullness of her guests. She sat smiling and nodding in the midst of their lively chatter, and looked at Mr. Marsden's strong, clear-cut profile. It seemed to her statuesque, noble, magnificent; and it did not once change into a full face during all the time she watched it.

Now the guests had eaten their dessert, and the hired waiters had gone from the room. The moment had come for the toast.

"Gentlemen," said Mr. Prentice, "fill your glasses and drink a health. I give you two people rolled into one—that is, the best Man of business in Mallingbridge and Mrs. Thompson. . . . Mrs. Thompson!"

"Now, all together," said Mr. Ridgway; and he began to sing. "For *she's* a jolly good fel-low——"

"Please, please," said Mrs. Thompson, getting up from her chair, and stopping the chorus. "No musical honours, *please*. . . . Gentlemen, I thank you. . . . And now my daughter and I will leave you to your coffee and cigars."

Then she followed Enid to the door, and turned on the threshold.

"Mr. Prentice, don't let our guests want for anything. . . . Yates has put the cigars on the side-table."

In the other room Enid walked over to the piano, and, without uttering a word, began to play.

"After all," said Mrs. Thompson, with a sigh of relief, "it didn't go off so badly."

"No," said Enid, looking at her fingers as they slowly struck the notes, "I suppose not."

"What is it you are playing?" Mrs. Thompson asked the question abruptly.

"Chopin."

"Can't you play anything gayer? That's so sad."

"Is it? . . . I don't feel very gay."

The plaintive and depressing melody continued, while Mrs. Thompson walked about the room restlessly. Then she came to the side of the piano, and leaned her arm upon the folded lid.

"Enid. Stop playing." She spoke eagerly and appealingly; and Enid, looking up, saw that her eyes were wet with tears.

"Mother, what's the matter?"

"Everything is the matter;" and she stretched out her hand above the ivory keys. "Enid, are you purposely, wilfully unkind to me? . . . Where has my child gone? . . . It's wicked, and *stupid* of you. Because I am trying to save you from a great folly, you give me these cold tones; day after day, you—you treat me as a stranger and an enemy."

"Mother, I am sorry. But you must know what I feel about it. . . . Is it any good going over the ground again?"

"Yes, it *is* good," said Mrs. Thompson impetuously; and she withdrew the hand that had vainly invited another hand to clasp it. "You and I must come to terms. This sort of thing is what I can't stand—what I *won't* stand." With a vigorous gesture she brushed away her tears, and began to walk about the room again.

Enid was looking down her long nose at the keyboard; and her whole face expressed the sheeplike obstinacy that she had inherited from her stupid father.

"Mother," she said slowly, "I told you at the very beginning that I could never give him up."

Then Yates brought in the coffee.

"Put it down there," said Mrs. Thompson, "and leave us."

And Yates, with shrewd and rather scared glances at mother and daughter, went out again.

"I don't believe—I *know* that this man is not worthy of you. I won't tell you how meanly I think of him."

"No, please don't speak against him any more. You have done that so often already."

"And haven't I the right to state my opinion—and to act on it too? Am I not your mother? Can I forget that—even if you forget it?"

"Mother, I haven't forgotten. I remember all your goodness—up to now."

"Mr. Kenion simply wants the money that I could give you, if I pleased."

"He only wants us to have just sufficient to live on."

"The money is his first aim."

"Mother, if that were *true*, nothing would ever make me believe it."

"No doubt he is fond of you—in a way . . . Enid, I implore you not to harden yourself against me. . . . Of course he is attracted by you. Who wouldn't be? You are young and charming—with every grace and spell to win men's love. Any man should love you—and other men will. . . . Be reasonable—be brave. It isn't as if you could possibly feel that this was the last chance—the last offer of love in a woman's life."

"Mother, it must always be the last chance—the only chance, when one has set one's heart on it."

"Set your heart!" cried Mrs. Thompson, vehemently and passionately. "Your heart? You haven't got a heart—or you couldn't, you couldn't make me so miserably unhappy as you are doing now."

"I am very sorry—but I share the unhappiness, don't I? Mother, I too am most miserably unhappy."

Mrs. Thompson was pacing to and fro rapidly and excitedly; her bosom heaved, and the words were beginning to pour out with explosive force.

"He is everything then—the sun, moon, and stars to you; and I am a cipher. The mother who bore you counts for less than any Tom, Dick, or Harry who puts his arms round your waist and pulls your silly face towards him."

"Mother!"

"Yes, mother! That's my name still—and you use it from habit. Only the fact—the plain meaning of the word is gone."

"Mother, they'll hear you in the other room."

"But I'm not a woman to be ignored and slighted—and pushed aside. There's nothing of the patient Griselda in my nature. I am what I *am*—all alive still—not done for, and on the shelf. I have subordinated my life to yours—let you rule it how you chose. But you must rule it by kindness—not by cold looks and cutting words. I don't submit to that—I *won't* submit to it."

"Mother dear, I have told you how grateful I am."

"And gratitude—as you understand it—is no use to me. I've a *right*—yes, a right to your affection—the natural affection that I've striven to retain, that I've done nothing to forfeit."

"No, no. Mother dear, you have my affection."

"Then what's it worth? Not much—no, not very much, if the first time I appeal to your sense of duty too, it isn't to be found. I tell you not to be a fool—and you swear I am wrecking your life. I'm the villain of your trumpery little drama—plotting and scheming to frustrate

your love and spoil your life. That's too rich—that's too good, altogether too good."

The expression of Enid's face had changed from obstinacy to alarm. She watched her mother apprehensively, and stammered some calming phrases.

"Mother dear, I'm sorry. Don't, don't get excited—or I'm sure they'll hear us in the other room."

"Your life, yes. And what about *my* life?" The words were pouring out in an unchecked torrent. "Look back at my life and see what it has been. You're twenty-two, aren't you? And I was that age more than twenty-two years ago—and all the twenty-two years I've given you. Something for something—not something for nothing. We traders like fair exchange—but you've put yourself above all that. . . . No, leave me alone. Don't touch me, since you have ceased to care for me."

Enid had come from the piano, and was endeavouring to subdue the emotional explosion by a soothing caress.

"Leave me to myself—leave me alone. I'm nothing to you—and you know it."

Enid's caress was roughly repulsed; and Mrs. Thompson sat upon the sofa, hid her flushed face upon her arms, and burst into a fit of almost hysterical sobbing.

"Mother, mother—don't, please don't;" and Enid sat beside her, patted her shoulder, and begged her quickly to compose herself lest the gentlemen should come and see her in her distress.

"It's so cruel," sobbed Mrs. Thompson. "And now—now of all times, I can't bear it. . . . But I mustn't let myself go like this. I daren't give way like this."

Then very soon her broad back ceased to shake; the convulsive gasping sobs were suppressed, and she sat up and dried her eyes.

"Enid, have I made a horrible fright of myself?" And she rose from the sofa, and went to look in the glass over the fireplace. The tears had left little trace; the reflection in the glass reassured her.

She was comparatively calm when she returned to the sofa and sat down again.

"Enid, my dear, I'm ashamed to have been betrayed into such weakness," and she smiled piteously. "But you have tested me too severely of late—since this unlucky affair began. I have thought myself strong enough; but the strongest things have their snapping point—even iron and steel;—and I am only flesh and blood. . . . You don't understand, but I warn you that I *need* the sympathy and the kindness which you withhold from me. . . . Be nice to me—be kind to me."

But Enid was crying now. Tears trickled down her narrow face. The strange sight of her mother's violent and explosive distress had quite overcome her.

"I do try to do what's right," she whimpered.

"Yes, my darling girl," said Mrs. Thompson tenderly "And so do I. It's all summed up in that. We must do what's right and wise—not just what seems easy and delightful. There. There. . . . Use my handkerchief;" and in her turn she reminded Enid that the gentlemen would be with them at any minute.

"Mother, when you ask me to give him up, it's more than I *can* do."

"But would I ask you if I wasn't certain—as certain as I can be of anything in the world—that you could never be happy with him? You'd be risking a lifetime's regret."

"I am ready to take the risk. Don't come between us."

"Enid, my dearest—my own Enid, trust me—trust the

mother who has never, never thwarted you till now. You know I'm not selfish—not greedy of money. Truly I have only worked for you. . . . And think—though I hate to say it—of the many—the many, many things I have given up for your sake. It wasn't difficult perhaps—because you were everything on earth to me. But any middle-aged woman who knew my life would tell you that I have made great sacrifices—and all for you."

"I know you have, mother. It's dreadful to think of how you have worked, year after year."

"Then can't you make this one sacrifice for me?"

"If it was anything else;" and Enid sniffed, and another tear or two began to trickle. "If it was anything else, I'd obey you implicitly—and know it was my duty."

"Why isn't it your duty now?"

"Because this is so different."

"Enid, stop. Don't say any more."

"But, mother dear, do understand what I mean."

"Yes, I understand too well."

"I'm not ungrateful. If you called on me to pay back some of my debt, I'd work for you till I dropped. I'd try to make every sort of sacrifice that you have made for me. But when it comes to a woman's love, she *can't* sacrifice herself."

"Then, by God, I'll take you at your word."

Mrs. Thompson had sprung up from the sofa; and once more she paced to and fro, a prey to an increasing excitement.

"Mother? You'll consent?"

"Yes—I consent. A woman can't sacrifice her love! Very good. So be it. That's your law. Then obey it—and, as there's a God in Heaven, I'll obey it too."

The gentlemen, leaving their dinner table, heard the raised voice, and paused in surprise outside the drawing-room door. When they entered the room, Mrs. Thompson, with blazing cheeks and flashing eyes, turned towards them and gazed eagerly through the open doorway.

"Mr. Marsden, where are you? Come here."

Marsden went to her quickly; and she drew him away to the curtained windows, and spoke in an eager whisper.

"Did you mean what you told me by the river?"

"Yes."

"Do you mean it still?"

"Yes."

"On your honour as a man, is that true?"

"Yes."

Then she took his right hand in her two hands, and held it tightly.

"Gentlemen—listen to me, please;" and she spoke with feverish resolution. "This is not perhaps an opportune moment for making the announcement—but I want you to know, I want all my friends to know without further delay that Mr. Marsden and I are engaged to be married."

Silence like a dead weight seemed to fall upon the room.

Enid had uttered a half-stifled exclamation of horror, but blank amazement rendered the guests dumb. Mr. Prentice, who had become apoplectically red, opened and shut his mouth; but no sound issued from it. Mr. Mears, with bowed head and heavily hanging arms, stared at the carpet. Gradually every eye sank, and all were staring

downwards—as if unable to support the sight of the couple who stood hand in hand before them.

At last Mr. Ridgway tried to say something; and then Mr. Fentiman feebly echoed his words.

"You have taken our breath away, madam. But it behoves us to—ah—congratu— to felicitate."

"Or to proffer our good wishes."

"And our best hopes."

But Mrs. Thompson did not look at them or listen to them. Marsden was speaking to her in a low voice.

"Yes, yes, yes. Every word. Every word. I meant all I said then—and I mean it a thousand times more now. You are making me the proudest of mortals—but don't forget one thing."

"What?"

"Why, all I said about the difficulties—the, the inequality of our position, which must somehow be got rid of. But of course you've thought it out."

"What do you mean?" She was gazing at him with love and admiration; but an intense anxiety came into her eyes.

"Well, I mean exactly what I said then. Nothing can change my mind. But, as I told you, I can't have all the world pointing at me as a penniless adventurer who has caught a rich wife. . . . But you've planned—you mean to prevent——"

His eyes did not meet hers. She dropped his hand, and looked at him now with a passionate, yearning intentness.

"Go on—quickly. Say what it is that you mean."

"I mean, it is to be a thorough partnership—husband and wife on an equal footing. You mean it too, don't you? Partners in love and partners in everything else!"

"Yes," she said, after a scarcely perceptible hesitation. "I did mean that. You have anticipated what I intended."

"My sweetheart and my wife." As he whispered the words, her whole face lit up with triumphant joy. "I knew that you meant it all along. And I'm the happiest, proudest man that ever lived. . . . Now you'd better tell them. Let them know that too."

Again she hesitated. She was in a fever of excitement, with all real thought obliterated by the flood of emotion; and yet perhaps already, though unconsciously to herself, she had attained a complete knowledge of the fatal nature of her mistake.

"Do you want me to tell them now—at once?"

"Yes," he said gaily. "No time like the present. Let them know how my dear wife and I mean to stand—and then there'll be nothing for anybody to chatter about."

"Very well."

"That's right;" and he gently drew her round towards her audience. "That's *our* way—side by side, shoulder to shoulder, you and I, facing the world."

"Gentlemen," said Mrs. Thompson firmly, "there's another thing that I must add to what I have said. Mr. Marsden, when he comes into this house as my husband, will come into the business as my partner."

Marsden, with his head raised and his shoulders squared, stood boldly smiling at the silent men.