XVII

IT had been a fearful year for Thompson and Marsden's. From the moment that the grand fascia permanently recorded the new style of the firm, money had flowed out of the business like water—and like big water, like mountain torrents or sea waves; while the feeding-stream of money that flowed into the business was obstructed, deflected, and plainly lessened in volume. And now, when all the immense outlay should begin to prove remunerative, even Marsden himself confessed that results were inadequate and unsatisfactory.

The Bazaar was a disastrous fiasco. The builders had broken their contract; the basement had not been completed on the stipulated date, and a law-suit was pending. Marsden swore that he would recover damages for the loss entailed by his builders' wickedness; but Mr. Prentice advised that he had a weak case.

When, to the strains of a Viennese orchestra, the public were invited to go down and enjoy themselves underground, they flatly declined the invitation. A peep into the brilliantly lighted depths was sufficient for them. Damp exhaled from the plastered walls; the few adventurous customers shivered, and the girls sneezed in their faces. An epidemic of sore throat, engendered down there, rose and spread through the upper shop. After three weeks, Marsden's grand Christmas entertainment was withdrawn—like a pantomime that is too

stupid to attract the children; the regiment of sneezing girls was disbanded; the mass of unsold rubbish was sent to London, to be disposed of for what it would fetch. And that, as the whole shop knew, was half nothing.

The Japanese department was almost as bad a bargain; the little ivory warriors terrified cautious citizens with their high prices; no one would come to buy and be educated. But Marsden for a long time was obstinate about his Oriental goods. He would not face the loss, and cut it short.

He seemed to have forgotten his American office equipments; but this feature had also failed to fulfil expectations. Only three small articles had been sold. However, as there was no risk here, the want of success did not much matter; but still it must be counted as one more of the governor's false moves. Indeed, as all now saw, everything attempted by the governor during this period of his energetic efforts had gone hopelessly wrong.

But he himself could not brook the disappointment caused by his failures. He was disgusted when he thought of what had happened since his pompous declaration of war. Although he would not admit that so far Bence was beating him, he inveighed against fate, against Mallingbridge, against all the world.

"What the devil can you do when you're buried in a dead and alive hole like this, surrounded by idiotic prejudices, and dependent on a lot of old fossils to carry out your ideas?"

The fitful energy that had occasioned so much trouble was now quite exhausted. He seemed to have entered another phase. He was never jolly now, but always discontented, and generally querulous, morose, or violently angry.

One after another the old shop chieftains succumbed beneath his bullying attacks. Mr. Ridgway and Mr. Fentiman had gone. Mr. Greig was going.

Mrs. Marsden always recognised the beginning of his onslaught upon anybody to whom in the old days she had been strongly attached. A few sneering words—lightly and carelessly; and then, when he returned to the charge, gross abuse of the doomed thing. She knew that it was doomed. In the wreck of her life this too must go. Then very soon there were insults and violences that rendered the position of the victim untenable, unendurable. Thus he had forced Mr. Ridgway and the others to resign.

Yates, the servant and friend that she loved, was also doomed. She was struggling to avert the stroke of doom, but she knew that sooner or later it must fall.

And during all this time his demands for cash were increasingly frequent. By his colossal outlay he had mortgaged the profits of years, and it was essential that the partners should wait patiently until they came into their own again. But he would not wait, and vowed that he could not further retrench his personal expenses. How was he to live without *some* ready cash? And if the firm could not furnish it, she must.

"I *am* trying to sell my big car," he told her. "And I suppose you will ask me to sell the little one next—and paddle about in the mud again. But, no, thank you, that doesn't suit my book at all."

At last she summoned to her aid something of the old resolution that seemed to have left her for ever, and refused to comply with his request.

"No, Dick, I can't. It isn't fair. I can't."

"You mean, you *won't*."

"Well, if you force me to use that word, I shall use it."

Then there was a terrible quarrel—or rather he abused her meanness and selfishness with brutal violence, and she protested against his injustice and cruelty with all the strength that she possessed.

After this he absented himself for a fortnight. He sent no messages; he left the business to take care of itself, or be run by the other partner; nobody knew where he was.

When he reappeared he showed a perceptible deterioration of aspect, as if the vicious orgies through which probably he had been passing had set their ugly print upon his mouth, and had tarnished the healthy brightness of his eyes. Henceforth the evidences of his increasing dissipation became more and more obvious. He had abandoned himself to the influences of this second phase. He drank heavily. He was careless about his clothes; never looked spick and span and well-groomed; often looked quite seedy and shabby, lounging in and out of the Dolphin Hotel, with cheeks unshaven, and an unbrushed pot hat on the back of his head.

But although he neglected his work, he made people understand that he still considered himself the boss, and whenever he came into the shop he asserted his authority. After lying in bed sometimes till late in the afternoon, he would come down and upset everybody just when the day's work was drawing to a close.

At the sight of him all eyes were lowered, and many hands began to tremble behind the counters. Before he had progressed from the door of communication to the top of the staircase, somebody, it was certain, would be dropped on. But on whom would he drop?

Once it was his ancient admirer and ally, Miss

Woolfrey. Outside China and Glass, she spoke to him pleasantly if nervously.

"Good evening, sir. You'll find Mrs. Thompson downstairs in the office."

"Who the devil are you talking about?"

"Mrs. Thompson, sir—Oh, lor, how silly of me! Mrs. *Marsden*, sir."

"Yes, that's the name; and I'll be obliged if you won't forget it." He was always exceedingly angry if, as still often happened, the old assistants accidentally used the name that from long habit sprang so easily to their lips.

"Mrs. Marsden, if you please. And not too much of that." He looked about him wrathfully, involving half the upper floor in his displeasure. "I wish you'd all learnt manners before you got yourselves taken on here. 'Yes, Mrs. Marsden. No, Mrs. Marsden'—that's the way I hear you. Don't any of you know that Madam is the proper form of address when you're speaking to your employer's wife?"

When he went behind the glass all the clerks began to blunder and to get confused. He called for day-books, ledgers, and cash-books, and glanced at them with lordly superciliousness while the poor clerks humbly held them open before him. Nothing was ever quite right—he blamed somebody for illegible hand-writing, someone else for a blot, someone else for the dog's ear of a page.

As promised by Miss Woolfrey, he found the late Mrs. Thompson quietly working at the little corner table in his room. Then he stood before the fire warming his legs, and haranguing about slop-etiquette, up-to-date methods, time-saving systems, and complaining of the many faults that he had discovered.

His wife listened without discontinuing the work.

Gradually, in spite of all his dictatorial interferences, he was allowing her to do more and more work. He told the heads of the staff that when he was out of the way, they were to take their instructions from Mrs. Marsden. Then, when underlings came to him, obsequiously asking for his orders in regard to small matters, he said he could not be worried about trifles. Mrs. Marsden would direct them. He had more than enough important things to think of, and could not descend to petty details.

One afternoon he came in from the street, turned the type-writing girl out of the room, and told his wife to give him all her attention.

"Attend to me, old girl. News! Great news!"

He slapped his legs, and laughed. He was elated and excited. It was a flash of jollity after months of gloom.

"Do you remember what I told you eighteen months ago?"

"What did you tell me, Dick?"

"I asked you to mark my words—and I said, that little bounder over there wasn't going to last much longer."

The old story of Bence's approaching bankruptcy had been revived again. Marsden had heard it once more, at the Dolphin bar or in the Conservative Club billiard room, and he greedily swallowed every word of it.

He said it was a hard-boiled fact this time. One of the profligate brothers had died; the widow was taking his money out of the business; and Archibald Bence, deprived of capital without which he could not scrape along, would go phutt at any minute.

"There, old girl, I thought it would buck you up to hear such news, so I ran in to tell you. But now I must be off."

And then, in his unusual good temper, he noticed the difficulties under which she was labouring.

"I say, you don't seem very comfortable with all your papers spread out on chairs like that. It looks so infernally messy—but I suppose you haven't space for them on your table."

"I could do with more space, certainly."

"Very well. You can sit at my desk—when I am not here. But don't fiddle about with anything in the drawers;" and he laughed. "You'd better not pry among my papers, or you may get your fingers snapped off. The whole damned thing shut up with a bang when I was looking for something in a hurry the other day."

She wondered if there could be any valid reason for the persistent recurrence of these stories of financial shakiness behind their rival's outward show of prosperity. Were these little puffs of smoke, appearing and disappearing so frequently, indicative of latent fire? She asked Mr. Mears what he thought about the gossip carried in such triumph by her credulous husband.

Mears did not believe a word of it.

"We've heard such yarns for ten years, haven't we?" And Mears nodded his head in the direction of the street. "I've used my eyes, and I don't see any signs of it—and I think Mr. Marsden shouldn't reckon on it."

"No, I quite agree with you."

"Although," said Mears, "it would be very convenient to us, if it *did* happen—and if it *is* going to happen, the sooner it happens the better."

"It won't happen," said Mrs. Marsden, sadly and wearily. "The wish is father to the thought—there's no real sense in it."

At this time she often thought of Archibald Bence, and of how, when alluding to his idle spendthrift brothers, he used to say with quaintly candid self-pity, "There's a leak in my shop."

Well, there was a leak on each side of the street now.

Availing herself of her husband's permission, she came out of the corner, and was generally to be seen seated in the chair of honour at the tricky American desk.

Little by little she was resuming control over the ordinary routine management of the shop; and, although in its greater and more momentous affairs she remained practically impotent, she was allowed full opportunities to supervise and encourage its daily traffic.

Once or twice as Mears stood by her chair in the office and watched her knitted brows while she considered the questions of the hour, he thought and felt that it was quite like old times.

But this was a transient thought. Old times could never really come again. Stooping to take the papers on which she had scrawled her brief and rapid directions, he noticed the coarse grey strands in the hair that such a little while ago used to be so smooth, so glossy, and to his mind so pretty. He could see, too, the differences in her whole face. The face was slightly smaller; the florid colours were fading so fast that occasionally she seemed sallow; the lines of the kind mouth had grown harder; and there was a curious, passive, subdued look where once there had been outpouring vitality. And the bodice of the black dress hung loose, in small folds and creases on the shoulders that used to fill it with such handsome thoroughness.

But instinctively Mears understood that behind the narrower and less glowing mask the inward force was not

extinguished—the indomitable spirit was there still, not yet quenched, and perhaps unquenchable.

He watched her—with a veneration deeper than he had ever felt in the easy prosperous past—while she went on quietly, bravely working, day by day, week after week.

One Saturday evening, after an uneventful but laborious week, when she had supped alone and was reading by the dining-room fire, Marsden came in and abruptly asked her for money.

"This is serious, Jane—no rot about it. I'm stuck for a couple of hundred, and I must have it."

"Really, Dick, I cannot . . ."

"I don't ask it as a gift. Of course I meant to pay you back the other advances, but everything has been against me. I *will* try to pay you. Anyhow, this is a bona fide loan. It's only to tide me over."

"But you said that last time."

"Last time you refused—and I had to chuck away my little run-about—simply chuck it away. And I wanted to keep that car as much for your sake as for mine. I knew you enjoyed a ride in it."

She had ridden in the car once, and once only.

"Look here, old girl." And he removed his hat, and sat down on the other side of the dinner-table. Perhaps he had hoped that she would give him a cheque and let him go out again in two or three minutes; but now he saw it would take longer. "I must have the money by Monday morning—or I shall be in a devil of a hole. More or less a matter of honour. . . . Don't be nasty. Help a pal. It's not *like* you to refuse—when I tell you I'm in earnest."

"But, Dick, I am in earnest too. Truly I can't do it."

"Rot. You can do it without feeling it." And he assumed a facetious air. "Just your autograph—that's all I ask for. I'll write out the cheque myself—save you all trouble. Just sign your name."

"No, I'm very sorry; but it's impossible."

He got up, and began to walk about the room, fuming angrily.

"Then I shall draw on the firm."

"Then I shall have to call in Mr. Prentice, and ask him to protect the firm—to go to the law courts if necessary."

"Oh, that's all my aunt. I've had enough of Mr. Prentice—Mr. Prentice isn't my wet nurse."

"Dick, be reasonable. Be kind to me. Don't you see, yourself, that——"

"I'm not going to have you and old Prentice treating me as if I was a baby in arms—lecturing, and preaching to me about the firm. You and Prentice aren't the firm. I'm just as much the firm as you are."

"Have I put myself forward? Do I ever deny your rights?"

"Be damned to Prentice." He took his hands out of his overcoat pockets, and brandished them furiously. "Prentice was my enemy from the very beginning;" and he raised his voice. It seemed as if he was purposely working himself into a passion. "I was a fool to submit to his bounce. I ought to have had a marriage settlement—money properly settled on me—and I was a fool to let him Jew me out of it."

"I gave you a half share."

"Yes, in the business—but *only* the business."

"Wasn't that enough for you?"

"Yes, in good times, no doubt. But what about bad times? And what the devil did I know of the business before I came into it? Nothing was explained to me. I came in blindfold. I took everything on trust."

"Oh, I think you understood it was a paying concern."

"It wasn't *proved* to me, anyhow. No one took the trouble to let me see the books—and give me the plain figures. Oh, no, that would have been beneath your dignity."

"Or beneath yours, Dick?"

"Yes, and I was a fool to consider my dignity. That was old Prentice again. I suppose he took his cue from you. You had put your heads together, and decided that I was to behave like the good boy in the copy-books. Open your mouth and shut your eyes, and see what God will send you."

"Dick, please—please don't go on."

Suddenly he stopped walking about, leaned his hands on the table, and stared across at her.

"Suppose the entire business goes to pot. What then?"

"The business will recover, and continue—if it isn't drained to death."

"Yes, but it's all mighty fine for *you*. You can afford to take a lofty tone. Fat years are followed by lean years—we must wait for the fat years again. I know all that cut and dried cackle—it's the way people of property always talk. I came in with nothing—please to remember that. I'm absolutely dependent on the business—if the profits go down to nothing, am I to starve?"

"You shan't starve;" and she looked round the comfortable, well-furnished room.

"*You* had your private fortune—all that you'd put by, —and I suppose you have got all of it still."

"How can I have it all—when you know what I gave to Enid?"

"You gave Enid a dashed sight too much—but you had plenty left, in spite of that."

"Dick, on my honour, I hadn't a large amount left. I used to count myself a rich woman, but I was only relying on the business. What I took out one year I put back into it another year. I was always trying to improve it."

"I'll swear you haven't put any back since you married me."

"No, I haven't."

'No, that I'll swear." He had lowered his voice, and he was speaking with a scornful intensity. "No, good times or bad times in the shop, you are content to pouch your dividends from all your stocks and shares, and sit watching your nest-egg grow bigger and bigger, while——"

"Dick! You are tiring me out. Don't go on."

"Yes, I will go on. You started it—and now I mean to get to the bottom of things. Let's get to plain figures at last. What are you worth now—of your very own—apart from the firm?"

"Not one penny more than I need—for my own safety."

"Ha-ha! You're afraid to tell me."

"Why should I tell you? Dick, don't go on. It's cruel of you to bully me—when I'm so tired."

"Twenty thousand? Thirty thousand? How much? Oh, I dare say I can figure it out for myself—without your help. Say twelve or fifteen hundred a year, coming in like clockwork. Why, I saved you two-fifty a year myself, by cutting down what you intended to settle on Enid and that skinny rascal of a horse-coper."

"Dick—for pity's sake——"

"Then answer me." And he raised his voice louder than before. "What are you doing with your private income?"

"This house costs *something*."

"Oh, this house can't stand you in much. Where does the rest go—if you aren't saving it? Are you giving it to Enid? . . . That's it, I suppose. If that lazy swine wants two hundred to buy himself another thoroughbred hunter, I suppose he sends Enid sneaking over here—when my back's turned—and just taps you for it. You don't refuse *him*. But if *I* come to you, it's 'No, certainly not. Do you want to ruin me?'"

"Dick!"

"Then will you let me have it?"

Her face was drawn and haggard; she looked at him with piteous, imploring eyes; and she hesitated. But the hesitation was caused by dread of his wrath, and not by doubt as to her reply.

"Dick. I am sorry. But I can't do it."

"Is that your answer?"

"Yes, that is my answer."

"Very good." He snatched up his hat, clapped it on the back of his head, and stood for a few minutes staring at her vindictively. Then, clenching his fist and striking the table, he burst into a storm of abuse.

. . . "But you'll be sorry for this, my grand lady. I'll make you pay for it before I've done with you." This was after he had been raving at her for a couple of minutes, and his voice had become hoarse. "You'll learn better—or I'll know the reason why."

Then he turned, flung open the door, and stamped out of the room.

"What do you want here—you prying old hag? Stand on one side, unless you wish me to pitch you down the stairs."

Outside on the landing he had found Yates hastily moving away from the dining-room door. Terrified by the noise, she had been irresistibly drawn towards the room where her mistress was suffering. She longed to aid, but did not dare.

She came into the room now, and saw Mrs. Marsden leaning back in her chair, white and nearly breathless, looking half dead.

"Oh, ma'am—oh, ma'am! Whatever are we to do?"

"It's all right, Yates. Don't distress yourself. It's nothing. . . . Mr. Marsden lost his temper for the moment—but I assure you, it's all right."

"Let me get you upstairs to bed."

"No, leave me alone, please. I am quite all right—but I'll stay here quietly for a little while. . . . Go to bed, yourself. Don't sit up for me."

And her mistress was so firm that Yates felt reluctantly compelled to obey orders.

An hour passed; and Mrs. Marsden still sat before the fire, alone with her thoughts in the silent house. And then a totally unexpected sound startled her. The front door had been opened and shut; there were footsteps on the stairs: the master of the house had returned, to resume the conversation.

But to resume it in a very different tone.—He took off his hat and coat, came to the fire, warmed his hands; and then, resting an elbow on the mantelpiece, smilingly looked down at his wife.

"Jane, I'm penitent. . . . Really and truly, I'm ashamed of myself for letting fly at you just now. But

you did rile me awfully by saying you hadn't *got* the money. Anyhow, I've come back to ask for pardon."

"Or have you come back to ask for the money again?"

"No, no. Wash that out. If you don't want to part, there's no more to be said. Forget all about it. Wash it all out. The word is, As you were—eh? . . . Old girl?"

He was leaning towards her, putting out his hand; and she was shrinking away from him, watching him with terror in her eyes. Before the hand could touch her face, she sprang from the chair and threw it over, to make a barrier against his movement.

"Janey! What's the matter with you? You naughty girl—I've apologised, haven't I? Let bygones be bygones —won't you?"

She had run round the table, and was standing where he had stood an hour ago. As he advanced she dodged away from him, keeping the length or the breadth of the table between them.

"Janey? What are you playing at? Hide and Seek —Catch who, Catch can? How silly you are!"

"Then stop. Don't touch me."

"Well, I never!" He had stopped, and he laughed gaily. "What next? This is a funny way to treat your lord and master. Janey, dear, you are forgetting your duties. You're very, very naughty."

He laughed again, and joined his hands in an attitude of devotion.

"There, I'm praying to you—like a repulsed sweetheart, and not like a husband who is being set at defiance. Dicky prays you to make it up. Janey, be nice—be good. . . . Dear old Janey—don't you know what this means?"

"Yes—it means that you want the money very badly."

Her face, that till now was so white, had flushed to a bright crimson.

"What a horrid thing to say! I'd forgotten all about the money. Why can't *you* forget it? . . . No, hang the money. Money isn't everything. . . . But, Jane, I've been thinking—for a long time—about the way you and I are going on together." And he changed his tone again, and spoke with affected solemnity. "It isn't *right*, you know. It has been going on a good deal too long, Janey—and it's just how real estrangements begin. . . . I don't know which of us is to blame—but I want to get back into our jolly old ways."

"That's impossible. We can never get back."

"Oh, rot, my dear. Skittles to that. When we used to have a tiff—well, we always made it up soon. It was like a lovers' squabble, and it only made us fonder of each other. . . . Janey, I want to make it up."

And with outstretched arms he advanced a step or two, pausing as she retreated.

"Oh, Janey—how can you?"

Then he brought out all the old seductions—the half-closed eyes, from which the simulated light of love was glittering; the half-opened lips, that trembled with a mimic passion; the soft caressing tones, made to vibrate with echoes of a feigned desire. To her it was all horrible—the most miserable of failures, an effort to charm that merely produces disgust. But he never was able to read her thoughts. He acted his little comedy to the end—like the cock bird who has started his amatory dance to fascinate the timid hen, he was perhaps too busy to observe results till the dance had finished.

"Dick—I implore you. Stop this hideous pretence."

Then he saw how utterly he had failed.

"All that is done with for ever." Her face had become livid; she shivered, and her mouth twitched, as if a wave of nausea had come sweeping upward to her brain. "On my side it is dead—utterly dead;" and she struck her breast with a closed hand. "On your side it never existed. . . . So don't—don't think I can ever be deceived again." And she spoke with a concentrated force that completely staggered him. "If you didn't understand it—if you attempted to compel me, I believe—before God—that I should go out and buy a revolver, and kill myself—or kill you."

"I say. Steady."

He shrugged his shoulders and turned away. Before he spoke again, he had picked up the overturned chair and seated himself by the fire.

"Very well, Jane. I twig;" and he laughed languidly. "I'm not such a cad as to make love to a lady against her will. I'm all obedience. The next overture must come from you."

She could read his thoughts always, though he could never read hers. Moreover, he had ceased to act, and perhaps made no attempt to conceal the sense of relief that sounded with such a brutal plainness.

"But we can be friends, Dick—if you don't make it impossible. There must be shreds of our self-respect left. We can patch them together—if you don't tear them into smaller pieces."

"Oh, you're having it all your own way now."

"I'm bound to you; and I won't rebel—unless you drive me to despair. I'm your wife still." As she said it, a sob choked the last words, and tears suddenly filled her eyes. "I'm your wife still. I'll carry the chain—until you consent to break it."

"By Jove, you *are* on the high rope to-night."

"Now, about this money?" And she wiped her eyes, and blew her nose. "You've proved to me that you must have it. You've shown that you wouldn't shrink from any—from any ordeal in order to get it."

He looked round with reawakened interest.

"I do want it most damnably, or of course I wouldn't have asked you for it."

"Then for this once I suppose I must give it to you."

"Jane! Do you really mean it?"

"Yes. I'll give it you, if you'll tell me that you understand—if you'll promise that this shall be the very last time. . . . But with or without the promise, it will be useless to apply to me again."

"There's my hand on it."

He promised freely and readily.

XVIII

NEXT day she was too tired to get up for the morning service, but she went to St. Saviour's church in the evening.

More and more she loved the quiet hours spent in church. Here, and only here, she was safely shut up in the world of her own thoughts, and could feel certain that the thread of ideas would not be snapped by a rough voice, or her nerves be shaken by the unanticipated violence of some fresh misfortune. And St. Saviour's was even more restful at night than in the daytime.

She listened automatically to the beautiful opening prayer; and then she retired deep into herself.

Except for the chancel, the building was dimly lighted. The roof and the empty galleries were almost hidden by shadows; lamps reflected themselves feebly from the dark wood-work; and the people, sitting wide apart from one another in the sparsely occupied pews, seemed vague black figures and not strong living men and women.

Each time that she rose, she looked from the semi-darkness towards the brilliant light of the chancel—at the white surplices and the shining faces of the choir, the golden tubes of the organ, and the soft radiance that flashed from the brass of the altar rails. But all the while, whether she sat down or stood up, her thoughts were struggling in darkness and vainly seeking for the faintest glimmer of light.

She thought of her husband and of the shop. He was holding her, would hold her as a tied and gagged prisoner surrounded with the dark chaos that he had caused. How could she save herself—or him? He concealed facts from her; he told her lies; he never let her hear of a difficulty until it was too late to find any means of escape.

And she thought of the destruction of her whole life-work. She saw it certainly approaching—the only possible end to such a partnership. All that she had laboriously constructed was to be stupidly beaten down.

The splendid old business would infallibly be ruined. No business, however firmly established, can withstand the double attack of gross mismanagement and reckless depletion of its funds. As she thought of it, those words of her inveterately active rival echoed and re-echoed. A leak, and no chance of stopping the leak—disaster foreseen, but not to be averted. The leak was too great. All hands at the pumps would not save the ship.

A new and if possible more poignant bitterness filled her mind. It was another long-drawn agony that lay before her; and it seemed to her, looking back at the older pain, that this was almost worse. Confusion, entanglement, darkness—no light, no hope, no chance of opening the track that leads from chaos to security. Bitter, oh, most bitter—to taste the failure one has not deserved, to work wisely and be frustrated by folly, to watch passively while all that one has created and believed to be permanent is slowly demolished and obliterated.

Quite automatically, she had stood up again, and was looking towards the brightly illuminated choir. They were singing the appointed psalms now; and, as half consciously she listened to each chanted verse, the words wove themselves into the burden of her thoughts.

. . . "They have compassed me about also . . . and fought against me without cause."

Altogether without cause. There was the pity of it. If only he would curb his insensate greed, put some check or limit to his excesses, the business would soon recover from the shaking he had given it; and then there would be enough to maintain him in idleness for the rest of his days. She would work for him, if he would but let her.

. . . "For the love that I had unto them, lo, they take now my contrary part."

Yes, in all things he would frustrate her efforts.

. . . "Thus have they rewarded me evil for good; and hatred for my good will."

The good will! How much value had he knocked off the good will already? If they tried to turn themselves into a company to-morrow, what price could they put down for it? Soon there would be no good will left.

"Set thou an ungodly man to be ruler over him; and let Satan stand at his right hand."

Ah! There spoke the implacable voice of the Hebrew king. No mercy for the ungodly.

"When sentence is given upon him, let him be condemned, and let his prayer be turned into sin."

Ah! There again.

"Let his days be few; and let another take his office."

She listened now fully, as the verses of condemnation followed one another in a dreadful sequence. That was the spirit of the Old Testament. The God of those days was anthropomorphic, a god of battles, a leader, a fighter: the friend of our friends, but the foe to our foes. He taught one to fight against the most desperate odds—and not to forgive enemies, but to punish them.

And to-night the spirit in her own breast responded to the ancient barbarity of creed. That softer doctrine of the Gospel, with its soothingly mystical miracles of forgiveness, was not substantial enough for the stern facts of life. She felt too sore and too sick for the aid that comes veiled with inscrutable symbolism, and seems to martyrise when it seeks to save. All that faith was beautiful but dim, like the unsubstantiality of these church columns ascending through the shadows to the darkness that hid the roof. The reality was before her eyes, where in the strong light those men stood firmly on their own feet, and, singing the grand old psalm, craved swift retribution for the ungodly.

These harder thoughts soon faded. As always happened, the hour in church did her good. Self-pity, except as the most transient emotion, was well nigh impossible to her. Courage was always renewing itself, and she could not long retard the heightening glow that succeeded each fit of depression.

After all, she was in no worse a fix than when her first husband threw a ruined business on her hands. While there's life there's hope.

To her surprise she found Mr. Prentice waiting for her outside the church porch.

"Good evening, Mr. Prentice;" and she looked at him anxiously. "Nothing wrong, I hope?"

"No, no," said Mr. Prentice jovially. "The fact is, my wife is on the sick list again; and as I'm at a loose end, I've come round to ask if you could give me a bit of supper."

The real fact was that earlier in the day he had seen Mr. Marsden driving to the railway station with a valise and dressing-case on the box of the fly. He knew that

this gentleman was by now safe in London, and he had grasped an opportunity of seeing his old friend alone. He desired, and intended if possible, to cheer her up and put new heart into her.

"Come along then." She was obviously pleased to accept his company. "But I'm afraid there won't be much supper—because Richard is away to-night."

"I'm not hungry. I over-ate myself at dinner—I always over-eat on Sundays. Bread and cheese will do me grandly."

"We'll try to produce something better than that;" and Mrs. Marsden bustled up the stairs, calling loudly for Yates.

Yates produced some cold meat; and Mr. Prentice said he thought it delicious. Yates herself waited upon them. The cupboard that contained the master's strong drink was of course locked; but there was a supply of good soda-water accessible, and Yates ran out and bought some doubtful whisky. Mr. Prentice, however, declared that the whisky was excellent. His kind face beamed; he chaffed Yates, and made her toss her head and giggle as she filled his glass; he chatted gaily and easily with his hostess;—he was so friendly, so genial, so thoroughly welcome, that this was the happiest supper seen in St. Saviour's Court for a very long time.

No fire had been lighted in the drawing-room, so when their meal was done they sat together by the dining-room fire.

"What pleasant hours," said Mr. Prentice, looking round at the familiar walls, "what pleasant, pleasant hours I've spent in this room. Those autumn dinners—with Mears and the rest! How I used to enjoy them!"

"You helped us to enjoy them."

"You've discontinued them altogether—haven't you?"

"Yes. Not without regret, both my husband and I decided that we could not keep up that little festival. Of course you know, we have been obliged to cut down expenses wherever possible. The times are not very good."

Of course he knew very well all about her difficulties in the house and in the shop.

"Better times are coming," he said cheerily. "I hear on all sides of the low ebb of trade. It's a regular commercial crisis. But things are going to improve. The rotten enterprises will go down, and the really sound ones will come out stronger than ever."

"Oh, I forgot. You like to smoke—but I'm afraid the cigars are locked up too."

"I've plenty in my pocket—if you're sure you don't mind."

She laughed amiably. "How can you ask? I'm quite smoke-dried. I let Richard smoke all over the house."

While he cut his cigar and lit it, he thought how wonderful she was—with the mingled pride and courage that allowed her always to speak of her Richard as if he had been everything that a husband should be.

He sat smoking for a few minutes in a comfortable silence, while she, with her hands placidly clasped upon her lap, gazed reflectively at the fire.

"Now," he said, holding his cigar over the fender and gently tapping it until the whitened ash fell, "there are one or two little things that I'd like to talk to you about."

She raised her eyes, and looked at him attentively.

"Nothing really worrying," he said quickly. "And something which you'll consider very much the reverse.

But I'll keep that for the last. . . . I had a call the other day from your son-in-law, Mr. Kenion."

"Did you?"

"Yes. Amongst other matters, he went for me about the marriage settlement;" and Mr. Prentice laughed and nodded his head. "You know, he says that Enid ought to have been given power to raise money for his advancement in life. His friends had told him it is always done, when the wife has the money; and he thought that the trustees ought to manage it somehow—because he had been offered a great opening. You'll smile when you hear what it was."

"What was it?"

"There was a fellow called Whitehouse who used to be Young's riding-master; and it seems he has made some money in London, and set up a smart livery stables—and he proposed that Mr. Kenion should join forces with him. Mr. Kenion was to go about the country, buying horses—and so on. . . . But I only mentioned this to amuse you. Of course I said Bosh—not to be thought of."

"It does not sound very promising, or very reputable."

"Besides, where did Enid come in? Was she to accompany him, or to stay moping at home by herself? . . . Do you see much of them out there?"

Mrs. Marsden confessed that she had not as yet ever seen the Kenions in their home.

"It isn't that there's the least bad blood between us," she hastened to add. "No, dear Enid and I are now the best of friends. Ever since her marriage she has been sweet to me. But life rushes on so fast—and married women are not free agents. When Richard is away, I consider myself responsible in the shop."

"Just so." And Mr. Prentice, puffing out some smoke, looked at the ceiling. "By the by, that's rather an awkward dispute that Mr. Marsden has let himself into with those German people."

"What is the dispute?"

"Hasn't he told you about it?"

"I don't seem to remember—but no doubt he told me."

"Well, if he hasn't, it's a good sign: because it probably means that he intends to act on my advice after all."

Then he explained the odious mess that Marsden had made of his American office equipments. It appeared that, when arranging to sell these wretched things for a handsome commission, he had undertaken to send his principals accurate monthly reports and immediately account for all moneys received; and had further bound himself, in default of carrying out the precise provisions of the agreement, to take over at catalogue price the entire stock that had been entrusted to his care. But he had sent no reports; he had forgotten all his undertakings; he had received cash for three small articles and never furnished any account; and the Germans said the goods now belonged to him, and not to them.

Mr. Prentice declared that it was the most impudent agreement he had ever read; and, although speaking guardedly, he implied that in his opinion no one but a fool would have signed it. But there it was, signed and stamped; and he did not see how you could wriggle out of it.

"Your husband vowed that he wouldn't give in to them. But I told him, from the first, that he hadn't a leg to stand on."

"I'll persuade him not to go to law about it."

"Yes, I'm sure it will be best to settle the wrangle. You see, he took such a high tone with them that they've turned nasty—talk big about obtaining goods under false pretences, and so on. But that's bluster—they'll be glad enough to get their money."

She remembered her thoughts in church. It was hopeless. He kept her in the dark. No business could stand it—the double attack: bleeding and buffeting at the same time. He would destroy their credit too; these continual blunders and the attempts to repudiate obligations would become known; and the firm would acquire a bad name.

"Don't look so grave, my dear. Your husband must pay up, and make the best of it. . . . And now for my *bonne bouche*." Mr. Prentice's eyes twinkled with kindly merriment; and he spoke slowly, in immense enjoyment of his words. "This is something from which you cannot fail to derive benefit. It is what I have always been hoping for. It will altogether relieve the pressure."

"What is it?"

"Well—immediately facing you there is a large and flourishing organisation, known to the world as——"

"O Mr. Prentice!" Her face had brightened, but now it clouded once more. "Don't say you are going to tell me again that Bence is smashing?"

"Yes, my dear, I am. A most tremendous smash!"

And Mr. Prentice repeated the old story in a slightly altered form. According to his certain knowledge Archibald Bence was vainly striving to raise money—was moving heaven and earth to obtain even a comparatively small sum. About a year ago, one of Bence's bad brothers had been bought out of the business; then the other brother died, and Bence was compelled to satisfy

the claims of the widow and children; and since that period he had been drawing nearer and nearer to his catastrophe. Now he was done for, unless he could get some capital to replace what had been taken from him. For years he had been working with the finest possible margin of cash to support his credit. At last he had cut it too fine. The wholesale trade were tired of the risk they had run in dealing with him. They would not supply him any further, unless he showed them first his penny for each reel of cotton or yard of tape.

"But what makes you believe all this?"

"I am not free to mention the sources of my information. There is such a thing as backstairs knowledge."

Mr. Prentice nodded his head, and smiled enigmatically, as he said this. Then he went on to speak of the solicitors who acted for Bence. Messrs. Hyde and Collins were held in supreme contempt by old-fashioned Mr. Prentice. They were—as he never scrupled to say—sharp practitioners, shady beggars, dirty dogs; and at the offices in the side street that gives entrance to Trinity Square, they looked after the dubious affairs of a lot of shabby clients. It was a bad sign when a Mallingbridge citizen went to Hyde and Collins: it meant that his finances were shaky, or that he had become involved in some disreputable transaction.

"It was enough for me," said Mr. Prentice, "to know that Bence was in their hands. I guessed six years ago what would come of it."

"Yes, but guesses, guesses! What are guesses?"

"My dear, you have only to *look* at Bence now. It is written in his face—a desperate man."

And Mr. Prentice reminded Mrs. Marsden of the fact that from his office windows you had an uninterrupted

view down the side street to the front door of Hyde and Collins. Well, every day, and two or three times a day, Archibald Bence could be seen hurrying to his solicitors —a man driven by despair, a gold-seeker amidst unyielding rocks, a poor famished little rat scampering to and fro in quest of food.

"Of course," said Mr. Prentice, with a touch of pity in his voice, "it's his brothers who have done for him. They have literally sucked him dry. Really, if it wasn't for *you*, I could almost feel sorry for him. But the dirty tricks he has played you put him out of court."

"I wonder," said Mrs. Marsden, thoughtfully looking into the fire.

"Don't wonder," said Mr. Prentice jovially. "Just wait and see. You won't have long to wait."

"I wish you could find out for certain."

"I *am* certain. . . . Well, you always get one's little secrets out of one. I've no right to mention this. But Hyde and Collins recently approached one of my own clients—to find out if he had more money than brains. Coupled with the other information, that clinches it. . . . I stake my reputation—for what it's worth—that unless Mr. Archibald procures help within the next fortnight, he will have to put up his shutters."

"A fortnight," said Mrs. Marsden absently.

Then they talked of something else, and soon Mr. Prentice bade his hostess good-night.

It had been a pleasant evening for her—a respite from the storm and stress af the days. But when she slept, the respite was immediately over; in dreams she fell back upon doubt and difficulty; in troubled and confused dreams she was desperately fighting for life.