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MRS. DAY'S DAUGHTERS

By

MARY E. MANN

"The common growth of Mother Earth
Suffices me--her tears, her mirth,
Her humblest mirth and tears."

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CHAPTER I

Their Large Hours

It was three o'clock in the morning when the guests danced Sir Roger de Coverley at Mrs. William Day's New Year's party. They would as soon have thought of having supper without trifle, tipsy-cake, and syllabub, in those days, as of finishing the evening without Sir Roger. Dancing had begun at seven-thirty. The lady at the piano was drooping with weariness. Violin and 'cello yawned over their bows; only spasmodically and half-heartedly the thrum and jingle of the tambourine fell on the ear.

The last was an instrument not included in the small band of the professional musicians, but was twisted and shaken and thumped on hand and knee and toe by no less an amateur than Mr. William Day himself.

The master of the house was too stout for dancing, of too restless and irritable a temperament for the role of looker-on. He loved noise, always; above all, noise made by himself. He thought no entertainment really successful at which you could hear yourself speak. He would have preferred a big drum whereby to inspirit the dancers, but failing that, clashed the bells of the tambourine in their ears.

"The tambourine is such fun!" the dancers always said, who, out of breath from polka, or schottische, or galop, paused at his side. "A dance at your house would not be the same thing at all without your tambourine, Mr. Day."

He banged it the louder for such compliments, turned it on his broad thumb, shook it over his great head with its shock of sand-coloured and grey hair; making, as the more saturnine of his guests confided in each other, "a most infernal row."

But an exercise of eight hours is long enough for even the most agreeable performance, and by the time Sir Roger de Coverley had brought the programme to an end the clash and rattle of the tambourine was only fitfully heard. Perceiving which, Deleah Day, younger daughter of the house, a slight, dark-haired, dark-eyed girl of sixteen, left her place in one of the two sides of the figure, extending nearly the length of the room, ran to her father, and taking the tambourine from him pulled upon his hands.

"Yes, papa! Yes!" she urged him. "Every year since I was able to toddle you have danced Sir Roger with me--and you shall!"

He shouted his protest, laughed uproariously when he yielded, and all in the noisy way, which to his thinking contributed to enjoyment. Presently, standing opposite the upright, pretty figure of his daughter, he was brawling to her what a naughty rogue she was, and calling on all to witness that he was about to make an exhibition of himself for the pleasure of his tyrant--his little Deleah. Then, turning, with his hands on the shoulders of the young man before him, he was racing down the room to join hands with the laughing Deleah at the end of the procession, ducking his heavy,

short-necked head, to squeeze his broad figure with her slight one under the archway of raised arms, dashing to his place opposite his daughter at the top of the room again. Breathless, laughing, spluttering, stamping, he went through it all.

And now he and his little partner are themselves top-couple, and must dance the half length of the room to be swung round by the pair dancing to meet them; must be swung by right hand, by left, by both hands; must dance to bow, dance to caper with the opposite couple, back to back. And William Day, who had loved dancing till he grew too fat to dance, and was extraordinarily light on his feet for such a big, heavily-made man, never cried for mercy, but cheered on his companions, and footed it to the end.

"Never again!" he declared when the dance was over, and he stood smacking his chest, panting, struggling for breath with which to bid his guests good-night, "You'll never any of you catch me making such a fool of myself again."

"Why, papa, you danced it beautifully! Every single year you shall dance Sir Roger de Coverley, and you shall always dance it with me."

He shouted that he would not. He always shouted. He would have felt himself falling behind himself on this festive occasion if he had been less boisterous to the end.

"I think it has been the nicest of all our parties," Deleah declared to her sister, as the girls went to their room.

"I've certainly enjoyed it the most," said Bessie. "And Reggie said so had he."

"You danced six times with Reggie, Bess. I counted."

"It is a pity you were not better employed. You wanted to dance with him yourself, I suppose?"

"Why, I did!" Deleah cried, and laughed "I danced the Lancers with him--_twice_. And in the grand chain he lifted me off my feet. He's most beautifully strong, Reggie is! Did he lift you off your feet, Bess?"

"Reggie would know better than to take such a liberty," Bess said, who was not dark and _petite_ like her sister, but plump and fair and somewhat heavily built. "And you're too old for such romping, yourself, Deleah; and you've nicely spoiled your frock with it!"

"Yards of frilling gone," Deleah said happily, as if the loss of so much material was a merit. "Just a teeny bit came off to start with; Tom Marston caught his toe in it, and went, galloping the whole length of the room carrying it with him and his partner before I could stop him. Oh, _how_ I laughed!"

"Mama won't laugh! She said you must wear the same frock at the Arkwrights' dance next week."

"The white silk, underneath, is all right--look! Only a new net skirt over it. Mama won't mind it in the least."

"If you have a new net over-skirt I shall have one too. You're not to have an evening frock more than me. So come! I shall have blue again. Blue tarlatan with white frillings on the flounces. Blue is my colour. Reggie said so to-night."

"I suppose he admired you in that wreath of forget-me-nots?"

"He didn't say I was to tell you, if he did! You go to bed, and to sleep, Deleah; and don't interfere."

"I'm getting out of my clothes as fast as I can. Why aren't you getting out of yours, Bess?"

"I'm not going to bed yet. I'm waiting for mama. I've something to say to her."

"What about? Oh, Bess, do tell! I always tell you everything."

She paused, stepped out of her dress which lay a heap of shining silk and billowy net upon the floor, looked at her sister. "It's something about Reggie," she declared with eager interest. "Yes, it is! Oh, Bessie, tell me first. Your face is as red as red! Tell me first!"

You mind your own business, Deda; and brush your hair."

"I'm not going to brush it, to-night: I can't. It's so tangly. I'm just going to say my prayers, and hop into bed."

"Mama won't like it if you don't brush your hair. I shall tell her if you don't, Deda."

"Tell her, then!" Deda challenged, and hurried into her nightgown, and flung herself on her knees by the side of her bed, and hid her face in her hands, preparatory to making her devotions.

A soft tapping on the door before it opened, and Mrs. Day, candlestick in hand, appeared. A pretty woman of medium height, middle-aged, as women allowed themselves to be frankly, fifty years ago. She wore a handsome dress of green satin, a head-dress of white lace, green velvet and pink roses almost covering her plentiful dark hair.

"Not in bed yet?" she whispered, and looked at the small white kneeling figure of the younger girl, her hair hanging in a dusky mass of waves and curls and tangles upon her back. Deleah was hurrying conscientiously through the established form of her orisons, trying to achieve the prescribed sum of her supplications before her mother left.

"Can I speak to you for a minute, mama?" Bess demanded, with an air of importance. "Not here," glancing at Deleah; "outside; just a minute."

"Pray God bless dear papa and mama, sister and brothers, and friends. Make us all good and bring us safe to heaven at last. Amen," Deleah gabbled, her face upon the white quilt, her ears open.

"Certainly, dear." Mrs. Day stepped back, closing the door behind her daughter and herself.

"I don't want Deda to know. She's such a blab, mama."

"Oh, my dear, I don't like to hear you say that!"

"But she is. And she listens to things." Here Bessie pushed the door behind her open, to reveal the culprit in her white nightgown on the other side of it. "I should be ashamed to be a Paul Pry!" Bessie said with indignation and scorn.

Deleah was not at all abashed. "Mama, I don't see why, when nice, interesting things happen, I should not know them as well as Bessie!" she complained.

She was sent to bed, however, and tucked up there, and kissed, and enjoined by an indulgent, reproving mother to be a good girl, and to go quietly to sleep. What mother could be angry with Deleah, looking at her rose and white face amid the tumult of tossed dark curls upon her pillow!

Then Bessie led her mother into an unoccupied room, hard by, upon the landing, and began to unfold her tale.

"Mama, it is about Reggie." The room was only lit by the flame of the candle Mrs. Day held, but there was light enough to show the blushes on Bessie's young plump cheeks. "Mama, he has said something about _that_ again. _You_ know."

"About his being engaged to you?"

Bessie, cheeks and eyes aglow and alight, ecstatically nodded; her fair bosom in its garniture of white tulle and forget-me-nots, rose and fell.

"What two pretty daughters I have!" Mrs. Day said to herself, and, being a devout woman, gave thanks accordingly.

"Well, dear, and what did you say?"

"I said--I don't know what I said, mama. We were dancing that last galop--the Orlando Furioso one, you know--and the room was so full, and other couples were rushing down upon us--people are so horribly selfish when they dance, and some of them dance so boisterously."

"It would be a very nice engagement for you, Bessie. I suppose there was not a girl here to-night who would not gladly take him."

"I know that. I know that, mama. So does he--Reggie."

"He did not say so, I hope?"

"No. Reggie does not always want exactly to _say_ things."

"But what did he say to you, dear? Is the matter any forwarder than it was the last time you spoke of it to me?"

"Well, I suppose so, mama."

"You mean you and Reggie Forcus consider yourselves engaged?"

"I think so. But it was so difficult to catch every word in that gallop. If he did not say the _exact words_ he said as much."

"Did he say anything about speaking to papa?"

"No. But I said it."

"_You_ said it, Bessie?"

"Well, mama! Reggie did not seem to wish to be bothered."

"I see."

"Not quite yet, you understand."

"I see."

In the pause that followed the mother's large eyes, surrounded by dark rings, and set rather deeply in the dusky paleness of her well-featured face, dwelt consideringly upon her daughter's round cheeks with their fair smooth skin, upon her grey-green eyes, and smooth fair hair.

"It is not very satisfactory, I'm afraid, Bessie," she said reluctantly at length.

Bessie's face fell. "I thought I'd better tell you."

"Certainly, my dear."

"I wonder what we ought to do, mama?"

"To do, Bessie?"

"I thought, perhaps, if Reggie does not speak to papa, that papa might speak to Reggie?"

Mrs. Day shook a sharply dissenting head. "That would not be the same thing at all, my dear child."

"What ought we to do, then? I thought you would know. Mothers have to arrange these things, haven't they?"

"Well, you see, Bessie, usually the young man--"

"I know. But Reggie does not wish to. If you must know, mama, he said so, in so many words."

"Then, Bessie--!"

"But I think that something ought to be done. You ought to do something--or papa. _Everything_ can't be left to me!"

The tip of Bessie's nose grew pink, her lip quivered, tears showed in her pale blue eyes. Mrs. Day laid a soothing hand upon her arm.

"We won't talk of it any more now," she said. "We are both tired. We will sleep on it, Bessie. Go to bed, dear, and leave everything till the morning."

Her silver candlestick in her hand, Mrs. Day trailed her rich green satin across the landing, pausing at the door of Bernard, her second-born, coming between Bessie and Deleah. She listened a moment, then rapped upon the door. "In bed, dear?"

"Yes, mother."

"Lights out?"

"A half hour ago."

"Not smoking, Bernard?"

"Of course not. Go away."

To the bedside of the youngest child she betook herself next. Franky, who had been sent to bed several hours before the rest, was sound asleep. There were nine years between this child and Deleah; Franky was the baby, the darling of them all. The mother, tired as she was with the duties and responsibilities of the evening, stood long to look upon the sleeping face of the boy. His dark hair, allowed, through mother's pride in its beauty, to grow longer than was fitting for a boy, curled damply about his brow, his small, dark, delicately aquiline features were like the pretty Deleah's. The elder boy and girl, fair of skin, with straight hair of a pale, lustreless gold, resembled their father; Mrs. William Day was not so far blinded by love of her husband as not to rejoice in secret that at least two of her children "favoured" herself.

The mother sat for a few minutes on the bed, her candle shaded by her hand, to watch the child's regular breathing. "My darling Franky!" she whispered aloud; and to herself she said, "If only they could all always keep Franky's age!" She smiled as she sighed, thinking of Bessie and her love affair, about which she had many doubts; of Bernard, who, in spite of prayers and chidings, would smoke in bed, and had once set fire to his bedclothes; of Deleah, even, who, schoolgirl as she was, had, and held to, her own ideas, and was not so easy to manage as she had been. If a

mother could always keep her children about her, to be no older, no more difficult to make happy than Franky!

She sighed, kissed the child, pushed from his face the admired curls, then dragged her rich, voluminous draperies to her own room, where her husband was already, by his silence she judged, asleep.

There was a pier-glass in the large, handsomely furnished bedroom. Mrs. Day caught her reflection in it as she approached, and paused before it. Bessie had thought her new green satin might have been made a yard or so fuller in the skirt. Did it really need that alteration, she wondered? She lit the candles branching from the long glass and standing before it seriously debated the point with herself. Walking away from the glass, her head turned over her shoulder, she examined the back effect; walked to meet herself, gravely doubtful still; gathered the fullness of the skirt in her hand, released it, spreading out the rich folds. Then, something making her turn her head sharply to the big bed with its red moreen curtains hanging straightly down beside its four carved posts, her eyes met the wide open eyes of the man lying there.

"Oh!" she cried. "How you startled me, William! I thought you were asleep. How silly you must have thought me!"

"Not more than usual," William growled. He held the idea--it was more prevalent perhaps at that period than this--that wives were the better for being snubbed and insulted.

"I was deciding if to have my evening dress altered or not."

"You are never in want of an excuse for posturing before the glass. What does it matter at your time of life how your dress looks? Come to bed, and give me a chance to get to sleep."

Mrs. Day extinguished again the candles she had lit, and began docilely to unrobe herself. As she did so she talked.

"It all went off very well to-night, I think, William?"

"First-rate. Champagne-cup ran short."

"There should have been enough. The Barkers at their party never have champagne at all."

"When you're about it, do the thing well. What's a few pounds more here and there, when the end comes!"

"The end, William?"

"The end of the year. When the bills come in."

"How did you think Bessie looked to-night?"

"I thought my little Deleah was the belle of the ball."

"Deleah is a child only. You never have eyes but for Deleah."

"Bess was all right."

"I thought she looked so fair and sweet. Her neck and arms are like milk, William. I wonder if Reggie Forcus--means anything?"

"Ba-a! Not he! No such luck."

"I really don't see why. I don't see why our girls should not have as good luck as other people's. Reggie will marry some one, I suppose."

"Now, don't be a silly fool if you can help it; and don't encourage the girl to run her head at any such nonsense. Francis Forcus will no more allow his brother to marry your daughter than the queen will allow him to marry one of hers. I told you that before."

"But Bessie--poor child--thinks differently."

"Tell Bessie not to be an ass then; and come to bed."

She went to bed; and, spite of her disturbing thoughts of Bessie and her love affair, went to sleep.

"Oh, dear!" she said as she lay down. "What a lot of bother there'll be for the servants, getting the house straight, tomorrow; and they so late to bed! The drawing-room carpet to put down again, and all the furniture to move into place. And it only seems the other day since we went through the same thing on last New Year's Eve."

"Turning the house upside down is what women like. It's what they're made for."

"I wonder how many more dances we shall have to give before both the girls are married, and off our hands! I'm sure I shall never take the trouble to give one for the boys."

"Shan't you, indeed!"

"Why do you speak like that, William? I don't know that I have said anything for you to jeer at."

"Oh, go to sleep! And let's hope you won't have any worse troubles than the laying down or taking up of a carpet."

The old servant Emily, who had lived with the Days since their marriage, and was as much friend as servant to her mistress and the young people, had once, in speaking of her master, made the memorable pronouncement that he was "Apples abroad and crabs at home." This speech, being interpreted, meant that the noisy, boisterous good temper and high spirit which his acquaintances witnessed in him did not always characterise the deportment of the head of the house in the bosom of his family.

He lay for a time, staring at the dying fire which was on his side of the room. He lay still, to let his wife believe he was asleep, but was too irritable and restless to lie so for long. He turned about on his pillow, cautiously at first, so as not to wake her; yet when she did not awake was aggrieved, and sharply called her name.

"You sleep like a pig," he said. "I have not closed my eyes since I came to bed."

The fact that she could sleep and he could not was to him a grievance which dated from their marriage, twenty years ago. Poor Mrs. Day had grown to think her predilection to indulge in slumber when she went to bed was a failing to be apologised for and hidden, if possible. She was often driven fictitiously to protest that she also had lain wakeful. He received a like statement when she made it now in contemptuous silence.

"I have been thinking about what you tell me of Bess and young Forcus," the father said. "Of course, if there were, by chance, anything in it it would be a very good thing for the girl."

"I am glad you see it in that light at last, William. I have always, of course, known that it would be a good thing."

"What I have been thinking is, perhaps I had better go and see Francis Forcus about it."

"Reggie's brother? Oh, no, William! I would not do that."

"And why not, pray? You and I can never look at a thing in the same light for two minutes at a time. If I want to rest on my oars you're badgering me to be up and doing. If I begin to see it's time for me to interfere, it's 'Oh, no, William!' There never was your equal for contradiction."

"All the same I should not go to Sir Francis."

"And why not? What's your reason? What is there against it? If his brother, who is dependent on him for the present as if he were his son, is going to marry my daughter, he and I will have to talk it over, I suppose?"

"Yes. But not until Reggie has spoken to you. At present he has not said a word, except to Bessie. I think Reggie should. I think--"

"Never mind what you think. Let's come to facts. Is there or is there not anything serious in this affair?"

"Bessie says there is."

"Can't you give a plain answer to a plain question? Is young Forcus, who is always hanging about the place, making love to my girl or is he not?"

"He has certainly paid her attention."

"Is he engaged to her?"

"Bessie considers herself engaged. But as I tell Bessie--"

"I don't want that. What you think, or what you tell Bessie. I want facts to go upon. Without facts you can't expect me to act."

"I really do not wish you to act, William."

"Leave that to me. I am not asking what you wish," William snapped at her; and then turning on his side he seemed to go to sleep.

CHAPTER II

Something Wrong At The Office

Mrs. Day had decided to spend the first morning of the New Year in superintending the relaying of the drawing-room carpet and the reducing her house to its habitual order after the dance. Bessie had decided otherwise. She had decided that she should be driven in the carriage, her mother beside her, to some flooded and frozen meadows, three miles out of the town, where many of the young people who had danced last night had arranged to go to skate. Deleah and the boys had started to walk there immediately after breakfast. Bessie, who could not skate, wished to be there also, but did not choose to walk, and could not be allowed to be in the carriage alone.

The girl, very fair and pretty in her velvet jacket with the ermine collar and cuffs, seated in the victoria by her mother's side, eagerly scanned the broad expanse of ice for the familiar figure of the young man who had paid her such particular attention during the memorable galop. She looked in vain. There were several of last night's partners who came to the side of the carriage and asked for the ladies' health after the fatigue of the dance, and descanted on their own freedom, or otherwise, from weariness. Deleah, her face the colour of a wild rose, her loose dark hair curling crisply in the frosty air, shouted greetings to her mother as she flew past, a little erect, graceful figure keeping her elegant poise with the ease of the young and fearless. Now and again she was seen to be fleeing, laughing as she went, from the pursuit of a skater who wished to make a circuit of the flooded meadow holding Deleah's hand. The girl was at once a romp and shy. She laughed with dancing eyes as she flew ahead; but captured, had a frightened, anxious look, her eyes appealing to her mother as she passed in protest and for protection.

"Deleah will be a flirt when she grows up," Bessie said, who knew that her mother was regarding the pretty child with admiration.

"Do you think so, my dear? I hope not, Bessie."

"She will! And she wants looking after. I thought, for a girl not yet 'out,' she was very forward last night. Reggie thought so too."

"I'm afraid you put it into his head, Bessie."

"As if Reggie had not got ideas of his own! Without my even so much as _hinting_ he said he supposed she knew she was pretty."

"Reggie isn't here to-day, Bessie."

"I think he will come. He said he would come, and as I could not skate he promised to push me in a chair on the ice. We need not go home yet, mama. I like watching the skating."

But she only watched the arrivals; and Reggie Forcus was never among them.

"Perhaps he's gone to speak to papa," she said brightly after a silence." No doubt he thought, after all, it would be better to get things settled. I expect that is what Reggie has done, mama."

"I would not think so much about it, if I were you, my dear. Wait until matters have arranged themselves."

"Yes, but ought not we to do something to arrange them?" Bessie persisted.

"It is not usual, Bessie."

"But, mama, am I to lose Reggie for any nonsense of that sort? Usual or not usual I think you or papa should speak to him."

To pacify her the mother admitted that her father had even thought of doing so.

"Then I hope papa will have the sense to do it; and to get the whole thing settled," Bessie said.

She awaited in feverish expectancy the return of her father from his office, that evening, welcoming him with bright eyes and eager looks, trying to read in his face that which she longed to hear from his lips. But Mr. Day had arrived home in a temper of mind the reverse of encouraging. In gloomy silence he sat through the meal which families of the upper middle classes then took instead of dinner at the dinner hour. A comfortable, informal meal at which a big silver tea-tray and great silver tea-urn and heavily embossed tea-services, took a prominent part; where rolls and patties and huge hams and much-decorated tongues were present; and hot toast and muffins and many cakes. No servants waited; there was no centre-piece of flowers; but the gas from the many branches of the great chandelier of scintillating cut glass overhead shone on the silver and china and the appetising viands to which the Days always did such ample justice in a very agreeable way.

But to-night the master of the house, seated opposite his wife at her

tea-tray, ate nothing of the generous fare. He had a black look on his heavy face, and short snarling replies for those who ventured to address him. Such a mood was not altogether unusual with him; when it was understood among them that something had gone wrong at the office and that it was safest to leave him alone. But Bessie, whose characteristic it was never, for a moment, under whatever stress of circumstances, to forget her own individual interests, kept whispering to her mother, by whose side she sat, urging her to ask of her father that which she desired to know.

"Ask him, mama. Do ask him!"

"H'sh, my dear!" a frown and a cautioning glance in the direction of the scowling face.

Bessie's foot upon her mother's beneath the table. "Mama, why are you so silly? Ask him! Ask him!"

The mother was never for long proof against the entreaties or commands of her offspring. "Have you seen anything of Reggie Forcus to-day, William?" presently she asked.

The man at the other end of the table glared upon her for a moment with angry eyes. "No!" he thundered. "But I have seen Francis Forcus, which was quite enough for me."

A silence fell. Bessie's heart beat loudly, the colour left her face. Her father turned to her as he said the last words. "Yes, papa?" she faltered.

"Your mother sent me to him on a fool's errand," he said. Then, scowling upon daughter and wife, he gulped down a cup of tea, pushed his chair noisily back and went from the room.

As the door closed behind him, Bessie burst into tears.

The boys and Deleah looked at her in consternation. "What's up now?" they asked of each other with lifted eyebrows.

"Bessie, my dear child! You must not give way so. You really must summon up a little pride," the mother chided.

"It's all very well for you!" Bessie retorted chokingly, and sobbed on. She felt for her handkerchief, and having none of her own grabbed without any thanks that which Deleah threw across the table. Deleah, shocked at the spectacle, watched her sister. "Whatever happened I would not cry before every one like that," she said to herself. Bernard, the elder boy, who lived in a chronic state of quarrelling with Bessie, openly giggled. Franky, having pulled his mother's face down to his own, was whispering, "What is it, mama? What is the matter with Bessie, now? Does she feel sick?" To feel sick was Franky's idea of the greatest earthly misery.

Having wiped her eyes on Deleah's handkerchief Bessie rolled it into a ball and flung it across the table, with greater force of will than

directness of aim, at Bernard's face. "You beast!" she choked. "Mama, Bernard's laughing at me. Oughtn't Bernard to know how to behave better? Because I'm so unhappy isn't a reason I should be laughed at."

Whereat they all laughed--Bessie was so ridiculous, they thought; and Mrs. Day, putting out a kind hand to the angrily sobbing girl, led her from the room. "You're all too bad," she said, looking back at the sniggering group. "Bernard, you should know better."

"Bessie's such an old ass!" the boy excused himself. "I want some more tea, mother. I won't have this her sopping handkerchief fell in. All her beastly tears in my cup!"

"Deleah must pour it out for you," the mother said, and closed the door behind herself and her daughter.

"I won't be called an ass by Bernard! I won't be made fun of by them all!" Bessie cried. "You should go back, and punish them, mama."

Mrs. Day, murmuring words of soothing, led her to the foot of the stairs, and watched the girl mounting slowly to her room, crying audibly, childish fashion, as she went. "You must try to have more self-control," she said.

"But why did papa look at me in such a horrible manner?"

"You know what your father is, Bessie. So often irritable at home when things have gone wrong at the office. Go to your room till your tears are dry; I will see your father and find out if there is anything to tell you."

Mr. Day was in the room they called the breakfast-room. Looking upon it with the housewife's desire for neatness Mrs. Day often spoke of it as the Pig-sty, but it was the room they all of them loved best in the house. It was here the children learned their lessons for school, the ladies worked, Franky played. It was spacious and cheerful, and held nothing that rough usage would spoil. All the most comfortable chairs in the house were pulled up to the hearth, upon which Franky's cats were allowed to lie, and Bernard's dog. A canary, Deleah's especial protegee, hung in the window.

Mr. Day had pulled a chair too small for his huge bulk in front of the fire, and sat, looking huddled and uncomfortable, his feet drawn up beneath his chair, his knees dropped, staring at the bars.

"Is anything the matter, William?" his wife asked. "Aren't you going out again, this evening?"

Every night of his life, except the Sunday night, when on no account would he have missed going to church with his family, he went to a club in the town where whist and three-card loo were played--for higher stakes, it was whispered, than most of its members could spare.

"You have taken off your boots, William: aren't you going to your club?"

"No; I'm not going to my club."

"In heaven's name why?"

"Because my club's seen the last of me."

She looked at him aghast, hearing the news with real dismay. She never would have admitted, even to herself, being a kind woman and a dutiful wife, that she preferred her husband out of her presence rather than in it--her children would not have whispered such a disloyalty; yet if he was going to pass his evenings in the bosom of his family, for the future, each of them would know in his or her heart that the peacefullest and most enjoyable hours of the day would be spoilt.

"Have you had any unpleasantness over cards, William?"

He turned savagely upon her where she stood by the corner of the mantelpiece. "What the devil did you send me on that fool's errand to Francis Forcus for?" he asked.

"_I_ send you, William?"

"I went because of the lying report you brought me."

"William, I--!"

"You led me to believe Bessie and young Forcus were engaged. Now did you or did you not lead me to believe it? Speak the truth if you can. Did you or did you not?"

"I only--"

"Did you lead me to believe it?"

"Yes, then; if you will have it so."

"And made me look a fool! I thought it was too good to be true--only you stuck to it. You were so d--d sure. You would have it so. Nothing would turn you."

"William, you must remember I advised you not to go."

"Did I ask your advice? Did I ever stoop to ask for it? I acted on information which you gave me. Went--and got kicked out."

"Kicked out? William!"

"Practically. I don't mean to say the man actually used his boot. If he had he couldn't have expressed plainer what he meant. Francis Forcus never had a civil word to fling at me in all his life. But for your infernal, silly cackle I'd as soon have gone to the devil as to him. If I'd only had myself and my own feeling to think about--Bessie or no Bessie--I'd have hanged myself sooner than have gone to him. But I'd got more than that."

His voice had fallen from its bullying key to a toneless melancholy. Mrs. Day, who had been standing hitherto, seated herself in the chair by the chimney corner, and looked at her husband's blunt profile as he sat before the fire with a sick feeling of impending disaster, and a dismayed inquiry in her dark eyes.

"I'd got you and the children to think about," the man added.

"What could Sir Francis have said to you, William?"

Her husband turned savagely upon her. "Say? He said there was no engagement between his brother--his '_young_ brother'--and my daughter. That such an engagement would never receive his sanction. That he was not aware his '_young_ brother'--he's always sticking the word down your throat; the sanctimonious prig--I longed to kick him!--was on terms of intimacy with any one in my family."

"William!" Mrs. Day, cut to the quick, called protestingly upon her husband's name. "I hope you answered him there. I hope you did!"

"I said the young beggar was always hanging about my house. That he had danced half the night with my daughter--and--and made love to her."

"And then? And then, William?"

"He said, 'I wish all acquaintanceship to cease. I beg you not to invite my young brother to your house again.'"

"He said that?"

"Damn him! Yes."

"But that was an insult!" The poor woman was pale with surprise and dismay. She stared breathlessly upon her husband. "Didn't you show him you felt it was an insult, William?"

William moved his huge shoulders. "What do you think?"

"Tell me what you said to him."

"I swore at him for ten minutes. He didn't know if he stood on his head or his heels when I'd done with him. Then I came away."

"I don't think that _swearing_ would improve matters."

"Perhaps you'll tell me what would improve them? It's what I want to hear, and more than I know."

"Poor Bessie! Oh, poor, poor Bessie!"

"Ah!" poor Bessie's father said, and his short-necked head fell upon his breast, and he gazed drearily at the fire again.

Mrs. Day got up and stood, her white hand glittering with its rings laid upon the black marble of the mantelpiece, thinking of Bessie.

"I would go to the club, William," presently she advised. "It can't make matters any better to sit at home and mope over them."

"Didn't I tell you I wasn't going to the club? D'you think I'm like a woman, and don't know my own mind?"

"I thought it would be pleasanter for you," she said; and then she left him. Her mind was full of Bessie, and the blow which must be given to Bessie's hopes.

"I don't know how I shall ever find the heart to tell her," she said to herself as she went from the room.

CHAPTER III

Forcus's Family Ale

It was the period when to rob a poor man--or a rich one, for that matter--of his beer would have been a crime to arouse to furious expression the popular sense of justice; when beer was on the master's table as well as in the servants' hall; when every cellar of the well-to-do held its great cask for family consumption, and no one had thought of attempting to convert the poor man from indulgence in his national beverage. It was the period when brewers made huge fortunes--and that in spite of the fact that they used good malt and hops in their brewings--nor dreamed, save, perhaps, in their worst nightmare, of the interference of Government in their monopoly. In Brockenham and its county the liquor brewed at the Hope Brewery was considered the best tippie procurable. Nothing slipped down the local throat so satisfactorily as Forcus and Son's Family Ale; and the present representatives of the firm were easily the wealthiest people in the town.

There were but two of them at the time: Francis Forcus--Sir Francis, for the last twelve months, he having been knighted in the second year of his mayoralty on the visit of a Royal Personage to his native town--and Reginald, his brother, born twenty years after himself of his father's second marriage, and now in his twenty-fourth year. Very good-looking, very good-natured, very gay and friendly and accessible the younger brother was. Perhaps the most admired and popular young man in the town. His simple-minded pursuit of pleasure occupied a great deal of his time, and prevented his spending much of it at the Brewery where his brother made it a point of honour to pass three or four hours every day. But now and again Mr. Reginald appeared at the enormous pile of buildings, rising out of the slow-flowing river on which Brockenham stands, and where the famous Family Ale was composed. Now and then he would amuse himself for an hour,

sauntering in the sunshine about the wide, brightly gravelled yards, inspecting the huge dray-horses in their stables, exchanging "the top of the morning," as he facetiously called it to them, with the draymen. He was seldom tempted to appear where the brewing operations were actually in process, but he never took his departure without looking in upon his brother in the spacious and comfortable room overlooking the river in which that gentleman sat conscientiously for three or four hours a day to read the Times and the local newspaper.

He paid his call upon the senior partner earlier than usual on the morning after Mrs. Day's New Year's Dance, but not so early that Sir Francis Forcus had not received a visitor before him. A visitor who had upset the equanimity of that always outwardly unruffled, and carefully self-contained person.

"You are up with the worm, this morning, Reggie," he said.

He was not at all a typical brewer in appearance, his tall, imposing figure being clothed in no superfluous flesh, his face, with its peculiarly set expression, being pale and handsome. His black hair, worn rather long, after the fashion of the day, was brushed smoothly from his temples; he was shaved but for the close-growing whiskers, which reached half-way down his cheeks.

"To what are we indebted for the honour of so early a call?" he inquired with a twist of his in-drawn lips.

"You were off before I was down this morning," the young man said. "I just looked in to tell you I was going out. That's all."

"You look in rather frequently on the same errand, I believe. Would it be indiscreet on my part to ask where you are going?"

"Not in the least," Reggie declared easily. He lifted for his brother's inspection a pair of skates which he had held dangling at his side.

"They've flooded the meadows at Tooley. The ice ought to be in first-rate order, this morning."

"So it is in the moat at home. Half a score people were skating there already as I drove away this morning. Tooley is five miles off. Why need you take the trouble to go to Tooley?"

"Several people, last night, said they were going. I thought I might as well go too."

"Where were you last night, Reggie? I don't want to tie you at home, by any means, but sometimes I like to know where you have been."

"All right, Francis. Of course. There was a dance at the Days' in Queen Anne Street. I've gone to it every New Year's Night, for years. I went there."

"I see." The light hazel eyes of Sir Francis, according strangely with his

black hair and palely dusky complexion, considered his brother's cheerful countenance.

"I'm going to ask you not to go to the Days' in Queen Anne Street any more, Reggie," he said.

Reggie widely stared. "I don't think my going there, when I wish, and they ask me, can do any harm to any one," he protested.

"Sit down, will you?" his brother said, and pointed to the chair on the other side of the table by which he sat.

"I think not, now. I think I'll be off. The ice mayn't keep--"

The other still pointed to the chair. "What I want to say to you won't keep--emphatically. Sit down," he said, and down Reggie sat.

He was by no means embarrassed, or afraid. His brother had stood to him in place of a father since his own father had died when he was a boy at school, but he lectured him as little as possible, and very rarely thwarted him. "Get over it as quick as you can, Francis," was all he said.

"Did you meet Mr. Day going away as you came in?"

"Mr. Day? No."

"He has just left me. He came to tell me that you," he looked during a moment's pause in Reggie's wide eyes, "were engaged to be married to his daughter."

"Well! Come! That's a good 'un!" Reggie was surprised, his brother saw, but not so satisfactorily taken aback as he had hoped.

"Is it so?"

"No."

"Then, what did the man mean by daring to say it to me?"

Reggie maintained an instant's quite undisconcerted silence; then, "You see, she says it too," he said.

"She?"

"Bessie."

"Day's daughter? She must be stopped saying it."

"Oh, I don't know. Girls do say that sort of thing."

"I think not. Unless they are privileged to say it. Miss Day, you say, has nothing to go upon?"

"Oh, well, you know!" Reggie sat back from the table, putting his hands in his pockets, leaning in his chair at his ease, with the air of talking as one man of the world to another.

"But I do not know. I am waiting for you to tell me."

"You don't want me to go into detail, I suppose?"

"You mean you have indulged in a flirtation with this girl, and she has tried to grab you?"

Reggie gave the subject a moment's thought. "I won't quite admit that," he said conscientiously. "She, somehow, seems to think I've gone further than I have gone. She said something to me last night about my speaking to her father."

"Instead of which her father is sent to speak to me. Now, look here, Reggie, you and I have never, so far, had any unpleasantness--have we? Do not let us have it over this. A daughter of William Day's is about the last person on earth it would be desirable for you to marry."

"I'm not thinking of marrying any one yet, Francis."

"I should hope not! Were you going to meet Miss Day on the ice?"

"Well, she said she'd be there. A whole lot of them were going."

"Stay away, will you? To oblige me?"

"If you put it that way--"

"Thank you. I don't want our name"--he was as proud of the brewery as if it had been a dukedom; he said "our name" as though he spoke of a sacred thing--"mixed up with the name of Mr. William Day."

"He's a nice, good-natured old fellow. You should have heard him banging away with his tambourine, last night."

"I'm going to tell you something in confidence. On the strength of your engagement to his daughter--wait! I know you are not engaged to her--Mr. William Day came here to borrow five hundred pounds of me."

"Good-night!"

"I refused him the loan, of course. Wait a minute! What I was going to say is this: I happen to know why he wanted that money. Why it was important for him to get it at once. It was to pacify a certain client of his who is pressing him. She authorised him to sell some shares, which he did; but she can't get a settlement."

"I say! That's pretty bad, isn't it?"

"And it's the one case of which I happen to know the history. There are

others, I am told, and more flagrant than this."

"Will he have to smash up?"

"I hope it will be no worse. I hope--well, we shall see. I have told you this to show you how specially distasteful to me was what the man said to me to-day. You understand, don't you?"

Reggie said he understood. "It was quite premature," he declared. "Quite!" But he looked very thoughtful.

"You will keep clear of them, remember."

"I think I'm best out of their way for the present."

"Instead of skating this morning I wish you'd go over to Runnydale and have a look at that thorough-bred Candy is breaking for me."

Sir Francis knew his man. If Bessie Day had held for him ten times her attraction an errand which had a horse for its objective would have proved more attractive still to Reginald Forcus. With hardly a pang he assented.

The young man spent a happy and profitable day at Runnydale with old Candy, a horse-dealer, much affected by the well-to-do youth of the neighbourhood, he having a racy tongue, and a fund of anecdote, and a pleasant, joking, familiar way of transferring money from their pockets to his own. He returned in time for dinner at Cashelthorpe, his brother's country-house a few miles out of Brockenham, which the younger man also made his home. The two dined alone, as was usual of late, the delicate health of Lady Forcus compelling her often to keep her room.

"You remember what I told you about Day's affairs this morning?" Sir Francis asked, looking across the table at his brother as they sat down to their soup.

Of course Reggie remembered.

"Where do you suppose Mr. William Day is spending his evening?"

Reggie paused with his spoon on its way to his mouth to say he hoped in the bosom of Mr. William Day's family.

"He is spending it in prison."

The spoon fell back into its plate, and Reggie's face grew white. "It can't be true! I'll never believe it!"

"What did you expect, after what I told you? Unless he had made a bolt of it."

"Oh, poor old fellow! But what's the poor old fellow done, then?"

"Done? Fraudulently appropriated his clients' money and adapted it to his

own uses."

"Poor old Day! Oh, poor old devil!"

"Well, get your dinner, my dear boy."

"He was slapping me on the shoulder, and I was drinking his champagne, last night!"

The younger Forcus recovered sufficiently to eat the fish, but his soup had to be removed untasted. He sat, with both hands gripping his table-napkin as it lay across his knees, his eyes on the table-cloth, seeing the pretty Deleah and her fat but agile father dancing down the gay ball-room. In prison! Some one he had known, and touched hands with! Prison!

"I wonder of what the poor old fellow was thinking as he banged away at his tambourine last night!" Reggie said.

CHAPTER IV

Disaster

Shortly after Mrs. Day had left her husband sitting in his stocking-feet over the breakfast-room fire, she, in the midst of her children at their several occupations but attentive to what went on beyond, heard his heavy step in the hall, heard the front door open and close.

"Your father has gone to the club, after all," she said, and gave a sigh of relief as she worked away at her embroidery, making holes in a strip of muslin and stitching round them, for the adornment of the elder daughter's petticoat. She was a timid woman, in spite of her fine and handsome appearance, with a great fear of the unusual. It was her husband's habit to go out. The thought of him sitting alone and idle in the other room had been weighing on her mind.

The children paid no attention; they were all a little tired and languid and disinclined for their usual amusements after the excitement of last night's dance and the exertion of their morning on the ice. Even Deleah, the reader of the family, neglected her book to lie back in her chair and gaze into the fire, the music of galop, and rattle of her father's tambourine humming in her ears; before her eyes figures chasing each other over the blue sheet of ice or flying rhythmically over polished boards.

Franky having temporarily deserted his paint-box and the Illustrated News he had designed to colour for many tinted sheets of gelatine, saved from the crackers on last night's supper table, now held them in turn before his eyes. "Mama, you're all red--all lovely red, like roses," or "Bessie, you're frightful--you're white as if you felt sick," he cried, accordingly as a red or a green transparency was before his eyes.

The game called "Tactics," over which Bessie and Bernard nightly quarrelled, had been so far neglected; a circumstance not to be regretted, since Bessie generally played a losing game in tears, and signalled Bernard's victory by upsetting the board and flinging the red and white ivory pegs in his face.

For, the last night's dance, which had been an engrossing topic for several weeks before it had come off, now that it was over must still be talked about.

How silly Deleah had looked when her white satin shoe had come off and shot across the slippery floor in the last waltz; and she would not stop, for all that, but finished the dance without it.

"Were your shoes too big, Deleah?"

"A little, mama. They were a pair of Bessie's last year's ones, that were too small for her."

"There you go! At me again!" Bessie cried. "Deda is proud because her foot is smaller than mine, mama. If you're a little weed of a thing like Deda, of course your feet are narrow and small. They have to be. There's no merit in it."

"And I suppose Deleah danced her silk stockings into holes?"

"No, mama! Mr. Frost, I was waltzing with, held me up most beautifully; so that after the shoe came off my feet never once touched the floor."

"Lucky it wasn't you, Bessie! It would have been the finish of poor Frost to have tried to carry such a lump as you."

"Mama, will you speak to Bernard, and ask him not to be always saying rude things about me."

"Hush, Bessie! Nonsense! Bernard, my dear, do try to be more polite to your sister."

"Mama, here's a motter I rather like in this green cracker.

"'What I most admire in you
Are your eyes of lovely blue.'

"What would you have done, Deleah, if a gentleman had pulled the cracker with you? Because your eyes aren't blue; they're yellow-brown."

"I should have passed it on to Bernard."

"And why wouldn't you have passed it on to me, pray, miss. My eyes are as blue as Bernard's, I suppose?"

"Your eyes are green," from a Bernard ever ready for the fray.

"Mama! Mama! He's at me again! Bernard is at me again! He says my eyes are green!"

"Come, come, children! Hush, Bessie! You are too bad, Bernard. Now then, we have not yet decided who was the belle of the ball, last night."

It was while they gave their opinion on this momentous subject that Franky fell asleep over his cracker papers and was sent to bed, an hour before his time, his mother going up to hear him say his prayers, as was her nightly custom. She was crossing the hall on her return when the front door opened and the master of the house, to his wife's astonishment, reappearing, stepped in again.

"Lydia!" he whispered, and with an odd shrinking from him, she noticed that there was something furtive in his manner, and that his voice, wont to sound alarmingly through the house on his return to it, was husky and hushed. "Lydia, how much money have you in the house?"

"Money!" his wife repeated, and gazed upon him with alarm in her eyes.

"Money--I gave you a cheque for ten pounds on Monday. How much of it is left?"

Most of it had gone in expenses for the dance. "I have only about thirty shillings left, William." Without knowing why, her voice, like his, had sunk to the tone of mystery.

"Give it me, then. Quick!"

She hesitated, fearfully questioning: "Has anything--?"

"Never mind now. Get it. Get all you can lay your hands on. Quick!"

Her purse was in the pocket hidden in the many folds of her silk dress. There was not quite so much in it as she had reckoned; she slipped the sovereign and few shillings with trembling fingers into his hand.

"I could ask Bernard, and Bessie, William."

"No! I won't take their money," he said. "This will get me to London."

"To London?"

"I am going up by the mail."

"But why in this hurry?"

Not the prospect of the sudden journey, but the something secret and horribly unfamiliar in his manner frightened her. He came a step further into the hall and picking up a dark muffler from a chair, wound it round his neck. She saw that his face was livid, and looked suddenly flabby, and that his hands were shaking.

"Business," he whispered. "Don't worry."

As he turned to the door, she laid a hand on his arm. "Something is wrong. I have felt it all the evening. Tell me, have you had losses, William?"

He nodded, without looking at her. "That's about the tune of it."

"You should have told me."

"I've told you now. You'll hear about it soon enough."

She gripped his arm. "Don't go like this! Whatever it is, don't run away. Is it very bad? Is it--" the word that stood for the worst business misfortune she could imagine, trembled and died on her lips--"is it _Failure_?"

He pulled his muffler about his face, his hat lower upon his brow: "You've hit it," he said. "It's that."

Her hand slid from his coat-sleeve, he slipped through the half-open door, and shuffled down the three white steps which led to the silent street. Then, as white, half-stupefied, she watched him, he turned and climbed the steps again and stood beside her.

"You had better go to George Boulton," he said. "Boulton will tell you what to do. Are you listening? Go to Boulton."

"But aren't you coming back to-morrow, William? You can't leave us like this! You must come back!"

He was going down the steps again. There was a moon clear in a frosty sky. How white the steps shone! For all her life she remembered the big, unwieldy figure of her husband shuffling down them.

"I don't know what my movements may be. Just at present they are uncertain." Arrived on the pavement he turned his miserable, furtive eyes on her as she stood in the open door, the brightly-lit hall of home behind her. "Shut the door," he said with something of his old passionate irritability of manner. "I don't want all the world to know I'm going away to-night. Shut the door!"

She obeyed him, as ever when he used that tone to her, with nervous haste. William Day waited a moment to hear the bolts slipping into place. It was a duty he performed himself every night of his life as he went up to bed. The door was bolted with him on the wrong side of it, now. Never, he knew, in all the years to come would he turn the lock of security on the sleeping house and shuffle upstairs, bed-candle in hand, to warmth and comfort and peaceful sleep again.

Mrs. Day, going back into the hall, came to a standstill beneath the hanging lamp, trying to collect her thoughts, trying to realise, but totally unable to do so, that ruin had come upon her home, her children,

herself. Ruin which she had seen visit the homes of other people, devastate them; but whose shadow she had never imagined falling on the fortunes of her own.

On the William Days; so well-to-do; so respected in the place; who had their annual dance last night, all the nicest, most desirable people of the town present. No one's dance was so nicely managed, so spirited, so successful as theirs.

She was actually thinking of the dance as she stood there, dazed, in the gas-lit hall. They would never give another New Year's dance.

William, with all his faults, was never mean. "Don't spoil the ship for a ha'po'rth of tar," was a favourite motto of his. She had ever thought it a proverb both pleasant and wise. She was not an extravagant woman, but she also liked to have things well done, and had no sympathy with cheese-paring ways. The house was well and handsomely furnished, she and the children had plenty of dress, their table was an excellent one, all of them indulging in an amused contempt of the domestic economies of their friends. Servants stayed with them for years, and it was easy to fill their places when they left. They kept one more of them than was needed, for comfort's sake. She was a good mistress; he, for all his passionate rating of his dependents at times, was a good master.

Was all this finished now? Was it possible? The old pleasant, natural order of things--the only order to which she had ever been accustomed. Finished now?

And if so what would follow?

Furniture sale. Dust of strange feet in the familiar rooms. People she would never have dreamed of admitting there pulling about her carpets, poking her feather-beds, turning up their noses at the breakfast-room chair-covers which were shabby, there was no good in denying it; and with her not by to explain they preferred them so. No more expensive paint-boxes and toys for Franky; Bessie and darling Deleah in shabby hats; Bernard without pocket-money, made a banker's clerk, perhaps--she had heard her husband say bank-clerks had no prospects, poor beggars! Bernard--her handsome Bernard to be a "poor beggar"--!

A sudden vertigo seized her: the hall was whirling round; she stretched a hand blindly for support, and pulled over an umbrella-stand which fell with a crash and clatter.

The girls and Bernard came running out. "What on earth are you doing, mama? Have you hurt yourself? What is it?"

She had subsided upon a hall-chair, her face was ghastly, all her strength seemed gone. "I felt faint. I am better," she got out, and looked strangely round upon them all. Her gaze wandered lingeringly from object to object in the hall as if she had never seen it before. She shivered violently with deadly cold. "I will go to bed," she said.

The children helped her upstairs. She leant on Bessie's arm, the arm of Deleah was round her waist. The stairway was broad, there was room for all three. Bernard stood on the mat below and watched with an anxious face.

"Sure I can't do anything, mother?" he kept saying.

They were all so fond of her, so frightened if for a moment she seemed to fail them. She could not get rid of them till they had undressed her and put her to bed. Until they themselves went to bed they kept coming back and peeping in at her. "Papa will be back soon; mind you send him for us if you feel at all ill," they adjured her.

"Mama, you are sure it is not because I worried you about Reggie Forcus?" a contrite Bessie asked. "Because he is sure to come to-morrow--you think so, don't you?--and we shall make it all right, in spite of Sir Francis. Promise not to worry, mama."

Twice in the night Deleah slipped from her own warm bed to stand, an anxious little figure, shivering in her nightgown, her dark curls streaming down her back, a suspensive ear to the keyhole of her mother's door. People fainted because they had heart disease. Of heart disease they also died. She dared not go in, because papa was there, but waited, trembling with cold and fear, until her mother's sigh reassured her.

In the morning the mistress of the house came down with a pale face and dark rings about her deeply-set large eyes. She could not smile, she could not eat, she hardly spoke, but she was better, she said.

The children would have to know; but she could not bring herself to tell them. That their father was not in the house they did not perceive, but put down his absence from the breakfast-table to the fact that he had over-slept himself.

A great fire blazed on the hearth. A stack of muffins was being kept warm in a silver dish on a brass stand before it. Fish, and broiled kidneys were on the table; a ham, and a brawn, and a glazed tongue on the sideboard. Mrs. Day always drank coffee at her breakfast, Deleah liked cocoa, the rest took tea; all three were served.

Mrs. Day surveyed these signs of comfort and luxury with a numb feeling at her heart. All this, and such as this, would have to go. How would the children endure life without it. Was this lavish amount of food "extravagance"? she asked herself, for the first time. Was it possible she, with her well-filled table on which she had prided herself, had conducted to the misfortune? She was a woman whose conscience was very easily touched, and she began to blame herself. "But I never dreamed!" she said, "I never dreamed!"

Bessie could eat neither fish nor kidneys, that morning. "Mama, there was some game-pie left, last night. Mayn't I have some of it?"

The servant was rung for to bring the game-pie. "If there are any oyster patties we might have them in, mother," Bernard suggested.

The mother, sadly gazing, assented. Nothing would she have denied them, that morning--her poor children who were so soon to be deprived of game-pies and oysters for ever!

They were in the midst of breakfast, their voices a little subdued because mama was not well, yet with an enjoyable sense of freedom because papa, who was so often irritable at that meal, had not yet come down, when suddenly the door opened and without any announcement Mr. George Boulton walked in.

He was a man they all knew as a friend and associate of the master of the house, but he had never been held in favour by its mistress nor her children, who indeed had but the slightest acquaintance with him. He had been a school-fellow of William Day's at the Brockenham Grammar School; a kind of comradeship had existed between the two from that time till now. George Boulton had assumed for years the habit of dropping in at Queen Anne Street on Sunday afternoons to smoke a cigar and drink a glass of wine with the lawyer, but it was a function the men had enjoyed *tete-a-tete*: as an intimate in the family circle he had not been admitted.

Boulton could have bought up all the superior people who turned up their noses at him, his friend frequently declared; it had been a standing grievance of his against his wife that she declined to put Mr. Boulton's name on the list of people invited to her parties.

George Boulton was a self-made man; the process of manufacture recent, and unfortunately fresh in people's minds. "If I invite the man who keeps the draper's shop the professional people won't come to meet him," Mrs. Day pointed out, and remained obdurate on the point. But because he, who did not in the least wish to go to her parties, could not be invited to them, a little awkwardness in the relations of her husband's Sunday afternoon visitor and Mrs. Day had arisen.

His appearance thus early in the morning, and in the midst of their meal was a matter more than a little surprising to them all. He was a short, rather podgy man, with fair whiskers curled upon red cheeks, a common, up-turned, broad-nostrilled nose, a wide, thick-lipped mouth; quick, observant, but by no means beautiful eyes, a protruding chin, and a roll of flesh which showed above his collar at the back of his neck. Well and carefully he was dressed, however, and wore that air of conscious prosperity to be observed in the man who has carved his own fortunes and is proud of the fact.

He grasped, in his broad, short-fingered, red one, the white hand of Mrs. Day, who went forward to meet him. "I got a verbal message from your husband last night, asking me to look you up the first thing this morning," he said. "This is a sad business for you all; I am sorry--very sorry."

Mrs. Day took her place behind her tea-cups again, lacking the strength to stand.

"Do the children know?" he asked, in a tone, muffled indeed, but quite audible in the children's ears.

Mrs. Day shook her head. "But they must know," she said.

"Know what?" they all asked, alert for news, but suspecting no evil. Even Franky looked up from his toast and marmalade with an inquiring glance. Perhaps the circus was coming, and there would be another procession, with elephants and camels walking through the streets, and unseen but loudly roaring lions dragged in their cages.

"There is bad news, my dears," Mrs. Day began, but very faintly; she clasped her hands upon the edge of the tea-tray, the cups and saucers jingled with their shaking. "Poor papa is in trouble. Tell them," she whispered to the man who stood beside her. "I can't tell them."

Mr. Boulton fixed Bessie with the gaze of his slightly protruding eyes of stone-coloured blue. She was the eldest, the only one who could really be said to be grown up. For all his tail coat and smart neckties, Bernard at seventeen was only a boy still.

"What is the matter with papa? Where is papa?" Bessie asked him.

"Just at present--we hope only for a short time until we can bail him out--your papa is in prison," George Boulton said.

He had known it would be a blow to them, but he was a man entirely without imagination, and therefore quite incapable of putting himself in another person's place. Rumours had been afloat in the business world. Money, which the jog-trot profession of law alone could never have brought him in, had been spent: more than once the suspicion of what would be the end of his old school-friend had crossed his mind. But that the possibility of such a, to them, hideous calamity, had never presented itself to the man's wife and children he had not considered, nor was he capable of appreciating the sorrow and shame they would suffer by such a disgrace.

He had not a high opinion of William Day's wife and family; they were people who thought the world a place for play rather than hard work, who frequented theatres and concert-rooms, and dances. It was not likely they could feel anything very much. He was unprepared for the effect of his words.

They were young, they were undisciplined, they were quite unused to misfortune. The children met the news of its appearance among them by a loud yell of terrified protest. Mrs. Day had flung herself upon him, grasped him, clung to him.

"Not William! Not my husband! No! No! No!" she shrieked.

"I thought you knew! I thought you knew!" George Boulton said. The woman hurt him by her grip upon his arms; what a din was in his ears!

"Papa! Oh, papa! Papa!" Bessie screamed.

Franky was screaming too. He had got down from the table and rushed round to his younger sister, who, white, and shaking like a leaf, took the child in her arms. Bernard had risen, ashen-faced, staring. "It isn't true!" he shouted savagely at his father's traducer. "It's a lie!"

"Didn't you know?" George Boulton kept saying to the poor woman who was shaking him by the force of her trembling as she clung to him. "I would have prepared you--I thought you knew."

"I thought it was bankruptcy," she got out between her chattering teeth. "I didn't know it was--disgrace. Are you sure? Quite sure?"

"Quite. There is not the shadow of a chance it is not true. A police officer brought me a message from him from the station-house last night."

She let go his arms, and sank into her chair again; and Franky, who could find no comfort in Deleah's embrace, left her, and still screaming his terrified "Papa! papa! papa!" flew to hang upon his mother's neck.

Deleah crept round to Bernard. "Oh, Bernard, what can we do?" she said. "What ought we to do?"

Bernard, who had sunk into his chair, only laid his arms upon the table, his head upon his arms, and sobbed.

George Boulton thought they were taking it very badly. "This comes of too much pleasuring," he told himself. He looked round upon the miserable group, feeling shocked and helpless. He had gone there to see if he could be of use. How was it possible to help people who behaved like this! He was a widower, but had no children of his own. If he had been more fortunate in that respect what serious-minded, well-conducted boys and girls they would have been: not squeaking over misfortune, but standing up to it when it came; looking about them, open-eyed, for ways of making money, marrying money, and getting on. The children of William Day and their mother were acting like a set of lunatics only fit for Bedlam.

"I'm sorry to have to spring it upon you suddenly. I thought your mama knew," he said again. "But it's a thing that had to be known--and perhaps as well one time as another. It's a thing that has got to be borne, too, and made the best of."

It was quite easy to play the philosopher if only they would have listened, but they would not. Mrs. Day was rocking herself backwards and forwards in her chair, the screaming Franky in her arms; Bessie had flung herself upon the floor and was beating it with her palms and calling upon the name of papa. George Boulton was sorry for their misfortune, but he looked on and listened with distaste. To have no more spunk than that!

"Which of you can I speak to?" he asked sharply at last. He crossed the room and touched Bernard's heaving shoulders. "Come out," he said; and Bernard, openly blubbing, got up, and followed his father's friend from the room. In the hall George Boulton laid a steadying hand upon the poor

boy's arm. "You must bear this like a man, Bernard," he said. "You're not a child, nor a woman; try to be a man."

"What's he done? What's my father done?" the boy asked. He blew his nose and wiped his eyes, and made an effort to hold himself upright.

"It's a question of some money belonging to a client."

"To a client, sir?"

"Your father invested a large sum of money for her, then sold the shares, and did not buy others or give her the money."

"But--he would have done--in time. He--meant to do it."

"Your father has got to prove that."

"My father will do it," with a sob.

"I hope so. There's another matter we need not go into now. Her signature authorising the sale she disputes."

"My father--will explain."

"Perhaps. He'll be up before the magistrates to-day. I shall attend, and shall offer myself to go bail for him. They'll probably want two. Who is there you can ask?"

Bernard did not know. He had not his wits sufficiently about him even to think. "I can ask my mother," he said. He was sobbing again, fallen limply against the wall, his face hidden.

"Do remember you've got to play the man," George Boulton said. He felt helpless in the presence of such surprising helplessness. He looked at the heaving shoulders of the youth with an astonished distaste. What was to be done with material so soft as this! "I am sorry I have been the bearer of such ill news, but there is no good in my stopping now. I'll drop in, tell your mother, when you're all more used to it. Wonderful how quickly people do get used to things! Meantime, remember, I'll stand bail for your father if you can find another. And there's no time to lose. You must shake yourself together and set about it at once."

"Helpless set!" he said to himself as he let himself out and passed down the three glistening white steps into the quiet street. "Hysterical, useless, helpless set! Fit only for pleasure-seeking and money-spending. What is to become of them now?"

They were certainly helpless. When Bernard went back to the room where breakfast--the meal to be for ever unfinished--stood about, and told them they had, there and then, to find some one willing to bail out his father, none of them understood, or knew what to do.

"Do you know of any one we could ask, mother?" Mrs. Day sat, her brow

clasped tightly in her two hands as if she really feared her head would split. "Let me think! Let me think!" she said piteously, but was incapable of thinking.

"Would any of the people who were here at the dance--the Challises, the Hollingsbys, the Buttifers, the Frosts, do it? Which of them shall we ask?"

"I don't think one of them would do it. They would not care."

"But they're often here--to dinner, and so on."

"Don't ask them."

"Who then, mama?" Deleah questioned. She had made less noise than the others, and there was about her an air of purpose, lacking in the rest, although her childish face looked stricken.

"There is no one I should like you to ask a favour of."

"But we must ask some one."

"Let it be some one we do not know, then."

"Could we ask Sir Francis Forcus? He is very rich."

"I will go somewhere--I will ask--some one," Mrs. Day said; but, trying to stand, she fell back in her chair, and her frightened children saw that she had fainted.

They laid her on the sofa, and over her prostrate body renewed the subject of the bail.

"Bessie must go," Deleah said.

"Then, I won't, miss!" said Bessie, and sobbed and choked and screamed at her sister: "I won't! I won't!"

"Bernard must go."

"It would come better from a woman," Bernard said.

In the end it was Deleah who went--the little petted, sheltered Deleah, who had never gone before on any errand of more moment than for the matching of Berlin wools, or for the changing of the three-volume novel at the Public Library.

"Deleah can't go--Deleah mustn't!" the prostrate mother on the sofa gasped. She looked like a corpse beneath the cloths soaked in eau-de-cologne-and-water which Bessie had arranged over her brow. "We can't ask Sir Francis. Call Deleah back. Stop her."

But Deleah would not be stopped. It was a question of getting her father

out of prison, and they had been told to lose no time. While Bessie and her mother and Bernard were still declaring she must not go she had run up to her room for her hat and jacket; and lest they should catch and stop her, she would not stay in the house to put them on, but flung them anyhow upon her when once outside the door. Then, with her little wild white face almost lost in the masses of loose dark hair escaped from the net she wore in the morning, and falling anyhow beneath her hat, and her small bare hands grasping the jacket she would not stop to button at her throat, she ran through the streets.

Was that really Deleah running there, and on that errand? Deleah, who at that hour was usually walking sedately to school; saying over to herself her French poetry, perhaps, as she went, or taking a last peep in her geography book, to make sure once again of the latitude and longitude of Montreal, or to impress more firmly on her mind the imports and exports of Prussia.

To get to her school she had to pass her father's office; and sometimes, if it pleased him to start early enough, he would walk there with his little daughter, her hand tucked within his arm. With her he was never savage, and rarely irritable; on these walks his mood would be playful and jocose, and they would incite each other to play the truant from office and school, and pretend they were off on a holiday jaunt together.

And now her laughing, noisy, loving, boisterous father was in prison--in prison!--and she was running to beg the help of a stranger to take him out.

She gave no thought to the man to whom she was going, nor to the words she would say to him. The difficulty of asking such a favour of such a stranger did not distress her. Her father--her father--her father! was her only thought.

CHAPTER V

Deleah's Errand

It chanced that Sir Francis Forcus drove to the Brewery an hour earlier than usual that morning, and--a circumstance of rare occurrence--that Reginald was pleased to drive with him. Both men came together into the private room of the elder, where Deleah, for an hour which had seemed a lifetime, awaited them.

If Sir Francis had ever seen William Day's little daughter, he had forgotten her. It was Reggie, at whom Deleah never looked, who called her name in his pleasant, good-natured tone of welcome.

"Why, it is Deleah!" he cried out, as if Deleah, of all the people in the world, was the person he most wanted to see. "This is Deleah Day,

Francis."

He liked little Deleah--what young man with eyes in his head did not like her!--she was so pretty; far and away prettier than Bessie, who had in Francis's word tried to grab him. She was the jolliest little thing to laugh with and to dance with; light as a feather--you could sweep her off her feet and dance on with her, never feeling her weight upon your arm.

He held out his hand to her now, but she did not see it. Her own hands were clasped. Without clasping them she would not have knelt to ask anything of God. She went across the room and lifted her little white stricken face to Sir Francis above the clasped hands, and gazed at him with an agony of prayer in her eyes.

"My papa is in prison," she said. "I have come to ask you to take him out."

Sir Francis looked at her in astonishment, not unmoved; at the back of his mind the thought that this was one of a family who had impertinently intruded on him, with whom, emphatically, he wished to have nothing to do. Because this girl was so young and pretty they had sent her!

"Will you take my papa out of prison?"

"My poor child, I fear that is beyond me. Beyond any one now."

She squeezed the clasped hands painfully together, her eyes clung to his face: "No: you can! You can! I heard them say so," she said. "Mr. George Boulton and you can take him out if you will. You can do it with money. He said so. You can do it to-day."

"She means go bail for him," Reginald explained under his breath.

"But why should I do that?" Sir Francis asked, turning upon his brother. "Her father was no friend--not even an acquaintance--of mine." He was most anxious that point should be established. "People in--in Mr. Day's position get their friends to bail them," he said to the girl. "And I shall not be present; I am going out of town to-day."

"No! you must not go!" Deleah sobbed. "You must do it. There is no one else. I don't know where to go--I don't know what to do. We none of us know. You must! You must!"

Half because her strength was failing her, and half because it was the attitude of prayer, she went to her knees, her head thrown back, looking up at him, her clasped hands beneath her upturned chin.

How could any man, however cold, reserved, remote, inimical to her cause, even, turn a deaf ear to such an appeal, remain adamant before her helplessness, her trustfulness, her childish beauty and self-abandonment!

"Who sent you to me?" he asked.

"No one. I came," she whispered. The change in his tone had weakened her, she began to shake from head to foot.

"They should have picked on a fitter person for such an errand. It is a cruelty to have sent such a child as you," he said.

He held out his hand to raise her; but Reggie went to her and lifted her and placed her in a comfortable chair. "It'll be all right. He'll do it. Don't you fret," he whispered, soothing her.

She did not heed him, her eyes were on the elder man, who had gone to a cupboard in the room from whence he produced a decanter of sherry. It was in that primitive time when in trouble of mind or body, to "take a glass of wine" was the customary thing. He was always stiff and distant in bearing, and just now he was annoyed and aggrieved to feel that he was being "had," as the word of a later age puts it. But his heart was sound. To look on that trembling, frightened child, and to remember the errand on which she had been sent he found to be an upsetting thing.

"Sip a little sherry," he said, and passed the glass to his brother to hold to her lips.

But Deleah took no notice of the glass, she seemed unaware of the presence of Reggie, her eyes clinging to the face of Reggie's brother: "Will you do it? Will you save him? Will you?" she implored.

Then, with a gloomy brow, Sir Francis consented. "Very well. I will be in the way, this afternoon. You say Mr. Boulton also will be in the way? If we can do anything we will."

"It's all right, Deleah," Reggie said. "I told you it would be all right."

"And, remember," Sir Francis adjured her, "that what I do, I do for you--and for you alone."

Her petition, she understood, was granted; her clasped hands fell from their attitude of prayer, but her strained eyes still clung to Sir Francis's face. She did not attempt to thank him; words were inadequate to express what she felt--she did not think of using them; but there was adoration of him in her eyes.

With his promise to help, resentment had died out of the man. He took the glass which Reggie had put down, and himself held it to her lips. "Sip a little; it will give you strength," he said in the voice of authority; and she obediently sipped.

"I'll go," she said, but held him with her adoring child's eyes for a minute still, then slipped from the chair and went to the door. But there she turned, and with her head pitifully lifted faced the two men. "My papa has done nothing wrong," she said. "They have put him in prison, but it is a mistake. Papa has done nothing wrong."

"Poor child!" Sir Francis said, and turned away. The scene had been

painful. He was anxious that it should be over.

Reginald had gone to the door and opened it for her. "You keep your spirits up," he said coaxingly. "Don't you go and be unhappy, Deleah." He was passing through the door with her, whispering cheery words, but his brother called him sharply back.

"Reggie, come here!"

"In a minute."

"No, now. I want you."

There were certain tones of his brother's voice which the younger man had, so far, never dreamed of disregarding. He reappeared in the room and closed the door on Deleah's retreating figure.

"Where were you going?"

"Nowhere, in particular. To walk part of the way home with that poor little girl."

"Stop here, will you? I want you."

Sir Francis Forcus was not going to allow his brother to be seen in the streets of Brockenham with any member of Mr. William Day's family, that morning.

CHAPTER VI

Sour Misfortune

Mrs. Day, in looking back over the miserable weeks and months and years that succeeded her last New Year's party, was inclined to award the palm for wretchedness to the weeks which intervened between her husband's appearance before the magistrates and the Spring Assizes at which his trial came on. It is more than possible that if George Boulton and Sir Francis Forcus had refused to stand bail for him, and he had remained for those ten weeks in prison, he would have been less unhappy there than was possible to him, a consciously guilty man, in the changed atmosphere of his home.

What had happened had changed for him for ever his relations with wife and children. Among the latter he sat as one beaten, cowed, estranged. With Franky, alone, for ever again, did he approach to any intimacy. Franky, who, now that that strange talk of his father being in prison was over, and his father here at home once more, holding no apprehension of the future, troubled his head no further about the matter. Him he sometimes took upon his knee, as of old. To Franky he would give languid advice

about the pictures he was colouring, about the amount of cobbler's wax to affix to the skipjack he was making, about the rigging of his walnut ships.

Of Deleah--Deleah, who had been his pet, whom he had acknowledged openly to be his favourite child--he was shy. He had been told how it had been she who had arranged the matter of his bail. His little Deleah, to have gone on such an errand for him! He would have liked never to meet again those pretty trusting eyes of hers that had been full of pride in and love for him.

When he had first come home she had cried heart-brokenly against him, had hung with her arms about his neck, sobbing out that she knew--she knew--she knew he had done nothing wrong. He had had to push her roughly from him. He did not wish to go through a scene like that again!

To Bessie and his son, who maintained a sullen condemnatory attitude towards him, he never spoke if he could avoid doing so.

Towards his wife he held an altogether different demeanour.

The troubles which had come upon him had been induced by his good-natured desire to meet the heavy expenses of an extravagant household. Money which he could not earn in the legitimate exercise of his profession, nor come by honestly, had been spent. Who had had the spending of it but she--his wife? Of his grievous undoing, then, it was she who was the sole cause.

Of this explanation he delivered himself to her in the first hour of his return to his home.

She was too stricken, too dumbfounded, too much overwhelmed with shame and sorrow for him to resent the attack upon herself, or to attempt reprisals. Of her defenceless submission he took advantage, and presently had brought himself honestly to believe that on his wife's shoulders lay the responsibility of his downfall.

His counsel advised him to plead guilty. There was not in any one's mind a doubt of what the verdict must be. The few who cared for him could only hope for a light sentence.

When Deleah heard he was not even to deny his guilt she hid herself in her bedroom, and lay there for hours, face downwards upon the floor. The carpet was wet with her tears, its scent in her nostrils. For all her life that snuffy, stuffy smell brought back to her the time of her uncontrolled, rebellious anguish and her cruel shame.

Was it true? Was it possible? Could this horrible thing have happened in her home? Deleah's, who had known there only careless, happy days? Was this man who was to plead guilty to forgery, who had robbed a poor woman of every farthing she possessed, who was to pass years, perhaps, in prison, really her father? Who had been sometimes so affectionate to them all, always so loving and indulgent to her; who had sat in the square family pew with them all on the Sunday morning, and said grace every day

at meals; who had often told them funny tales, shouting with laughter over his own jokes; who had banged the tambourine and joined in Sir Roger de Coverley only a few nights ago?

Bessie and Bernard, drawn together by their misfortune, and forgetting to torment one another, talked, their heads close together, over the tragedy which had befallen. They were angry, outraged, seeing what their father had done as it affected themselves, and they did not spare him. Sometimes to them--the elder boy and girl--Mrs. Day felt constrained to talk. It was a relief to pent-up feelings to talk, if only to say, "What will become of us? How are we to live? What, in the name of God, are we to do?" To these three, from companionship in misfortune, some consolation was afforded.

But Deleah spoke no word--except to the carpet.

All of them had much leisure. Mrs. Day and Bessie would not show their faces out of doors. Bernard, who was spending a last quarter at school in order to pass the Senior Cambridge Exam. before going into his father's office, decided to work for it at home, rather than at school, where all the other fellows knew. A letter was received from the head-mistress of the Establishment, "all of whose pupils were the daughters of professional men," and where Deleah was receiving her education, saying that, until the dark cloud was lifted which at present overshadowed her family, it would be better for Deleah Day to take a holiday.

"In any case, I would not have gone there again," Deleah said. "The girls are always talking about who their fathers are, and looking down on each other. Not but what there were some upon whose fathers I also looked down. The Clarks--the wholesale shoe-makers--you could hardly call them professional, could you? But now--oh, what nonsense it all seems now!"

The education of Franky had been carried on hitherto by Bessie. In a lamentably desultory fashion it is true; but now that, for economy's sake, they had restricted themselves to a fire in only one sitting-room the poor child's tuition had to be abandoned. It would have been impossible to live within the four walls wherein the elder daughter and the younger son fought through the difficulties of imparting and acquiring knowledge. Either Franky, on his back, on the floor, was screaming and dangerously waving his legs, or an infuriate Bessie was chasing him round the table. The spelling-book was more often used as a weapon of attack than a primer, and Bessie's voice screaming out the information that C A T spelt Cat could be heard in the street.

Economies in coal, economies in every direction they had to practise. Money, where it had been so plentiful was all at once painfully scarce; credit, which had seemed unlimited, there was none. George Boulton, taking things in hand, and trying to bring some order out of chaos, handed over weekly to Mrs. Day two pounds for housekeeping. The change from lavishness to penury bewildered the poor woman, and the change from a table loaded with good things to one that was nearly bare was not skilfully made. For a time, until experience taught her, things they could have done without she continued to buy, and that which was really necessary they went without. And that allowance, poor as it seemed to her, could not go on for long. It

was by no means certain that enough legally remained to them to repay Mr. Boulton for these disbursements. If they had been willing to live upon his means he was not at all a generous man; he did not encourage them to expect pecuniary help from him.

"What do you advise? Have you no plan? What are we all to do?" Mrs. Day asked of her husband.

"You must hang on till I come out. If we're lucky it will only be a matter of a few months."

"But even for a few months, William, what are we to do?"

"You must work," William said. "Earn something. It will be a change for you. I've kept the lot of you in idleness till now. Now you'll learn what it is to work. It won't do you any harm."

"All that is so easy to say. But what work are we to do? Where are we to work? I cannot see that we shall have a roof over our heads."

Then the wretched man, who knew no more than she what would become of them all, and was infinitely the more wretched on that account, broke into a torrent of oaths. "Haven't I enough to bear?" he asked her. "Haven't I myself to think about? Is mine such a pleasant prospect, that you come to pester me, giving me no peace? How do other women manage? Women that have never had husbands to slave for them as I have slaved for you."

Poor Mrs. Day, the least pugnacious of women, who at the best of times had scarcely known how to hold her own with him, fled before the unreasonable, miserable man.

Bessie, in talking to her brother over the hopelessness of their position, used the child's time-honoured reproach against the parent. "Papa and mama should not have had children if they were going to make such a muddle as this," she argued. Bessie had not wanted to be born, she declared. Her father and mother were responsible. They must at least say what was to be done. Papa, she declared to Bernard, should be made to say.

"Papa, when Deleah and I want our hats and dresses for the spring, what are we to do?" she asked her father, with that note of aggression in her voice with which he had become familiar from her.

"Do? Go without them," he promptly replied.

"You know very well we can't go without clothes, papa."

"Then go to the devil," papa said, and getting up slouched from the room.

Bernard, too, who was more afraid of the altered man than Bessie, and for long shrank from any conversation with him, was at last induced by his mother to consult his father as to his own future.

"There isn't much use that I can see, sir, in my sweating away at my books

for this exam," he said.

"Oh? Why not?"

"Supposing that I get through it, what am I to do then?"

"You must do the best you can. This Senior Cambridge Exam, they tell me, is a door to any of the professions."

"But you want money to enter a profession, sir. From what I hear we have none."

"Your hearing has not played you false in that direction. What I had you managed to spend, among you. I was the goose that laid the golden egg; now circumstances forbid my laying any more--for a time. You must look after yourselves."

"But if you could only give us some idea of how to set about it."

Then, upon him, too, his father, having shown a greater measure of forbearance so far than he accorded the mere women of his family, turned savagely. The poor wretch did not know how to help them, did not know what to advise them to do: to frighten them was his only resource.

"Haven't I got enough to think about?" he shouted at the boy. "You and your mother and sisters come and badger--and badger me--"

"All right, sir. I won't badger you any more."

"All I ask is to be let alone--to be granted a little peace. You have no mercy--none!"

But after that conversation the boy gave up even the pretence of studying.

"Where's the good?" he asked of Bessie. "If I passed the blessed thing, where's the good? I shall have to be an errand boy, I suppose, or sweep a crossing. I don't want a Senior Cambridge Certificate for that."

The womankind did their best to persuade him to persevere, but he declared that he could not study in his bedroom without a fire, nor could he so much as drive a word into his head if he had to sit in the same room as his father.

That room where their pleasant evenings had been passed while Mr. Day played his cards at the club, presented altogether a different aspect in these sad times when that unhappy man formed part of the circle. The poor, bulky wretch sat always over the fire--literally over it, his chair-feet touching the fender, his own feet as often as not on the bars; the rest of the family withdrawn as much as possible from the hearth. If there was talk among them as they sat at their table with their sewing, their painting, their books--and being young they talked, and even sometimes laughed--he resented the fact that they could do so, and sometimes snarled round upon them with a request for silence. But equally, it seemed, did he resent their silence when it fell, and would make sarcastic remarks to

them when they withdrew on the liveliness of the society they provided for him.

An undue amount of the weekly two pounds for housekeeping money went to find the master of the house tobacco. There was some good port wine in the cellar; he might as well drink it while he had the chance, William Day thought. What else had he to do but smoke and drink; and he did both, all day long.

He had not been a drinking man, although he had ever taken his share of the good things of life, nor an idle one. His family looked on now at his altered habits with fear and a growing disgust. It was surprising how, in the loss of his own self-respect and the knowledge that he had lost the respect of those who had loved him, the man altered. With astonishment they, who had known him all their lives, saw him in a few short weeks become selfish, greedy, unmannerly, even unclean. The ash from his pipe fell on his coat, he would not brush it away; he had evidently given up the use of a nail-brush; his hair hung over his forehead; his untrimmed beard and whiskers stuck out round the big face which was flabby now, and unwholesome.

Missing the luxuries from his table, he forgot the niceties he had hitherto observed there. When he came to his meals with unwashed hands, took to himself, with apparently no thought for the rest, the best of what he found there, the elder boy and girl would look at each other with angry condemnation in their eyes. Such lapses from a hitherto observed code of good manners Mrs. Day bore with an apparently apathetic indifference. For years, truth to tell, she had ceased to love the man, and the little deviations, which read so trivially but mean in daily life so much, were almost unnoticed by her in the stupefying sense of the misfortune which had befallen them all.

It was only Deleah, devotedly loving her father, who perceived the real tragedy at the back of this neglect of personal and family obligations; only she who dimly understood that this disfiguring outward alteration was but the sign of an inner, more pitiful change; only she who had the insight to read in her father's savage ways the despair, the scorn of himself, the rage with destiny, the bitter enmity against a world in which he was no longer to exist. Only Deleah felt in her heart the sorrow of it all--Deleah who was a reader of Thackeray, of Trollope, of Dickens, of Tennyson; whose eyes had wept for imaginary woes before these bitter drops had been wrung from them for her own; who had learnt that tears were not the only signs of an anguished heart; and knew that the love of position, of home, of a fair name even were not the chief things for which they as a family should have mourned.

And so the slow weeks, even the slow months passed. The muddy, narrow pavements of Brockenham grew dry and dusty in the biting east winds. People at whom Mrs. Day and her daughters peeped through curtained windows walked by with snowdrops, with violets, and presently with cowslips in their hands. Spring, so slow in coming, yet so dreaded by them all, was coming at last. Easter was here. Easter too soon was here!--and the Easter Assizes.

CHAPTER VII

Husband And Father

On the evening before the morning on which his trial was to take place, a different creature seemed to be in the place lately occupied by William Day.

For one thing, his appearance was improved. A barber, sent for, that afternoon, had cut off the greasy, disguising locks of sand-coloured hair, and trimmed the wildly luxuriant beard which had given the man such a slovenly, unfamiliar appearance. His upper lip was once more shaved.

"I don't mind kissing you now, papa," Franky said, who had shirked saluting the stubbly face.

This improvement being completed, he made a change in his clothes, and at their tea-time appeared among them all in his black cloth, long-skirted coat, his "pepper and salt" trousers. As another outward sign of his moral degradation he had dispensed with linen at throat and wrists lately, but now his heavy chin sank once more into the enclosure of a collar whose stiffly starched points reached to the middle of his cheeks. The pin which adorned his thickly padded necktie was large in size, consisting of a gold-rimmed glass case in which was exhibited, braided and intertwined, hair cut from the heads of his four children. They had all of them clubbed together to prepare this offering for papa on last St. Valentine's Day.

And with the resumption of a more careful toilette the poor man had gone back to the decent demeanour of happier days. He said nothing; was, indeed, in a state of black depression which he made no attempt to hide, but he outraged no longer the sensitive feelings of his family by his behaviour.

"Papa is just like what he used to look," Franky said, when he beheld the renovation of his parent's appearance. "Shall we paint pictures this evening, papa?"

They tried to hush the child, but Franky saw no reason why he should not make his request, nor why it should be refused. He fetched his paint-box and a store of pictures he had cut from some old papers.

"You do sunsets so much more beautifully than me, papa. If you'd just do the sunsets for me!"

And presently the father had drawn a chair by the side of his little son's, and was showing him how to mix his colours, and admonishing him not to suck his paintbrushes, as on the happy winter evenings before the crash.

It was a landscape with mill and marshland and water, the child had chosen, and there was a large space to be occupied with the sunset at which his parent excelled, and much scraping and mixing of carmine and yellow ochre and cobalt blues. So that Franky's bed-time was here before the picture was finished. He was sent off as usual, protesting and in tears.

"You'll help me to finish it to-morrow night, papa? Promise you'll help me to-morrow night!" he entreated, through his weeping. But Bessie, whose task it was to see him to bed, pulled the child relentlessly from the room, and slammed the door upon them both.

George Boulton had come in, for a last talk with his friend. His presence was never desired by the family, but it relieved the tension, somewhat, of that sad evening.

The two men sat with their pipes, and a bottle of that much diminished store of "eighteen forty-sevens" was broached. But presently it was noticed that although William Day held his pipe in his hand he did not smoke. With the other hand he shaded his eyes from the gas light, and he said nothing. One by one the young people crept off to bed, and presently Mrs. Day, whose attempt to keep up a conversation with the visitor had quickly failed, also stood up to go.

"Are you leaving us, Lydia?" the husband said when he became aware of her intention.

"I will not go if you wish me to stay, William."

"No, no. Go, and get some sleep."

Then, as for a moment she stood, hesitating at the door, longing to escape from that sad presence, yet miserable to go: "Do the best you can for my poor wife," Day said to his friend. "She has been a good wife to me."

She had lived with him for twenty years, and had, perhaps, never heard a word of praise from him before. When at last it came it was too much for her to bear, and she went, sobbing loudly, from the room.

An hour later when the unhappy master of the house had for the last time attended his friend to the hall-door, watched him down the steps into the quiet street, given a silent nod to the other's silent gesture of farewell as he turned to walk down the echoing pavement; when he had put out the gas in the sitting-room and hall, and dragged himself--who can divine with what heaviness of heart?--heavily up the stairs, he came upon a little white night-gowned figure, watching for him on the landing, outside his bedroom door.

It was Deleah who had waited for him there.

"It is only I, papa," she said when he stopped short at sight of her. "Only your little Deleah that I--I--loves you so."

"Be off to bed, this instant," he said, and pointed an angry finger in the direction of her room.

But she put her arms about his neck and clung to him with stifled sobbing, till with the choke of his own sobbing she felt his great chest heave beneath her clinging form.

When he had flung himself upon the bed beside his wife he was choking and sobbing still, in a fashion dreadful to hear.

"William!" she said timidly, and put a shaking hand upon his shoulder. "Is there anything I can do or say that can help you, William?"

He did not answer her, but the bed shook with his rending sobs; and she lay and sobbed beside him.

When at length such calm as comes from exhaustion fell: "I did it for you and the children," he said. "I thought, with luck, I could have put it right. But it was for all of you I did it. You will remember that?"

"I will remember it while I live," she said. "You may be quite sure that neither your children nor I will ever forget."

"Deleah upset me. She should have been in bed"--it was so he excused his tears to her--"I should not have broken down like this if she had not unmanned me. The child should have gone to bed."

She heard him swallow down his tears, and then he began again: "Deleah and Franky have always been--have always been--"

"The dearest," she supplied, understanding him. "The dearest of your children, William?"

"Tell them that--after to-morrow, will you?"

She promised. "Bessie and Bernard have not such winning ways, perhaps, but they love you, William, I am sure."

To this he made no answer. After a time she spoke to him again: "Have you anything else to say to me, William? There have been too few words between us of late. It has been my fault, perhaps. But now, have you anything to say that might comfort us both to remember?"

"Nothing." He said the word drearily, but not unkindly, and she did not resent his silence. Full well she knew that volumes, if he could have spoken them, could not have lightened her helplessness in the present and terror of the future, nor his despair.

She lay for a few minutes, the tears pouring down her cheeks, unchecked in the darkness, then she forced herself to say the only few words she could think of which might comfort him in the time to come.

"William, I won't talk to you, I won't disturb you. I want you to go to sleep, to get a night's rest, if you can; but just this one thing I do wish to say to you--I do want you to remember. It is that you must be sure never to think I feel any anger against you. Only pity--only pity, William; and such a sorrow for you that I cannot put it into words. I have wanted to tell you all along, but--"

She left it there, and he received what she said in silence.

Only once again he spoke. "This has been Hell," he said, and she knew he spoke of the weeks he had spent, an alien in his own home, awaiting his trial. "Hell! Whatever comes, I am glad this is over."

Then he turned on his side, away from her, and lay quite quiet; and presently she knew with thanksgiving that he slept.

CHAPTER VIII

The Way Out

The prisoner in accordance with his counsel's advice pleaded Guilty. It was only a question of the length of the sentence, therefore, and the judge before whom William Day appeared did not err on the side of mercy. The heaviest sentence that it was in his power to allot to a malefactor of that class he passed upon William Day.

None of his own were present, but the Court was filled with people to whom the prisoner was a familiar figure of everyday life.

It was all but impossible to look upon this big, important-looking man in the well-cut clothes, holding till the last few weeks among them the position of gentleman, and believe that it was a criminal standing before their eyes. The attraction of gazing at, of gloating upon, such a phenomenon was great. He had been a hectoring kind of man, walking very noisily among his fellows, taking to himself a great deal of room. Such an one gives offence frequently if unconsciously. There was none who saw William Day standing up for his sentence in the dock that day who bore a grudge, or remembered.

With some there he had assumed an insolent superiority, with other few, whose position entitled them to choose their acquaintance, he had been unwarrantably familiar. For the minute he held his place after sentence was pronounced his eyes travelled slowly but with a dreadful look of appeal over the familiar faces. Over faces of tradespeople, with whom he had dealt; of clients for whom he had done business; of people with whom he had dined and whom he had entertained in return; of men who had driven him in cabs, blacked his boots, carried his portmanteaux. The slowly travelling gaze had in it something of a sick despair, something of a wild appeal. The men over whom it passed, bore it in absolute, breathless

silence, but they never forgot it.

The great cheeks that had seemed ready to burst with good-living, hung loose and flabby now, the hands that had been prompt with the grasp of friendship, that had waved greetings from window or pavement, that had ever been generous in giving, clung to the rail of the dock, the knuckles whitened with the tension. The tongue that had been so loud in dispute, so rough in anger, so boisterous in welcome, lay dry and silent in the mouth which had lopped open.

There was a feeling upon many of those who momentarily encountered the dreadful gaze that they were responsible; they longed to exonerate themselves, to say to him, "I, at least, had nothing to do with it. I am sorry, William Day. Indeed I am sorry." It was a relief when he turned, at the warder's touch on his arm, and went below.

In the room where he was allowed to sit for a time before being driven to prison his lawyer came to speak to him; the confidential clerk from his own office; his friend, George Boulton.

"It is very severe," George Boulton kept saying with nervous reiteration.
"Very severe."

The prisoner did not speak. He was wearing, arranged across his heavy paunch, a handsome chain of gold. With fingers stiff from their hold upon the dock-rail he began, bunglingly, to detach this chain from his waistcoat. His watch came out with it--a big watch, with a double gold case. He opened the outer case in an aimless way, mechanically, and for no object, it seemed, for he did not look at the time. Then, without a word he held out the watch and chain to his friend, and lifted the fingers which had fumbled with the watch-case to his lead-coloured lips.

Within a quarter of an hour from the time that William Day had listened to his heavy sentence of penal servitude he lay on his back, dead.

CHAPTER IX

For The Widow And The Fatherless

At the initiative of George Boulton a subscription was opened for "the widow and children of the late William Day, who had left them without any means of support."

This sad and irrefutable statement was made in an advertisement in the local newspaper, and was written, in Mr. Boulton's own round and clerical hand, on the top of the list of subscribers hanging in conspicuous places in the Banks, the Public Library, the principal shops of the town.

It was said by those competent to form an opinion that the engineering of

this scheme to help poor Mrs. Day and her children should have been in other hands. That George Boulton's social position in the town did not entitle him to head the list. A banker's name should have figured there, or the name of the M. P. for Brockenham, or Sir Francis Forcus's name. With such an influential person to lead the way it was argued that the smaller fry would have been more willing to follow suit. It was also whispered that one of such persons of wealth and note would have led off with at least a hundred pounds. George Boulton's name was down for fifty.

It was a large amount for him to give--not because he could not well have afforded more, but because he was all unaccustomed to giving. He had been known to be the unhappy man's friend, and because he headed the list with his fifty pounds it was said that no one liked to outdo that donation. Sir Francis Forcus, in order to avoid hurting those sensitive feelings with which Mr. Boulton was accredited, had the happy thought to put his own name down for fifty pounds, and those of his wife and his young brother, each for the same amount.

There were two more names down for like sums, after which came a few for ten pounds, a few more for five pounds; there were numerous donations of one pound; after which the subscriptions dropped to ten shillings, to five--

Poor Mrs. Day, casting a sick eye down the list as it continued to appear, once a week, in the local paper, felt ashamed by the paltriness of the amounts which were being amassed in her behalf. "Collected by a well-wisher, six and nine." Several people, modestly content that their initials only should appear, presented two and six.

"Sympathy" was down for a shilling. How degraded she felt as she read! Though, why a gift of a shilling should have hurt her more than the gift of fifty pounds she could not have explained.

When, after dragging on for several weeks, the subscription list was closed the sum collected only amounted to a little over six hundred pounds.

George Boulton had been ready to pledge himself that it would have risen to a thousand. He had spared no trouble in the collection of the sum. The list of subscribers hung in a conspicuous place in his shop. He never failed to call to it the attention of his well-to-do customers. A case more needing help was never before the public of Brockenham, he would point out to them.

But the public of Brockenham, severely shocked by the tragic circumstances of William Day's death, recovered quickly from the blow, to say that the death had been the best thing which could happen to the family. To be rid of such a man, to have no more attaching to them the reproach of a father and husband in prison, removed half the woeful load of misfortune from the case. That the children were mostly of an age to earn their own livings, their mother still fairly young and strong, were facts also remembered. Then the word began to be passed about from mouth to mouth--spoken in a whisper at first, but presently a word which might be spoken without fear

of rebuke in any ear--that the Day family had always been eaten up with pride, and that the lawyer's troubles had come about through the extravagance of his wife.

The sum of six hundred and forty-nine pounds being collected, what to do with it was the next thing to decide.

The day after the subscription list was closed Mrs. Day went to an interview with George Boulton in order to set before him a proposition, the result of the unanimous conclusion to which she and her children after many tearful consultations had come.

"Of course I must have some plan to put before him," the mother had said, pathetically conscious that however helpless she felt she must by no means appear to be so. "It would not do for us to have made no plans, after the interest Mr. Boulton has taken; and his fifty pounds."

"I wish we could chuck it in his face," Bernard said; he was well on his way, poor boy, to exemplify the truth of the proverb that scornful dogs eat dirty puddings.

"Of all the people who have given, Mr. Boulton is the one I would most love to send his money back to," Bessie agreed. "We may be able to wipe the rest off our minds in time, but we shall never be allowed to forget the fifty pounds of the detestable Boulton."

"He was poor papa's friend--the only one. He was good to papa," Deleah said, but to herself alone. For in that unhappy household was a law, unwritten, unspoken, but binding none the less, that the name of the husband and father should never be spoken.

"We must remember that the fifty pounds seems a great deal to him," Mrs. Day reminded them. "The least we can do is to pay him the compliment of telling him what we intend to do with the money."

However, she found, on interviewing George Boulton, that no such delicate attention was expected from her. The money he had raised was money for him to handle--for the benefit of Mrs. Day and her children of course, but without reference to what might be their feelings in the matter.

He was not a man to doubt his own wisdom, or to seek to confirm an opinion with the approval of others, or to hesitate in the pursuit of a course which to his perceptions appeared desirable. Also, having mapped out his plan or set out on his chosen path he never afterwards allowed to himself that there were others. A simple method which reduced to nothing for him the chances of regret or mental worry.

He was an eminently successful tradesman. His draper's business, which had been on a par with the businesses of half a dozen drapers when he had originally started in Brockenham, was now easily the first of its kind, not only in the town but in the county. It was natural that he should believe in trade--natural that he should fix his faith to nothing else as a means of money-making.

"There's nothing like business," he said to Mrs. Day.

She was seated in his private counting-room on the upper floor of the big shop--it was half a dozen shops joined into one now. To reach that room she had to pass through an ante-room full of entering clerks, busy at their desks. They lifted their heads from their quill-driving to look at the poor woman as she went by. She went with hanging head, her thick widow's veil over her face, the thought in her mind, "Perhaps among the poor clerks that collection of six shillings and ninepence had been made." Perhaps one of the chilblain-fingered girls behind the counters down below had been the "Sympathiser" to whom she had been indebted for a shilling.

She was humbled to the earth. It was so she would have described her condition, as she walked to her interview with George Boulton. If she had been told that her heart, on the contrary, was filled with pride, and beating high with rebellion, and that it was just the want of humility within her, who yet contrived to present a humble bearing, which made everything so unnecessarily painful, she would not have believed.

When, seated opposite to him at the small square leather-covered writing-table in the draper's counting-house, she turned back her veil, he noticed at once the ravages which grief and shame and anxiety had made in her face. He was quick to notice, because, practical, hard-working, hard-headed widower as he was, he had an eye for female beauty, and the handsome dark face of his friend's wife--the woman who, in the days of her haughtiness, had turned her back on him and kept him at arm's length--he had unwillingly admired.

The face of Lydia Day now was that of a woman who had been plump but was so no longer. The cheeks which had been firm and full were pendulous, the healthily pale but brunette complexion was of a leaden pallor; in the darkened skin beneath the deep-set, large dark eyes, little puckers showed. Her figure, too, had fallen away. She had lost her proud, self-assured carriage.

"It's finished her off, as far as looks go," George Boulton said to himself, not entirely without satisfaction. He was one of those who firmly believed his friend's ruin lay at her door. William Day had robbed to minister to his wife's extravagance and pride. It was well that she should be humbled.

"There is nothing like business," he repeated. "And I have decided to invest the little capital of six hundred and forty-nine pounds and a few odd shillings I have raised for you, in a business which will yield a good return, and enable you to make a living for your two younger children. A groshery business, in short."

"Grocery?" repeated Mrs. Day, gazing blankly at him.

"Groshery," he said shortly, and looked hardily at her with his lips set, his chin stuck out, and his quick observant eyes on her face.

"Grocery?" she reiterated faintly, at a loss for anything else to say.

"You know that nice bright little business in Bridge Street? Carr's. Old Jonas Carr's. He is retiring, you know--or perhaps you don't know--it's been kept secret for business purposes. I am glad to have got hold of it in the nick of time, and I am putting your little capital into the business."

"Indeed!"

"It's a stroke of wonderful luck, I consider--its falling in, just now."

"But I do not quite understand. Will someone who is taking the shop allow a good interest, do you mean?"

"Not exactly that, ma'am." He gave a sound that might have been caused by a smothered chuckle, or have been meant for a snort of contempt, and going from the table, placed himself upon the hearthrug, where he paused, making a prayer perhaps for patience to be given him to deal with this fool in her untrained, untaught folly.

"Not exactly," he went on. "I am taking the business for you to work, ma'am. Jonas Carr is an old man now, but he has lived out of the business, and brought up his children out of it, and this with only antiquated methods. With new life put into the concern, and with altogether up-to-date management, there is the making there, in my opinion--and I think I may say my opinion on such a matter is of value--of an excellent little business."

"For me to work?" Mrs. Day asked in feeble protest. "Me? A _grocery_ business?"

"Why not?" He eyed her relentlessly, biting his finger nails. "What did you think you were going to do with the money which I have collected for you? Spend it? And collect again?"

"Not that, Mr. Boulton. Certainly not that." She looked down at the black-gloved hands which lay in her lap. They trembled; to keep them steady she caught them one in the other. "I have been talking it over with my children, and we have decided, if you approve, to take a good-sized house by the sea, where we could all live together, and take in lodgers. That would be a way of making a living which would come easier to my girls and me than any other."

"Easier? Yes. The misfortune is, ma'am, that the things which are easier in the beginning are always difficult to finish up. We'll begin the other way round, if you please." He bit the nail a minute longer, looked at it, put it out of sight behind his coat tails. "Ah no; that scheme won't do at all," he said, quite pleasantly. "I know these lodgings, and the miserable women who keep them, and can only make ends meet by thieving the lodgers' mutton. The groshery line is altogether on another shelf. You and your daughters can not only make a living at it, you can make money. Make money."

Mrs. Day lifted her head, tried to capture something of her old bearing, tried to get a note of firmness into her voice. "I do not really think I could keep a shop," she said. "Above all, a grocery shop. I could not undertake it, Mr. Boulton; and I am sure the girls would not like it at all; nor my son."

"What then?" he asked her, very quiet.

"I think my own plan. The house by the sea. We should escape from Brockenham, which we much wish to do; we should begin again where we--where our story--is not known. For the children's sake it would be best. For us all it would be more--suitable."

"But I have told you, ma'am, the plan is out of the question." He turned from her and kicked the coal in the grate, working off his irritation in that harmless fashion. Then, facing the poor lady again he adopted a tone intended to show her he was not to be trifled with. "Understand at once, Mrs. Day, I will be no party to the money subscribed on the tacit understanding that it is to be properly invested for you and your children, being thrown away in any such hopeless, silly fashion. Your husband asked me to stand your friend; to do my best for you. As I understand the position, you have no one else to look to?"

He paused, but she said nothing. William Day's relatives had been poorer, less well placed than he. As he had risen he had left them behind, forgotten them. Mrs. Day had been the only child of parents long since dead.

"Since there is no one else, I am willing to be your friend--within limits, of course. I have been instrumental in securing for you this sum of money--many fortunes have been made with less. To begin with I did not have half the capital. In doing so I made myself responsible for its being put to a proper use. I intend to see that it is done."

Mrs. Day was mute. The eyes looking out from their dark-stained orbits were hopeless.

Mr. Boulton having paused for the reply which did not come, went on in a lighter tone. "There is a very good-sized house over Carr's shop. I went over it, and in deed into everything before deciding. There are six bed-rooms and a living room of unusual size. This gives you the opportunity of taking a lodger. I have already spoken to my new buyer about it. My Manchester man. He is anxious to board with a pleasant family, he tells me. So there you have a lodger ready to your hand, ma'am; since you fancy lodgers."

Mrs. Day had a feeling of oppression in the breathless air of the counting-house, of being smothered by George Boulton. She untied the broad strings of ribbon and crape of her widow's bonnet, and looked round anxiously for a window. There was none, the counting-house being lighted by a sky-light. Two big tears rolled down her cheeks, she drew a long breath like a great sigh.

"I am giving my Manchester man a good salary," the draper went on. "He would easily be able to spare you thirty shillings a week for board and lodging, and I should not advise you to take a penny less."

Mrs. Day with an effort pulled herself together. "The man who is to manage the shop would want a room in the house, I suppose?" she suggested.

"Manage the shop? What shop?"

"The shop you have been speaking of--the grocer's shop."

"You yourself will manage it," Boulton said. "Nice bright little concern as it is, the business won't keep a man; you will manage it, assisted on busy days by your eldest daughter."

But although Mrs. Day could not fight for herself, she was capable of defending her children. "To that I could not consent," she said; "I would never allow Bessie--Bessie!--to wait in a grocer's shop."

"It would not hurt her, ma'am. It would do her good."

Mrs. Day was silent, but her silence was eloquent. With shaking fingers she tied her bonnet strings--the wide black strings that wanted pulling out, the narrow white ones which must be arranged above them.

Boulton, seeing that she was preparing to depart, assumed a more friendly tone. "You must not feel that you are being hustled into this thing," he said. "The money is, of course, in a sense, yours, although I have had to decide what to do with it."

Mrs. Day rose to go, Boulton came forward with his hand extended.

"Anything that has to do with the people's food or drink _pays_, " he said encouragingly. "If I had my time over again I would take up with the groshery line instead of the drapery. People must have food, ma'am. They must have it, even before frocks and furbelows."

"About Bernard?" Mrs. Day asked, waiving, not without dignity, the other subject.

"I have thought of sending Bernard to Ingleby. I have opened a branch there. It is not a big concern at present, of course, but the boy can learn the business there, and if he has anything in him--I shall keep my eye on him--he can come to us later."

Then he grasped the hand she unwillingly extended.

"You see I promised poor William," he told her, by way of explaining his kind interest in her affairs. "And however thankless the task may be, I shall keep my word."

She could not answer him, but when he released her hand she bowed her head and went away.

Before Mrs. Day betook herself home she turned her feet in the direction of Bridge Street. It was situated in a busy part of the town, but was only a short and not by any means prosperous thoroughfare connecting two of the principal streets. Standing on the opposite pavement Mrs. Day contemplated the grocer's shop from which Mr. Jonas Carr was retiring. His name in small white letters was painted on the black lintel of the door: "Jonas Carr, licensed to sell tobacco and snuff." A dingy-looking little shop; not such a shop as any of those on which the wife of William Day had bestowed her custom, and she had never been within its door.

The three windows above the shop looked dirty, and closely over them were stretched dirty lace curtains. The windows on the higher floor were dirtier still, and in place of the lace curtains were crooked-hanging blinds.

Poor Mrs. Day set her lips tightly as she looked. Then she crossed the street and entered the shop. Mr. Carr, behind the counter, a toothless, unpleasant-looking old man, was exhibiting in an apathetic manner a piece of fat bacon to a customer.

"You can have the streaky if you prefer it," he said.

The customer did prefer the streaky, and took it, half wrapped, under her shawl, and went.

"And what for you, pray?"

Mrs. Day asked for a quarter of a pound of tea, and while he served her looked about at the dark little dirty shop with its mingled odours.

When she left the establishment of Jonas Carr her spirits had risen. The whole thing was ludicrous. Imagine the name of Lydia Day, "licensed to sell tobacco and snuff," painted over the door! Imagine her--her!--behind the counter of that squalid little shop! Imagine Bessie, and her exquisite young Deleah passing their lives in that upper room behind the net curtains! It was ridiculous, grotesque, impossible, and could not be.

But she was to find with astonishingly small waste of time that it could be.

And it was.

CHAPTER X

Exiles From Life's Revels

For the first year that Mrs. Day waited behind the counter of the Bridge Street shop more trade was done there than in the most prosperous period of old Jonas Carr's tenancy. Quite half the ladies of Brockenham left their particular grocers to bestow their custom on the widow. From kindness of heart, from curiosity, from the impulse to do as others were doing, people flocked to purchase their tea and sugar of Lydia Day, licensed also to supply them, if desired, with tobacco and snuff. George Boulton's prognostications of the success of the venture seemed to be more than fulfilled.

Bessie stoutly refusing to go into the shop--it took more than George Boulton to manage Bessie!--he was constrained to sanction the engaging of a youth to assist behind the counter. Mr. Pretty, therefore--he was called "Mr." for business purposes, his tender years hardly entitling him to the designation--and a boy to go errands, composed the staff.

From eight in the morning till eight at night the shop was open; and even when it was supposed to be closed, Mrs. Day could not enjoy an undisturbed rest with her daughters and Franky in their upstairs sitting-room. For the neighbouring tradesmen, all of whom had stretched out friendly hands to the poor lady so unwillingly becoming one of them, had the bad habit of forgetting to make their purchases till after shop hours, when they would send their maids-of-all-work to the private door for the supper cheese, or the breakfast coffee they had too late discovered they were "out of."

Bessie and Deleah fought against the humouring of these out-of-season customers. Often they attempted to hold their tired mother forcibly in her chair when she would arise to go to them. "Let people get their goods at regulation hours, or refuse to serve them," said the Manchester man, now an inmate of the Day household. But when the grievance was put before George Boulton he was of a different opinion.

"Refuse to serve them over-night, and they go somewhere else in the morning," he asserted. "The maxim I have held by all my life is, 'Business is Never Done.' And you may take my word for it, ma'am, successful business never is done. Write that out on a card, Miss Bessie, and hang it over your mantelpiece."

"No, thank you," from a scornful Bessie with an averted head. "As it happens I don't at all agree with you, Mr. Boulton."

So poor Mrs. Day, who did not grumble, but who nevertheless knew herself to be a martyr, would rise from her delicious rest in her chair over the fire, accompanied by Deleah to hold the candle, would descend to the cellar to cut the cheese--both the women were terrified of the cellar, the unilluminated caves and corners, the beetles, the rats. In the shop again, they would take down one of the monster green canisters, purchased of the retiring Jonas Carr for the purpose of striking awe into the bosoms of customers, but a few of which did, of a truth, hold tea, and select the special mixture to the taste of the laggard customer. It was an aggravation of the hardship when, in place of the maid, the mistress would run in. In that case Mrs. Day must stand for a half hour to listen to talk

of the neighbour's children's colds, the neighbour's servant's delinquencies, the neighbour's husband's shortcomings.

Bessie was always cross with her mother when she returned. "It makes everything so uncomfortable and spoils the evening," she complained. "The only time we have for comfort, mama. You might remember!"

As the Christmas season approached Mr. Boulton was inspired with an idea which was productive of good commercial results, but was the cause of added extreme discomfort to them all. Mrs. Day, he ordained, was not only to advertise home-made mincemeat, but to make the mincemeat at home, and of a quality not procurable in shops. The housewives of Brockenhurst made their own mincemeat because the article on the market was not palatable, the tyrant of the family declared. Every one of them would be glad to be saved trouble. Then, let Mrs. Day, for whom he had procured an excellent receipt, make it for them. The sale would be enormous.

So they advertised the precious stuff from the beginning of December; and from a fortnight before this time to the end of the second week in January, the little family worked at stoning raisins (there were no machines to make the task easy then), chopping almonds and suet and apples and orange peel, late into the night, and sometimes on into the early hours of the morning.

For the sale, as predicted, was great. It taxed the powers of the women to their utmost to keep up the supply. Orders poured in, orders were repeated; customers called to assure Mrs. Day that while she lived to do it for them they would never be bothered to make the stuff again. Others came with the intention to wheedle the receipt from the shop-woman. Such was the unbusiness-like disposition of the poor creature, she would at once have surrendered it, had the prescription been hers to give. But George Boulton, knowing with whom he had to deal, had laid an embargo on the property.

It was during the stress of that first Christmas in Bridge Street that the relations between the Days and their boarder, the Manchester man, hitherto somewhat strained and distant, became easy and familiar.

Beside the comfortable chair in the chimney corner which had been apportioned him, a small table was drawn up which held, always ready to his use, his tobacco jar, his pipe, his book, his papers. To this, the evening meal which he shared with the family over, he would retire, preferring silence and, generally pretended, absorption in his book to the obtrusion of his conversation on the widow and her daughters. But in the harassment of the time of mincemeat the lodger's shyness evaporated or his reserve broke down. He could not see women, dropping with sleep and weariness, working themselves half to death over their hated tasks while he sat at ease with his pipe and his newspaper.

"Why should you ladies spend your evenings in the kitchen?" he asked. "It is comfortabler in here. Chop your plums and grate your nutmegs and things here. You won't disturb me."

Bessie at once demurred. "We will keep our sitting-room, at least, free of the shop, thank you," she said.

"If Mr. Gibbon doesn't like being in here alone, mayn't he bring his pipe and see us chop in the kitchen," Franky suggested.

The lodger had become possessed of a pistol, bought second-hand, with a view to practise on the stray cats who made a happy meeting-place of the Days' back yard. But, one of the girls proving tender-hearted on the subject of cats, bottles were substituted, Franky being admitted to the perfect joy of seeing Mr. Gibbon try to hit them from his bedroom window. An honour and privilege highly appreciated by the child.

Mr. Gibbon would not bring his pipe, but presently he appeared among them, and drew up a chair to the table between Bessie and Deleah, and proceeded quite cleverly to cut up the orange and lemon peel, a task allotted him by Deleah.

"It is quite the nicest and least messy of all the things," she told him.

Deleah was careful at all times to show little special politeness to their boarder. She had it on her mind that he lived among them, lonely and apart, and often anxiously she pondered in her own mind the question did poor Mr. Gibbon get his money's worth?

"Deleah always chops the candied peel herself," Bessie explained. "She eats it, and feeds Franky on it. Mama, I should think Deda will soon take all the profit off your mincemeat if she eats the citron peel."

"Don't eat the citron peel, my dear," mama dutifully admonished the pretty younger daughter.

"Only the tiniest little bit, mama. Kind of hard bits that you can't cut up. Bessie can take my place, and I can grate the nutmegs if she likes."

"But last night, Miss Deleah grated her thumb as well. We can't have any of your thumbs, Miss Deleah, in the mincemeat."

It was Emily who made that observation. Emily who had gone into the family nineteen years ago as nurse to the eldest child. She had stuck by them in their reverse of fortune--indeed it had never entered either her mind or theirs, so completely had the long service made her one of them, that she could do anything else--and she now occupied the position of "general" in the upstairs kitchen of Bridge Street. She was chopping suet at the present moment, standing apart, at a side table, because Bessie had declared that to see the suet cut made her feel ill.

"Miss Bessie's more nice than wise," Emily commented; but she removed her material from the young lady's vicinity.

"I'm glad to know that I'm nice, at any rate," Bessie said, with her head on one side. "So long as I'm nice, Emily--?"

"Oh there's more than me in the world that think you that, I suppose, Miss Bessie."

"I don't know, I'm sure," Miss Bessie languidly murmured. "I only know I'm very tired."

"Give up for to-night then, dear, and go to bed."

"Nonsense, mama. As if I could leave you all! Why should not I work as well as poor Mr. Gibbon, for instance?"

"Some are made for work and some aren't, I suppose," that gentleman said, with a side glance at Bessie's white hands. "I'm one of the workers. I don't mind tackling your nutmegs after I've finished my lemons, if you'll say the word, Miss Bessie."

"Mama, I wonder what Mr. Boulton would say if he came in now and found me working like a slave at ten o'clock at night?"

"Nothing complimentary, dear, I fear."

"Horrid, rude man! Yesterday afternoon he found me sitting over the fire reading. I was in your comfortable chair, Mr. Gibbon--I hope you don't mind?"

"I hope you'll always do it the honour of sitting in it, Miss Bessie; and you, Miss Deleah--"

"I was gloriously comfortable; and Mr. Boulton took upon him to lecture me."

"Well, he doesn't stop at much! but how he ever screws up his courage to lecture _you_, Miss Bessie, passes everything," said the polite Manchester man.

"I thought you'd be surprised," and Miss Day smiled obliquely at the nutmegs. "He called me names, too."

"Names, Bessie! Surely not! What can you mean by 'names'?"

"He called me a drone, mama. A drone in a busy hive."

"And how did you answer him, Bessie?"

"I just went on, toasting my toes at the fire, and reading my book."

"And what then, Miss Bessie?"

"Oh, then he sat down opposite to me and preached me a sermon. A sermon of five minutes, by the clock. He said--"

"We don't want to hear any sermons, thank you," from a petulant, tired Franky. In the stress of their work the poor child's hour for retiring was often overlooked.

"Go to bed, Franky. Go off, this minute. Mama, send Franky to bed."

"Oh, go at once to bed, my darling boy."

Franky, crying that he wanted to sit by Deleah and see her cut the citron peel, was removed: "I hate Bessie," he announced at the door.

"Go! spoilt little wretch!" cried Bessie, threatening him with the nutmeg grater. "Mama, Franky is becoming as rude as a horrid little street boy."

"Never mind, my dear. Tell me what Mr. Boulton said in the sermon."

"He said my happiness as well as my duty was to work. He said my 'peevishness,' and my 'nervy fits'--wasn't it rude of him!--came from idleness. He did, Mr. Gibbon, he said it in so many words."

"I hope you gave him one for hisself, Miss Bessie?"

"Oh, I hope not!" from an alarmed mother.

"It is what he wants, ma'am; and it is what he never gets. It is bully, bully, bully, all the day, with the governor. And unless Miss Bessie stands up to him--"

"You may trust me not to be afraid. All the rest are afraid. Not!! I just raised my eyes to him, and said 'I wonder you dare to use such words to me, Mr. Boulton!' You should have seen him look! 'It's because I take an interest in you,' he said; quite quiet, like any other man. It does him good to snub him, mama."

"It was kind of him to say he takes an interest," Deleah put in.

"Now if he was only a handsome young gentleman, and Miss Bessie could take an interest in him, there'd be more sense," Emily remarked from her side table.

"Don't be such a ridiculous old thing, Emily!"

"Well, he've got his kerridge!"

"And a pretty sight he looks driving in it! podgy, fat, vulgar man!"

"Miss Bessie would never look twice in that direction, I'm sure," Mr. Gibbon declared, and Mrs. Day gave one of her now seldom heard laughs.

"How can you all talk such nonsense?" she said.

"Oh, do let us do it!" Deleah pleaded. "It so helps with the citron peel, mama."

Deleah said very little in those days. The shock, the grief for the cruel end of a father, for all his faults most dearly loved, told more on her

than on any of his other children. She had not felt the sense of injury against him which had helped Bessie to support the tragedy of his death, nor had she Bessie's engrossing preoccupations with herself, her looks, her fancies, her love affairs. Bernard at George Boulton's little branch shop in the country town of Ingleby, chained body and soul to the heavy drudgery of uncongenial occupation, thought of his father only with rage and resentment. Franky, childlike, had apparently forgotten.

Deleah could not forget. Night by night her pillow was wet with tears shed for him on whose neck she had sobbed for those never-to-be-forgotten minutes of his last night on earth. She tortured herself with a secret, unearned remorse. Forgetting her habitual love and dutifulness, her mind would dwell on some remembered occasion when she told herself she had failed him. When she had pretended not to notice a hand held out for hers, or had shirked some little service she might have done him.

Of none such small sins against him had the father been aware, but she was tormented by the belief that she had wounded him. He seemed ever to be looking at her with reproachful eyes. She forgot his ill temper, his unlovableness, his want of consideration for any one but himself, during the last wretched weeks of his sojourn among them, and saw him only as he had been upon that last night before his trial, heard always the great sob which had seemed to rend his chest as she had leant upon it.

Her seventeenth birthday was past now, and it seemed to her mother that her young daughter had grown of a still more exceeding prettiness. Poor Mrs. Day often longed for a sympathetic ear into which to breathe her maternal admiration. With Bessie the subject of Deleah's beauty was like a red rag to a bull. Emily, the general and confidential friend of the family, was not an altogether satisfactory confidante on that matter, because in her eyes, blinded by affection, the whole family was equally beautiful.

"You've got handsome children, ma'am. I've knowed it since folk used to crowd round my pram to have a look at them when I wheeled 'em out, times gone by, as babies. Ofttimes the pavement got blocked, as you've heard me mention before. There's no two opinions about their looks, and we know which side they got them from."

There were no two opinions about that, at any rate. Not even the most charitable critic could have credited poor William Day with good looks; and the tired pathetic face of his widow was a handsome face still.

CHAPTER XI

The Attractive Bessie

Having been permitted to take his place among them, and to chop material for mincemeat at their kitchen table, it was felt by them all that their

boarder could never be a stranger to the widow and her children again. Through pride and through shyness they had held him at arm's length, but now that they had joked together about George Boulton's peculiarities, and he had ventured with playful force to take the nutmeg grater from Bessie's weary fingers, valiantly completing her task himself, it would have been impossible, even if desirable, to return to their earlier relations.

Bessie, who had treated him with a carefully masked hauteur in the beginning, was among the first to place him on terms of easy familiarity. She had strongly resented the inclusion of a stranger in their family circle, and presently was welcoming his presence there as supplying the one item of interest in the _menage_.

"A year ago, mama, we should not have admitted Mr. Boulton's Manchester man to the same table with us. And now, here we are keeping his plates hot, if he comes in late, and telling him all our secrets."

"Mama and I don't tell Mr. Gibbon any secrets," Deleah said.

"I dare say Mr. Gibbon does not want to hear them. As for me I find, when you live in the same house with a man, it's impossible to keep him at arm's length."

"Who wants to keep him at arm's length? I only mentioned I did not feel called upon to tell him any secrets."

"And I only said he wouldn't care to hear your secrets--if you have any."

"I haven't," Deleah admitted, laughing.

"I have, then. And I shall tell them to who I like, spite of Deda's pertness, mama."

"Say to 'whom you like,' Bessie."

"Mama, will you speak to Deleah? She is being impertinent to me again."

How impossible it would have been to entertain Reggie Forcus and Mr. Gibbon at the same board, Bessie often felt. But the days when Reggie had dropped in to meals with the prosperous Days in Queen Anne Street were over for ever. Half a loaf was better than no bread. To know that a male creature, who could not be indifferent to her, was an inmate of the house was as she often said to herself--something.

She took no interest in him, of course. A young man out of a draper's shop! But it was more amusing to subjugate even such an one as he than to have no one at her feet.

So, at the hour when Boulton's great shutters went up over the front of the six shops in Market Street, and the Manchester man was free to go to his evening meal, Bessie took an extreme care to be ready to receive him. She had allowed herself to become a little slovenly over her appearance in the day-time--who was there to look at her, or care what she wore in the

sitting-room over the shop? But by supper-time she would have changed into her most becoming frock, would have arranged her hair to the greatest advantage, would have rubbed with a rough towel, or beaten with a hair-brush the plump, fair cheeks she considered too pale.

There was always an irregularity about the meals in the Day family. The shopkeeper was often kept below for an hour after the time she should have been seated at the board above, and when she was detained in such a way, Deleah would always stay too, to help her mother. But Bessie had ordained that the meal should go on without them. It was not right that a man, at work all day, should be kept waiting for his food at night. And so it often happened that he and she would sit, *_tete-a-tete_*, over the cold meat and pickles, of which, with the addition of bottled beer for the boarder, the meal consisted.

Many intimate items of her own heart history did Bessie confide to the politely attentive ear of Mr. Charles Gibbon. She did not receive confidences in return, or ask for them. What could the young shopman have to relate to compare with the interest attending Bessie's revelations?

He was no prince in disguise as it would have been so pleasant to discover him to be--this short, thickly-made, middle-aged man, with the prominent, bright, dark eyes, the large dark head, the knobby red forehead, whose parents had kept a small draper's shop in a small market-town in the county.

What could a man so born and nurtured have to give Bessie in return for the stories of the high life to which she had been accustomed? But he must consider himself flattered by Bessie's condescension, he must see how attractive she looked seated beneath the three-branched bronze gas-burner to preside at his supper.

Emily, bringing in the hot sweet pudding to replace the cold meat, would wag a facetiously warning head at the young lady behind the back of the unconscious Mr. Gibbon. "Don't you go leading that nice young chap on to make a fool of hisself over you, Miss Bessie," she would caution the girl, the next day.

"He can take care of himself. Make your mind quite easy," Bessie would answer, well pleased. She loved to discuss such topics with her devoted admirer, Emily, and liked to be accused of breaking hearts.

"We shall be late for supper again," Mrs. Day, busy with daybook and ledger in the shop, would say to the young daughter beside her.

"Never mind, mama. Perhaps it is charity not to hurry," Deleah on one occasion responded.

"Oh, nonsense, dear!" said Mrs. Day, looking up with alarm in her tired eyes.

"Well, if Mr. Gibbon is in love with Bessie?"

"If,' indeed!"

"That will be the end of it. You'll see."

"The end indeed, Deleah!"

"You think Bessie would not take him?"

"Bessie will, at least, wait till he asks her."

"But should you object, mama? He is not a gentleman, I suppose; Bessie says he's not. But I think we've got to accept things and people and our place, as we are; not always to be looking back to what used to be. I often wish Bessie would see it like that, mama."

"We should be all happier if we could, I have no doubt," poor Mrs. Day sighed. The poor lady could not always keep before her mind the fate of Lot's wife, and often cast longing eyes towards the pleasant, easeful land that had been home.

"And I am not always inclined to take Bessie's opinion as to what is a lady or what is a gentleman."

"Bessie does not think so much as you do, Deleah."

"I don't know that I think: I feel," Deleah explained.

While she waited for her mother to finish her books she was weighing out and making up into half-ounce packets the tobacco Lydia Day was licensed to sell. She dropped her voice to a more confidential tone, although she and her mother were alone in the shop, where they were doing their evening's work by the aid of the one melancholy gas-burner, to which they restricted themselves after business hours. It gave insufficient light for the low-ceilinged, narrow length of the place.

"Do you think, mama, Bessie ought to be always saying horrid things about Mr. Boulton? Making fun of him, mimicking him, complaining of everything he does; not only to you and me, but to Mr. Gibbon? to Emily--to any one who will listen? Do you think a lady--what you and I think a lady, not what Bessie thinks--would do that?"

"Bessie is sensitive--and very proud. We must not forget that--poor Bessie! And Mr. Boulton's methods are not always pleasant, Deleah."

"No. But he has been our friend. He has stuck to us. Who else has, of all the people with whom we were friendly? And we were never nice to him, in the old days--not asking him to our parties, you remember, and never being friendly to him on Sunday afternoons. Oh, how I wish we had been, mama!"

Mrs. Day acquiesced, but not with enthusiasm. She did not like George Boulton well enough to regret having kept him at arm's length while she could.

"I am sure we ought to be grateful to him," Mrs. Day admitted. She was very tired; the scent of the tobacco Deleah was pulling about, staining the tips of her small white fingers, was in her nostrils; she did not feel especially grateful.

"Then, when Bessie is laying down the law about what a lady should do I wish you would remind her, mama, that a lady must show gratitude for kindness."

"And why, my dear, are you suddenly fighting the battles of poor Mr. Boulton?"

"That is a secret," Deleah said. "But one day, if you are good, I will tell you."

The sitting-room, with supper nicely laid, with Bessie nicely dressed, fair and plump and attractive in the gas light, happily chatting to Mr. Gibbon, looked a Paradise of Rest in the eyes of poor wearied Mrs. Day. The room was in fact a very pleasant one; long, low, with broad seats before each of the three windows looking into the street; with a tall and narrow oak mantelpiece opposite the three windows; with panelled oak walls, heavy oak rafters, supporting the low ceiling, old brass finger plates high up on the oaken door--all as in the days when old Jonas Carr's grandfather first kept shop in Bridge Street. It was made sweet with flowers too. A basket of pink tulips set in moss occupied the central position on the supper-table, and some pots of primulas, fully in bloom, were on the window-seats; above that window upon the corner of whose seat Miss Deleah Day liked to sit, her slight and supple body curled into as small as possible a space in order not to incommode the primulas, a brass birdcage holding a canary was hung.

Bessie was carrying on an animated but evidently confidential conversation with the boarder, as mother and daughter came into the room.

"He was riding past again to-day," she was saying. "I took care that he should not have the pleasure of thinking I was looking out for him; but peeping behind the curtains I could see him gazing up at the window. What consolation the poor thing finds in just looking at a window I'm sure I don't know."

"He sees you there, Miss Bessie. Or hopes to see you."

"You can't see me from the street."

"From the opposite pavement you can. I know, because I have seen Miss Deleah sitting there; with her book, and the bird, and the flowers."

Bessie's attention was caught by that piece of intelligence. "Can you? Are you sure?" she asked; and at that moment, unpropitious for her, Deleah appeared with her mother.

"Mama! When Deda sits on the window-seat in the corner she can be seen from the street!"

"Well, my dear?"

"Well, mama! You don't wish Deda to make herself conspicuous, I suppose?"

"Who says I make myself conspicuous?" an ireful Deleah demands. "Who has been saying anything about me?"

"I," the Manchester man hurriedly admits. "I did not say you were conspicuous, Miss Deleah. I only said I had seen you sitting there with your book--among the flowers."

"She is not to sit there again, mama. Will you please say so? Deda, you are not to sit in the window again. We can't help living above a grocer's shop, but we need not make a display of ourselves."

"If it offends Mr. Gibbon he does not need to look at the window. I shall certainly sit there if I wish."

"Come, come, my dears. There is enough about it. Pray let us have supper in peace."

"You've had a tiring day, ma'am," says Mr. Gibbon. "Let me persuade you to have a glass of ale with your beef, to-night. Just to revive you. Forcus's Family Ale is the finest pick-me-up."

"Reggie Forcus has ridden past three times this afternoon, mama," Bessie informed her parent. Then turned sharply on her sister, "You were at school, miss."

"I met him as I came away," said Deleah, seating herself at the table. "I wish the pleasure had been yours instead of mine, Bessie."

"Did he stop to speak?"

"Of course he stopped. He always stops."

"Well?"

"He asked for you."

"He always does, I suppose?"

"Always."

"There!" said Bessie on the note of triumph, looking round.

"There!" echoed Deleah as she helped herself to the mustard Mr. Gibbon was offering her.

"Mama, do you hear Deda? She is not to mock me."

"Bread, Miss Deleah? Pickles, Mrs. Day?" hastily interposes an obsequious Mr. Gibbon. He was assiduous in his attentions on the ladies, ever anxiously polite and kind. That he found his happiness among them and was eager to gain and to retain their favour he plainly showed. If he sometimes jarred on their fastidiousness he did not know it.

"Any interesting incident in the day's trade, ma'am?" he asked, as he busied himself in supplying their wants.

Nothing much. The Quaker lady had been again for sugar. Again Mrs. Day had unconditionally pledged herself that the canes from which it had been derived had not been grown by slaves.

"And have they?" Deleah asked.

"I'm sure, my dear, I don't know if they have or they haven't," a harassed grocer-woman acknowledged. Her conscience was becoming blunted in the stress and strain of business life. "She took a pound of it as usual, and that's all I can say about it."

"But, mama! For the sake of the profit on a pound of sugar!"

"There's no profit on it at all, Bessie. If she had taken a quarter of a pound of tea with it there would have been three-ha'pence into our pockets. But she did not. So you see I perjured myself for nothing."

"Don't let the thought trouble you for an instant, ma'am," Mr. Gibbon advised. "None of us can afford to be too nice in trade. We've got to live, Miss Bessie. Customers don't think so--they'd skin us if they could--but we have. I'm of Mr. Boulton's mind on that subject, although there isn't much I uphold him in. 'Let us do our best for the public while it pays reasonable prices,' he says, 'and when it won't, let us do the public.'"

"All that is so low, Mr. Gibbon."

"But it's business, Miss Bessie. Business is low."

"Oh, don't let us talk about it now," Deleah pleads.

"Deleah has a secret. She's dying to tell us all," Deleah's mother said.

"It's something Deleah's been up to!"

"No, Bess. Calm yourself. Calm all yourselves."

"But how can we? Out with it, darling."

"It's nothing, mama."

"Nothing?"

"Only an idea of mine."

"Something you've been and made up, Deda!"

"Something I'm as sure of, Bessie, as I am that you're always dying to find fault with me. Thank you, Mr. Gibbon, I've got three pieces of bread already, look!"

"You've handed Deleah bread three times in as many minutes, Mr. Gibbon."

"Hand the bread only to Bessie, Mr. Gibbon. (Mama, I must answer sometimes.)"

"We're waiting for the secret, dear."

"It's about our mysterious presents, mama. Mr. Gibbon, you have heard us talk about our unknown benefactor who loads us with delightful things, and yet is so ungenerous he won't give us the pleasure of saying 'thank you.'"

Yes. Mr. Gibbon had heard that there was some one who sometimes sent Miss Deleah flowers.

"They're always sent to Deleah--but I suppose they're meant for all of us," Bessie said.

"And because they came in my name only, gave me the first clue," Deleah said. "Let me see, we began with violets, didn't we? And in January, when they were scarce and expensive. Lovely bunches of violets 'for Miss Deleah.' Miss Deleah's name done in printing characters, so that no one should discover by the handwriting. Then we went on to a basket of sweets--sweets of my very most particular kind, such as none of us can afford any longer to look at. Oh, my mouth waters to think of them even now! No, I didn't ask for any more water in my glass, thank you, Mr. Gibbon."

"We all know what you had, Deleah; we thought we were going to hear who sent them."

"Patience! Patience, good people all! Let me see, what came next? Oh, the bird in the cage. And there he is still in his cage for you all to see," and Deleah leant back in her chair, and threw her pretty head over her shoulder to look at the canary hanging above the left-hand window where was her favourite seat. "Then the azalea. The lovely rose-pink azalea; and after that--oh, I forget. But always something coming--something that we cannot afford to buy, but which has made our sitting-room delightful; and horrid Bridge Street a bearable place to live in. Now you have all been dying to find out who it is that has given us these delightful things; but I have always known; and at last I am going to tell you."

"Then, if you knew you should have told us. Deda ought not to have been so sly about it, mama, if she knew."

"We shall each have one guess; and Bessie, as a reward for her good-nature, shall have the first. Now, Bessie?"

"I've known all along, too, miss. And what's more, I've known that although they were sent to you, they were meant for me. Reggie Forcus."

"Wrong. Here is Emily with the pudding. Emily, you shall have a guess; who is it who sends the flowers, and the books and the birds in the cages--?"

"One of the masters at the school that has fell in love with you, Miss Deleah." Emily gave her opinion without hesitation, going on with her business of changing the plates.

"Wrong again, Mr. Gibbon? Now, I give you a tip. Think of the least likely person in all the world."

"The Quaker lady who objects to slave-grown sugar."

Deleah laughed as she shook her head. "That is most ingenious. And would be delightful; but it is wrong. Now, mama. The least likely person in all the world, remember."

"Mr. George Boulton."

"Mama has it. It is Mr. Boulton."

"Oh, my dear child, I hope not!"

"Scrooge?" cried Bessie. "Never!" Bessie herself had bestowed the name of Scrooge on the successful draper, to whom, as far as his personal appearance went, it was absurdly inappropriate.

"It is Scrooge;--a converted Scrooge; and I, I suppose, am Tiny Tim. And he has heaped benefits on me, mama; meaning thereby to benefit the family."

"Oh, my dear, it can't be! I am sure you are wrong, Deleah. Mr. Gibbon, do say she is wrong. It can't possibly be Mr. Boulton."

Mr. Gibbon only threw back his head and loudly laughed.

Deleah was a little hurt that the boarder should have forgone his usual careful politeness to receive the exposition of her idea with ridicule. She contemplated him gravely till he stopped laughing and gazed with an apologetic, anxious gravity in his protruding, extraordinarily speaking eyes back at her. Then she turned from him to her mother.

"Why do you think it impossible, mama? Because Mr. Boulton can't _say_ agreeable things is no reason he cannot do them. Don't you know that there are poor shut-up souls who want to be nice, who long to be loved--who have to speak in the dumb language because they can't articulate?"

"Miss Deleah is right. That is so. That is so!" Mr. Gibbon eagerly

affirmed.

"Well, then, Mr. Boulton isn't blessed with a tongue to say smooth things; but the bird in the cage, the basket of sweets, the rose-pink azalea--they are his kind and polite speeches."

"My dear, what nonsense!" cried Mrs. Day, who did not wish to believe in Mr. Boulton as the author of such agreeable attentions.

But the Manchester man assented with enthusiasm: "Miss Deleah is right, ma'am," he said. "A man who could not get at Miss Deleah to say things to her might try to say them so."

"And you think Mr. Boulton wants to say things to Deleah?" a scornful Bessie demanded.

"No, I don't, since you ask me. No, Miss Bessie."

"I should think not! And why, pray, should he have pitched on Deda?"

"Oh, why should any one pitch on me?" Deleah asks, lays down knife and fork, spreads hands abroad, as if inviting with exaggerated humility an inspection of her poor claims to favouritism.

"But--if it were Mr. Boulton I think I can understand why it might be Deleah," Mrs. Day said slowly, looking down. She was remembering how her poor husband had made no secret of the fact that the younger girl was his pet; and she recalled also that for her father's sake it was Deleah who treated the arrogant, tyrannical man with unflinching respect and courtesy.

"Yes. And I can understand it too, mama," Deleah softly said.

"Well, them that live'll see," Emily remarked sententiously as she removed the remains of the sago pudding.

CHAPTER XII

The Attractive Deleah

An engagement had been secured for Deleah Day as assistant English governess at a ladies' school. At Miss Chaplin's seminary she was employed in hearing lessons learnt by heart from Brewster's *Guide to Knowledge*, Mangnall's *Questions*, Mrs. Markham's *History of England*; in reading aloud while her pupils tatted or crocheted mats and antimacassars; in struggling with them through the intricacies, never mastered by herself, of Rule of Three and Vulgar Fractions, from nine every morning till five every afternoon; with the exception of the Wednesday, when there was a half-holiday, and the Saturday, when there was no school at all.

The slightness of Deleah's figure and the fragility of her small face, with its innocent, unconscious allurements, were increased by the black garments she still wore. To cast off her mourning for her unhappy father would be, she felt, a slight to him.

"It is as if Bessie had forgotten," she said to herself, seeing her sister in the blues and pinks in which she began as summer came on again to array herself, for supper and the Manchester man. "I do not forget."

Black was not a fashionable wear in that age, only being used for mourning. A woman wearing black did it to proclaim she sorrowed for the dead. The sentiment attached to her sable garments heightened the interest awakened by Deleah's slight form and her winsome face;--made her clear skin paler; made her eyes shine more jewel-like beneath the fine line of her black brows.

Among the members of her own sex were, at the period of her eighteenth birthday, all the captives to her charms of which Deleah was aware. There is no such ardent lover as a schoolgirl when she conceives a passion for another girl at school; and half a dozen of the little pupils at Miss Chaplin's were head over ears in love with Deleah Day. They sighed at her, their adoring eyes clung to her face, they suffered agonies of jealousy through her. They were cast down by a word, elated by a smile.

One of the girls then acquiring a polite education at Miss Chaplin's seminary remembers to this day how she slept, night after night, with a glove--such a worn and shabby glove--of the young English teacher beneath her pillow. She possesses still an album called "The Deleah Book," wherein is pasted an atrocious photograph--all photographs (cartes-de-visite they were called)--were libellous and atrocious in those days--of a girl in a black frock, the skirt a little distended at the feet by the small hoop of the day, a short black jacket, with black hair parted in the middle over a smudge of a face and gathered into a net at the back of the neck. Beneath it is written Deleah's name and the date.

In "The Deleah Book," too, are treasured, scrawled there in the schoolgirl writing, the words of wit and wisdom gathered from the idol's lips, together with such precious items of information and memorabilia as the following:

"Tennyson is the favourite poet of D. D."

"Of all flowers the rose is the Queen, and is the best loved of D. D."

"To remember to keep back unkind words. D. D."

"If we knew all we should find there are excuses for all. D. D."

"(Note). Burnt almonds are the favourite sweet of D. D. and 'Abide with Me' is D. D.'s favourite hymn."

Their ways lying in the same direction, it was this young devotee who was privileged to walk home with the passionately admired D. D. On a certain

afternoon as they made their way through the quiet streets of the old town their talk was of a long-advertised concert to take place that evening, at which a great singer was to appear.

"How much you will enjoy it, Kitty," Deleah was saying with a little girlish longing. "Not only the concert, but everything. Let me picture it. You will run home when you leave me--me in horrid Bridge Street!--and in your bedroom there will be a fire lit, and on the bed your pretty evening frock will be spread, and your lace petticoat, and your silk stockings--"

"Oh, how do you know all that, Miss Day? You know everything! But I shan't enjoy the concert a bit. I shall not. Do you know why? Because you will not be there."

"Oh, nonsense, Kitty! Nonsense! Nonsense!"

"I shall be thinking of you all the time, and wishing--oh wishing! Miss Day, do you believe it is true that if we keep on wishing with all our strength--not a selfish pig of a wish, you know, but something nice for another person--the wish ever, ever comes true?"

"Every wish is as a prayer with God," quoted Deleah, unquestioning in her child's heart the literal truth of the words.

"Then, Miss Day, this is not Kitty Miller walking with you any longer, but one big solid Wish--Oh, there he is again, Miss Day! There is young Mr. Forcus--look!"

"I see him. I am not going to stop. Let us walk on quicker, Kitty."

"Isn't it strange that he should always be riding here, just when we come out of school, Miss Day?"

"Never mind. No; you are not to look round, Kitty."

"How beautifully he pulls off his hat! He had a most dreadfully disappointed look when you would not stop, Miss Day. I think you are very cruel."

"Never mind. No, Kitty! Don't, dear. No lady looks back when a gentleman passes her."

(A new entry appeared in "The Deleah Book" that night: "No lady looks round when a gentleman passes her. D. D.")

"Miss Day!"--with a soft, irrepressible giggle--"He has turned his horse and is riding after us."

"Never mind. Let us hurry on."

But when the mare was pulled up beside her, her hoofs clattering on the cobble-stones of the street, Miss Day, in spite of herself, must stop.

"How do, Deleah?" Kitty Miller had again the privilege of seeing how beautifully the hat came off, exposing for quite an appreciable time the young man's fair, smooth head. "Whoa, Nance!" to the satin-skinned, black mare, who objected to being pulled into the gutter running by the side of the pavement. "I say--there was something I particularly wanted to say to you, Deleah. Whoa! Steady, old girl! I say--how's Bessie?"

"Bessie is very well, thank you, Mr. Forcus."

"Mr. Forcus?' Come, I say, Deleah! you aren't going to put me at arm's length, that fashion! I was going to ask you--How is Bessie?"

"Very well, thank you."

"I haven't seen Bessie for ages."

"Is it so long?"

"I was wondering if I might look in sometimes on Mrs. Day--"

"Mama is always busy, thank you."

"At your place, then?--Just to see--Bessie?"

"I'm sure I don't know. You'd better ask Bessie herself."

"I'll ask her when I call. Whoa! Steady, you fool! Steady! What time could I come when I shouldn't be in the way?"

"We're always busy. Always. I think perhaps you'd better not come at all."

"Thank you! Why?"

"You used to come, if you remember; and you gave up coming," Deleah said. The small face turned to him was unsmiling and proud. The clear eyes of pale hazel looked past the fine young man on the beautiful fidgeting horse.

"I'm more my own master now," he said. "I should like to look in upon you all again, Deleah."

"You had better not. Good-bye."

"Wait! Wait! One minute! I say, are you going to this concert to-night?"

"Of course. All of us. Even Franky. Half-guinea places. Why need you ask?"

"But if I get you some tickets? You and Bessie and Mrs. Day? I will, you know. I will, Deleah, if you'll say you'll go--"

"The tickets were all sold a fortnight ago. You're too late," she said; and then she smiled her winning smile, in spite of herself, upon him and moved on.

Kitty was waiting for the older girl a few paces farther on. "There!" she said, her eyes wide with awe. "There, Miss Day! My wish nearly came true! Oh, if he could have got you tickets and you would have gone, how heavenly, heavenly everything would have been to-night!"

Tea was ready in the sitting-room above the shop when Deleah reached home. Tea with thick bread-and-butter, dry toast, water-cress, little dishes of sliced ham, and pastry-tarts made in Emily's best fashion; and Bessie and Franky were already seated at the table.

By Deleah's plate a letter was lying. A letter at which she looked dubiously, shrinking a little from opening it; for it was addressed, in a fashion which had become embarrassingly familiar to her, in carefully printed characters.

"It's money, this time, we think," Franky cried, jumping in his chair. "Make haste, Deda."

"We're simply dying to know what he's sent you. How slow you are!" Bessie scolded.

Reluctantly Deleah broke the envelope and drew forth two tickets for the evening's concert.

"The ten-shilling places!" Bessie cried. "We'll go, Deleah. We'll go!"

Deleah looked with a little distrust at the tickets lying beside her plate. "It's all very well, but I should so much prefer presents without all this mystery about them. Months ago I would have thanked Mr. Boulton if you and mama would have allowed me. I am sure it would have been better. I am sure we ought to thank him."

"That doesn't matter now. We've got to think about the concert. I'm going to it, and I can't go without you."

"I don't know if we ought to go, Bessie--"

"Why not, pray?"

Deleah was silent.

"Because of papa? He's been dead nearly two years. Are we never to show our noses among other people again? You do carry things to extremes, Deda!"

Deleah accepted the reproach meekly, having nothing to say--nothing, that is, which Bessie would understand.

Then the boarder came in, for it was early closing afternoon, and took his

place by the side of Franky.

"Some more mysterious presents," Bessie said, smiling upon him. "Very useful ones, this time, and just what I should have wished for."

"Tickets for the concert," Deleah explained, pushing them across to him. "Ten-shilling ones. Poor Mr. Boulton hates music. I heard him say once that he believed every one hated it, and that when they pretended to like it it was only affectation and humbug. What pleasure can he possibly get in giving us these tickets for which we may not even thank him?"

"He'll have the pleasure of knowing that you are happy, and that he has made you so, Miss Deleah. And you too, of course, Miss Bessie."

"But Mr. Boulton no more sent those tickets, than he sent the bird in the cage, or the--!"

"Oh, you're thinking of Reggie Forcus again," Deleah interrupted impatiently. "Such nonsense, Bessie!"

"She thinks a lot more of him than he does of her," Franky announced, munching his bread-and-butter.

Bessie got up from her place at the tea-tray and with purpose in her eyes walked round the table. "You take that for impertinence, sir!" she said, and administered a stinging slap to Franky's cheek. His intention of immediate retaliation was frustrated by Mr. Gibbon's seizing the tea-spoon he was about to hurl at his assailant.

"I hate Bessie," Franky said; but he was used to having his face slapped by his elder sister, and went on munching his bread-and-butter and water-cress, not much the worse.

"We can't go to the concert, Bessie," Deleah was presently saying. "We've got no evening frocks."

"Oh, but we have!" Bessie quickly reminded her. "The frocks which were new for our party and never worn again."

"We can't wear them!" Deleah pleaded. She felt that she could never endure even to look at those garments again.

"But we can, and we will," Bessie declared. She was a very practical person in matters connected with millinery and dressmaking, and in a minute had planned the slight alterations and additional furbishings required for their party frocks. Black ribbons instead of blue run in the lace of the bodices. Deleah's skirt would be short, but who would see that if Deleah were sitting down?

Deleah drooped as she listened, leaving the tea in her cup and the bread-and-butter untouched on her plate.

"Elbows off the table, Deda," Franky reminded her, who was frequently

commanded to remove his own.

Deleah took no heed. She sat with brow leaning upon the hand which screened her face, looking back upon that evening before the shadow of misfortune and disgrace had touched them all; when she had worn her new white silk frock, and papa had played the tambourine.

Bessie had gone, leaving her tea also, untasted; hurrying away to Emily, who would help her to pull off the forget-me-nots from her frock, and to substitute the black ribbon which would be more decorous. Bessie's pale, full cheeks were pink with excitement, her eyes shone.

"Black will look better than blue, even--although that _was_ your colour--against your white skin," Emily encouraged her.

Mr. Gibbon had made himself a neat sandwich of water-cress and thin bread-and-butter. He paused in the act of daintily sprinkling it with salt pinched in finger and thumb, and looked at Deleah across the table, her hand hiding her face. So long he looked at her, so long she remained unconscious of him, that Franky ventured in their preoccupation to help himself to a third piece of cake, his allowance being two.

"Miss Deleah, if you don't want to go to this concert to-night, why go?" at length the boarder ventured to ask. Deleah dropped the shielding hand; she had for the moment forgotten the presence of Mr. Charles Gibbon.

"Bessie wants to go. Of course, I must go with her," she said.

"But why 'of course,' if you don't wish? Whoever sent those tickets--"

"Mr. Boulton sent them."

"Well, then, Mr. Boulton sent them to make you happy; not unhappier."

"I know. I am really quite grateful, Mr. Gibbon. It was only those dresses. We wore them at a dance at our house--the evening before--everything. I can't think how Bessie can! But she does not feel things as I do. She never did feel like--dying--of pity--and sorrow--as I did." She lifted her cup to her lips to hide the fact that tears were rolling down her face.

Mr. Gibbon sighed heavily. He pushed his own cup away from him as a signal perhaps that for him also the tea was spoiled. "But why need you go in that particular frock, Miss Deleah?"

"I haven't another."

"The one you have on."

"This one? Oh!"

She laughed with the tears in her eyes, and looked down at her school frock--a black skirt and a white muslin "garibaldi" (the garment so called

at that time being extremely like the shirt blouse, or waist, as the Americans have it, of to-day). "Oh, how funny men are!" she said. "To think I could go in the half-guinea places in such a dress!"

"It's a beautiful dress, isn't it! It seems so to me. And I don't think it matters at all what you wear, Miss Deleah."

He spoke in a hushed voice, as if conscious of saying something of tremendous import. Deleah accepted the remark as a simple statement of a fact.

"It doesn't matter, perhaps, really. But Bessie thinks differently. Most people do. I shall have to wear what Bessie wishes."

"I notice you are always the one to give way, Miss Deleah."

"No--not always, Mr. Gibbon."

"Can I do anything? I would do _anything_--" He spoke in the same hushed voice; with his arms extended on each side of his plate, he was gripping the edge of the table tightly, "Anything!"

"I know. I know you are a true friend. I know she talks to you. She talks about Mr. Reggie Forcus. Bessie can't see that things are different with us--at least she sees, of course, but she does not realise that they must be different; not only now, but for ever. She never sees us with other people's eyes. It never comes home to her that the friends we had we can never have again. What have people like the Forcuses to do with us!"

"I think that Mr. Reggie Forcus, mighty as he thinks himself, or the Prince of Wales, come to that, might feel himself honoured to be taken notice of by you, Miss Deleah--or by Miss Bessie."

Deleah laughed in spite of herself. "You are too kind, Mr. Gibbon."

She got up from her chair and picked up the concert tickets and twisted them about in her fingers with a little distaste of them. "All this is very kind of Mr. Boulton, of course," she said: "and one likes to be sure there is a generous heart beneath that--well, that atrocious manner of his. But we're under mountains of obligation to people already, and we can do without concert tickets. We can do without--" She was going to say without flowers, but she leant across the table and stooped her face above the pot of heliotrope that graced the centre of the humble board, then lifted it, shaking her head. "No; we could not do without the flowers," she said. "I do thank the good man for his flowers; and I shall tell him so the first time I see him. I have made up my mind."

"I would not if I were you, Miss Deleah."

"But why not? Do tell me why not?"

"Mr. Boulton is a good business man. He's my chief, and I'm not going to speak against him; but I don't quite see him buying you flowers."

"You know he loved my poor father, don't you?" she asked him in a lowered voice. She had never mentioned the dead man's name to him before; her cheek paled, he saw, as she did so now. "And I was my father's pet. You will not think me vain for saying that, will you? Mama will tell you it is not my selfish fancy alone. Mama will tell you it is true."

"Indeed, Miss Deleah, I can quite believe it."

"He was a good father to us all, and fond of us all, but of me he would talk always if he could get any to listen. He liked me to sit on his knee--I was younger then--to walk with him, and wait on him--" Her voice broke; she waited a minute before she went on. "And so I suppose Mr. Boulton sends these things to me for papa's sake. I could not explain before; but you understand, do you not?"

He quite understood her point of view, Mr. Gibbon said, looking at the tablecloth.

"I knew you would, when I could explain. I think poor Mr. Boulton likes me to take what he sends, for papa's sake--as if it really came from papa. You see what I mean? And I can't help thinking there is something beautiful in that thought of his."

Mr. Gibbon reflectively agreed. It was a beautiful thought, come to think of it, he said.

"Well, then--?" said Deleah.

"Well then, Miss Deleah, don't you think by mentioning the matter to him, you'll spoil all that? His intention, his beautiful thought, and the rest of it."

"Perhaps!" Deleah acquiesced seriously. "I must think about what you say."

"You've done me a great honour to mention it, Miss Deleah. You won't think I'm taking upon myself in any way to give you my opinion?"

"Oh, Mr. Gibbon! How could I ever think such a thing!" Deleah said, but began at once to be a little ashamed of the confidence she had made. With a man who could ask if he was "taking upon himself" she ought to have been more reserved, she thought.

CHAPTER XIII

The Gay, Gilded Scene

Mrs. Day, being told that her daughters proposed to go unchaperoned to the Assembly Rooms that night, declared that for them to do so was unheard-of

and not to be sanctioned. But, under the strain of adversity the poor woman's will, never a strong one, had weakened. She was painfully conscious of her own helplessness in the grip of circumstances, and was always troubled with doubts as to the wisdom of her own judgment. By the time her day's work was over she was too tired to stand up against any power she came into collision with. In all that concerned Bessie she was absolutely feeble. Bessie was victor always, not by reason of superior strength but through fractiousness, through stubbornness, through a hysterical determination to talk the opposing voices down, through her habit of crying like a baby when contradicted, and flinging things about.

So, on this particular occasion, the elder daughter avowing in a high, excited voice that not many pleasures came in her way, and that when one did come she meant to take it, let her mother be pleased or let her be teased, the objections were speedily silenced.

Leaving the shop for once in the care of Mr. Pretty, Mrs. Day went upstairs for the pleasure of seeing her girls once more in gala attire.

"I have taken the liberty of ordering a fly for the young ladies," Mr. Gibbon said as he and the mother sat awaiting the appearance of the pair.

"Oh, Mr. Gibbon, if you would go with them, and see them safe to the Assembly Rooms I should be so much obliged."

Mr. Gibbon, with great solemnity of mien, thoroughly realising the responsibility of the office, undertook to do so. He, for his part, was going to take his chance of hearing the great singer with the expenditure of a shilling only. He would be in the Promenade, but his eyes should be on the Miss Days, and if protection were required by them he would be at hand.

Mrs. Day was by no means sure in her anxious heart that her daughters might not need the strong arm of the male to defend them. She thought as she surveyed them while they awaited the arrival of the fly that no mother had ever possessed such treasures to guard. Bessie was always especially comely in evening dress. Her plump, clearly pale cheeks were now pink with excitement. Her white skin against the black ribbon round her throat and threaded through the lace over her ample young bosom was dazzlingly fair.

"Mama, I'm afraid my frock is dreadfully short; even now that Emily has let down the hem," Deleah said, looking anxiously toward her extremities. "It shows all my feet!"

It showed the ankles too, truth to say; but what did that matter when the feet were so small and pretty, and the ankles so elegantly slim?

The wonder to the mother was to see how, since that white silk dress had been worn before, the girl's beauty had grown to perfection.

"Do you think it looks ridiculous, mama?" referring anxiously to the scantiness of the skirt and the unblushing exposure of the feet.

"Not at all ridiculous, my dear." What did any imperfection of raiment matter with a face and head like Deleah's; as exquisitely moulded, as delicately poised on her slender throat as a flower on its stalk? "There's a tiny bit of hair awry," the mother said, caught the girl's little chin in her hand and passed her fingers over the shadowy black hair for the mere pleasure of caressing it.

When Mr. Gibbon came in presently it was seen he had changed into dress-clothes, in which attire he had never before appeared.

"But, Mr. Gibbon, you need not have taken the trouble to dress for the shilling places!" Mrs. Day told him.

"I am to have the honour of escorting the two young ladies," he said.

He was red in the face, and appeared bashful and ill at ease in the costume which they saw was a new one.

"To think of his a-gettin' hisself up like that!" Emily said with an amused scorn of the poor man as the cab containing the three drove off. "There's no doubt what he've set his mind on, 'm. But Miss Bessie ain't for such as him. She'll look higher."

When Mr. Reginald Forcus came into the Assembly Rooms with his brother and the sister who since the death of Lady Forcus kept house at Cashelthorpe, and made his way to seats not very far removed from those the sisters occupied, Bessie impulsively seized a bit of Deleah's bare arm in her finger and thumb. She pinched it unconsciously but with such painful emphasis that in the morning Deleah discovered the place to be black and blue.

"There he is! Quite close to us! _Now_ perhaps you will believe! I always knew it was he who sent the tickets, and sent all the flowers and things! and he sent them for me--only you always took them to yourself, Deda."

She was very smiling, very happy and excited and flushed, through the concert. She looked so pretty, so like the Bessie of the "party" days of old, that Deleah thought not only Reginald Forcus but every man who saw her must admire her pretty sister.

When the "half" arrived, and the ten minutes in which the audience is permitted to stretch its legs and crane its neck, and acknowledge the presence of its acquaintance, behold the younger Forcus eagerly recognising the sisters, and bowing in response to Miss Bessie's delighted smiles and nods.

"Oh, what a pretty girl!" a woman's voice said. There had come a sudden lull in the buzz of talk, and the exclamation reached the ears of many more than his for whom it was intended.

Deleah felt sure it was Bessie who was being admired. She looked quickly at the speaker. It was that middle-aged sister with the pleasant, kind face who had come to take the place of Sir Francis Forcus's dead wife. It

was to Sir Francis she had spoken, but she might have been proclaiming the fact of her discovery of a pretty girl, for the general benefit; so complete had been the temporary calm into which her speech had broken. Heads were turned, and several pairs of eyes were fixed upon Deleah.

By a good many present the sisters were recognised, and here and there a smile was turned on them, and here and there a cool, discreet little bow was made. And more often the people who knew them, having involuntarily looked, looked away again; for them the girls' presence there, in a fashionable company and the most expensive seats, was an offence.

"People we were asked a little time ago to keep from starving!" they said to themselves. "If Mrs. Day's daughters can afford this sort of thing, we might as well have kept our guineas in our pockets."

When the audience resumed their seats Bessie kept her eyes pretty constantly directed upon the smooth fair head of Reggie Forcus. Perhaps he was conscious of her gaze and found it a compelling one, for again and again he turned round to look at the sisters, and always Bessie's eyes caught and held his.

Except to the accompaniment of the singing of her own heart the poor girl was unconscious of the music. If it was to the evening's nightingale she listened or to the twittering of the inferior songstresses of the grove who lifted up their voices when the queen was silent she could hardly have said; the melody her heart was chanting triumphantly drowned every note of theirs.

"It has been heavenly," she said, when it was all over, and they stood up for the singing of "God Save the Queen." "In all my life, Deleah, I have never enjoyed a concert so much before."

While she said it she was lingering in her place, stopping the gangway for people anxious to make their way out, pretending to arrange her own cloak and her sister's, in the endeavour to time their exit to that of the Forcus family. She did manage it too; and in the crush as they all approached the door Bessie's happy shoulder was rubbing against the shoulder of the attractive Reggie.

"It's been first-rate, hasn't it?" he said, as if the two years in which he had had no speech with the girl were as nothing, and they had parted yesterday. "Wasn't She fine! Glad I came. I wouldn't have missed her for anything."

"Heavenly!" Bessie acquiesced, then quickly introduced the personal note. "I wonder you knew me! I thought I was quite forgotten, and was surprised when you bowed."

"Ages since we met, isn't it? I did think about coming to call, but I suppose Mrs. Day is busy?"

"I'm not busy. And I'm always at home. Do come."

"Rather! Shall I call your carriage?"

"Will you?"

So the words "Miss Days' carriage" were passed from mouth to mouth; men yelled it in the street, the officials in the porch of the Hall bawled it to one another, a man in the crowd nearer the door turned his head and shouted "Miss Days' carriage" into the concert room. The air was reverberating with the cry, it seemed to poor Deleah. How could Bessie have made them conspicuous in that way!

Sir Francis Forcus had been looking with some curiosity at the girl to whom his brother was speaking, wedged into the crowd just in front of him; the younger girl at her sister's back was by his side. He glanced at her now, and saw it was she to whose loveliness his sister had called public attention. The Days, of course! He remembered when he heard the name called; remembered all about them.

"Good-evening. How do you do?" he said, looking down upon Deleah.

And Deleah, recalling the last occasion on which she had heard his voice, lifted a pale and speechless face to him, for all her answer.

Some big and important Person at the back, impatient of the delay, here attempted to battle her way through the crowd congested by the too narrow doors. Sir Francis turned and looked at her reprovingly.

"It's no good, Lady Elizabeth. You'll have to wait like the rest of us. It's only a matter of a few minutes."

"Oh, do hurry up in front there!" Lady Elizabeth called back to him, laughing, but imperious. The pressure she and her party were making still continued, with the result that Deleah was driven roughly forward.

"Gently! Gently!" Sir Francis called again, and Deleah felt that his hands were on her shoulders and he was shielding her with his arms as much as possible from the crushing of the crowd.

A minute, and they were through the doorway into the spacious porch, where individual movement was possible, and the fresh night air blew, and Deleah could see the light from the big lamp over the archway flaring on the top of her shabby old fly, while behind it was a long line of handsome carriages whose drivers vituperated the driver of the cab, in his broken hat. At the window was Bessie's face. Bessie's excited voice was heard shrilly calling on Deleah's name.

"Deda! Deda! Where _on earth_ have you got to?"

"Miss Days' carriage stops the way"--the cry which made one Miss Day long to hide her minished head in the earth--woke the echoes again.

Deleah half turned her head on its long neck, whispered a shy "thank you" to the tall gentleman at her back; and darted away.

"Oh here you are, Deleah! Come along," Reggie Forcus cried, appearing before her. "We thought we'd lost you. Take my arm."

But before Deleah could comply another arm was proffered, and proffered in a manner so brusque and so determined that the young Forcus fell back involuntarily.

"Thank you. Miss Deleah is in my charge," a voice said; and Deleah felt herself dragged through the crowded porch, and over the pavement to the cab-door, on the arm of Mr. Charles Gibbon.

"You'll excuse me," he said, looking in upon the sisters through the cab window when the door was shut. "I hope you young ladies did not think I intruded. But your mother had asked me to keep an eye on you."

"And pray why didn't you come with Reggie?" Bessie demanded indignantly as the fly at last moved on.

Deleah laughed hysterically. "I was torn away from him," she said. "He all but knocked Reggie down, and seized upon me." She indicated the form of Mr. Gibbon, dimly seen, seated sentinel on the box beside the broken-hatted driver.

"Impertinence!" Bessie said. "We have to be civil to him at home, but when we are among other people I think he might leave us to our friends."

"Reggie Forcus hasn't been much of a friend."

"He is going to be for the future. He asked leave to call. It is a little awkward as you are always at the school, and mama is always downstairs"--(Bessie had never yet brought herself to say "Mother is in the shop") "I would have asked him to come in the evenings, but _he_" (again a nod towards the figure of the guardian-angel on the box-seat) "is always there."

"Well, why not?"

"Can't you understand that Reggie might not care to meet a young man out of a draper's shop?"

"But he comes to call on people in a gro--"

"That's different," Bessie quickly announced. "We weren't always there, remember."

"Wednesday afternoons I am at home after three. Saturdays I am at home all day."

"I know," Bessie said, but did not promise to avail herself of the protection offered by her sister's presence on those occasions.

CHAPTER XIV

A Tea-Party In Bridge Street

His time being so fully occupied in his own business during the week, and those hours he had been wont to pass with his friend William Day being still unfilled, Mr. George Boulton had fallen into the evil habit of coming to hold a business consultation with the widow on the Sunday afternoons. The Day family complained bitterly of this custom. The poor grocer-woman's one blessed day was no longer hers, to be passed from morn to eve in the midst of her children, in rest and peace and forgetfulness of business worries.

She was too tired for church, she always pleaded; but it was not fatigue alone which kept her from public worship. She was accustomed to her place behind the counter now, and in the work-days of the week was too busy for regret, too anxious to sell her goods to feel any shame in the occupation. But on that day when the rest of the world of women went forth with husbands and children to take their places, dressed in their best, in family pews, she felt that she lacked the courage to show her face. She who had queened it with the best of them; she who was the widow of a man who had killed himself to escape from prison! She for whom "sympathisers" and "well-wishers" had collected their sixpenny-pieces that she and hers might be saved from starving.

So she sent the girls to church with Franky, on the Sunday morning, while she, prayer-book in hand, would sit in Deleah's favourite window-seat, beneath the canary's cage, to watch the smart and prosperous Sabbath people airing their newest clothes on the opposite pavement of the street.

Presently Emily, her preparations for dinner made, would come to stand beside her mistress's chair, to turn a critical eye upon the passers-by beneath. Emily knew the names of most of the people of any consideration who passed; knew, and could at length relate the history of themselves and their domestic economies.

"There's Mrs. Hamley, m'm. I haven't never seen her in that black lace shawl before."

"Perhaps she's laid it by from last summer," Mrs. Day would suggest.

"Not she!" Here Emily would lean over the back of her mistress's chair and crane her neck to get a better view of the raiment in question. "Bran' new, I'll lay a guinea! And her still fifteen pound in your debt!"

"Here come the Briggses! Look out, m'm!" presently she would cry. "Well, and ain't they figged out! The whole four of the girls--and every one of 'em in a new bonnet! And them buyin' a pound-and-a-half of butter a week for the whole fam'ly! Tha's what I always say, m'm; the Briggses is a fam'ly that save out of their insides to put it on their bids. Now, here

come the best-lookin' young ladies and young gentleman we have set eyes on yet." And then Mrs. Day's own daughters, with Franky clinging to Deleah's arm, would be seen to approach.

"We think so, don't we, Emily? It's because they're our own, you know," the mistress would say, with her deprecating smile. "It's because they're ours, that they seem to look so nice."

But in her heart she heartily agreed with Emily that hers was indeed a charming family.

In the evening Bessie would go off to church again, escorted by Emily, but Deleah would stay with her mother. They would sit together in peaceful, delicious idleness over the winter fire, or, it being summer, they would go forth, escaping by backways and narrow lanes of the old town from the crowded pavements to the quiet roads with their formal rows of trees, their flower-packed gardens and trim hedges. Slowly they would pace along, enjoying the sweeter air of the suburbs, or, gardenless themselves, would stand to peep through garden-gates at the well-ordered array of geranium, calceolaria, verbena; sniffing the fragrance from the serried rows of stocks, the patches of mignonette, or the blossoming lime-trees overhead.

When on that scented Sabbath peacefulness the warm dark would begin to descend, it sometimes happened that the boarder, Charles Gibbon, who also loved the scent of flower and of shrub, and enjoyed the soft air of evening upon his cheek, would meet or overtake Mrs. Day and her daughter as they sauntered homewards; and in a very friendly and pleasant way the three would finish their walk together.

But about the Sunday afternoons there was a less agreeable tale to tell. The young ladies retired with their books to their bedrooms, on those occasions; Franky took refuge with Emily in the kitchen, a store of oranges and nuts having been laid in by that faithful retainer for his entertainment there. The Manchester man saw more than enough of his employer on week-days, and would have preferred to pass a Sabbath afternoon in the cellar with the coals, to spending that portion of his precious holiday with his employer. Poor Mrs. Day was compelled therefore to receive her taskmaster and benefactor alone.

Then had her books to be produced, her order-sheet criticised; then was comparison made between this week's takings and those of the corresponding week last year. If, as too often happened, alas! the sales had been less, the poor apologetic tradeswoman had to suffer for it.

"You are losing custom. You must not lose it," the tradesman would bluster. Or "Your expenses are too much. You are eaten up with expenses," he would insist. "You don't see how you can reduce them? Do with less help, my good lady. What do people do who can't afford help? Go without it, and do the work themselves. It's what you must do. It is indeed, I do assure you. Cut down your expenses. Cut them down! Cut them down!"

"It is easier to say that than to do it," poor Mrs. Day would demur. "We have nothing superfluous."

"You will be surprised how much you can do without if you really make the effort. Get rid of your assistant in the shop. Get rid of your servant. A servant is a very pleasant possession, but if we can't afford to keep one, we can't. What is Miss Bessie doing all day long?"

"Bessie is useful in the house. Bessie is not strong," Bessie's mother would plead; and George Boulton would snort the suggestion to scorn.

"A little extra work would be the best physic for Miss Bessie." She had put on a good stone of flesh since he had seen her last, he would declare. Work never killed half the women that idleness killed.

On a Sunday afternoon soon after that concert to which the girls had been escorted by the lodger, George Boulton, his business exhortation finished, sprang on the poor mother the news that her son at the branch shop at Ingleby was not giving satisfaction.

A complaint of incivility to a customer had come to the ear of the local manager, who had reported to the Head at Brockenham, delivering himself of the opinion at the same time that the young man played billiards at the Rose and Crown more than was consistent with his means, or the devotion he should have shown to his employer's interests.

Lydia Day listened, her dark, handsome face of a lead white, while the man seated at the table opposite to her condemned her son utterly as one who was flinging away a fine chance. He, George Boulton, had been thrown, at Bernard's age, on his own resources. Never that he could recall had a helping hand been held to him. (Men of the stamp of George Boulton never recognise the helping hand.) Work had been his pleasure. Had he played billiards? Had he shown temper before a customer? No! Or thought of his own pleasure before his employer's advantage? Never!

Very eloquent he was on the strenuous period of his own youth, recounting the virtues he had displayed and the vices he had shunned, holding up his shining example before the dimmed eyes of the poor mother, listening with sick politeness, her heart so heavy in her breast. The excuses she made for her Bernard to herself she dared not put forward. The fact that he was his father's son; the contrast between the life he had known and that he was called on to live; his youth; his exile from home and home influences; his empty pockets; his tastes which had been formed when money seemed plentiful.

"I implore you to be patient with the boy," was about all she thought it wise to say; that and the promise she made to write at once to Bernard to beg of him to consider his circumstances and Mr. Boulton's goodness, and to change what was amiss.

Bernard, her darling, handsome son! While she said it she saw him in a thousand pictures stored in her mother's heart. All that was desirable he had seemed to her; she had never thought of wishing him to change!

"Let him know he is on his trial," George Boulton said.

"He is being carefully watched and reported on. Do not tell him this, but tell him the impression he has made on Adams" (Adams was the manager at Ingleby) "is not a satisfactory one; and Adams is a man whose opinions I hold very high. Tell him he is having the chance of his life; warn him not to abuse it."

He was still trampling the poor woman's heart beneath the prancings of his own eloquence, when the ringing of the street-door bell created a diversion.

Downstairs went Miss Bessie, her fair hair ruffled, her cheek flushed from its pressure upon her pillow, to take in, as she imagined, in the absence of Emily, the afternoon's milk.

It was not the anticipated milk, however, that Bessie found upon the doorstep, but no less a delightful surprise than the exquisite person of Mr. Reginald Forcus.

"Ah, how do, Bessie? I thought I'd give you a look. I hope I am not *_de trop?_*" he asked. He pronounced the last words as they are spelt, not because he did not know better, but because he liked to be amusing, and the mispronunciation of words was the kind of fun he appreciated.

With effusion, Bessie bade him enter; but in her mind were distracting thoughts of the condition of her chignon, and the present occupancy of the only sitting-room.

"There's some one upstairs with mama," she told him, anxiously smiling upon him, her grey-green eyes glinting with pleasure. "The Mr. Boulton, you know, who helps her with her books and things when she'll let him. You won't mind?"

"Happy, I'm sure. You're all alone, week-days," he said as he mounted the stairs behind her--stairs very dark and very steep, starting from the almost unmitigated blackness of the hall upon which the front door opened. "I thought if I looked in on the Sunday afternoons I should find the others as well, perhaps."

"You'll find mama," Bessie said, wondering a little at his concern for the proprieties. "Here is Reggie, mama," she said. And Mrs. Day, her heart full of her own unhappy boy, went forward with a weary step, and smilelessly held out a welcoming hand.

"You are very kind to come, Reggie," she said. "This is our good friend, Mr. George Boulton; Mr. Reginald Forcus."

"I take it young Mr. Forcus and I don't need any introduction," the draper said.

The Forcus family did not deal at his shop; the deference therefore which the draper never failed to pay his customers was not needed here. He shook poor Reggie's hand mercilessly, and inquired after Sir Francis. Mr. George

Boult had recently been made a magistrate; Sir Francis and he sat on the same bench.

"You are extremely well known to me by sight," he went on, still exercising the visitor's hand. "I should say there are few people in Brockenham better known to me by sight."

"I go past your place pretty often," Reggie admitted.

"You'd see me four or five times a day if you were looking out."

"Oh, I'm not always behind my own shop window," Mr. Boult said, not too well pleased. When he was not talking to a customer why should he be reminded of the shop? Since he had been able to write J.P. after his name, he had more than once been secretly desirous of temporarily forgetting the successful drapery establishment.

He was always disposed to lose himself in wonder at his own marvellous achievements. Time was when the members of the great brewery firm were as far above his head as the stars of heaven above the pebbles of the street. Yet here he was now, to all intents and purposes on a par with them. Where was the difference? A successful business man, he was--what more were they? Still, since Sir Francis had taken to addressing him as "Boult" without any prefix to the name, when they met in the magisterial room, the desire to ingratiate himself with any member of the Forcus family was very warm within him.

"Whenever I do see you, I am struck with the handsomeness of the animal you ride, Mr. Forcus," he was saying presently. "I think this young gentleman rides the handsomest animal in the town, Miss Bessie. I'm a great admirer of handsome animals, Mr. Forcus."

"Is that so? Really?" said Reggie, supremely indifferent. He had no objection whatever to make the acquaintance of old Boult, the linen-draper--although, of course, that difference between a successful draper and a successful brewer which Mr. Boult was incapable of discerning was quite clear to him--but he was not in the least interested in him; and what should the old fellow know about a horse?

"Isn't Deleah at home to-day? I thought I should have caught Deleah. That is why I dropped in on the Sunday."

Deleah was out walking with Franky, Mrs. Day told him, thankful that Bessie, who had slipped away with a view to the adjustment of the disarranged chignon, was not present to hear that explanation.

"I meet Deleah sometimes as she comes home from school," the young man artlessly continued. "I dare say she's told you I sometimes meet her?"

No, Mrs. Day did not remember hearing Deleah mention that interesting fact.

"No harm in that, I suppose, Mrs. Day? You don't object, if Deleah

doesn't?"

"Harm?" repeated Mrs. Day, only half conscious of what was said, thinking of Bernard going wretchedly about his hated work with a "sharp watch" set on his doings.

"I mean I wouldn't do anything to annoy you or Deleah--"

It was a relief that at that moment Bessie descended, her hair in order, a look of pleasant excitement on her plump face. No one need half-heartedly try to carry on a conversation with Reggie when once Bessie was present to monopolise him.

And then Deleah and Franky, their cheeks rosy from exercise, appeared. Franky went to his mother and climbed on her lap, and Deleah sat close to her side, a little too apparently, perhaps, leaving the young man and Bessie to carry on their sparkling conversation uninterrupted.

When Emily came in, to lay the tea-table, the two men got up to go. "Mama, Reggie will stay if you ask him," Bessie said. How triumphant she felt, how her eyes sparkled when Reggie said at once he should like to--rather!

"And Mr. Boulton will stay to tea too, mama," Deleah said quickly. She did not need the heavy silence which fell to tell she had offended; not Bessie's warning scowl, nor her mother's piteous look of appeal. As no one seconded the invitation, "Do stay," Deleah said. And he gracefully yielded.

"Since you are so polite, I don't mind if I do," he said. He really felt honoured by the invitation, the first he had ever received in that house. The long low-ceilinged sitting-room above the grocer's shop was tenanted by ladies of whom in days gone by he had felt a certain awe. Down in the world as they were now, he never forgot that ancient attitude of theirs. Even when he bullied Mrs. Day, and advised her daughters to do the work of servants, he had not forgotten. Perhaps at such times he remembered it more than ever.

His wife, dead for the last seven years, had been of a different make from these women. Finding nothing in himself to debar him from being an ornament in any society, he saw very well that the late Mrs. George Boulton had been, as he put it, "of another kidney." He had been fairly content with her while he had her; she had been a good housekeeper; and had not crossed him in his wish to save money; but looking back upon the poor woman, he saw plainly that she had not the appearance of these ladies, nor had she spoken like them, nor possessed the ways of them. She had been all very well for his then condition, but times had changed for him; and here he was, well pleased to be sitting at the board of people who would not at one time have received the late Mrs. Boulton under their roof, on terms of equality with Sir Francis Forcous's brother!

He was a rich man himself, and going, he would see to it, to be richer, but the income of the Forcuses he knew was perhaps seven times as much as his own; and he was one of that large body of good sort of people who love

to be in the society of men richer than themselves.

"We so much enjoyed the concert, Mr. Boulton," Deleah said to him.

"The concert?" Mr. Boulton repeated. He wished to talk to Bessie, having it on his conscience to advise her to do without a servant, and he did not feel called upon to exert himself "to do the polite," as he phrased it, to the younger girl.

"Some kind friend sent us stalls for the concert," explained Deleah, flushing. "It was so kind of the unknown person, and such a delightful treat."

"Stalls? The half-guinea places, do you mean?" There was astonished disapproval in eyes and voice.

"Wasn't it sweet of Someone?" Deleah went on, bent on expressing her gratitude to the shy donor. "It was the same Someone, I suppose, who sent the lilies-of-the-valley, yesterday, and my darling canary; look! It is Someone to whom we can never be grateful enough!"

"Better keep your gratitude for the more substantial benefits you have all received." He was thinking, Mrs. Day knew, of the fifty pounds which had headed the subscription-list. "Lilies were sixpence the bunch in the market yesterday."

"But it isn't the cost," Deleah explained; her face was rose-red with her effort to say that which she had determined should be said to the man they all disliked, but who was showing himself by the thoughtful little attentions to which she alluded, in his true colours. "It isn't the cost alone, it is the kind thought for which we are so grateful."

"Oh, come, Deleah!" Reggie interrupted. "I offered you tickets, you remember, and you weren't a bit grateful for the kind thought. And as for the lilies, I dare say I could send you flowers every morning from the conservatories at home, if you'd care for them."

"I should not in the least care for them from your conservatories. Don't send them, Reggie, or we should have to send them back."

"Why, pray? Speak for yourself, please," Bessie cried. "If you've any flowers going begging I'm not above taking them, Reggie, remember."

"The flowers aren't mine," Reggie reminded her at once. "They grow there--tons of them--and no one to look at them now, but Francis and Ada. Yet, if I want to send a few to a girl there's questions asked, and a sickening fuss made. I order them from the nurseryman rather than have the fag of it."

"Well--?"

"Oh, all right. I'll order some for you, Bessie."

Then, when tea was all but finished, a step was heard upon the stairs, and presently Mr. Gibbon came in. At the sight of the other two men his face fell perceptibly. To him also the Sabbath was a precious time. The hour, especially, which brought the meal over which they need not hurry for any evening work; in the room made sweet with flowers; in the company of the three charming ladies; on the table the extra delicacies Emily always provided for the occasion.

Boult! Forcus! The two men whom, least on earth, he desired to see there.

"Hallo, Gibbon!" his chief said; and the man addressed felt in his bones that the tone was unmistakably that of the employer to the employed. "Been getting forward for to-morrow, I suppose?"

No, Gibbon said, he had not; and he spoke curtly, and kept his heavy head up, and drew his brows together, and was somewhat offensive in manner, in the effort to show he was not subservient. He bowed sulkily to Mr. Reginald Forcus, when Mrs. Day murmured that gentleman's name. The fact that the young man when he came of an age to take the third share which was to be his in the brewery would be rolling in money, was nothing to him, and he wished to show to all present it was not! At the concert he, who was ugly, and short, and poor, and of no account in the world, had had the best of the elegant young man with his fortune and the name which was one to conjure with in Brockenham. He had wrested Deleah from him, and pushed him on one side. He did not propose to smile amiably at him across the tea-table after that.

He was going to Lancashire to buy goods for his department to-morrow--he was absent there for four or five days every three weeks. This was his last evening of Paradise for a while; and the Serpent had entered there!

"You are late," Bessie rebuked him sweetly. "And you must wait for more tea to be made. Where have you been, pray? Give an account of yourself."

He had walked out five miles, he told her, to the garden of a friend who had a small conservatory. He had hoped to be rewarded with some flowers to return with, but had only been accorded the three roses he held in his hand.

"Very sweet of you to bring them for me, all the same," Bessie said, smiling graciously.

Gibbon was, however, shy or sullen this evening, for he seemed by no means anxious to relinquish the flowers; and when he did so he laid them between his plate and Deleah's, who promptly put them into Bessie's extended hand. When pinned in the bosom of her grey frock the flowers had a charming effect, to which she called the attention of all present.

"Aren't they sweet, mama! Mr. Boult, Reggie, aren't they simply sweet! And poor Mr. Gibbon to have walked so many miles for them!"

And so, at cross purposes, with heart-burnings and some bitterness of spirit, they got through their Sunday tea.

"It would have been delightful if you had not invited your old Scrooge," Bessie, who, at any rate, had thoroughly enjoyed herself, flung at her sister.

CHAPTER XV

The Manchester Man

Mrs. Day had retired to write her letter to Bernard in the privacy of her own room, and Bessie, in radiant spirits, had gone off to dress for evening service, where she was to go escorted by Franky and Emily. Deleah was left in charge of the boarder.

It was a point of honour with them all that the young man should have his money's worth while under their roof, and above all, should have his meals in comfort. The cup which Bessie had poured out for him stood cold and untasted by his side. Deleah took it from him. Certainly he should not have the dregs of the tea-pot; she would brew a fresh pot for him.

"I beg you will not trouble, Miss Deleah. It is my fault in being late."

He, who held the creed that a gentleman must never allow a lady to wait on him (unless she was his mother, or he was married to her), must follow Miss Deleah to the kitchen, also on the upper floor, must watch her rinse the tea-pot, must advise with her as to the amount of tea required to make the three large cups he always drank, must himself pour the boiling water, she, with many exhortations from him to be very careful lest she scalded her fingers, holding the tea-pot. There was something delightfully homelike and familiar in this sharing of simple duties.

Deleah, returned to the sitting-room where she sat to fill his cup and to cut him bread-and-butter, was as lovely a vision as any man could desire to see at his board. Pleasantly and gaily she chattered, waiting on him with her dainty hands. He, tongue-tied, answering little, embarrassed and ill at ease in that sweet society.

For a year and a half he had lived in the dingy house above the shop in Bridge Street. He had for eighteen months enjoyed that propinquity, that familiar intercourse, which is all that is necessary to make many an ugly woman beautiful in the eyes of the man in enjoyment of her society. It is small wonder then, if the poor Manchester man exaggerated in his own mind those unusual charms which Deleah incontestably possessed.

A year and a half! And in all that time he could never recall an occasion when he had been left for any length of time alone with Deleah, before. It was Bessie who had constituted herself his especial friend, had seized on him, talked to him, made confidences to him, and satisfied herself it was his wish to talk to her. Deleah, he knew, had looked on him as Bessie's

property. He had resented this assumption, but had not known how to dispute it.

Besides being of a loveliness which he had come to think unsurpassed, she was so gentle, so tender-hearted, so pitiful, this young Deleah; so adorably kind. She had learnt in that grief and shame which he knew had befallen her a lesson, taught her he was sure by the pitying angels of God; to think no sorrow too trivial to be despised, to be tender even to the scratched finger, the bruised shins of the poor men and women scrambling painfully along the tough and thorny path of life.

He was a short and broad and ugly man, approaching middle age; of a commonplace cut of features, of poor birth, of mean fortunes, of small account in the scheme of things; but he had an eye for beauty; he had a soul; and his eye was filled with a beauty completely satisfying his conception; and with his soul he worshipped the soul of Deleah.

"I am sorry," he suddenly said, cutting across some little triviality of hers with which she was striving to cover his silence--"sorry you did not have even one of the roses I walked ten miles to get for you."

"I?" she glanced fleetingly at him. "Oh, it does not matter, of course. Bessie has them, and she loves them so. I had far rather Bessie had them."

He gazed upon her, reproachful but silent.

"Bessie so loves flowers," she said, remembering how Bessie had pounced upon the poor roses before they had been offered. It had not been a pretty sight--but Bessie--poor Bessie!--did such things.

"Miss Bessie so loves them to wear in her dress," he corrected.

And at that moment Miss Bessie burst into the room, attired for conquest and for church, the flowers which the boarder had walked so far to procure, pinned, as was the mode of the day, beneath the collar of her jacket. Gibbon glanced grudgingly at them, nestling becomingly enough under Bessie's plump chin.

"Oh, how glum you look!" cried Bessie in the best of spirits.

"Not glum at all," said Mr. Gibbon with something less than his usual politeness of tone.

"Only cross? Ah! I am so afraid of you! I must run away."

She beckoned to Deleah, who followed her to the tiny landing. "The Honourable Charles has got his back up because of Reggie," she whispered, "and Reggie is furious because of the Honourable Charles's flowers. Did you hear how he snapped at me just now?"

"Why should Mr. Gibbon be angry because of Reggie?"

"Oh, my dear innocent babe! Don't you know that men are sometimes jealous?"

"Yes. I know it. And I know another thing: and that is you were doing your best to make them jealous."

Bessie laughed delightedly as at a compliment: "I leave one of them to you. Try to get him into a better frame of mind before I come back," she said, and turned to run downstairs.

Deleah leaned over the railing of the tiny landing, lit by a single gas-jet above her head, to watch her go. She liked to see Bessie good-tempered and in good spirits, and if to believe that every man she knew was in love with her made her so, Deleah was willing to humour her. About the devotion of young Forcus for Bessie she had her doubts, but that of the lodger she took as a matter of course.

He was still seated at the table when she returned to him; the bread-and-butter she had cut for him untouched on his plate, his tea untasted.

"I thought perhaps you were not coming back," he said. He sighed, as if relieved from an anxiety which had been painful. "Miss Deleah, I wish very much to speak to you."

There were a few things in the matter of deportment he had learnt since living over the grocer's shop; one was that a man must not sit while a lady is standing. So he stood up in his place now, and waited till she had taken hers again behind the tea-urn.

"Oh, but, Mr. Gibbon, do eat your tea!"

He pushed his plate away: "I don't want to eat. I want to talk to you."

Glancing at him she saw that his face, ordinarily of a deep-diffused red, was as pale as it is possible for such a face to become. Often when she had felt his eyes upon her and had looked up frankly to meet them, she had noticed how quickly he had averted them, almost as if detected in a crime. Now she found them fixed upon her face.

"There is something I have made up my mind to tell you," he said.

"It won't take long, I hope? Because as Emily is at church I have to clear the tea-things."

She jumped up at once and began to do so. "He is going to tell me about Bessie," she said to herself. She did not particularly desire his confidence, and with a little more clatter and fussiness than was necessary to the task, she put the cups and plates on the tray.

In a preoccupied manner he helped her to do this, took the tray from her, when it was laden, to the kitchen, while she carried the eatables. Coming back, together they folded the tablecloth. A pleasant enough occupation to be shared with a pretty girl; but it was evident, although his trade had made his blunt fingers deft at the handling of material, and he was

carefully observant of the practice which must be followed in the art, that he was thinking of other things than maintaining the creases in the tablecloth.

"There!" said Deleah, as an announcement that their light labours were finished. She had put the cloth away in the press, and turned to find the Honourable Charles, as she and Bessie to themselves always called their boarder, standing with his back to the little dresser at which Emily made her pastry, his arms crossed upon his chest.

"Now you can go and sit down in comfort, and smoke the pipe of peace on my special window-seat--I give you permission--and watch the good people going to church."

"That is, if you are coming."

"I think I'll go first and see what has become of mama."

"This will do, for a few minutes, Miss Deleah. We will stop here," he said.

So Deleah, there being no escape, perched herself on the corner of the table where the plates and tea-cups were collected until Emily should return to wash them, and waited for what he had to say.

He found some difficulty in beginning apparently, and frowned upon the matting covering the floor.

"It's about myself," at length he began with an effort painful to see; his hands seemed to be pulling tensely upon his folded arms, the blunt fingers of the broad red hands showed white upon the coat-sleeves, his face was still of the muddy pink which with him stood for pallor.

"I hope you won't think it intruding of me to talk about myself."

"Which in other words means about Bessie," said Deleah to herself, strung up, now that it was inevitable, for the revelation.

"It's about my prospects. Perhaps you think I haven't got any, Miss Deleah. Or any position, to speak of? I have not, I know. Not like your friend, Mr. Forcus. He's got this thousands a year, where at most I can hope for hundreds, I suppose."

Deleah divined the sore feeling in his mind and hastened to bring the balm: "Reggie Forcus might have millions where he will have thousands--and the more he had the less likely would he be to affect any of us. He has been here this afternoon, and if he remembers he may come again. But that is simply the whim of an idle young man who at the moment can think of nothing more amusing to do."

"I thought he seemed to take a good deal of interest. I caught him looking--"

"At Bessie? He likes her, of course, and there was once a great friendship. If--things--hadn't happened, I dare say it might have come to more than friendship. But they did happen, and--" She broke off. Never could she without suffering and difficulty allude to the tragedy which had cost them so dear.

"I assure you, Mr. Gibbon," she began again, and smiled encouragingly upon him, "you are of far more importance to us than Mr. Reginald Forcus is ever likely to be."

"I thank you for telling me that," he said, and his fingers strained tighter upon his coat-sleeves.

Then he lifted his eyes and looked at her as she sat, perched with ease and grace among the tea-cups on the kitchen table. Every movement of hers was made, every posture taken, with ease and grace. It happened, for Deleah's fortune, to be the day of the small woman; the day when she of inches was pronounced a gawk, and she of five feet and a little--slim of waist, of foot, of hand, of ankle--slid with ease and naturalness into a man's heart.

"Thank you for that," said the Manchester man again, with a kind of hoarse fervour in his voice. "You are always kind. I don't think the angels in heaven are kinder than you."

A statement at which Deleah among the tea-cups laughed light-heartedly.

"No. Don't laugh," he said almost fiercely. "It is true! I believe it with all my soul."

He looked from her to the floor at his feet again, frowning upon it, striving for the calmness to proceed with that which he had to say in the order he had taught himself to believe was best for his case.

"I'm getting two hundred a year," he said. "This year, come Christmas, I'm to have a rise to two hundred and fifty. Next year"--he paused, set his lips tightly--"next year I mean to ask for a share in the business."

"Do you?" said Deleah with polite interest. "Do you really think you will get it, Mr. Gibbon?"

"I shall get it, fast enough. I shall get it, for this reason: if Boulton doesn't give it me I shall leave him. Boulton can't afford to lose me. I don't want to boast, but it's true. He can't afford to lose me, and he knows it. Do you know," and he lifted his head, speaking more naturally and looking at her with pride in his achievement, "in the two years I have been in the concern I have doubled the takings in my department?"

"Really? How very clever of you, Mr. Gibbon! You must be pleased!"

He looked at her, and laughed hopelessly. "You don't understand these things, Miss Deleah. You don't realise that what I have done means much."

"Oh, but I do, Mr. Gibbon! I have always thought that you must be a quite wonderful business man; so quiet, so regular, thinking of nothing but your work."

"I do think of other things," he said fervidly. "I want to get on. I want to improve myself, and my position. There's an end I'm working for. If a man sets an end before him, and works for all he's worth to get it, does he get it, Miss Deleah?"

"He gets it. Never doubt it!"

"Well then, see! When I get my share of the business I shall work the whole show up as I have worked my own department. The other establishments in the same line can put their shutters up. It's the biggest drapery business in the town now--Boult is proud enough to ram that fact down your throat--but I shall make it the biggest drapery business in the Eastern Counties."

"How splendid of you, Mr. Gibbon! And supposing Mr. Boult won't give you the share?"

"I am not sure it would not be better. In that case I shall start on my own. Not in a shop. I shall open a warehouse for the sale of my goods, alone."

"Those calicoes, and prints, and 'drabbets,' you go to Manchester to buy?" put in Deleah, anxious to show that she understood.

"Manchester goods. I shall carry with me all the little customers who come to me now to take my advice what they shall buy, and a lot of shopkeepers of a better class, who will deal with a wholesale man but will not buy their goods of Boult."

"Poor Mr. Boult!"

"He must look after himself. I heard Miss Bessie say the other day that the wholesale line was genteeler than retail--." He broke off and looked questioningly at Deleah, who had formed no opinion on the subject.

"Bessie knows about these things," she assured him. "Then, you will become a very rich man, Mr. Gibbon. And will go away, and never help us to make mincemeat any more, or to clear the table after Sunday tea. You will drive your carriage with a _pair_ of horses--not one miserable screw like Mr. Boult--and you will live in a fine house, and grow roses, and build conservatories; won't you?"

"Yes," he assented solemnly. Then he unfolded his arms and' stretching them sideways gripped with each hand the ledge of the dresser against which he leant. "I shall want you to come with me," he said.

"Me!" said Deleah. The shock of the surprise made her for a moment breathless. She sat and gazed at him with wide eyes for what seemed an age, saying nothing; and he also, for the moment incapable of further

speech, gazed back. At last "Bessie?" Deleah got out. "You mean Bessie?"

"Why should I mean Bessie? _Bessie!_" he said, and flung the thought of her from him with scorn. "Why should I mean Bessie? I mean you--you--you!" he said, and endured her silence with eyes that clung desperately to her face.

"When I leave here, to go into that fine house--with the carriage and--conservatories--will you come too?"

"Oh, no!" Deleah said, whispering, with drooping head.

Then they sat opposite each other on table and dresser and were silent, while the blood sang loudly in Deleah's ears, and beat with such cruel throbbing in the man's temples that he did not know how to endure the agony, and thought that his head must burst.

When Deleah at last lifted her eyes and looked at him the change in his face frightened her, his breath came hard and noisily as if he had been running. Was it possible he could feel like that--this quiet, inoffensive, uninteresting, middle-aged boarder, who had never appeared to feel anything particularly before? About her?

"I am so sorry," she said in genuine distress, horribly grieved at and ashamed of her part in his pain. "I thought it was Bessie."

"You have refused me? You mean it--absolutely? There is no hope for me?"

Deleah shivered. It was the regulation phrase used by the rejected lover in the novel of the day. It had thrilled Deleah a hundred times as she had read it. There was nothing stilted or theatrical in the words as Charles Gibbon said them, but they brought home to her the unwelcome fact that he was in deadly earnest, that he loved her, and she was dealing him a cruel blow. She felt miserable, humiliated, ashamed. It was preposterous, out of all proportion, that he should have had to ask such a question, in such a tone, of little Deleah Day.

"I am so very sorry, Mr. Gibbon," she said again, and he heard in a silence that made her heart ache.

"Shall you go away?" she asked him presently. In books the lover being rejected removed himself for a time in order to recover from the blow. She was relieved to find in the boarder's case this was not considered necessary.

"Why should I go away?" he asked.

"It will be better to go on just the same," she advised eagerly. "Bessie need never know."

"Bessie!" he said again contemptuously; he loosed his grip of the dresser, and swung round, standing with his back to her, that she might not see his face. "You've crushed every hope I had; you've--broken me; and you talk to

me of Bessie. What, in the name of heaven or hell, do you suppose I care for _Bessie_; or whether she knows or not?"

Deleah, keeping her place on the table, listened to the altered, choked voice of him with astonishment. Their unfailingly polite--too polite! and retiring boarder! Was it really he, standing with his back to her, speaking of Bessie--Bessie!--in such a tone!

"You see, I never knew! I never guessed," she excused herself helplessly.

"No. I don't suppose you gave me a thought. Morning, noon and night you were everything to me. There was nothing else. I have worked for you, lived for you--"

His back was towards her--the horrible thought that he was crying came to her; his voice was rough and broken.

"If I had only guessed--" she said in hideous distress and embarrassment. She had thought, as all girls do, of one day getting an offer of marriage; that it could ever be such a miserable experience as this she had not imagined. If it had only been a stranger, she thought foolishly; some one outside her life, of whom she had seen little! But Mr. Gibbon--their boarder! The sight of him in their home circle had become as familiar to her as might have been the sight of her brother: she could not reconcile herself to the thought that this man in the horribly unfamiliar guise was he. "If I had only guessed--!"

"And if you had?" he asked, but hopelessly, without turning round.

"I could have told you the sooner. There wouldn't have been such a--waste."

She slipped off the table, and stood beside it in a painful state of indecision. She longed to get away from the sight of him, to escape; but at the same time, being Deleah, she also longed to comfort.

"I shall not even tell mama," she promised. "We shall go on just as usual. And soon--soon we shall forget it has happened."

"Shall we?"

"Oh, yes! It is astonishing how we can put things away, in the back of our minds, and go on as if they weren't there at all. Quite astonishing."

"We oughtn't to make a piece of work about our sorrows if we can get along with them as easily as that!"

"Oh, not our sorrows, of course." She remembered how the sorrow of her father's dreadful end was with her still and would be while she lived.

"Our sorrow, of course, Mr. Gibbon, we cannot forget. But a little thing that goes amiss like this--a little disappointment--"

"I see," he said. Then he gave a sound, half choke, half hiccough, that

was meant for a laugh; and presently he turned round. "Then, we will go on as before, Miss Deleah. You need not be afraid any one will learn of this--'little disappointment'--from me. I am pretty well used to hiding what I feel. It comes easy when you've once learnt that nobody cares."

"Oh, Mr. Gibbon. Don't please say that. I care."

"No, you don't. You don't care like I want you to. What's the good of anything else? Have we finished clearing away the tea-things, Miss Deleah? Anything more that I can help you with?"

She shook her head, looking at him with eyes which implored him not to be bitter or unhappy. And as she looked, seeing the familiar red face and squat strong figure of him in a new light an idea struck her.

"Mr. Gibbon," she said, "it was you who sent the concert tickets, and all the flowers and fruit, and the canary in its lovely cage. It was you--you!"

"No, no! Mr. Boulton, of course, Miss Deleah. You found out who it was, long ago. Kind, generous Mr. Boulton!"

"And I took them all, and never thanked you--!" She put out a hand to delay him as he walked past her to the door; but he took no heed, and without another word she let him go.

"What have you done with your roses?" Deleah asked. Bessie tucked in her plump chin and looked down upon the place beneath her jacket collar where they had been pinned. "I must have lost them coming out of church!" she said. "Pray do not let the Honourable Charles hear of it."

The three poor roses! Deleah's roses, the boarder had tramped the ten miles to get for her!

CHAPTER XVI

For Bernard

Sir Francis Forcus was standing with his back to the empty fireplace in his private room at the Brewery, a copy of the local daily newspaper in his hand. It was a pleasant room, although the view from the two open windows was only of the tall black wharves and warehouses across the way. You must lean from the window to catch sight of the black river flowing beneath, upon which the Brewery was built; of the great wherries and barges unloading below; to see the canoes and pleasure boats, escaping from the polluted waters, the bricks and mortars of the locality, to the sunlit stream flowing between fair gardens and green pastures of the country, a half-mile farther on.

From a window in one of the black, ill-looking wharves across the way an imprisoned lark was singing, rewarding man for his cruel treatment with the best he had to give, after the manner of the brute creation, whose avenging is not yet. A ray of sunlight straggling in--in more open, more favoured localities, the sun lay broadly over all on that spring morning--touched the face of Sir Francis, which wore a by no means well-pleased expression. In the paper he was reading, wet from the press, was an account of a steeplechase in which his brother's name had largely figured. He had not won the race, nor distinguished himself in any way, except by the number and severity of his falls, and the fact that he had killed his horse; but the Brockenham Star was, to a large extent, the property of the firm of big brewers, and had therefore made the most of the young man's exploits.

"The boy will break his neck yet," the reader said to himself. He was not largely in his brother's confidence. The death of the horse was news to him; he had not even known there was a steeplechase.

"What good is he doing with all this?" Sir Francis asked of himself, sternly looking off the paper. "He takes no interest in the Brewery. He is a man in years, and has never done a half-hour's work in his life."

Sir Francis's own half-hours of work would not have totalled up to much, but he had business ability, nevertheless. At certain hours of the day he was always to be found, as now, at his post, and what he did not do himself he took care that those he paid should do efficiently.

Above the mantelpiece hung the portrait of the founder of the Brewery, or rather of the man who had worked up the business already founded into a phenomenally successful one. Often as the elder partner looked upon the sensible, kindly, handsome-featured face, he reminded himself how very dear to his father in his old age had been this unbusiness-like, pleasure-loving, steeplechase-riding younger son, who had been but a boy at school when the old man had died. Very frequently it was necessary for him to remind himself of the fact; for between the duty-loving, serious-minded, middle-aged, sorrowing widower and his half-brother was very little in common.

A clerk opening the door announced that a lady had called who was waiting to see Sir Francis.

"A lady? My sister--Miss Forcus?"

"A young lady. She didn't give her name."

"Ask it, please."

Back came the clerk with a slip of paper on which was written a name Sir Francis read to himself, and then aloud, looking questioningly upon the clerk, "Miss Deleah Day. Miss Deleah Day?"

The clerk, having no information to give or suggestion to offer, continued to look respectfully at his employer's boots.

"Show her in, please," Sir Francis said; and in a minute the door was opened and Deleah appeared.

Sir Francis, the Brockenham Star depending from his left hand, bowed in his solemn fashion to the girl, and going forward turned a chair round from the writing-table, in which he indicated his desire that she should sit. How white and frightened she looked; what a young, little, extraordinary pretty thing! Full well he remembered the last occasion of her presence in his room. What had sent her to him now? What did she want? He recalled how Reggie, whose name, it seemed to him, was always being mentioned in some undesirable connection or other, had got himself mixed up with this girl's objectionable family. Reggie, he wondered? Or was it that the mother's wretched grocery business had failed, as he had always expected it to do, and he was to be asked for another contribution towards setting her going again?

With those thoughts passing through his mind, he went back to his old position by the fireplace, standing up stiff and straight and tall, upon the hearth, to survey his visitor from there.

"You were so kind once," Deleah said, and he heard that she had a difficulty in keeping her voice steady, and saw that her lips shook "--so very kind when I came to you before, that I have come again."

Too apprehensive of what her errand might be to say that he was glad to see her, he bowed his head in sign of courteous attention, and waited.

As she had come on her hateful errand, she had thought of how she would prepare the ground, in some way leading up to the petition she had to make, but speech was too difficult, and she could barely deliver herself of the necessary words: "I have come to ask you to give me fifty pounds," she said.

Sir Francis's eyes opened largely upon her, but he did not speak. To say at once that he would give the poor child--the tool no doubt of her family, sent by them to work upon him because she was so pretty and young and appealing--fifty pounds without further explanation would be simply silly: to say that he would not did not enter his head.

She had waited for an encouraging word; none coming; painfully she laboured on: "I say 'give' because I am not sure I could ever pay you--I earn so very little money. But if I ever can pay you, you may trust me that I shall."

"I am sure you will," the rich man said, and waited for her to go on with her story. But she sat in an embarrassed silence before him, her head drooping, frightened and ashamed.

"We will call it 'lent,' shall we?" presently he said. "You will feel happier so. And there will be no hurry. No hurry, at all."

"Oh thank you! I do thank you so much. I want to tell you--"

"No, no," he said and held up a hand to check the words upon her lips. It was ridiculous to give away money in such a fashion, but he had a feeling that if he knew its destination he should give it with more reluctance.

"But I must tell you, please. I wanted to tell you before, but--" Her eyes avoided his face and wandered distressedly round the room. How well she remembered it! It was here she had come to beg this man--this stranger!--to keep her father out of prison. And now her brother--now Bernard! Was there any girl in all the world so overwhelmed with shame as she! "It is my brother--" she got out. "He--I have brought his letter."

She found her pocket, and brought forth the letter which had come to her by the morning post, ravaging her heart, turning the sunshine black, making the song of the imprisoned lark opposite into a dirge, plunging her back into the woe which had been hers at the time of her father's disgrace. She drew the miserable letter from its envelope and held it to Sir Francis in trembling fingers.

"No," he said, and waved it away. "It is perhaps something that your brother would rather not have known. Something which can remain between you and him. And this--this fifty pounds"--he had gone to his writing-table, pulled a cheque-book from a drawer, was writing within it as he spoke--"this also is between you and me. No one, besides, needs ever to know a word of it."

The chair he had arranged for her to sit in was by the writing-table; he, sitting on the opposite side of it, lifted his eyes to her face without lifting his head: "You wish this made out to your brother or yourself?"

"To my brother."

"Will you tell me his name?"

"Bernard William."

She watched his strong white hand move over the paper, writing so easily the words that were of such moment to her. How the great ruby in the ring he wore on the hand which held the pen seemed to glow and burn in the sunlight. On the little finger of his other hand was a plain small circlet she knew to be from the finger of his dead wife. She noticed in the strong light from the window how the smooth black hair had grown grey about the ears, how lines which had not been there before had graven themselves in the handsome, impassive face. Was he very unhappy too, Deleah wondered, in the midst of her own trouble? Did he still mourn, as they said he had done, so heavily, for the lost wife?

He pushed the cheque across the table to her. "There!" he said.

He had caught her gaze fixed with its sorrowful questioning upon his face, and he put away from him his doubt, his annoyance, and in spite of himself smiled encouragement into her pleading, beautiful, innocently worshipping eyes.

"Do not be unhappy," he said. "This will put things right, we will hope; and set your brother on his feet again. You must not look so sad."

At the words--he had been wrong to speak so kindly--the clear hazel of her eyes was suffused with tears. The eyes were doubly beautiful so.

"I'll not believe but Desdemona's honest" he found himself replying to that annoying little voice which kept whispering, "Have they put her on to me?"

Deleah kept her wet eyes strained upon him, lest in lowering them the tears should overflow. "I don't know what you can think of me," she said falteringly. "I don't know how I had courage to come. I only had Bernard's letter this morning; he said--it--must be done to-day. My mother must not know: there is no one else: I had no one to ask. You had been so good to me once--I thought of you."

"I quite understand. Quite. Quite."

"I was a child then," she laboured on, forcing herself to try to express what she felt ought to be said; "and although I had no right to trouble you, to a child things may be forgiven. But now--but now--!"

"But now," he repeated, and smiled his faint smile again. To him she was but a child still, and his tone conveyed that message.

"I am very much ashamed," she said. "And so--so grateful."

She folded the cheque, put it in her cheap, little-used purse, and stood up. So humiliated she felt, she hesitated to put out her hand, lest he should think it presumptuous on her part to expect him to shake hands with her.

"Where is this brother of yours? What is he doing?" he asked.

"He is at Ingleby. Mr. George Boulton put him into one of his shops in the country."

"Oh! George Boulton?"

Something in tone depreciatory of the man caused Deleah to say quickly, "He has been very good to us. He helped mama about the grocer's shop; and advises her."

"So I have heard." He was thinking to himself if the unsatisfactory brother had to look for mercy for any misdoings to George Boulton he would be in a sorry case.

"He is very young--my poor brother," Deleah put in. "And I suppose he has made bad friends. He never has a holiday. He can never come home to mama and us--"

"Ah, that is bad. And can't you go over to him? I am sure that you could do him good." For the thought came to him, as he looked down upon the sorrowful girl in her neat, cheap frock, standing so shyly before him, that he had never seen goodness written so legibly on the face of any human being as on that of this daughter of a thief and sister of a never-do-well.

"Railway travelling is expensive, and we are obliged to live very carefully," Deleah said. "Poor mama has made one or two bad debts lately. And so many people, who pay in the end, are so very slow to do so." Deleah shook her head slowly and sorrowfully over these sluggards. "Also, I am occupied, of course, all day long."

"May I know in what way?"

"I teach," Deleah said, and lifted her head with a kind of pride in the avowal which was very pretty. "I am second English governess at Miss Chaplin's school for young ladies. I earn enough there to buy my own clothes and Franky's."

Her courage was coming back to her; instead of the difficulty she had experienced in dragging out the words necessary to explain and condone her errand, she now had the impulse to tell him things, to make him confidences.

"And who is Franky?"

"He is my little brother. Very much younger than the rest, and the pet with all of us. Mama says, but for Franky, she thinks she could never have survived the troubles she has had. I think we all felt that. We could not be always crying and melancholy in the company of a little boy who does not understand, and who wants so much to enjoy himself. For Franky's sake we have to be cheerful. He is only nine. Only seven when--all that--happened to papa."

"Franky must not go into one of George Boulton's shops," Sir Francis said. "When Franky is old enough to leave school--to begin to earn his living--come and tell me, will you?"

Her face lit, till it was lovely as a sun-kissed flower. "Oh, I will! Oh, thank you," she said; and then she did put out her hand, and for an instant her fingers closed with all their soft strength round the hand he gave her. "Oh, thank you!" she said again.

Then he opened the door for her, and she went.

Deleah, when she had sent off the cheque, whose receipt must have surprised him exceedingly, to her brother, felt herself to be almost bursting with the desire to confide in some one the history of her visit to the rich brewer. She longed to descant on his looks, to repeat his

words, above all to tell of the heavenly promise contained in that last divine sentence concerning Franky. No one must be told; but Deleah was over young to be burdened with a secret; it made her restless. She could not sit with Bessie, to hear her discuss the pattern of the sleeve she was cutting out for a new Sunday frock. She ran down to the shop, for the relief of being near her mother.

Mrs. Day glanced at her with welcoming eyes and turned at once again attentively upon her customer, a good lady difficult to please in the matter of candles.

"A tallow candle will do very well for the servants to gutter down, in the kitchen," she was irritably declaring. "But neither my daughter nor me can abide the smell of tallow; and your wax ones are a cruel price. Cruel, Mrs. Day! I suppose you could not make a reduction by my taking two packets?"

Mrs. Day shook a patient head. "We really get almost nothing out of them, as it is," she sadly protested. "These candles--called composite--ladies are beginning to buy them for servants' use as well as their own. I sell more composites now than either wax or tallow."

"You couldn't oblige me with one or two to try?--Oh, good afternoon, Miss Day. So you are not above coming into the shop sometimes, to bear your mama company?"

"Above it!" said Deleah; and because she had to be as sweet as sugar to her mother's customers, she smiled upon Mrs. Potter, who turned from the counter to engage her in talk.

"What for you, my dear?" Mrs. Day's next customer was a very shabby, very small boy, his grimy, eager face appearing just above the counter.

"A ha'p'r' o' acids, like th' last." He held up the coin in his fist to assure her of the good faith of the transaction.

"You give me more 'n that, last time, for a ha'p'ny. You ha'n't weighed 'em," the customer grumbled.

"Lucky for you I have not! Here! Take your ha'penny and be off."

Many customers of that unremunerative order had the widow. When the ragged little ones happened to be about the age of Franky they were sure of bouncing weight, and of getting their money returned. She smiled upon the scaramouch now, who was watched from the door by half a dozen confederates. The ha'penny was common property apparently, for each was presently clamouring for his share.

These screws of sweets and quarter pounds of broken biscuits given to the children of the very poor afforded her the only pleasure Mrs. Day got out of her long hours behind the grocery counter. For, in spite of the greed and selfishness of human nature, perhaps the most keenly felt deprivations of the one who has been rich and now is poor is the inability to put the

hand lightly in the pocket, and with no thought if it can be afforded or no, to give to those who ask.

While Mrs. Day had been attending to her own customers with one ear, she had been hearing with the other a discussion going on at the opposite corner as to the price and the quality of the butter.

"Ours is from the best dairy," young--very young!--Mr. Pretty was assuring the poor, respectable woman who was hanging back from putting his assertion to the test. "Fresh in, every day, mum. Like to put a bit on your tongue to try it?"

The woman did so, tasting the morsel with an anxious look. "But I can't afford to give you one-and-two the pound, if I can buy it a penny less, only a little way down the street."

"You don't get butter there like this, ma'am;" and young Mr. Pretty, who should have been Master Pretty surely, by rights, conveyed a piece of butter to his own tongue, and tasted it loudly, looking very wise.

"Best quality, one and a penny.' I see it ticketed up as I come by Coman's." She turned round to the mistress of the shop. "I have always dealt along of you for butter, ma'am," she said. "I haven't no wish to leave you, but where I buy my butter--stand to reason I must buy the rest of my grosheries."

"If Coman is down to that; you shall have it for the same sum;" Mrs. Day promised. Her butter had already been "dropped" twice before, that day, in order to keep pace with the passion for underselling of the new grocer, who had, for the undoing of the widow and the orphan, opened a shop lower down the street. Our poor retailer was selling her sugars, too, for less than she gave for them.

"You must do so for a time," George Boulton had informed her. "Coman can't go on like this for ever. He'll get tired of the game soon--if I know anything of trade and tradesmen--then you can stick it on to your goods again."

While the subject of the butter was being debated, the child Franky came in from afternoon school. He was day-boarder at a cheap academy to which other small tradesmen's sons were sent--a school very inferior to that to which Bernard had gone. Companionship with rough, common children had not improved the manners of Franky, nor his habit of speech. He dashed in, with no thought of the deference due to customers, pushed out of his way the lady just deciding to let Mrs. Day try to procure in the town a candle more to her taste, rushed round the counter to his mother.

"C'n I go in to tea with Willy Spratt? Willy Spratt's ma says I may go to tea with 'm. I wish to, very much. C'n I go?"

"No, my dear. We like you to have tea with us. We can't spare you."

"C'n I go, ma? C'n I go? Willy Spratt's waitin' outside."

Willy Spratt was the son of the cutler and his wife, across the way. Very good customers of Mrs. Day, very good people; but--

"You haven't spoken to Mrs. Potter, Franky," Deleah said to divert the child's mind. "You know Mrs. Potter, sir. Where are your manners?"

"Quite 'ell, I thank ye," said Franky without a glance in the direction of the good lady in question, who had not the intention to inquire for his health. "C'n I go, ma? Willy's waitin' outside; and c'n I go?"

"Oh go!" his poor mother said. "Go! But, Franky dear, _don't_ pull your cap in that hideous fashion over your eyes."

But Franky had ducked his head from beneath his mother's hand, dashed round the counter, and was away to the society of the expectant Willy.

In an interregnum of peace between the going and coming of customers Mrs. Day moaned to Deleah over the grievous subject of Franky's deterioration.

"He even brushes his hair, and wears his cap, in the fashion of that dreadful Willy Spratt. Being so young he does not stand a chance. He must grow into just a common little boy."

"Never, mama!" Deleah, the unfailing comforter, declared. "Why, Franky looks like a creature of a different mould from Willy Spratt. Franky, with that dear little nose of his, is distinctly aristocratic. Don't laugh! He is indeed. You and he are, you know; and any one can see it."

"Nonsense, my dear," the mother said, but smiled and was comforted on that score. "It is inevitable, I suppose," she went on, "that we fall into the way of speech of those around us. But it vexes me. Have you noticed that even Bessie habitually speaks of Mr. Gibbon now without the 'Mr.'? 'Gibbon' said this or 'Gibbon' did that. I don't like to mention it to her, but it offends my ear."

"I wouldn't say anything," Deleah counselled. "We know that Bessie is--so very easily upset."

"Poor Bessie!" the mother said. Both of them had a vision of Bessie drumming her heels on the floor in the hysterics into which a few thwarting words would throw her. "What about Bessie's love affairs?" Mrs. Day presently asked. "I should be so thankful to see Bessie with a home of her own. She would be so happy, married. But--?"

She paused questioningly upon the "but," knowing it to be a very large one.

"I don't think Reggie means anything, mama."

"No," acquiesced Mrs. Day, sadly shaking her head. "I can't think how Bessie can be so blind. Yet, if it were otherwise, what an escape out of Bridge Street it would be for her."

Deleah was silent.

"Or for you?"

Deleah laughed with her colour high: "I would not marry Reggie Forcus if he were stuffed with gold, mama."

Mrs. Day turned away to wait upon the untidy little servant girl from over the way whose family had suddenly "run out of vinegar."

Her eyes had been sharp enough to see on which of her daughters' faces it was that Reginald Forcus's gaze dwelt; she had divined the attraction which drew the pleasure-loving, much sought young man to sit patiently for hours in the evening, watching the girls at their work. She looked, drearily, the vinegar being measured and the customer gone, between the intervening biscuit tins and pickle jars into the street. She had begun to cherish a dream that if not Bessie it might be her pretty Deleah who, through Reggie, should find a way out.

"Supposing he really wanted to marry either of us you would not surely like it, would you, mama?"

And Mrs. Day was obliged to admit with a kind of shame that she would.

"That silly, irresponsible, baby of a young man; without two ideas in his head!"

But the mother knew if his head was empty, his pocket was not. He might not be clever, or have much stability of character, but oh, how many things which made life pleasant he possessed! She who had had them, and had lost them, was not one to underrate the value of worldly goods.

"I suppose the end will be Bessie must marry Mr. Gibbon," she said, with an effort at resignation and putting away from her unwillingly the golden dream. "I should not blame Bessie," she went on judicially. "He is a good and steady-going man, although so very quiet. Have you noticed, my dear, how very quiet Mr. Gibbon has become?"

"Yes, mama."

"I suppose it is love which makes him so quiet."

She supposed so, Deleah said. That he had been quieter still would have pleased her better. She could have spared his fierce "I love you," whispered behind the tablecloth when he and she had stooped simultaneously to pick up a knife which had fallen yesterday; his impassioned "Only look at me!" fiercely breathed last night over the candlestick he put into her hand. Both Bessie and her mother looked on the Honourable Charles as Bessie's property. Deleah was frightened at, and ashamed of, these irregular demonstrations.

"He is a commonplace, uninteresting looking man--but for something there in his eyes. I don't know if you have noticed what I mean, Deleah?--Yet he

will make a safe husband, with no thought in his head but for Bessie; and I suppose we must make up our minds to the sacrifice."

CHAPTER XVII

What Is It Now?

"Any message for your son, ma'am?" Mr. Gibbon inquired one night at supper-time of the widow, and announced that business called him to Ingleby on the next morning.

He did not add that he went with special instructions to inquire into complaints again made of Bernard Day by the manager of the branch shop, and to bring back a report on which George Boulton could act.

"The boy will have to be removed from Ingleby," the draper said. "I want to know if I am justified in discharging him on the spot, or whether I may risk giving him another chance."

Mr. Boulton had stayed his hand from dealing summarily with the young man, as it had been his instinct to do. After all, he was William Day's son; the son of the one friend whom, in all his life, he had made. The son of the widow of Bridge Street, also; and he, George Boulton, had been the arbiter of her destiny, of the destiny of her children, and was proud of the fact. The result had not been altogether satisfactory. No amount of teaching or of bullying would ever make a business woman of the mother; but then he knew that he had enjoyed the teaching and bullying. He felt a glow of satisfaction, when he read her name in the small white letters on a black ground above the shop door, "Lydia Day, licensed to sell tobacco and snuff," and remembered it was he who had caused that legend to be written there. It pleased him to recall the handsome woman in her silks and laces, who had extended a patronising hand to him, now and again, on those Sunday afternoons he had spent with her husband--the haughty-looking, dark-skinned, dark-eyed beauty, as he conjured her to his mind's eye--and then to enter the gloomy little shop, and to see this same woman--was it in truth the same?--her black gown covered by a large white, bibbed apron, white sleeves to her elbows, standing behind the counter, to weigh treacle into a customer's jar, or to descant on the merits of various scrubbing soaps.

"My doing," George Boulton said to himself, and was pleased.

His mother had many messages for Bernard, of course. A parcel of a couple of shirts for him too, which she and the girls had made for him, stitching busily together after the day's work was done. He was to write oftener. He was to send her his socks to mend. To take long walks into the country; and not by any means to be tempted to spend his evenings at the horrid hotel which Mr. Boulton had complained to his mother he frequented.

In the morning a little parcel was put into the boarder's hand, with the request that he would give it to Bernard. It contained a sovereign the poor woman, who had not a penny to spare, had taken from a sum due to meet a certain account, that day. The boy's salary was so very, very small; the wholesale house must wait for payment.

When Deleah arrived home from her school on the afternoon of that day, she found the shop in charge of Mr. Pretty alone, a state of things never permitted except at meal-times. Deleah went into the house and ran upstairs with a foreboding mind. Reaching the dark landing upon which the sitting-room opened, her heart sank within her at the sound of loud weeping proceeding from that room. Her mother was dying, or dead, bemoaned by Bessie, she decided, her thoughts leaping to the worst that could befall.

It was a relief to her, therefore, to see Mrs. Day seated in her accustomed chair, grey and stricken of face, but alive, and as she maintained an upright position, presumably well. The mother was looking straight before her with blindly staring eyes, paying no heed to Bessie, stretched upon the sofa, uttering howl upon howl.

"What is it now?" Deleah asked, standing in the doorway as if struck there. "Tell me quickly what it is." Her mind flew afield in search of awful possibilities. "Is Bernard dead?" she asked.

"Oh, I wish he were! I wish he were!" Bessie cried, and flung herself into a sitting position. "I wish he were. Bernard is worse, far worse than dead. Bernard has enlisted for a soldier!"

Deleah shut the door and came forward into the room. "Is that all?" she asked. Her poor little face was white, her eyes wild with fear. That Bernard was in prison had been what she dreaded to hear. "Oh, mama, if that is all, it is not so terrible."

Then there came a knock at the door and Charles Gibbon came in. Deleah turned upon him: "You should not have told them; you should have told me," she reproached him.

"I don't think so," he said bluntly. "Why should you bear the brunt of everything?"

Mrs. Day was incapable of speech, her poor lips shaking, the hands twitching which lay helpless on her lap.

Bessie looked at her. "Poor mama! Poor mama!" she moaned. "This will kill mama! The disgrace will kill her!"

"Hush!" said the Honourable Charles, and turned upon her, shocking her into silence. "You should have more control over yourself, Miss Bessie. Hysterics never helped any one in the world, yet."

"Hysterics!" repeated Bessie, but was so astonished that she ceased to moan.

"Mrs. Day," the boarder went on, "I told you the news about your son a little abruptly perhaps, but I did not consider I was telling you bad news. Many"--he was going to say "better men" but changed it into--"many better off than he have done the same thing, and it has been the making of them. I tell you straight, under all the circumstances, I think he has done the best thing he could."

"I must buy him off, of course," Mrs. Day said, paying no heed. "Do you know how to set about it, Mr. Gibbon; and what it costs?"

If Mr. Gibbon knew he did not say.

"To think of Bernard being a common soldier--a private!" Bessie began again, and shook once more with sobs. "If he comes here, Deleah, do you think he will expect us to walk out with him? We can never be seen with Bernard again--never! Never! Never!"

She had quarrelled continually with Bernard, but she had been fond of him, and proud of his good looks. Poor Bessie's grief was selfishly shown, but it was genuine grief all the same.

"Discipline will be the best thing in the world for him," the boarder promised. "A friend of mine who also went to the b---- who also enlisted, for certain reasons, is an officer now."

"Bernard will have no luck," Bessie declared. "No luck ever comes our way."

"There's no good waiting for luck, Miss Bessie--"

"Will Mr. Boulton buy him off?" the widow interrupted. No argument weighed with her. She listened to no attempt at comfort. "I must go to Mr. Boulton at once, and ask him to do it."

"If you take my advice, you won't, ma'am. If you ask him ever so, he won't."

"I will beg him, on my knees," the poor lady said.

Deleah followed Gibbon to the landing. "Is there anything you are keeping back?" she whispered to him. "You can tell me. I am not Bessie."

"The boy's been a fool--but there's nothing that can't be hushed up."

Her eyes full of fear clung to his face; she was determined to hear the worst. "You must tell me," she persisted.

"A couple of bills were paid over the counter; only for small amounts. Your brother did not--did not--"

"You mean he took the money for himself?"

How white her face was! The sound of Bessie's sighs and moans came from the sitting-room. Deleah opened another door on the landing. It was that of her mother's bedroom, but she cared nothing for that. With a hand on the boarder's arm she led him in there, and shut the door.

"Bernard stole the money?" she whispered. She had no thought of herself, or of who it was she held by the arm, had forgotten that he loved her. To know the worst, and to know it at once, so that in some way her mother might be spared the knowledge, was what she wanted.

She had no pity on herself, but he had pity for her--abounding, overwhelming pity; the brave little white-faced girl, who did not moan, nor fling herself about, nor talk nonsense; who had courage, who faced things.

"Your brother gave the receipts all right," he said slowly, "but he omitted to enter the accounts as paid in the ledger."

"And the money? What did he do with the money?"

"The money is all right. The firm loses nothing."

"How do you mean? Tell me."

"The money was found in his room."

"Who found it?"

"I found it. It was only for a small amount."

"And paid it in? So that they lose nothing? So that they all know that Bernard had only been careless? That he was not a thief?"

"It's all right," he assured her. "There's nothing for you to worry about--now."

"You are sure you are keeping nothing back? You would not deceive me? There is nothing more?"

Gibbon hesitated; he was not a man who told lies; and there was something more. "It seems he made debts--debts that out of his salary it was impossible for your brother to pay."

"Yes?"

"But he did pay them."

"He did? Then--?"

"You see, Miss Deleah, they're wishful to know where he got the money from to pay with."

She looked at him with knit brows anxiously for a minute, then her face

cleared and a glad light was in her eyes. "Why, I can tell them!" she said, "I sent him the money to pay the debts."

"It was fifty pounds--about. _You_ sent it?"

"Oh, the money was not mine. It was Sir Francis Forcus's money. I asked him for it. You can tell them I sent it, Mr. Gibbon; but tell them no more. Sir Francis wished it to be a secret between him and me."

"Oh!" Gibbon said, and roughly shook her hand from his arm.

"You don't believe me?"

"I believe you fast enough; oh, yes."

"Then why are you angry?"

"You might have come to me. Why didn't you come to me?"

"Oh, I don't know," Deleah said. The several reasons she could have given it seemed kinder to withhold.

He pounced upon her, his eyes blazing. "I don't like these '_secrets_' between a man and a girl."

Deleah drew back with a little offence. "If you knew at all what Sir Francis is like you would not say such a thing as that, Mr. Gibbon."

"What is he like?"

"Infinitely--infinitely above everything that is not kind and generous--and noble."

"He is just like any other man, except that he has more money."

Deleah put on her little air of dignity. "I thank you for telling me everything about my brother," she said. "I am so relieved that there was nothing worse to hear."

He watched her as she walked across the gloomy little square of landing and entered the other room. When she held her small head so poised on its long graceful throat, when the corners of her lips were ever so little turned down, the small rounded chin turned up, and the wonderful black eyelashes swept her cheeks he was afraid of her, little bit of a girl of less than half his age as she was; a girl who had been a child but two years ago, when he had come to the house. A girl whose lips as far as he had ever heard had never spoken one ungentle word; a girl who had pity on drowning flies, and carefully turned away her foot from the abject worm. But then he was always trembling before her, either with love or fear.

The impulse to tell her that the purse-proud brewer was not the only man who had done the wretched brother a service for her sake possessed him. The few pounds he had put, in order that he might find them there, in

Bernard's room, had been infinitely more to him than the fifty pounds to Sir Francis Forcus. And he was one who saved his money anxiously for the end he had in view. Would she call him "kind and generous and noble" if he told her? He more than doubted it.

"We can't possibly walk about with Bernard in the dress of a private soldier," Bessie was saying when Deleah returned to the sitting-room. "We have come down, mama, I know, but we have not come down so low as that; and Bernard can't expect it of us."

"I shall buy him off, if I have to sell the clothes off my back," Mrs. Day said, oblivious of the fact that her wardrobe in the market might perhaps have fetched the sum of thirty shillings.

"I would not be in too great a hurry, mama."

"You think nothing about the sufferings of your poor brother, Deleah. My darling son."

"I do think of him. I think he will be very angry if this is done at once. You must wait until he has had time to get sick of it."

"As soon as the shop is closed I shall go to Mr. Boulton and beg of him to help me to buy him off," Mrs. Day persisted.

She rose up stiffly from her chair and stood beside it, her hand grasping its back, waiting for the strength to come to her to take up the burthen of business again. Ah, if only she had leisure for grieving, if she might lie on the sofa and cry, as Bessie was doing, what a luxury it would have been!

The assistant had been left to "get up" an order for her most important customer in her absence. He had put the wrong sugars into parcels, and the wrong tea. In reaching the tin of "foxy grass" from the top shelf, he had knocked down and broken a bottle of piccalilli, catching its contents in the crystallised sugar drawer. Mrs. Day was very gentle with him, who was younger even than poor Bernard.

CHAPTER XVIII

The Dangerous Scrooge

Mrs. Day was spared the errand to Mr. George Boulton on which she had been bent, for that gentleman, before the time for putting up shutters was reached, having had an interview with his Manchester man, sought the widow in her shop.

Since having been made a magistrate, it was to be observed that certain changes had taken place in the appearance and the attire of the successful

draper. He affected now the light-coloured tweed suit of the country gentlemen, rather than the black decorous garments of trade. A deerstalker replaced the tall hat to which his head was accustomed, and he wore it, as was the fashion among the younger generation at that period, ever so little on one side. His short beard was trimmed to a point, his moustache turned upwards at the ends, on his hands were gloves of tawny-coloured leather. Altogether he now presented a figure which, in spite of the undue protuberance of stomach, and the shortness and thickness of neck, he had the satisfaction of knowing to be strangely rejuvenated and quite up-to-date.

"Business not very lively to-day, ma'am?" he said in his quick, hard way, looking round upon the empty shop.

It was about everybody's tea-time. A slack hour, Mrs. Day reminded him.

"Coman's was full, as I came by," he told her. "He's got a sugar in his window at three-ha'pence; one great placard quoting primest butter at elevenpence; another setting forth that a quarter pound of tea would be given away with every half-crown spent in the shop."

Mrs. Day sighed despondently. "We can't cope with him," she said. "There is no good in trying."

"What do you intend to do then? Do you suppose families will buy their groshery" (he was always pronouncing it "groshery") "of you when they can buy it cheaper, a few shops farther down? Why should they, ma'am, come to think of it?"

"They won't, of course," Mrs. Day acquiesced, "but we may as well be ruined through lack of custom as through selling our goods for less than we give for them."

"I'll tell you what will ruin you," he said brusquely. "And that is lack of spunk." He derived a pleasure from the belief, apparently; he announced it with so much gusto. "In business you must not be a coward, ma'am. You must go for the man that's 'underselling' you, stand up to him, pay him out of his own coin."

Poor Mrs. Day heard him with a fainting spirit, dreary-eyed. What did she care for paying out Coman, down the street! Her heart was full of Bernard.

"Now look here, ma'am; _re_-dress your window. Where's your young man? Where's Pretty?" Pretty, who cordially loathed George Boulton, reluctantly appeared. "Look here, young man; to-night, when you've up-shuttered, clear out half your window. Shove it full of the best sugar you've got. Put a card on it--one that'll shout at 'em as they pass. Letters that long, do you see, and black--_black_. 'Our three-ha'penny sugar. Comparisons invited.' Just that. See? And, look here again, ma'am, stick a ha'penny, or a penny a pound, on to your other goods, to make up. Understand?"

Mrs. Day faintly admitted that she understood.

"Oh, these things are easy enough to manage, get the hang of 'em. I don't object to this underselling on Coman's part. A little conflict in trade wakes interest, stirs us all up, customers and salesmen. We're too much inclined in Brockenham to go to sleep. We must wake up, Mrs. Day. That's our motter."

Then, with hardly a pause, and with no change of tone, he went on to the subject so near to her heart. "I have come in to speak to you, ma'am, about this boy of yours. He has conducted himself towards me with the basest ingratitude--but that we need not refer to, that don't matter, although I must say, considering what I have done for you all--"

Mrs. Day glanced towards Mr. Pretty, pricking his ears, and dismissed him to his task of grinding coffee in the cellar.

"Mr. Boulton, if you would spare me!" she pleaded with a pitiful kind of dignity. "We owe you a great deal, I know; not one of us is ungrateful. But I beg you to be so considerate as to spare me complaints of my son."

"I don't forget you are his mother, ma'am. I don't forget it for a moment. Otherwise--"

"What Bernard has done is the cause of the greatest grief to me--grief I do not really know how to support. I was coming to see you, Mr. Boulton. Coming to ask you--to beg of you--"

He lifted his square-looking hand, clad in the new orange-coloured glove, to silence her. "Don't ask it," he said. "I know what you want me to do. Gibbon prepared me. You wish me to buy off this ungainly son. Not a penny of my money shall go to do it. Not a penny!"

He brought the hand down smartly upon the counter, to emphasize the words. Mrs. Day, gazing sad-eyed at him, said nothing.

"The boy has behaved like an ill-conditioned, ignorant cub--Well! I'll spare you. We know how he's behaved. Let him pay for it. He'll get a sickener, I don't doubt. Serve him right. Serve him well right."

"But, Mr. Boulton--he is my son."

"What difference does that make, my dear lady? Every ungainly boy is some mother's son."

"If Bernard could have one more chance!"

"He's got it. By buying him off you are trying to do away with his chance. The boy's been brought up too soft. Give him hardships; it's the best physic for him."

"Think of the forced companionship with those he must associate with!"

"When he could pick his companions he chose the worst he could find. He's amongst a rougher crew now, but a far and away better one for him."

The tears were running down Mrs. Day's cheeks. She wiped them away furtively with her hand, but he saw them. Saw, and resented them with the impatient sense of injury a woman's tears arouse in that order of man. He turned his back upon her, and began fingering the lemons displayed in a box on the other counter.

"Think over what I've said, ma'am. Words of wisdom you've heard, and every one of 'em for your good. And see that your young man carries out my suggestion for the window to-morrow, will you? Miss Bessie upstairs?"

Mrs. Day, staring into the street through her tears, said she believed her daughter was in the sitting-room.

"I'll just run up and pay my respects to Miss Bessie, then."

He had adopted the habit, of late, of going up to pay his respects in that quarter after every business interview in the shop. Bessie pretended to look upon the predilection for her society as presumption on George Boulton's part.

"A man as old as my own father!" she often said to Emily, with whom she had many confidences.

"All the more reason for him to come fascinatin' round you," Emily declared.

How this ill-favoured, more than middle-aged spinster came to be an authority on affairs of the heart she would have found it difficult to explain; but she had ever an opinion to offer on such matters, and she gave it with a weightiness and a conclusiveness which rendered it final.

"It's when they gets past the time that females is likely to cast an eye to them that they're dangerous--so madly are they then overcome with love," she asserted.

"I don't think old Scrooge will ever be dangerous," Bessie regretfully demurred. She was much interested. "What do you mean by 'dangerous,' Emily?"

Emily would not descend to detail. She nodded a wise head. "You look out!" she counselled. "And remember, Miss Bessie, I'm always at hand when he's near."

The idea that the elderly draper might suddenly become riotous, gave always a zest to the tete-a-tete which otherwise it might have lacked. She was, truth to tell, a little disappointed to find him after each visit no more alarming than he had been before. She even tried to pique him into an exhibition of the "dangerous" symptom, treating him with the caprice and the disdain she dared not have shown but for Emily's repeated assurance she could play as she liked with him and he would never take offence. The mother, Deleah, even little Franky, had to mind their "P's and Q's" with the man who, as he himself had phrased it, "stood at the

back of them." Bessie was on a different plane, she told herself, and could do as she liked.

"I've been bullying your mother about that ill-doing brother of yours," he said. "I thought I'd better say a word or two to you on the same subject."

"Thank you, Mr. Boulton. You have forgotten to take off your hat."

He took it off with reluctance, because it concealed the bald top of his head, and without being asked to do so, seated himself in the chair opposite hers.

Every man carries about with him his ideal of what a woman should look like, although he probably changes it a good many times before he arrives at the age, in Emily's opinion, dangerous for a lover. At the mature age of fifty-five, George Boulton's ideal happened to be realised by Bessie Day. Fair-skinned she was, and very plump. Her waist was small, exceedingly, as was in accordance with the taste of that day, but her hips and bust were large; there was a promise of a double chin to come later. The necklace of Venus showed alluringly in her full young throat, and in the knuckles of her small white hands were dimples.

"Is that how you pass your days?" George Boulton asked her, pointing to the book she still held in her hands.

"Reading? A part of my day. A very good way, too, to pass it. Don't you think so?"

"I call it a sinful way. A sinful waste of time."

"Oh, Mr. Boulton! But it is only stupid, uncultured people who don't read."

"I read my newspaper every day," he said, as if she had accused him. "It is all that business people have time for."

"I'm so glad I'm not a business person, then."

"You never will be! One of the idle ones of the earth, Miss Bessie. Those that toil not neither do they spin."

"A lily of the field," Bessie reminded him.

"I have told you before, a fine, healthy young woman like you has no right to be sitting over the fire in idleness."

"What do you suggest I should do?"

"Go down and wait in the shop. Why not? If you would do so your mother could get rid of Pretty."

Bessie turned on him a face flushed with anger: "I will never wait in the shop," she said. "I hate the shop. I hate all shops, except to spend money in."

"Ah, you'd do that, I don't doubt," he said, with a certain bitterness. He utterly condemned the fat, lazy girl. He would have liked to see her down on her knees scrubbing the boards. He would have enjoyed the chance to punish her for her frivolity, the impertinence, the nonsense, that yet in some unaccountable way attracted him. He looked angrily at her, and Bessie watched him. Perhaps he was going to show the "dangerousness" incident to his time of life at last.

"As you're all going on now, I'm afraid you won't have much money to spend," he contented himself with saying; and then he began on the other subject. "And what about this wretched boy?"

"I'll thank you not to call him a wretched boy to me, Mr. Boulton."

"What else is he? He is a wretched boy."

"He is my brother."

"Yah, yah!" said Mr. Boulton, unable to find articulate expression for his contempt. "More's the pity for you! Your mother's running her head at buying the young ass off. I've told her I would not give her a farthing for any such purpose."

"Did she ask you for a farthing?"

"All I ever intend to do for Master Bernard I have done. I give you all notice. If you choose to get him home here, to dangle about, eating you women out of house and home, don't look to me to help you."

"Mr. Boulton, we are unfortunate, but we aren't quite friendless."

"I'm glad to hear it. It's news."

"Let me tell you that there are others--"

"Pity they didn't come forward sooner!"

In his soul he believed that no family had ever possessed such a guide, philosopher and friend as he had been to them. For much he would not have credited the suggestion that he must share the honour of having befriended them with another.

"If you've got another friend like me up your sleeve you'd best bring him forward, and let him put a little more money into the business. That's what's wanted, Miss Bessie."

He got up from his chair and advanced a step upon her: "Who are these mighty friends then? Out with them."

"Suppose I don't choose to tell you?"

"I should expect you've got your reasons. I will bid you good-afternoon,

Miss Bessie." He thrust out his hand to her.

"What is that for?" Bessie inquired, looking with disdainful curiosity upon the yellow dogskin. "You shouldn't shake hands with a lady with your glove on, Mr. Boulton."

At that he drew back the hand, put on his hat, and walked away.

"Good-afternoon, Mr. Boulton."

"Yah! Yah!" Mr. Boulton responded from the landing.

And as he went down the dark staircase and out at the private door he said to himself some words the reverse of complimentary to Miss Bessie.

CHAPTER XIX

When Beauty Calls

"Oh, Reggie!" Deleah said in a tone of supreme annoyance.

She regarded the young man walking to meet her--his rather dandified but sufficiently handsome figure resplendent in the latest and best cut of coat, waistcoat and hat, the newest thing in neckties about his throat, the ropiest arrangement of gold chain looped across his person--with a severe expression of disapproval on her face.

"Now, what are you doing here?" she demanded of him as he turned and walked by her side. "Isn't it too bad of you, Reggie! I told you that Miss Chaplin had heard of your 'hanging about' for me, as she called it; and that I had promised it should not occur again. I have gone a longer way home, through far less pleasant streets, to escape you--yet here you are, waylaying me again."

"Don't be angry with me, dear; I can't help it," the young man pleaded.

"Can't help it!" she repeated, softly scornful. "You'll get me dismissed from the school. That will be our next misfortune."

"I wish the old woman would dismiss you. I wish she'd turn you out, so that you hadn't a penny except what I could give you; or anywhere to go except to come to me."

"How many times have I asked you not to say that sort of thing?"

"But, hang it all, why shouldn't I? A man knows his own mind at my age, I suppose--?"

"You thought you knew it a year ago when all the town was talking of you

and Harriet Hart. You thought you knew it two--or was it three years before that?--when you said you were in love with Bessie."

"Parcel of silly rot, Deleah! They tell you anything, my dear. Don't you believe it. I've never been in love--not head over ears, as I am now--in all my life before. You may believe it."

"I don't wish to believe it. Let us forget it. Do, Reggie!"

"No; let's have it out. You know what I mean. I mean I want you to marry me, dear."

"Nonsense!"

"I can tell you there's no nonsense about it. It's downright, deadly earnest. And I'll tell you another thing, Deleah, since you have dragged in Bessie: that you've no need to be jealous of her--"

"Jealous! Really, Reggie! Oh, what a conceited young man!"

"Hold on. I'll come to that presently. I'm telling you that even when I seemed sweet on Bessie, years ago, I used to think about you. I used to think you were the prettiest little girl I'd ever set eyes on. And so you were; I used to think what a beauty you'd be; and you are. There's no one among the girls I've seen to touch you. You top the lot. You needn't laugh, dear. I mean it."

"But if you do--I'm much obliged to you--but it makes no difference, Reggie."

"And as to my being conceited--you're always hinting I'm conceited--I'm no more so than any young man would be in my place, with a lot of girls trying to catch him--Ah, there you go! Don't jump on me, Deleah. You know what I mean. Lots of girls are looking out to get married, and I've got money, and I've got a name--"

"On the Brewers' carts. 'Forcus and Sons; Brewers.'"

"It's a name I ain't ashamed of, and one that's pretty well known, at any rate!"

"And my name, or my mother's name, is over a shop-doorway, 'licensed to sell tobacco and snuff'; and it's a name that we can't be proud of, Reggie."

"But I'll put up with it, Deleah. I've made up my mind, and I'll go through with it. The name wouldn't be yours any longer, dear, when you'd taken mine; and as for the grocer's shop--"

"Why, here it is!" Deleah said. "And so good-bye, Reggie."

"I was coming in with you."

"You can't unless I ask you."

"And you're not going to? You're not very polite or kind to me, Deleah, upon my word!"

"Indeed, I am very, very kind, Reggie. And that you'll say when you are wiser. And so, good-bye. Run away and get wiser, Reggie."

"Deleah, something must be done for Bernard," Mrs. Day said with desperation in her tone. She had called the girl into her bedroom to hold conference away from the excitable Bessie. "Something I must do for my poor boy, or I feel that I shall go out of my senses. You must help me to do something, Deleah. Look at this."

From her pocket she drew forth a letter received that morning from the unhappy son. Deleah read it with a painful mingling of pity and contempt.

It was indeed an afflicting letter for any mother to receive; and Mrs. Day had too long been fed on the bread of affliction.

"You see, he begs of me to do something--to buy him off."

"Yes. I think his letter is abject."

"Don't, dear! Your blaming him makes it worse for me to bear, not better. Somehow this thing must be done--_somehow_, if I am to know any peace, to be able to go on. Deleah, Reggie Forcus would do anything for you. Ask Reggie Forcus to do this."

"Oh, mama! No!"

"My account is overdrawn at the Bank. I dare not ask for a further amount. What would these few pounds be to him? He spends as much on a dinner for a few men at the Royal."

"I can't ask him. Can't you see I must not?"

"I see what you mean. But oh, Deleah, we seem to have come to the bottom of things. What to us, in the very depths, are all those rules and niceties that happier people observe? You see what my boy says? He is 'in hell.' He says it in so many words. My boy! My Bernard!"

With that Mrs. Day flung her arms upon the table by which she was sitting, and her head upon her arms, and gave way to bitter weeping: "My boy! My boy! My poor dear, precious Bernard!" she sobbed despairingly.

The sight made Deleah almost desperate: "I can't do what you ask. I can't possibly ask Reggie. But--there is another person--"

She stopped there, saying to herself, "The third time The third time! I

can't ask him for money the third time!"

"Bernard! My Bernard!" cried the mother, her face hidden on her arms.

"Mama, pray do not cry so dreadfully--you break my heart. I can't do what you ask, but I will do what I can," Deleah promised.

CHAPTER XX

Sir Francis Makes A Call

The letter in which Deleah, in her most careful handwriting and in formal language, set forth her prayer that for her mother's sake Sir Francis Forcus, who had already shown her family such generous kindness, should buy off her brother Bernard; he, having left Mr. George Boulton's shop at Ingleby, and now enlisted in such and such a regiment--was addressed to that gentleman at his private residence, The Court, Cashelthorpe.

He read the letter among others as he ate his breakfast, gave a shrug and a snort of impatience, and put it aside on a little heap of those which required answering.

Before starting for town he singled it out from the rest and read it again. Then, standing up, the letter still in his hand, he gave vent to his feelings on the subject, for the enlightenment of his sister.

"They've put that pretty child on to me again," he said. "This is from that little Day girl you fell in love with, last year, in the Assembly Rooms, Ada." He tossed the letter into her lap.

"That sweetly pretty little thing at the concert?" She read the letter.

"What shall you do?" she asked.

"Decline."

"Oh, Francis! Why?"

"Because the boy is a ne'er-do-well. I have heard of him before. He is safest where he is."

"She'll think it so unkind, poor child."

"It can't be helped."

"Would it cost much to buy him off?"

"It isn't the money."

"The principle?"

"No. Nor yet, altogether, the principle."

"It would be kind and good-natured to do what the poor little thing asks."

"Yes. But for the sake of seeming good-natured I'm not going to be made a tool of."

"You'll simply write back, then, that you won't do it?" She laughed a little, looking across at him as he stood up, tall and solemn and handsome, with his back to the fire. "To do that will cost you more than just enclosing the money."

"That is not the question, Ada. I shall write, or"--he paused a minute, putting his lips together as his habit was when making up his mind to a course which did not altogether please him--"I'll go and see her," he finished.

"That will be kinder," the sister said. To be kind was Ada Forcus's religion; it is possible she could not have professed a better one, or one more likely to benefit mankind.

"They live at the shop, I suppose?" he asked.

"Over the shop, poor things. I am so very sorry for that poor Mrs. Day."

"You deal with her, don't you? You do what you can?"

"I tell them to get some things there every week."

"And they do?"

"You know how difficult servants are. Mrs. Twiss makes a grievance of it. They won't drink the tea in the kitchen; the currants are not so good. She always gets the matches there, and the blacking. Everything else Mrs. Twiss finds so much better at Wolsey's--"

"And Wolsey, no doubt, gives her a percentage on her order. However--."

Sir Francis fulfilled his intention of calling to see Deleah on the subject of her letter on the afternoon of that same day.

Miss Deleah was not home from school yet, he was informed by Emily, answering the door. She would not most likelies be many minutes. Would he walk in, and wait?

The gentleman, acquiescing, was shown up the steep staircase and across the dark landing. Emily had no need to ask his name--there was not a soul in Brockenham probably who did not know by sight the rich brewer. With a feeling of proud satisfaction the old servant threw open the sitting-room door and announced on a sounding note of triumph, "Sir Francis Forcus."

Emerging from the gloom of hall, staircase and landing his eyes were

almost dazzled by the unexpected brightness and pleasantness of the long room, lit at the street end by the three deep-seated windows. Everywhere were evidences of occupation by refined women. The street below was hot and squalid and dusty, but the room with its shaded wide-open windows was cool. In one of them Deleah's bird was singing, and the plants in bloom on the wide seats beneath had been pushed on one side to make room for Deleah's little pile of books. Bessie's workbox was open on the table. A picture or two of no commercial value, but saved with the solid, handsome furniture from the prosperous days of the family, hung on the panelled and painted walls.

By the side of the rosewood workbox with its over-flowing contents of muslin and ribbon to be used in the concoction of an afternoon apron which she was engaged on, Miss Day was sitting. Near by, his hands on the raised sash of Deleah's special window, leaning forward to look into the street, her companion stood. It was not until Bessie had come forward to greet the unexpected, astounding visitor, that Sir Francis, turning to look at the other occupant of the room, recognised his brother.

Whatever surprise he may have felt he did not show.

"Hullo!" Reggie said, turning round, and looking a little foolish. He raised a finger to his fair, smooth hair, in mock-respectful salutation.

"Oh, it's you!" Sir Francis said, and paid the young brother no further attention.

The very opposite in manner to the ever-popular Reggie, with his easy manners and his never-failing good temper, Sir Francis, cool, reserved, spare of speech, and in uncongenial society, truth to tell, unconquerably shy, was a difficult person with whom to make talk. He said a few constrained words to Bessie, with whose presence on the scene he had not reckoned any more than with that of his brother; and Bessie, struggling valiantly to appear at ease with him, and failing utterly, answered them according to her kind.

"Very warm, to-day."

Bessie was afraid he felt it so in this stuffy, airless street.

"But you are delightfully in the shade here."

Bessie, straightening her back and pouting her vivid lips, told how the weather made her long for a garden, a river, and waving trees, or the sea-shore.

"Or anything you can't get," Sir Francis commented to himself, looking with distaste at the plump, foolish, pink and white face of the young woman with whom he had been entrapped into intercourse. "You have some roses, I see," he said aloud.

"They are sent to me," smiled a conscious Bessie. She did not consider herself to be lying. What was sent to Deleah she continued to persuade

herself was intended for her.

"I know whose money goes for that," Sir Francis inwardly ejaculated. He glanced at his brother, hanging his foolish head from the window again. "I'm glad I came, after all. I'll put a stop to this," he resolved.

"Your gardens at Cashelthorpe must be charming now, Sir Francis."

Sir Francis admitted without emotion that they were charming.

"That's why you're leaving them, and going off to Scotland next week," Reggie supposed, drawing in his head from the window.

"It must be delightful to travel," gushed Bessie, seizing on the topic. She exacted a programme from him, punctuated by her "Delightful! Delightful!" of the places he was intending to visit.

And so for a few minutes, Bessie struggling with all her poor wits to do so, they kept up a painfully lagging conversation. And all the time the poor girl was desperately supplying improbable, and impossible reasons to account to herself for the bewildering fact of his visit; all the time Sir Francis was wondering how quickly without incivility he could get away; all the time Reggie, as he watched for the figure of Deleah coming down the street, was muttering to himself, "He's on my track again, hang him!"

At the end of the difficult ten minutes Sir Francis rose: "Coming my way?" he inquired of Reggie.

"Not just this minute, old man," said Reggie, who knew better.

"Mind you don't tumble downstairs," he called after his departing brother.

Sir Francis gazing stonily in his direction did not deign to thank him for the not all unnecessary caution. Emily awaiting him in the little hall at the bottom of the stairs, had set the outer door open to light the distinguished visitor upon his way.

"Miss Deleah should be in by now, sir," she said as he passed out. Fain would she have all Brockenham to see him issuing from that door, yet fain would she have kept him there for Deleah.

"It is of no consequence, I will write," he said, and departed with a sense of escape.

"Well!" Bessie breathed, as the door closed on the visitor. "Wasn't that extraordinary! What on earth--?"

Her feelings would not allow her to finish the sentence. She looked the rest at Reggie, eyes and mouth open, the fluster into which the visit had thrown her still visibly palpitating in all her person.

"Oh, the dear old boy came to look after me," Reggie explained, calmly indifferent. "I shall get it hot now."

"But _why_?"

"He won't like my being at home here, like this, you know," the ingenuous youth admitted.

"But, Reggie, you're your own master, aren't you?"

Reggie said he jolly well was, and leaned his head out of the window, to look for Deleah again. He knew very well why she was so long in coming, she had gone ever so far out of her way in order to escape from his attendance on her. It was not very flattering to his _amour propre_, but it piqued him, in his indolent, spoilt habit. Bessie would have run into his arms, he knew right well, not away from them, and so would three or four other pretty girls be knew. But he did not want Bessie or the others. It was Deleah he wanted. And--Bessie was right there--he was his own master.

Sir Francis as he walked away was making plans to frustrate those resolves for his own management of his affairs which Reggie was making in the window overhead. He had turned aside quite easily the young man's foolish bent in this direction, once before. It might be more difficult now, but he would spare no effort to do it effectually again. He was not favourably impressed by the young woman he had just left; her plump prettiness had not appealed to him; nor the mauve-coloured ribbons streaming down her back. As for her family history it was not only undesirable, it was disreputable.

So, walking with his usually composed mien through the streets of his native town, perhaps its best known and most imposing figure, but in a ruffled and indignant frame of mind, he forgot all about Deleah Day and his errand to her until he saw her come, hurrying along the pavement in his direction.

Of all the people in the world she least desired to meet Sir Francis Forcus until he had answered the letter it had cost her so much to write. Would he let her pass him? She redoubled her pace, and making him a shy little bow, tried to hurry by, but with a word of apology he stopped her.

"I got your letter, Miss Day," he said; and then looking at her, at her youth, her beauty, her helplessness, the shrinking grace of her figure, the fear of him that was expressed in her down-dropped head and averted gaze, the rich man's heart failed him; he found that he could not tell her he would not grant her request. "I wanted to tell you I will do what you ask," he found himself lamely substituting for the firm refusal he had intended. "But at the same time you will forgive my saying I think you are wrong."

"You mean mama should not buy Reggie off?"

"I am sure she would be far wiser not to do so."

"Then I will tell mama what you say. Other people have told her so; but

coming from you it might carry more weight." Deleah, in her innocent way was a flatterer, he perceived; but she did not gush like Bessie. He thanked his lucky stars for that.

She stood before him, plainly longing to escape, her light figure almost poised for flight. Overwhelmed she was by the consciousness of the shabbiness of her school frock and worn gloves; pitilessly the sun shone on them, bringing out the poorness of their quality, and all the defects of long use and age. It shone on him almost blindingly it seemed to her; so that to look at him, so fine, so grave, so grand, as he stood before her hurt her eyes. They had met in one of the principal streets of the town; the men who passed them looked such miserable creatures, she thought, beside his tall figure. How had she the presumption to have pestered him with her degrading troubles!

"Mama was in such sorrow about Bernard," she was impelled to excuse herself. "Mama wished me to ask your brother, who knew Bernard very well; but I thought it better not to trouble him. I thought it better, as you had helped me before, to ask you to help again."

"It is better to come to me," he said with great gravity.

"Your brother is very generous," she went on saying in her nervousness anything that came into her head. "He would have given us the money without a thought as to whether it was right or wrong. I should have felt we were taking advantage of him. It did not seem to me to be right to ask him."

He wondered as he heard her how she had come to be a Day; and then he too found himself plunging into a subject he had not, a moment before, intended to mention.

"I called to see you at your house, just now. I found my brother there. May I ask if he is a frequent visitor?"

The small face which had been so clearly pale was suddenly like a scarlet rose. "Just lately a very frequent visitor," she said; and, in spite of her shyness, she lifted her head and looked him straight in the face.

"A young man who is idle can never understand that other people are busy," he said. "I am sure that you are all too much occupied to wish to have my brother always hanging about."

Deleah looked at him in silence. She understood perfectly what he meant. What was there for her to say?

"I shall try and waken him to the perception that he is trespassing on valuable time, and making a bore of himself," he said; smiled to make his words acceptable, raised his hat to go on his way; yet delayed for a minute still.

"In the matter of your brother, you understand, I will do what you ask."

"I shall persuade mama to give up her idea of buying him off."

"What is his regiment?" She told him, and that it was at Aldershot. A couple of years ago it happened to have been quartered at Brockenham. "I know several of the officers," Sir Francis remembered. "I could write to Colonel Greene about your brother. If it did him no good it couldn't do him any harm; and there is the chance that Greene would take an interest in him."

Deleah said with an averted head that that would be very good of him; and making him a grave little bow hurried away.

CHAPTER XXI

In For It!

"I shall keep out of his way for a day or two--put up at the Royal instead of going home," Reggie had explained to Bessie in the quarter of an hour he was *tete-a-tete* with her before Deleah came in. "By the time he sees me again he'll have forgotten all about finding me here."

"I suppose you don't see that all this fuss about being 'found' in our house is not very complimentary to us?" Bessie said.

"Oh hang!" said Reggie. "How can I help it if he objects? You all know very well you're good enough for me."

He was not a clever nor a tactful young man, although quite good-natured. He did not intend to offend, and never understood why he sometimes did so. Bessie was "touchy," as he often declared, but she bore no malice. So long as she had the young man dangling around, so long as she could dress for him, put on her long mauve ribbons for him, do up her hair for him in a chignon whose dimensions should surpass those of any other chignon in Brockenham, so long as Emily continued to make him the subject for her winks and nods and innuendoes, she lived in her Paradise and was fairly content.

But by putting up at the Royal Reggie did not long evade the discussion he foresaw might be unpleasant; for on the very next morning, before he had arisen from his bed he received a message from his brother asking for his presence at a certain hour at the Brewery.

"I'm in for it now," he said to himself when he got the message; but he did not dream of disregarding it.

He presented himself, therefore, punctually enough, in the pleasant private room which looked out upon the river flowing black and oily so far beneath; where the portrait of the father of the two men hung above Sir Francis's head as he stood upon the hearthrug.

"Oh, there you are, Reggie! Good-morning."

"Here I am. Sharp as a new pin, and bright as a button."

"I hope I have not upset any plans for the day by sending for you; but--You have not been overworking yourself of late, have you?"

"Thank you, no," Reggie said, choosing to ignore the sarcasm, if any were intended.

"You're looking very nice, and fit, I'm sure. That brown velvet coat is the latest, I suppose? Looks a little as if you were thinking of giving up Beer for the Arts, eh? I've been wondering if you'd like to travel for a year?"

Reggie sat down and stared at his brother, with a perplexed vacuity of eye. This was not at all what he had expected. He thought of Deleah in a flash. If Deleah would marry him and go with him, the very thing!

"You haven't been about the world very much," the brother went on.
"Neither have I, you will say. But I can't be spared. You--perhaps--can. We will try, at any rate, to carry on the business without you."

Reggie, accepting the remark in all seriousness, nodded a solemn head in silence.

"You might even combine business with pleasure, which I am sure would meet with your approval."

"When do you want me to go? I can't be ready for some little time."

"Why not? If you go at all I want you to go at once."

"What do you call at once?"

"Next week, at latest."

Reggie shook his head. He couldn't be sure of Deleah in that time. How long would it take to get married, he wondered.

"No, thank you. I really don't care for it. I couldn't possibly get away so soon."

"Why not?"

"There are the Widdimouth races next week, and I've booked several engagements for the week after."

"The fact is I want you to get away for a time, Reggie. This place is all very well if you've got a business or a profession to attend to, but simply to idle away your time here isn't healthy."

"What's wrong with Brockenham?" Reggie asked, who had a great admiration for his native town. "Any one been gossiping about me again?"

"No one has mentioned you to me. But Ada was hearing an interesting piece of news about you, yesterday."

"Ada's as bad as the other old women."

"Nonsense. You had better go, Reggie. I mean it."

Reggie passed a ringed hand over his smooth, fair hair, felt his moustache, opening his mouth beneath the caressing fingers as he did so.

"The engagements you mention are negligible ones?"

Reggie nodded, gazing at his brother, busy with the corners of the moustache, making up his mind for a plunge. "Fact is," he got out, "I'm thinking of settling down."

Sir Francis left his position on the hearthrug, walked across to the table, to arrange more symmetrically some papers which lay there; returning, took up his place on the hearth again. "Getting married, you mean?" he asked.

Reggie nodded, still holding his mouth open, the more satisfactorily to handle the moustache.

"My dear fellow, that intention need not deter you. You have held it so often before. Go away for twelve months, at least. Get engaged, if you are still so inclined, when you come home."

"Perhaps," amended Reggie artlessly, "if I were to put off going for a month, or even a couple of months, we might get married, and she could go too."

"Who is the lady at the present moment, may I ask?"

"I expect you've formed a pretty good guess," said Reggie, bold as a lion. "You saw me there yesterday."

"A daughter of Mrs. Day, at the grocer's shop; widow of----? But we needn't go into that."

"It doesn't seem necessary. Her daughter."

"Well--!" said Sir Francis slowly. "You have given me one reason more, my dear boy, and that a supreme one, for hastening your departure. Take my advice--you will never regret it--and go to-morrow."

"No," Reggie said, and then both were silent.

When the elder again began, he had changed his easy, almost indifferent tone for one firmer and less indulgent.

"What you propose is impossible," he said.

"I don't see it."

"Have you thought what you would be marrying? The grocer's shop, the debts, the helpless mother, the disreputable private soldier of a brother (he enlisted, I am told, to save himself from prison, as the father killed himself for the same purpose). A charming family with which to ally yourself, truly!"

"I don't intend to marry the family. I should allow the mother--not a bad sort at all. I'm fond of her--a hundred a year, to shut the shop up. I should--"

"Nonsense! The idea is ridiculous; monstrous. Get married if you must, but take a girl of your own position in life. Easy enough to find--"

"I don't care a hang about position!"

"Then, more fool you. But if you don't, at least marry a woman that has honest blood in her veins--for your children's sake."

Reggie turned away his head sulkily. "The Days were good enough for me before they fell into trouble," he said.

His brother lifted his head and squared his shoulders, standing up tall and imposing before the empty grate. "William Day was never good enough for me," he said.

"I don't see that a girl is to be made to suffer all her life because her father was not good enough for you," Reggie said sulkily.

"Try not to be an ass, my dear fellow. You don't suppose you can be allowed to do a mad thing like this without my telling you what I think of it. You know, I have never had much opinion of your judgment--except, perhaps, in the matter of horses; but in your admiration for this Miss Day your taste is to my thinking astoundingly bad. I call her a commonplace, almost vulgar young woman."

"Vulgar? _Vulgar!_"

"She is pretentious, she is affected, she is gushing--what is that but to be vulgar? She is not even pretty--"

"Not pretty!" Reggie cried, and started up from his chair. "Not pretty! Deleah Day!"

"Deleah! The young one?"

"I've been telling you so, all along, haven't I? Who did you think it was?"

"It was the other, when we spoke of the Days before," Sir Francis reminded him, but flatly, and his face had fallen.

Here was more serious matter. Not that flaunting extravagant queen, not Bessie with her plump prettiness, her cheap wiles, her nets that were spread in the sight of man; but Deleah, the dainty, charmingly pretty child. The marriage would be none the less hideously undesirable on the social side, and from the point of view of the family; but it would be infinitely more difficult to stop. Sir Francis, in his widowed estate, with twenty years more of experience on his head, was yet not so old but that he could picture how deeply, how dangerously in love a young man of his brother's age could imagine himself with Deleah Day.

Reggie was recalling attention to himself by a loud snort of contempt. "I'm not very likely to have thought of Bessie when Deleah was on the spot," he said.

"Except that the younger sister has a more attractive appearance, all the objections remain the same in either case."

"The Days are down-pins, I admit," Reggie said dispassionately; "and the father and brother were rotten; but no one'll think of those things when they look at Deleah. I'm not afraid."

Sir Francis contemplated his young brother meditatively. "Let us know precisely how we stand, Reggie. Are you actually engaged to this girl?"

"Oh, yes! I'm engaged to her, right enough."

"What does being 'engaged right enough' mean exactly?" There had been a something indicating a want of confidence in Reggie's tone.

"There's no doubt about me. I'm running straight."

"But the girl? What has she to say to it?"

"The fact is, she's afraid of Bessie. She can't get over it that I was once considered to be Bessie's property--by Bessie. I never was; but Bessie chose to lay claim to me."

"So, although you are engaged to Miss Deleah Day, Miss Deleah Day, so far as I understand the matter, is not engaged to you?"

"That's about how we stand at present, I suppose."

"I see," Sir Francis said.

CHAPTER XXII

The Importunate Mr. Gibbon

The news that the addresses of young Mr. Forcus were being paid not to her but to her younger sister could not altogether have come as a surprise to Bessie. She must have noticed the direction of the young man's admiring glances; she must have known why, when alone with her, he watched the street till Deleah came in; she must in a measure have been prepared for the fact that he had now declared himself Deleah's lover, and had even sought the approval of Mrs. Day on his suit.

But Bessie had no dignity. She gave herself away without reserve whenever occasion offered. She abused Deleah, she scolded her mother, she wept noisily over her wrongs. She declared that there was positive indecency on Deleah's part in encouraging the love-making of a young man who had once, however long ago it was, made love to her.

"I don't think Deleah did encourage him, Bessie."

"Would he have done it without? You remember what Reggie was in those days, mama, and how he _wanted_ encouragement--"

"My dear, Deleah has far too much self-respect--"

"There you go! Always Deleah. I suppose if Deleah took up a dinner-knife and stabbed me to the heart you would make excuses for her!"

"Oh, Bessie, do not be unjust."

"It is you that are unjust. It is you that have spoilt Deleah, with petting and praising and telling her how pretty she is--"

"My dear Bessie!"

"You don't say it in so many words, but you are always _looking it_ at her. You are, mama! I see you doing it. And when Deda comes home I shall tell her what I think of the way she has behaved to me--the sneaky way; I shan't spare her. She shall hear it all. And then if we live together for twenty years I won't speak to Deleah again. I won't, mama! I won't! I won't!"

Poor Mrs. Day hurried away, carrying her harassed face and all her maternal cares into the even more perplexing area of business worries; but Emily having heard the raised voice of her young mistress--Bessie was always shrill when unhinged--went at once to her assistance.

Bessie had taken to the sofa--that mid-Victorian sanctuary for the afflicted fair--and encouraged by the sympathy of the faithful servant, must begin to cry, must begin to laugh, must go on to screaming and pommelling the horsehair with her heels, as was her custom when moved. Emily, postponing for the purpose the washing up of her dinner-things, sat beside the sofa till Bessie grew calm enough to become attentive, when, she sympathetically listened, and flattered, and soothed.

"There's others as is ready to die for you, and ask no better, if Deleah have snatched away this one," Emily declared. "There's one of 'em, that to my mind, for real affection and stiddiness, is worth a dozen of your Focuses." And Bessie, listening greedily, knew that the family boarder, George Boul't's Manchester man, was indicated. "There's him to your hand. You can have him for the taking," Emily promised; and Bessie quieted down, meditating.

"You've treated this one cruel, Miss Bessie. You have that! And him sittin' by, his heart fit to fly out at you, sayin' nothin'; while this other young chap, his flower in his button-hole, his horse a-pawin' up the stones in the street down below, is a-carryin' on."

"I have neglected the poor Honourable Charles lately, I admit," said Bessie with a remorseful sigh.

"And him that patient--that faithful! Well, now, Miss Bessie, you listen to me. Turn your back on Reggie--give him the cold shoulder--see how he'll like it! And you pay your addresses to our young man. The mistress was a-telling me how he's made a partner with Mr. Boul't an'll be rich as him, if not richer, some day. You'd drive your kerridge, my dear; and Reggie hisself couldn't give you more."

Bessie stretched herself complacently, and feigned a yawn, to indicate that the subject was rather beneath her notice: "I dare say I might do worse," she admitted.

By such judicious means was the injured Bessie restored to something of her former calm.

Mrs. Day, running up presently to see how her daughter was bearing up, found her sitting up on the sofa, drinking tea, her plump cheeks flushed, the light of excitement in her eyes.

"Mama," she said, "there is something I have been wanting to ask you. Should you object very much if I and the Honourable Charles made a match of it, after all?"

Mrs. Day looked doubtfully at the girl without answering. She had her own ideas on the subject of the Honourable Charles's intentions.

"I mean should you think I am marrying beneath me, and that kind of thing?"

"No, my dear. I should certainly not make any objection on that score. Has something occurred, then, to put the idea into your head, to-day?"

"I suppose you can understand, mama, that I do not wish to see my younger sister married before me? If Deleah thinks she is going to put that kind of slight on me she's mistaken. It's what I won't put up with from her, and so I tell her; and so I tell you. It's--it's--"

"Yes, yes, my dear. Pray don't excite yourself again, Bessie."

"So, if Deleah persists in taking Reggie--and she'll richly deserve all she'll get with him--I shall make up my mind to Gibbon."

"_Mr._ Gibbon, Bessie."

"Mr. Gibbon, then. I don't think he's a man to be ashamed of, do you?"

"Certainly not. I believe he is quite a steady and honourable young man. A little moody, perhaps--"

"There's a cause for that. And if Deleah, when she's Mrs. Forcus, is ashamed of him it won't matter to me, because I'm ashamed of Deleah, and so I mean to tell her when she comes home."

"And you think that Mr. Gibbon _means_--?"

Bessie gave a scornful laugh: "If you haven't eyes in your head to see, mama, ask Emily!"

Ah, if these things might be! Mrs. Day thought as she descended again to her duties behind the counter. If only her girls could find homes for themselves, how thankful she would be. For the business was doing badly; all the customers who were worth keeping had fallen away; the little capital she had had in hand had dwindled, disappeared. In that morning's paper she had read that the regiment in which Bernard had enlisted was ordered to India. Too late now to buy him off, even if she had been permitted to do so. If she had not been compelled to show a calm face above her counter she would have passed the day in tears at the thought of the privations and sufferings before her boy. Her poor young Bernard.

So tired she was of it all: of smiling, with tears raining upon her heart, of listening to the complaints of customers, the grievance of poor Bessie upstairs--poor unreasonable, self-centred Bessie, whom yet she so loved--when she was herself like to drown in trouble. If only the girls could find homes--Deleah she knew would provide for Franky--she would shut up the hateful shop, would give up the humiliating struggle--she being an earthen vessel--to swim with the hateful Coman who was of iron. She would then, she thought, go to bed and to sleep, and would sleep and sleep, and never get up again. Orthodox Christian as she was, in her anxious, worried, and wearied existence the joys of Heaven did not tempt her so much as the possibility of enjoying a long, uninterrupted sleep.

She was kept late in the shop that night, and when at length she went upstairs she found only a glum family party already at the supper-table awaiting her.

Franky, who generally talked, whoever else was silent, was conspicuous by his absence, he having been ordered out of the room by his sister Bessie because his clothes smelt.

This was a constant source of grievance and friction between the eldest and youngest hope of the house. The poor boy had not many changes of

raiment, and he being of an age to dabble in any mess that came handy without reference to his sister's olfactory nerves, there was no denying the fact that his little brown tunic, his worn little trousers had acquired a very _boyey_ smell. Unless under the protection of his mother's presence, therefore, he was often exiled to the kitchen to get his meals with Emily. He never went without protest and tears and often kicks, on his own part, and fisticuffs on Bessie's, who remained behind, after such encounters, flustered by victory, and ready to quarrel with any one on the spot.

To-night, however, ignoring the presence of Deleah, she had intended to be very gracious to the boarder, who as ill-luck would have it did not come in to his supper at all. Under the discouraging influence of Bessie's silence conversation fell flat between Deleah and her mother. The meal over, Mrs. Day, more than, usually tired, announced her intention of going to bed, an example quickly followed by Bessie, who wished to avoid at that moment a _tete-a-tete_ with Deleah.

It happened to-night, that as soon as mother and sister had gone, and before Deleah had finished clearing away the books and work and Franky's painting things, which had been in use earlier in the evening, the boarder came in.

It was extraordinarily seldom that the Honourable Charles found himself alone with the younger daughter of the house--whether by chance, her management, or the management of others, he could not tell.

Deleah Day, in her cotton frock of white with tiny black spots, a wide, embroidered collar tied with black ribbon at her throat, her black, thickly waving hair brushed behind her ears and gathered at the back of her small head, was an agreeable figure at the hearth to greet any poor worker on his return to rest and fireside.

He did not want any supper, would have none. His appetite was poor of late, he came down in the mornings looking as if he had not slept all night. Business, now that his interest in it had increased, seemed to be making too great demands on his time and health.

"You must smoke," Deleah said, and put the tobacco jar at his elbow. She always touched it with lingering fingers: it was that out of which William Day had been wont to fill his evening pipe. She placed by him the little decanter of whisky from which the boarder, by the admixture of lemon and hot water, would brew himself a nightcap. He appeared to ignore these preparations for his comfort.

"I was just clearing away, before going to bed," she told him.

She did wish to go--ardently. But the more desirous she was to avoid a _tete-a-tete_, the more she knew in her kind heart that she must not show her anxiety. So she sat down at the corner of the table opposite to him, and began hurriedly to show how perfectly at ease she was by telling him of mama's headache; and how she believed it was due to the fact that poor mama was worried about business; which, since the horrid Coman had opened

opposite for the express purpose, it seemed, of underselling Mrs. Day, had been so unsatisfactory.

The Manchester man had nothing encouraging to say on that theme. Indeed, his utterances on any subject they had all found to be irritatingly constrained and limited of late.

He made use to-night of an oft-repeated phrase of his when talk had been made of Mrs. Day's difficulties. "I know nothing of the grocery line. It's altogether distinct from the drapery, of course."

"I wish you'd gone in for grocery, Mr. Gibbon. Then you could have helped us."

"You've heard, I suppose, I've fixed it up with the Governor, the way I spoke to you about? You've heard I'm to be taken into partnership at Michaelmas?"

"I am very glad."

"I wonder if you are?"

"Why not? Of course."

"You remember what you said about the fine house I was to live in?"

"When are you going to take it, Mr. Gibbon?"

"When will you come to live in it, Miss Deleah?"

She was sitting in a low chair and leaning negligently upon the table, her cheek in her hand, her fingers lost in the masses of her black waving hair, her eyes turned with polite interest upon his face. She dropped them now, and looked at the tablecloth without speaking.

"When?" he repeated, and was breathless again in the horrible way she remembered.

"I told you: I am not going to live in it at all, Mr. Gibbon."

He leaned towards her, throwing himself forward on his arms that were folded upon the table; she felt his eyes glowering upon her down-bent face: "Oh, yes, Miss Deleah!" he implored.

"I told you before," she said; and then distressedly like a child wearied by importunities, "Oh I wish you--I wish every one would leave me alone!"

It was all very well to be pretty and admired, but not much gratification, thanks to Bessie's jealousy, and untoward circumstances, had Deleah experienced so far from looks or lovers.

There was a young assistant music-master, coming twice a week to Miss Chaplin's, who had taken to blushing and paling when Deleah spoke to him.

To her great embarrassment a rosebud or a spray of forget-me-not would be found deposited on the chair in which she sat to play propriety when the pupils took their lessons. On the days when with great difficulty she managed to elude Reggie, a lout of a grammar-school sixth-form boy, whose name even she did not know, would watch her exit from the school, and stalk at her heels, keeping sentinel over her, in a way that she felt was making her ridiculous, to her own door. She had caught Mr. Pretty peeping between the biscuit tins to watch her down the street. He would leave any customer he was serving to rush forward with hateful assiduousness with a stool for her to sit on, as soon as she entered the shop. He would entice Franky, who had a great admiration for Mr. Pretty, to sit in the cellar with him of evenings to talk about the younger sister. There was Reggie always pestering; and now here again were the unwelcome attentions of the Honourable Charles.

"I do so much wish you would all leave me alone!"

"How can I leave you alone when I so much love you, Deleah."

"Oh!" said Deleah, impatiently sighing.

She knew how young ladies comported themselves under such circumstances in the delightful books of her dear Anthony Trollope; but she was neither angry, nor frightened, nor particularly shy; nor did she feel the inclination to throw herself into any man's arms, and to rest her head on his shoulder. She was uncomfortable under these declarations of love, and felt that she was being made ludicrous; that was all.

"You know it, don't you, Deleah?"

"Yes. I know it; since you tell me so."

"And believe in it? Believe in my desperate love?"

"I am sure you don't tell stories, Mr. Gibbon."

"Well?"

"I think it is a pity."

"Why?"

"I think you might love some one else."

"No! I want you."

"You can't have me," said Deleah, pettishly, and feeling more hopelessly inadequate than ever.

"I can," Gibbon said, and he said it quite fiercely. "I can! I can! I can! Do you hear?"

"I think I will go to bed." Deleah sprang up; she so longed for flight;

she looked anxiously to the closed door which was on his side of the table.

Gibbon also rose to his feet. "Look at me, Deleah," he said. She looked, and saw the paleness of his face. It made her sick as well as sorry to see how pale the man had become. "Does this mean Mr. Reginald Forcus?"

"Certainly not!"

"You are not engaged to him?"

"Certainly not!"

"Look at me; keep on looking." His eyes held hers, she was compelled to look. "Do you like him better than me? He is the best chance, out and out; but for all that he mayn't be the best man. Do you like him the best?"

"I don't know that I do."

"Now. I've something else to ask you."

"No! I think you are too bad. I am very tired. Let me go to bed, Mr. Gibbon."

"Answer me first. How about the other one?"

"The other one! I don't know what you mean."

"Sir Francis--that gave you the fifty pound. How about him?"

Deleah's eyes, staring into his, dilated, her face grew whiter than his own. "I don't know what you can mean," she said. "Sir Francis Forcus and me? Me! Me! Deleah Day!" She whispered the words in a kind of awe. Almost there seemed sacrilege in them.

"Why not? Why not?"

"I think you must be mad, Mr. Gibbon."

"I am. I often am. Quite mad. Mad with love of you."

"Oh!"

"Why do you sigh like that?"

"I so much wish you wouldn't."

"Wouldn't what?"

"Be so ridiculous."

"Is that all you have to say to me?"

"That--and good-night."

"I did not think you could be so cruel."

"I am not cruel," Deleah said; and then, quite unexpected by her, a sob rose in her throat, and it was all that she could do to keep the tears of self-pity back. "I am not cruel, but you so torment me. I want to be kind to you, but I do not want to hear about all this--which sounds so ridiculous to me. You are older than I am--you should know better. You should know how silly it is to talk to a girl like me such nonsense. And I want to go to bed, Mr. Gibbon. Will you please stand away and let me go to bed?"

He put his hand on the door-knob as if to open it for her, but held it there. "This isn't the end," he said.

"Oh, no!" she sighed with dreary prescience.

"I am working for you from morning till night--only for you--so that I can put you in a nice house, and make a lady of you. Only for you! And all night long I can't rest for thinking of you. Mine'll be an awful night, to-night."

"Oh, Mr. Gibbon, I'm so dreadfully sorry!"

"Then, can't you say a word to me before you go? Can't you say you'll think of it?"

"Of course I shall think of it; I can't help thinking of it. But I don't wish to talk of it any more. Let me go now, will you? Let me go to bed! Good-night, Mr. Gibbon."

"Say 'Good-night, Charlie.' They call me 'Charlie' at home."

There was no help for it if she wished to escape. "Good-night, Charlie," she mumbled, and rushed away to her own room, in a condition between laughing and crying which recalled Bessie's attacks.

"It is all so ridiculous!" she kept saying to herself as she undressed.

"'Good-night, Charlie!' Imagine my having called him 'Charlie.' Charlie, indeed!" She set her teeth at the remembrance. "I would rather have hit him than called him Charlie!"

But as she undressed herself the more serious side of the position presented itself for consideration. Her mother wanted her to get married--she had owned as much, and she had an absolute faith in her mother's wisdom. Did girls marry men feeling about them as she felt about this man and Reggie Forcus, she wondered? It was indisputable that men, "horrider than they," as she phrased it to herself, found quite nice girls to marry them. Ought she to take one or the other? She did not wish to--but ought she?

She got into her night-dress, brushed her hair, even said her prayers--the

self-same prayers in the identical words she had said by her bedside in Queen Anne Street on the night of the New Year's party, long ago; she had not even left her father's name out of her petitions--debating these things. She slept in a tiny bedroom through Mrs. Day's, and when she got up from her knees she took her candle and went into her mother's room. "I will hear what mama has to say about it," she told herself.

Mrs. Day was lying awake in the darkness, thinking of Bernard and the dangers of India.

"Mama," Deleah said, holding the candle aloft to peer at her mother. Its light fell on her own charming face half hidden in the loose waves of curling black hair. "You aren't asleep, are you? Of course you aren't! I believe you lie there all night, staring into the shadows and thinking of miserable things! I wonder if it would really make things better, if you would like it very much, that she also has made up her mind to marry Mr. Gibbon!"

Deleah stared for a minute, and then she laughed; and Mrs. Day saw that she laughed whole-heartedly. "Bessie takes all my young men!" she said. "You see, mama, with the best will in the world to please you, I can't get married; so there's an end of it; and I may as well go to bed."

"Come and kiss me, dear."

Mrs. Day put a detaining arm round the girl's shoulders. "Nothing of this makes you unhappy, Deleah?"

"It only makes me want to laugh," Deleah said.

CHAPTER XXIII

Deleah Has No Dignity

A day or so after her encounter with the local magnate in the principal street of Brockenham, Deleah found herself, to her extreme surprise, on her way to the Hope Brewery, in response to a letter from Sir Francis Forcus, asking her to call on him there on a matter of business. He had named the afternoon hour in which she was released from school.

"I sent for you, because I wished to see you alone, and I thought it might be difficult to do so at your own house," Sir Francis said.

His address was more formal, his appearance more formidable than ever, she thought, as he indicated the chair in which he wished her to sit, and took his own seat, entrenched behind his writing-table, at some distance from her. "I hope it is not objectionable to you to come to me here, my own house being so far away?"

Deleah shyly, but quite honestly, said that she did not mind in the least. "He is going to tell me that, after all, he has decided to buy Bernard off," she told herself, but was not allowed to maintain that illusion long.

"I have a word or two I wished to say to you about my young brother, Reginald," he said, plunging into his subject.

He sat, his face a little averted from her, looking down at the papers on his desk, and spoke in a tone as cold and non-committal as if he read what he had to say to her, written there.

Deleah receiving his communication in uncomfortable silence, he went on: "For several reasons--some of them business ones--it has been arranged for my brother to leave Brockenham for a year. To travel!"

Pausing there, she still finding nothing to say, he added, looking closer at the paper on the desk, "He will not go."

"I am sorry," Deleah shyly said.

"He won't go, because of you." Then he turned his face to her, and Deleah saw that his face expressed cold disapproval. "I am quite sure you do not wish to stand in Reginald's light, Miss Day?"

"Oh no."

"I was sure of it. And therefore I was encouraged to send for you. It will be better that we talk matters over a little. You have influence over Reggie?"

"I think not." Once or twice she had tried to impose her own ideas of what was right and fitting upon the young man, and had failed. Why should she pretend to any influence?

"But of course you have. I want to ask you to be unselfish enough to exert it for my brother's good."

"I would do that gladly if I could."

"Then, send him away. It will be doing him an inestimable benefit."

"I can tell him it would be better for him to go; but he is not easily made to do a thing he does not like.

"He tells me--without any engagement on your part--he considers himself bound to you."

She shook her head quickly, her face rose-red: "Oh no!"

"He is always being engaged to--somebody: poor Reggie!"

"Is he?" she asked innocently.

"Reginald is my brother," he went on, and he turned his gaze from her face and looked at the finger-nails of his left hand with an absorbed attention. "He is, however, so much younger than myself that he has almost been like my son. You will give me credit, I am sure, for not wishing to disparage Reginald, when I tell you that this is not by any means the first time Reginald has thought of marriage." He paused, and smiled awry to himself as he contemplated the finger-nails. "Or, rather, I should put it, not the first time he has talked to young ladies of being engaged to them."

Deleah sat silent, determined not to speak till speech was absolutely demanded of her.

"It has not cost my brother much to change his mind," Sir Francis said, and dropped his hand and looked at the pretty girl sitting before him.

"Since he has to do it so often, that is well," Deleah said.

"It is well, in a way," Sir Francis agreed. "But supposing that he took an irretrievable step, and then changed his mind?"

"That would be more serious," Deleah admitted.

"You understand what I mean, Miss Day?"

"Perfectly. You mean, supposing he married me and then repented, not having been given time to repent beforehand. Having been taken at his word as soon as he spoke--and snatched up."

"That is putting the case more strongly than I had thought of doing; but--"

"But it is what you mean?"

"You are not offended, I hope?"

"No; because I quite understand. It would be surprising if you did not feel as you do about it."

Her voice shook a little, and Sir Francis felt compunction. After all, from the girl's side of the question, what a sacrifice this was he was so coolly demanding of her. He felt suddenly ashamed, and half afraid of what he had taken upon himself to do.

"I hope you believe I am actuated by no feeling antagonistic to yourself, Miss Day?"

"I think I understand that," she said gently.

And he knew that she comprehended, and was grateful to her that she did not say, "You hate, not me, but the grocer's shop; but the idea of an alliance with my father's daughter, my brother's sister." "After all the

girl is a lady," he said to himself, and the thought crossed his mind: was his empty-headed young brother likely to marry a better woman than this? All the same, his duty in the matter was clear before him.

"And you will do what I ask? You will help me to send the boy away?"

"He won't go for my telling, I fear."

"He won't go unless you tell him;" and he permitted himself to smile persuasively on her.

"Then I will tell him," she said gravely; and feeling that was all he wanted with her she got up and turned to the door.

He reached it before her. "Mine has been an ungracious task," he said. "It has seemed to me that it was demanded of me. I hope you will forgive me." He said it quite earnestly, quite humbly, all his grand formality of manner laid aside for the moment. And the anger and the hurt pride which had been in her heart melted from it.

"You have been very kind to me, always. If there was anything to forgive I would forgive you," she said simply; and her face was charming with its look of innocent confidence in him, its wavering, shy smile.

"What I have said has been for my brother's sake," he assured her, compunction stirring at his heart. "But I believe it to be equally good for yours. You may not think so to-day, but you may take my word for it that you will come to think so."

He clasped her hand reassuringly for a moment; then she went.

The letter from Sir Francis Forcus had been on Deleah's breakfast plate. The family had the bad habit of expecting to see each other's letters. They all knew who it was who had written, and what he had asked. At supper, when the family met again it was expected of Deleah to describe the interview, and publicly proclaim what had taken place.

Preferring to keep the matter to herself, she had eluded her mother and sister by going without her tea, gaining only by the delay the addition, to those already agog for her news, of the innocent Franky, of the ever-curious Emily, of an Honourable Charles consumed with jealous fears.

They would not even let her take her place at table before they were upon her. "Well?" inquired Bessie, alert, her suspicious, bright eyes upon her sister, who appeared a little pale of face, a little languid of manner, the effect of going without her tea, perhaps.

"Well?" Deleah echoed.

"I don't suppose it's a secret. Mama, I don't suppose Deleah has been sent

for by Sir Francis Forcus for anything she can't tell!"

Emily, pouring out the lodger's supper beer, remarked that Miss Deleah was always one to keep things to herself, even when she had been a baby.

"I can't imagine, Deleah, what he can have wanted with you," Mrs. Day said, in answer to Bessie's appeal.

"It was nothing much, mama."

"It couldn't have been _nothing_. At least say if it was good or bad," persisted the elder sister. "I don't see why Deda need be so affected and silly, mama."

"Oh, do let me get some supper first," Deleah prayed.

"Thank you, Mr. Gibbon. Some beef, please."

Those prominent, burning eyes of the boarder, the eyes which Mrs. Day and Bessie had discovered rescued his face from the commonplace, were upon her face, with a desperately eager questioning. In his heart he believed that Sir Francis had sent for her to beg her to marry either himself or his brother. Supposing she had consented! Supposing she was going to say it now! His red, square-looking hands shook pitiably as he carved the beef and put it on her plate.

"Perhaps Miss Deleah would rather keep her news till I'm gone," he forced himself to say.

"Oh no," Deleah, who would infinitely have preferred to do so, but must not hurt his feelings, declared.

"It is about Reggie, I know," said Bessie, her eyes, filled with fierce questioning, on the girl.

It was not till Emily had reluctantly withdrawn that Deleah confessed that Bessie was right, and told her news defiantly, in a sentence. "Sir Francis sent for me to ask me not to marry his brother," she said, and applied herself to the contents of her plate as if she were really enjoying them.

For a minute, speechless with surprise, they gazed upon her.

"But _were_ you going to marry him?" Bessie at length inquired.

"No," said Deleah; "I was not."

"And did you tell him so."

"No."

"My dear Deleah!" from her mother. "You should have told him, of course."

"I didn't. I don't know why. I felt I could not. I hardly said anything, I

think."

"But now I would marry him!" Bessie cried. "No man should put an insult like that on me for nothing." Her face had flushed pink. She felt the insult to the family very keenly. "Now you've got to marry him, Deleah. Mama, tell Deleah that for her own pride's sake she's got to marry Reggie now."

"No!" said Mr. Gibbon. He laid down his knife and fork with a clatter, and fixed angry eyes on Bessie.

"No!" he said, and having stared at her till, astonished, she averted her eyes, he turned a protecting gaze on Deleah. "Miss Deleah need do nothing of the sort," he said reassuringly.

"I certainly shall not," Deleah said.

"Are we to sit down tamely under such rudeness, then?" Bessie asked at large. "You never assert yourself, Deda--you and mama. That's why people dare to treat you so. Sir Francis would not have sent for me like a servant, to give me his orders. What did you do, Deda? Stood there meekly, like an idiot, to listen, I suppose?"

"Miss Deleah did what was right. Least said soonest mended," the boarder declared. He had never openly stood as Deleah's champion before.

"I'm on Deda's side too," Franky said. "Deda's got the most on her side. C'n I have another piece of tart, ma?"

"No, you can't," said Bessie promptly. "Mama, Franky cried out in his sleep the last time he had two pieces of tart."

"C'n I have another piece of tart, ma?"

Mrs. Day explained to Franky that instead of having more tart, at that time of night, he must go to bed; and Bessie with excitement started a new idea.

"I suppose that was what he came here for," she cried.

"Sir Francis called, and found Reggie Forcus with me," she explained, turning to the boarder. "He came here spying upon me. No doubt he meant to say to me what he's said to Deleah, but he found a different person to deal with. I didn't give him any chance to put an insult on me, I can tell you! So he sent for Deleah, who can't defend herself."

"Poor little Deleah!" the mother said, fondly regarding the girl, indisposed to defend herself at that moment evidently, and apparently busy with her supper.

"Miss Deleah could find them that would defend her if she'd say the word," Gibbon said, greatly daring; the beef was untasted on his plate, but his eyes devoured Deleah.

Bessie gave him a glance of astonished disapproval, and went on to expatiate on what would have been her own conduct in Deleah's place. How she would have listened to Sir Francis with apparent calm, saying nothing, leading him on to his own destruction, and then--

"I did listen, I didn't say anything. I was thinking all the time how horrid it was for him to have to do what he did."

"Well, my dear child, that was no concern of yours, you need not have been unhappy about it."

"No, mama. But I was; and unhappy that I had to sit to listen to him. I wanted desperately to get away, that was all. I came the very instant that I could."

"Instead of which, I should have said," explained the eager Bessie, "I should have said: 'Until this moment I have not given your brother a thought, Sir Francis. But now that you have dared--_dared_ to insult me and my family in such a way, I will tell you what I will do. I will marry him to-morrow morning. I'd have done it too,'" Bessie declared, looking round the table, eyes shining with strong self-approval.

"My dear Bessie. Don't let your feelings run away with you so much," Mrs. Day reproved.

"Deleah has no dignity, mama. Any one can see Deleah behaved without the least dignity."

Deleah listened miserably, pretending not to hear. She did not agree with Bessie's idea of what was dignified, but she knew that she had cut a poor figure. She felt humiliated, hurt, helpless. Sir Francis Forcus had been for her her ideal of what a man and a gentleman should be. He had helped her in the day of her necessity, and she had set him at once as her hero on a pinnacle, and had looked up to him and worshipped him secretly, and from afar. She knew that she had sat before him this afternoon shamed, and helpless, and childish; filled with as much sorrow for him who was so clumsily wounding her as for herself. She had not desired to retaliate; she would not have been revenged on him if she could; the only effort of which she had been capable had been the effort to make him think that she had been as little wounded as possible, that the situation was not a horrible one to her.

Yet when they asked her why she had not shown more spirit she could not explain. She could only sit silent and miserable, and let them talk.

Even Mr. Gibbon, usually so preoccupied and silent now, talked. He said that he supposed Sir Francis Forcus called himself a gentleman, but that he, the Manchester man, had always had his doubts on the subject, and that one day he hoped for the opportunity of telling him that he was a _snob_. And more, with unwanted, stammering loquacity, to that effect, with fire of eye, with un-called-for, excited repetition.

CHAPTER XXIV

The Cold-Hearted Fates

When Mrs. Day and her daughters had retired that night, their boarder sat up writing a letter.

Deleah found it pushed under her plate at breakfast the next morning, Gibbon always breakfasting early and alone.

"I think you behaved nobly," the letter ran. "Do not heed what others in their spite and jealousy may say. The man Forcus is a purse-proud snob. But if as such he is too proud to receive you into his family, remember that there is another that have better taste. My family is highly respectable, but they would receive you gladly, for my sake. And as for me, I should always think you did me honour by becoming mine. Which honour I pray you, my beloved Deleah, to do me."

Deleah crumpled the note in her hand--she was down before her mother and sister, that morning--and took it into the kitchen where Emily was making the breakfast toast, and rammed it, with the poker, and a good will, into the heart of the glowing coals.

She thought as she did so of the talk with her mother the other night in which the name of the Honourable Charles had figured. She had only half meant what she had said then, but now--how could she ever so lightly have contemplated for one moment such a marriage!

"And what young chap's love-letter are you a-burnin' of now, Miss Deleah?" Emily facetiously inquired, waving the round of toast gracefully before the bars.

"The love-letter of a young chap who should never trust himself to write one," Deleah told her, calmly. "His love-letter was abominable, Emily."

She had a love-letter of another sort that morning. It was brought to her, and given in the presence of her pupils at the mal a propos moment when Miss Chaplin had unexpectedly entered the little class-room in which the juniors were taught, and where was Deleah's domain. Miss Chaplin had thought that she had heard laughter issuing from this direction, and had burst into the room to beg of Miss Day to keep the children in order.

Poor Miss Day was desperately anxious to retain her post in Miss Chaplin's Academy, and for that reason, and because Miss Chaplin was quite aware of the fact, she found it safe and convenient to make of the poor young teacher the scapegoat for whatever irregularities were committed in the school, to discharge upon her the pent-up irritabilities she dared not vent upon the more valuable assistants, who might resent such ebullitions at inconvenient times.

She had received notice that morning that three pupils of whom she was proud, who did the school credit, were to leave next quarter. She had had a "brush" with the German governess, and Fraeulein had been insolent. But Fraeulein was valuable, and Miss Chaplin had bottled her wrath, to empty it on the innocent head of Deleah.

"I must really ask you, Miss Day, to maintain better order in your class. I heard laughing. Frequently when I pass the door I hear laughing--"

But where was Miss Day who should be responsible for such a terrible state of things?

One of the tots of pupils had slipped off the form on which she sat, and rolled under the table, and Deleah had crept under the table too, in search of her, at which the other pupils had laughed. The abashed governess received the reproof of her principal on all fours.

"Really, Miss Day!" cried the scandalised woman. "Yours is hardly a seemly attitude to assume before the pupils, is it?"

And at that least opportune moment, the door of the class-room burst open again and Kitty Miller, that day scholar who sometimes walked home with Miss Day and kept "The Deleah Book," appeared. She flourished a letter in her hand.

"What will you give me for this, Miss Day?" she cried, not till too late perceiving the awe-inspiring figure of Miss Chaplin.

Deleah took the missive, and it would have been hard to decide whether she who gave it or she who took it had the guiltier look.

The outraged voice of Miss Chaplin arrested Kitty Miller in the moment of ignominious flight. "Wait!" commanded the alarming tones. Kitty stood still, trembling as she heard. "Who employs you to convey letters to Miss Day, Kitty?"

Kitty, the colour of beet-root, looked at Deleah, lily-white.

"Who gave you that letter, Kitty?"

And poor Kitty, looking piteously at Deleah, lied--futilely, but for the sake of her friend--and said she did not know.

"Was it a gentleman?"

Kitty, confounded and demoralised, stammered out that she had forgotten.

Deleah came to her rescue. Deleah, who knew well that her hour had come: "It is from Mr. Reginald Forcus," she said. She had received warnings on the subject of Reginald Forcus before.

"And what has that gentleman to write to you of such immediate importance

that it must cause an interruption to class?" Miss Chaplin with head in air demanded.

And Deleah looking at the note in its envelope, said she did not know.

"Open it, and see," Miss Chaplin naturally recommended.

When Deleah hesitated to comply, the schoolmistress held out her hand, but Deleah, choosing to disregard that gesture, put the letter in her pocket.

The elder lady threw her thin lips into a tight line across her narrow face. She really thought it immoral for a girl to receive a letter from a gentleman, she really felt that the high tone of her school was endangered by that flagrant breach of manners made by Deleah Day. She had to punish iniquity, she had to protect from the evil effects of pernicious example, the unsullied young under her care.

When Deleah, that afternoon, came upon Reggie waiting for her at the corner of the street, a fatuous expression of joy at her approach on his silly, good-looking face, she had received her dismissal from the school.

She was filled with anger towards him as the cause of that which was to her a calamity.

"I have been given notice to go. _You_ have done that, Reggie," she greeted him. "Your silly letter this morning was the finish."

"A rattling good thing too," the irreverent Reggie declared. "I'm jolly glad to hear it."

"And what do you suppose I am to do now?"

"That's what I came to tell you. It's just spiffin' for my plans, as you'll see, dear."

"It's not at all 'spiffin' for mine."

"You. wait! You and I will get married, Deleah. We'll bring it off at once, do you see?"

"Oh, no, Reggie!"

"Oh, yes, Deleah. See if we won't! I'm not doing anything underhand. I've told Francis, straight. He's no fool. He knows when I mean a thing. And I'm my own master."

"But you're not mine, Reggie."

"You wait a bit. We'll fight all that out afterwards. What I've got to say to you this afternoon is this: I want to put you up on horseback."

"Absurd!"

"Wait! Only wait! Where do you think I've been this afternoon? I've been over to Runnydale, to look at old Candy's little brown mare. It's the one his girl has been riding. She's married, and gone away; and I've got the promise of it for you. No! Now do wait a bit. That little mare's as safe as a donkey; a child might ride her. All the same, I'm not going to put you up on her till you've had lessons; and I've been and seen about that too."

"Reggie!"

"I have, right enough. I went round to Ben Steel's when I came back from Runnydale. He's arranged to take you out twice a week. I'm going with you--so as you don't feel strange. I told Ben you'd take to it like a duck to water. 'That young lady'll look stunning on horseback,' Steel said. A little cheeky of him, but he's privileged. I say, Deleah, what'll the old women of Brockenham say when they see you with me, a-cock-horse, riding side by side past their windows?"

"They'll never see me doing it, Reggie. I'm not going to ride with you, my dear boy."

"You wait! You'll change your mind when you see Laura Candy's little brown mare. Let me bring her up for you to see, to-morrow. Look here, I'm to send over for her to-night. Oh, hang it all, Deleah, we'll put off the marrying for a time if you like, but I've set my heart on having some rides together. You don't know how proud I shall be to ride with you beside me down Broad Street, and through the market-place, and up St. Margaret's Lane. It will give all the cackling old women something to talk about."

It was with difficulty she made him understand that to help him to afford food for gossip was not her ambition, that she declined his escort on horseback through the streets of her native town, as well as his companionship through life. The events of the day had hardened her heart; and she succeeded in convincing him at last.

"And, Reggie, you are not to come to our house any more; you are never to write me letters; you are not to waylay me in the streets."

"Oh, I say, Deleah! Come! You can't mean it."

"I mean every word."

"But can't I sometimes meet you by accident even?"

"If you do I shall cut you."

"And if I won't be cut?"

"I shall call a policeman."

She laughed, but she made him see that she was in earnest. He walked by her side, crestfallen, a grieving look on his good-humoured, pleasant

face. The hunting season was not here for several months. His head and his heart had been filled of late with Deleah, his time had been passed in riding down Bridge Street in the hope that she might be looking out of window, in waylaying her when she came from school, in sitting in the room over the shop with Bessie, to get rid of time till Deleah should appear.

"If I'm to give up seeing you, and trying to see you, what on earth am I to do?" he asked.

"You are to travel."

"Why that is what Francis has been sticking into me!

"There you are, then. Two people who know what is good for you, Reggie."

"Francis is in a deuce of a hurry. He wants me to go next week."

"And why not?"

"I don't know why not--now," a miserable Reggie admitted.

"Then go at once and tell him you are ready."

For her word's sake to his brother she wrung a reluctant assent from him, and left him. But an hour later Emily bringing in the tea announced that a gentleman had called to see Miss Deleah.

"You can guess who 'tis," Emily said, as she spread the cloth. "He's in his dog-cart at the door, and his horse that resty, he says he can't come in; but he won't keep Miss Deleah a minute."

Bessie kneeling on the window-seat, was looking down into the street:

"It's Reggie, of course," she said. Then she turned round to her sister.

"Deleah," she said, "don't be silly; take Reggie. Don't be put off by that stuck-up, conceited old brother; don't trouble any more about me, and things I've said. It's a real chance. The best you'll ever get. Take it."

She had to call the last words over the balusters, for Deleah, paying no heed to her exhortation, was running down the stairs.

Beside Reginald Forcus in his smart dog-cart little Franky Day, to his own delight and surprise, was sitting. He had come running down the street to his tea, when Reggie had accosted him with the agreeable attention of a whip-lash curved round his calves.

"Hullo, youngster!" Reggie had greeted him.

"Quite 'ell, I thank ye," Franky had responded.

"Coming for a spin with me?"

No further invitation had Franky required, but had clambered at once,

great eyes sparkling, little heart beating high, into the vacant seat beside the driver. The exceeding honour was his to hold the reins, the groom standing at Black Michael's head, while Reggie got down to speak to Deleah at the door.

"Deleah," he said, "I've come to tell you I've done all you asked of me. I've seen Francis, and I go away next week."

"Good Reggie!"

"I've done it because you asked me; and now I want you to do just one thing for me. I know it's all over, and there's no hope for me, and after to-night I shan't see you any more. I want you to come for a spin with me to-night."

"No, Reggie."

"Yes, Deleah. I've got to go to Runnydale, to tell old Candy I shan't want that little mare. Franky is coming. Franky can sit up between us, Deleah--"

He was very proud of himself for his forethought in securing Franky. Deleah, chaperoned by Franky, could have no excuse.

She refused him very gently, because of his subdued demeanour, and because, absurd as it was of him, his voice had faltered when he made his appeal, and his eyes had grown moist. "But you must not take Franky, Reggie," she said, and called on the child to descend, and come in to his tea.

"Le'me go, Deda! Le'me go!" Franky pleaded.

"Oh, Deleah, just to please me--this last time ever I shall see you--you come too!" the young man tried her again. When again she refused, he flung away from her in a rage, and mounted to his seat; the groom, leaving the tossing head of Black Michael, sprang up behind. She called again to Franky, but they were off without reply. Deleah, looking after them for a minute, could see the child's excited little face beaming with delight turned up with admiration to the young man beside him.

Then she went back into the black little entry which did duty for hall, and mounted the steep, narrow stairs with a lagging step. How brightly the afternoon sun had shone on Reggie, his fair, smooth hair, vivid necktie, the flower in his coat. How the brass harness had glittered, and Black Michael's satin coat had shone; how spick and span was Odgers, the groom, in his green and buff livery; what an air of wealth and well-being about every appointment.

Deleah would have liked very well to have sat behind the spirited horse by kind Reggie's side; to have dashed forth into the sweet-smelling country--away from cheese and coffee and their mingled odours, away from Bessie and her complaining over the chance Deleah had thrown away; away from the society of the boarder who looked at her with such burning eyes,

beneath a penthouse of hand, watching her every movement, who whispered his recklessly fierce "I love you" when the least excuse could bring his head near to hers. Away from the thought of Miss Chaplin, and the necessity to set about finding a fresh situation.

She had not wished to marry Reggie, but now that he was lost to her past recall, a value which for her he had not before possessed seemed to attach to him. How easy life would have been with him! Every day Franky might have gone for a drive; her mother could have turned her back on the grocer's shop--

From the time she set her foot on the lower stair till she reached the landing Deleah almost allowed herself to believe she would call the young man, and all that he stood for to her and hers, back again. But before she had opened the door of the sitting-room, she had remembered Sir Francis, and his scorn of her and hers, and her face had burnt with shame.

"Well?" questioned Bessie, as she entered, her eyes glittering with eagerness.

"He wanted me to go for a drive. I would not go. He has taken Franky."

"Franky, in his old school suit, and without having his collar changed?"

Emily, lurking around, to hear the result of this short interview on the doorstep, was also horrified to think of the disgrace brought on the family by the condition of Franky. "His nails is that black when he come home from school, and often as not his face smudged. What a sight to set in front of Odgers."

"Odgers has got his back to him."

"For all that I'd have liked to scrape the top of the dirt off him. And he've got on the knickers with the patch at the back!"

Mrs. Day, having been up for her tea and retired again to the shop, took her place behind the counter, and dispatched Mr. Pretty to his meal.

No customers came in. She turned her sad and patient eyes upon the street, thinking--not of the cutler's over the way, with whose son Franky had formed such an undesirable friendship, nor of the passers by on the narrow pavement, nor of the tradesmen's carts rattling over the cobble stones; thinking of Bernard on his way to India and untold danger and privations, of Deleah and her dismissal from the school. Her pretty, good child, to have received such shabby treatment! Deleah, who if she had chosen might have queened it over them all. Of her steadily declining business, too, she thought, and of how impossible it was for her to cope with Coman's, down the street. To-morrow was the seventh, the day set apart in each month by Mr. Boulton for going into her affairs; looking through her books, catechising her, cross-questioning her, giving her advice in his

tyrannical, bullying way. From this her thoughts glanced off to the subject Bessie had held forth upon in her irritating, worrying fashion, through tea.

"It is a pity the child did not have his face washed, certainly," she said.

At last a customer! No, only the cutler's little boy, Franky's chum, from across the way.

The cutler hired a strip of garden on one of the roads, and when tea was over, in the summer evenings, Franky and the cutler's son ran off together to their garden to get into what childish mischief was possible in the restricted space.

"Franky isn't in, this evening," Mrs. Day told the boy. "He's gone for a drive with Mr. Forcus." She gave him a screw of acid-drops for himself, and the boy ran off.

"All ri', thank ye. Tell Franky I looked in," he called.

The next comer was the fat little maid-of-all-work from the butcher's, near by. She was red-haired, with a large goitre over which her afternoon black frock would not quite button. She was hardly worked from early morning, to late evening, and Mrs. Day, ever full of compassion for the weak and oppressed, was kind and gentle to her.

She was generally breathless with hurry and the trouble of the goitre, and Mrs. Day took no special notice of her panting condition now.

"What for you to-night, Alice?" she asked her.

"It's soap," Alice gasped. "Soap, and matches, and six eggs for the morning's breakfast, and I was to tell you, if you please, as you was to put in seven, steads of six, for one in the last lot was stale. And have you heard, please, there's been an accident with that there Mr. Forcus's tricky horse?"

Mrs. Day's dark eyes gazed at the girl out of a face blanched to the pallor of the dead.

"There have, then! Master, he jus' come in and said so. His horse is kilt; and the groom, he's cut about the face; and your little boy, what he took a ridin' with him, have got his neck broke."

CHAPTER XXV

To Make Reparation

"Of course we must do something for them," Sir Francis said. "The difficulty is to decide what."

He and his sister had followed in their carriage the funeral of Franky Day. Sir Francis had wished, seeing that he must appear there, to appear unobtrusively, but Ada had thought that she also--painful as it was--must be present, and Ada could not go afoot. The Forcus carriage, therefore, had been conspicuous in the meagre procession following the little coffin to the cemetery.

"We must remember that the poor things have seen better days, and be careful how we offer," Miss Forcus said. "I have no doubt we shall find they would rather starve than touch our money."

"I hope they know Reggie has gone away; otherwise it might have looked heartless his not being there to-day."

"They will understand. And Reggie could not have stood it. It was painful enough as it was," Sir Francis said.

It had been very painful. He thought of the figure of the poor mother, tearless, looking down into the little grave; of the poor weeping girls clinging to her. Franky's common little school had attended, and stood, marshalled by the meagre young master in charge, at a distance, but the small son of the once despised cutler had advanced, pushed forwards encouragingly by his comrades, and dropped upon the coffin a bunch of flowers gathered from the garden on the road, where Franky and he had loved to play. No other flowers were there. It was before the day of floral memorial displays.

"If they would let us bear the funeral expenses, or put up a little monument in the cemetery, or a window in their church?" Ada suggested.

"If we could do something to help them to make a living," Sir Francis said.

The day of Franky's funeral had been the first to bring home the fact that summer was gone. The chapel had been cold and bleak, and while they stood around the grave it began to rain. In the drawing-room at Cashelthorpe the fire had been lit, and tea awaited the brother and sister. Consoling as these comforts were they could not dispel the sadness which oppressed the kind heart of Ada Forcus.

"I shall never forget those poor things, to-day. Never!" she said, and cried unashamedly into her tea-cup.

The man, of course, did not cry, but he too appeared for the time overwhelmed with the shadow of what had befallen.

"I spoke to their old servant to-day," he said. "It seems the child was called back; Reggie wouldn't listen; drove off with him."

"I am horribly sorry for Reggie. But oh, I can't forget how little the

coffin looked. Francis, what a handsome family they are! I couldn't help noticing that, even when they cried, the girls were pretty."

It was more than could have been said of Ada; and she knew it, but cried all the same.

"The younger girl is extremely good-looking," the brother said, "and she is a conscientious and good girl, besides."

He thought how certainly, if she had so wished it, she might have been going to be his sister-in-law, and the reflection again quickened the perception of the fact that something was due from the family of Forcus to that of Day.

"I will go and see George Boulton to-morrow," he said.

"The draper, do you mean? Why?"

"He is their adviser. Put the poor woman into that wretched shop. He will know what can be done for them."

Sir Francis, however, did not find himself greatly helped in his benevolent project by Mr. George Boulton, a circumstance surprising the man to whom the character of the successful draper was not unknown. That he would have accepted on the widow's behalf without scruple anything that could be got, was what was expected of him; instead of which he received all the rich man's propositions coldly, and did not even faintly encourage his charitable intentions.

Through his brother--however blameless in the matter--a heavy sorrow had come upon these poor people. It would be a great relief to Sir Francis and his family if he could be allowed in any way to be of use to them. His name need not appear. Mr. Boulton could arrange the transaction. He had heard that the grocer's business was not successful--?

The shop must be given up. George Boulton admitted the fact. The woman was too timid for trade. All women were. No blame to her, specially. She had been industrious, and careful. She was standing behind her counter that very morning. He had seen her there. But what customers would care to go to buy soap and candles of a woman half dead with grief?

"She must not be allowed to remain there," Sir Francis said. "I can easily put in a man who will take entire charge and set Mrs. Day at liberty. I will send a man in, to-morrow."

"I am putting one in to-day," George Boulton said, who had decided to do so on the moment only. He swelled out his chest, settled his shoulders, shook his head in his low collar, and put on an important air. "No doubt it is common knowledge that Mrs. Day and her family have looked to me for advice and assistance, hitherto," he said.

"I promised William Day I would look after them. I have kept my promise, and mean to keep it. I am obliged to you all the same."

"My offer to help in any way possible holds good, you will remember," Sir Francis said. He would not give up his benevolent intention without a struggle. "Is there anything which could be done for the girls?" he asked. "The younger is teacher at a school, I believe?"

"Got the sack!" said Mr. Boulton easily; and then, seeing no reason why he should not do so, went on to explain that it was through the attentions of Mr. Reginald Forcus that misfortune had come about. "So Miss Bessie tells me," he finished, and inquired with the glance of a glistening eye at Sir Francis if he had the pleasure of Miss Bessie's acquaintance. "A remarkably fine-looking young lady is Miss Bessie," he pronounced.

He nodded a familiar farewell to his visitor when, uncomfortable and crestfallen, the latter withdrew. The Forcuses were not even customers. Sir Francis and he sat on the magistrates' bench together. "We are on a par, about, now," he said to himself; and he reminded himself he also was now entitled to put a cockade on the frowsy hat of his coachman in the mildewed livery.

Let the high and mighty brewer put up a widow of his own to play Providence to, and leave the especial property of George Boulton alone!

Sir Francis, for his part, was more troubled in mind than ever when he emerged from that interview. The girl dismissed from her school too! It seemed that all the misfortunes of the poor Days must be laid at his door. He, who hated to owe to any man, could not ease himself of that heavy debt.

"I will go to see them," Ada said when he told the ill-success of his mission.

"They will hate to see you."

"I shall go. I am sure they are people of nice feeling."

Of that visit, too, no very satisfactory account could be given. It had been very painful. Mrs. Day had not been present. She had sent a message thanking Miss Forcus for calling, and asking to be excused. There had been only the girls. She might say only the one girl, for the elder had started wildly crying at the appearance of Miss Forcus, and had not recovered when she left.

"The poor little boy seems to have been their idol," Ada said with a sigh, miserably oppressed.

The younger girl had pleased the lady very much by her demeanour; so composed, so unselfish, so evidently aware of the trying ordeal it was for the visitor, so sweetly striving to be gracious.

Sir Francis nodded. "I have always liked the manner of that younger girl."

"And she is quite lovely, Francis."

He did not know about the loveliness, the brother said, but he believed her to be simple and conscientious and good. He looked at his sister's plain face: "Every woman who is that is lovely," he announced.

"I am going there again," Ada said.

"It won't seem an intrusion?"

"I will risk it. They appear to have no friends."

After the second visit she had something more definite to relate. "I hope you will approve, but if you don't it can't be helped," she said, "for the thing is arranged. That younger girl, Deleah, is coming here."

"Here? On a visit, you mean?"

"She is coming to be my companion. It is the only way I can discover in which we can be of use to them. The poor child has been receiving fifteen pounds a year. I can give her fifty--"

"You haven't forgotten how that young fool, Reggie, made a bigger fool of himself over this girl. Would have married her, I suppose, but for the extraordinarily decent way the young woman behaved about it."

"Luckily Reggie is away," Ada comforted herself. "He'll have been in love a dozen times over before he comes back again."

"But what are you going to do with the girl? Won't it bore you to have her always about? You have never wanted a companion before."

"How do you know I have not?" his sister asked him laughing. "I didn't know it myself, but I expect I've wanted one all the time. At last I'm going to have one."

There was in Ada Forcus that ineradicable love of gaiety which some women carry to the grave. Since, at the death of his wife, she had gone to keep house for her brother small indulgence had been shown to this passion. In the grave of his wife, not only all Sir Francis's heart had been buried, but apparently the love of all that made for the brightness of life. By the time the poignancy of his sorrow had worn off, to be solemn and sad of demeanour, to shun the disturbing effects of social distraction, had become second nature to him. By no wish of his own, but naturally and irresistibly, that habit of melancholy which had fallen on its master seemed to enshroud his home. He liked his brother to be with him in the home in which he had been born, but he would not welcome his brother's friends. He was greatly attached to the sister, who was half a dozen years older than himself, but the idea that she could desire any other company than his own, had not apparently presented itself.

"There are some things a man can never learn," the mid-Victorian Ada said to herself, when Sir Francis prophesied that she would find a companion a bore. "And one is that a woman, however happily situated in a man's house,

must have another woman easy of access to talk with, to sew with, to whisper to."

CHAPTER XXVI

A Householder

When it was explained to her that a man was to be put into the shop to give her a holiday, Mrs. Day refused the indulgence. Her heart was broken, but she was not ill. To have had a little time to give to Franky--to take him for walks in the country, to read to him, to help him with his favourite occupation of painting old numbers of the *Illustrated News* and *Punch* would have been a joy. Often she had longed for the leisure to do these things. But now that Franky was gone, where was the use of leisure? She did not even want the leisure to cry. She who had wept so often in this latest sorrow could shed no tears.

Deleah cried, wetting the pillow nightly with her tears. When talking of matters quite unconnected with the lost child the tears would come welling up, drowning the beautiful hazel eyes; would tremble, as she tried to go on talking, on the thick black lashes; would roll, she pretending not to notice, down her cheeks.

Bessie cried--howled, even, lying with her face buried in the sofa cushion, calling in a smothered voice upon Franky's name.

Emily cried, cleaning with spirits of ammonia the shabby school suit whose odour had so offended the nostrils of the elder sister. Putting yet another patch in the hinder portions of the trousers, the only use of such labours being that it delayed the laying away of the little garments for ever.

But the mother was denied such easy expression of sorrow that was beyond words and beyond tears. "I am not ill. Mr. Pretty and I can manage," she said, and the substitute supplied by George Boulton was sent back.

Mr. Pretty was very good to her, giving up, for the time being, his surreptitious smokes in the cellar, his skylarking with the youths of his own age who passed the door, giving his serious attention to duties he had consistently shirked hitherto.

Every one who came near the bereaved mother committed the common mistake of ignoring her loss. Even her daughters did this as much as possible; so that in the place where the child's name had been on every lip it was no longer heard.

Those who have endured such a loss know how the ear sickens for the sound of a name which yet the tongue refuses to utter; how the heart stirs to the music of it when at length it is pronounced.

Mr. Pretty did not understand this, but also he did not know the accepted creed that of the newly dead it is kindest not to speak. He had not seemed very fond of the child, had often complained of him as a hindrance when Franky had wished to help him to grind the coffee or to clean the currants, yet he had laid by a store of sayings and doings which he drew on now for his mother's ear. Stories of Franky's naughtiness, even: of his partiality for the neighbourhood of a certain drawer which contained preserved cherries. Of his cheek in daring to address the assistant as "Pretty" without the Mr., and, the youth objecting, his ready substitution of an adjective which certainly was more descriptive of his appearance. Of his riding on Mr. Pretty's back when he, in pursuit of his duty, must crawl on all fours under the counter; his clinging to his legs when duty again called him to mount the steps for the topmost shelf. Nothing was too absurd, no tiny record too trivial to be precious in the mother's ears.

A source of furtive interest to her were the movements of Willy Spratt, the cutler's son. Instructed thereto by his parents, who may have thought that the sight of him would be painful to the poor woman, the child gave up, going to the shop to spend his pennies. Looking in, a little wistfully at first, as he passed, he soon ran, singing or shouting, by the door, with no thought of the little companion who used to wait to join him there. When at length he took to coming in again for his screw of sweets, Mrs. Day would look away from him resentfully, leaving him to Mr. Pretty to serve. She could not bring herself to speak to the child who was alive and well, and happy with his acid-drops, while Franky lay in his grave.

Of the company of Mr. Boulton at that time the Days had more than enough. Mr. Gibbon used to get up and retire to his room or go out to walk the streets, when the head of his firm appeared. "I have enough of him in working hours," he would excuse himself afterwards. "Mr. Boulton is all very well in his place."

"I'm sure I wish he would keep there!" Bessie would declare. She thought the Honourable Charles was jealous; for with the elder daughter the draper had come to indulge in a kind of heavy badinage which may have gratified George Boulton, and apparently was not displeasing to Bessie, but which those who looked on must have found fatiguing.

Bessie always pretended to be bored by these encounters of wit with the fat, bald-headed man who had been her father's contemporary: "You have no right to yawn when I am talking to you, Miss Bessie," he would reprove her. "Why do you do it?"

"Because I am tired."

"You mean because you are tired of my company? That is not the reason you yawn, however. You yawn because you have indigestion."

"I? Indigestion? What makes you think so, pray? Do I look like indigestion? Have I spots on my face, or a red nose?"

"No, but you are growing fat. You eat too much."

"Mr. Boulton, how _dare_ you!"

"You eat too much, and work too little. You don't take exercise enough to digest your food."

"You are making personal remarks, Mr. Boulton. No gentleman can make personal remarks to a lady unless they are complimentary--" and so on.

When Deleah went away it seemed that Bessie blossomed out into greater attractiveness. Perhaps in the restricted spaces of Bridge Street there had not been room enough or air enough for the development of both sisters; or it may have been that Deleah, with her superior beauty and winsomeness, shone the other down, and that Bessie had been conscious of the fact. Certainly she grew more amiable, more useful, even grew prettier and more lovable. And George Boulton came often, and more often. Hardly a night that he did not come.

The business, not paying, must be disposed of; there was no absolute cause for hurry; Mrs. Day could hang on till an advantageous offer was made, Mr. Boulton decided. The house, open to receive him whenever it pleased him to go, suited him. He liked the long narrow sitting-room above the shop, with its fireplace at one end, and its three deep-seated windows at the other, where he could sit now as in his own home, and talk to Bessie wilfully idle, or Bessie pretending to sew--always Bessie pleasant to look upon, and oddly stimulating, with her daring treatment of him.

Deleah gone, Franky gone, it was very snug there, especially when the winter evenings came on, and the poor widow stayed late in her shop while he and Bessie sat and "chaffed," as he called it, alone.

How she dared! he often asked himself. To think of all the benefits he had bestowed on the family, and that she dared!

"What would have become of you all if I had not got up that subscription-list, and started you in business?" he asked her.

"What's going to become of us now that the money is spent, and the business has failed?" she retorted.

"You leave that to me," he told her, and as good as promised that the future of the family was safe with him. He expected her, perhaps, to be overcome with gratitude; instead of which she gave him a not unneeded lesson in manners, advising him that a person of so much importance should not demean himself by blowing his own trumpet.

In the sitting-room over the shop was no attraction for Charles Gibbon, Deleah's light figure and darling face being absent from it. He could afford a house very well now. Not the grand house of which Deleah had spoken, but one which would suffice to his modest wants. A house with a big garden beyond, where, supposing a lady ever came to live there who was fond of flowers, roses might be grown, honeysuckle, jessamine trained. A garden where a bower could be constructed large enough for two who could

eat their strawberries there, in season, or drink a glass of wine there, on a Sunday afternoon. Far out of the town, for choice, on a road at whose gate some one might stand watching the departure of the master, as he went to work in the morning, welcoming him when he returned at night.

In his spare hours he occupied himself in looking for such a retreat, and when the ideal one was found he left his rooms in Bridge Street and went to live there.

George Boulton took the trouble to walk out one Sunday afternoon to the little trellis-covered house, a mile and a half away from the town, and discovered the junior partner in his shirt-sleeves rolling the gravel of the back-garden. Boulton, a strict Sabbatarian, was more than a little shocked to observe that breach of decorum. The fact that the back-garden was not overlooked, set his mind at rest, however. "We've got to be careful about such things. Customers are often particular," he said.

The patronage of the visitor who insisted on being taken over the small domain was trying to the temper of its proprietor, uneasily conscious already that the lawn was only half big enough for the croquet-hoops ostentatiously set forth thereon; that the furniture in the dining-room was much too big for it, and that in the drawing-room absolutely unsuited to its purpose. He wished to forget these defects, which the other thought it his duty conscientiously to point out.

"Very nice. Very nice. Very suitable indeed," was the verdict finally pronounced. The Honourable Charles's soreness was not at all soothed thereby. Since the abode, obviously in Mr. Boulton's eyes, left so much to be desired, it was no compliment to be told it was suitable. "A very nice little cage, Gibbon. Where is the bird?"

"No hurry," Gibbon said, sullenly uncommunicative. Earnestly desiring his departure he had strolled with his visitor to the gate. To have him on Sunday as well as all the week was a little too much, he was saying to himself, aloud saying nothing. And at that moment a carriage was driven past, whose servants wore the green and tan liveries of the Forcuses. One of the two ladies seated in the carriage, with a look of surprise on her face, leant eagerly forward and bowed to the men at the gate. Mr. Boulton, taken unaware, made a dash at his hat, Gibbon, bare-headed, did not so much as bend his neck in response to the salutation, but his face grew leaden-white.

"Slap up turn-out! I suppose their carriages are always dashing by?" Mr. Boulton said; for the road on which the Laburnums stood was that which led to Cashelthorpe.

He was generally at work at the back of the house, and could not say how often they passed, Gibbon said.

"You'd rather be looking at your three-yard-square of croquet-lawn than at Deleah Day in the Forcuses' carriage, Gibbon?"

Gibbon plucked a leaf from the hedge and put it in his mouth, but made no

reply to the facetious remark.

"What are they doing, driving their horses, and dragging out their servants in the middle of a Sunday afternoon?"

They went sometimes, in the afternoon, to a service at the Cathedral, Gibbon, who in spite of being habitually at the back of the house evidently knew something of the Forcuses' movements, was able to communicate.

"Little Miss Deleah thinks a mighty lot of herself, seated up there in state."

He should not think so, Gibbon said. "What is she but a servant there? She was a far greater lady, to my thinking, when she sat in the room over her mother's shop."

"It's Bessie that should ride in her carriage," Mr. Boulton declared.

"Perhaps she will," said Gibbon, and looked at his partner, who met the other's eyes hardily.

"If she does," he said with sudden bluster, "the fool that owns the carriage is a ruined man. Mark my words. Extravagant, idle young woman. Die in the workhouse--that's what Bessie Day will do. Look here, Gibbon; you know how things are; you know all I've done for them. I could put up the shutters of the shop to-morrow, and they could not help themselves. Bessie knows it too. I have not made a secret of these things. She knows I hold them in the hollow of my hand. Yet to hear her cheek me! The daring of it! Gibbon," he touched the younger man's shoulder with the stiff finger of his thick hand, "I used to think that you--eh?"

"No," said Gibbon, with decision.

"Nice little place all ready--when you've spent a few pounds more--?"

"No, thank you."

"Is that so?" Boulton said, and pressed his lips together, nodding his head and seeming to take time to turn the information over in his mind. Then he leant forward, and again touched the other's shoulder, tapping it two or three times by way of emphasis. "You're wise," he said, confidentially. "Take my word for it, Gibbon, you're wise. If I were a marrying man, which, thank Heaven, I am not, I wouldn't risk marrying Bessie Day if there was not another woman on earth."

CHAPTER XXVII

Promotion For Mrs. Day

Deleah had lived for several months at Cashelthorpe as companion to Miss Forcus, when on a certain Thursday afternoon she excused herself, as it was often her habit to do, from attending on Miss Forcus, and went to pass the hour and a half of the early-closing day with her mother and sister.

Mrs. Day was alone at the moment of her arrival, and that her mother was in unusually low spirits was quite obvious to Deleah.

"Come for a walk with me, mama; it is not good for you to be shut up on such a day in this stuffy room."

Mrs. Day declined, but she could not deny that the room was stuffy. No flowers were on the table now that Gibbon's offerings had ceased. No plants on the wide window seat. On a whatnot in a corner which had been devoted to the child's belongings were Franky's paint-box and some of his toys. The mother's eyes turned from Deleah, now well appointed in her pretty muslin and hat with its long ostrich feather, and rested on these mementoes.

"But for what happened to him you would not be where you are, Deleah," she said.

"But you wish me to be there, mama?"

"Oh, I wish it, dear, since you are happy; only--"

She did not put the thought into words--only Franky seemed to have died for this. Franky, who had come crying to her one day because a school-fellow had laughed at the patch on his trousers: Franky who had begged so hard only a few hours before his death for a little box of conjuring tools like Willy Spratt's, which had to be denied him. Her little Franky crushed to death beneath the wheels of the Forcus carriage! In her heart the mother would have liked Deleah to reject the good things offered her by the Forcus hand.

"Of course I am not happy!" Deleah said. "How can I be happy, mama, if you are unhappy? And poor little Franky--do you think I forget him? And Bernard, and--poor papa? And again I'm not happy because I don't _earn_ the money they pay me," Deleah said, and her cheeks grew pink at the thought. "It is out of charity they give it me. I _can't_ earn fifty pounds a year by just sitting in a carriage, or sewing beads on to canvas, giving a few messages to servants, writing a few letters! I wonder if they would be glad if I gave it all up, mama?"

"We're leaving the shop," Mrs. Day told her. "You must try to keep where you are, for the time, Deleah. Miss Forcus is kind to you?"

"Oh, so heavenly kind!"

"And Sir Francis?"

"I suppose he knows I am in the house. Yes. Sometimes he speaks to me

quite ten words a day. Tell me about leaving the shop, mama."

"Mr. Boulton has proved to me that we are not solvent."

"What does that mean? Not that we are bankrupt? Oh, mama! As if we had not had disgrace enough without that!"

"There is no end to it," Mrs. Day said hopelessly. "But you, at least, are out of it, Deleah." She had a dreary air of detachment about her; the troubles that had beset them had been common to them all, but Mrs. Day sat, on this holiday afternoon, as if she were singled out and set apart, a queen of sorrows. Deleah resented that attitude.

"Surely you don't think I want to be out of it, mama! Do you think I want to live in luxury while you and Bessie haven't a home?"

And at that moment Bessie appeared, coming in from the kitchen and confidential confabulation with Emily. Her face was flushed, and her eyes glittered with an excitement too evidently not pleasurable.

"Well! What do you think of it?" she burst forth.

"It is bad news. But everything that happens to us is bad," said Deleah, with uncharacteristic despondency.

"Bad?" echoed Bessie. "That depends on how you look at it."

"Bankruptcy? To owe more than we can pay? I should have thought that there was only one way of looking at it."

Bessie swung round to her mother. "You haven't told Deda!" she cried accusingly. "She hasn't told you! Mama is going to marry Mr. Boulton, Deleah."

"To _marry_ him!" Deleah cried, as if she might have cried "to _murder_ him!" and sprang from her chair to stand before her mother. "Mama! Mama!"

Mrs. Day, sitting huddled in her chair as if she lacked the spirit to hold herself upright, and looking all at once a dozen years older, shook a desponding head. "I can't!" she said. "I don't think I _can_ do it."

"Well, you've got the chance," Bessie said, hardly. "And it's a good one. Good for all of us. He's rich. He has sat here bragging of his money to me--and that he might spend a couple of thousand a year if he liked. As if I cared! But if it's going to be yours, mama--two thousand a year--I do care. I do!"

"But we can't think only of ourselves, Bessie," Deleah, horrified, put in. "We've got to think of mama. She could never endure it."

"She should have thought of that before," Bessie said. "Mama should not have been so sly and underhand--"

"Bessie! Bessie! You can't mean what you say."

"I mean every word of it. Pretending to dislike him! Pretending to keep out of his way!"

"Deleah, I have told your sister I nearly died of astonishment when he spoke to me. The idea had never entered my head." Poor Mrs. Day leant the head upon her hand and hid her face, in her misery.

"Bessie, you are not to bully mama. Do be silent. Don't mind her, mama. What did you say to him?"

"I didn't say one way or the other."

"Such nonsense!" cried the irrepressible Bessie. "You'll have to say! and he isn't in any doubt about it. He came to me and told me he was going to be my papa. I could have felled him to the earth when he said it! But I did not. I said 'You may be a papa to me a hundred times over, I will never be a daughter to you. Never! Never! Never!'"

"But if mama did this horrible thing, you'd have to be his daughter--you'd have to live in his house--"

"I'd live there, but I'd make it warm for him!" Bessie cried; and then her feelings becoming too much for her, she dashed from the room, and slammed the door behind her.

Deleah, left alone with her mother, did her best to strengthen her. "Never mind her, mama. Do not think of any of us in this; think of yourself alone. You could never do it."

"Bessie and he would fight like cat and dog," Mrs. Day said. "They are always fighting now. She says such things to him, and he to her! Environment has told on Bessie. She says things no lady should say. My life would be unbearable."

"It is not to be thought of for a moment."

"But there are the debts I cannot pay. There is poor Bernard. I ought to do it, Deleah. I know I ought. But I have had miseries enough."

When Deleah left her, Mrs. Day still sat a huddled heap upon the sofa. "I have had miseries enough," she repeated; and upon that text she spoke to herself--going over in faithful detail the troubles she had known--vainest and most useless occupation in which a woman can indulge.

Her orphaned, dependent childhood; her marriage. It had been loveless on her part, but she had cared a little, believing that love on her husband's part would suffice. Was it love, ever at all? Is love possible where tenderness, courtesy, consideration do not exist? Time going on, daily she had suffered his incivility, the despite he did to her sense of what was due to her as his wife, the mother of his children, the mistress of his home. Habit, and love for her children, had made life tolerable. But for

twenty years he and she had lived side by side in the outward union of inwardly divided minds.

Then had come his crime, its awful expiation, the terror, the disgrace, the bitterness of the fall for her children and herself, the salt, salt taste of the bread of charity, the drudgery which had been humiliating all through, with failure at the end. The grievous sorrow of Bernard's blighted career, the cruel death of her innocent comfort and consoler, her little boy.

Were not these things enough? Great God, was it possible she still had unspeakable agonies of mind and humiliation of body to go through? Her eyes, so pathetic in their subdued look of patience, wandered round the room which had been to her a haven of refuge from her sordid life in the grocer's shop. A hat Bessie had just discarded lay upon the table. Poor Bessie! poor undisciplined, unruly, never wholly grown-up Bessie! In the day of cataloguing the miseries of her life she was too sadly honest to pretend that Bessie could be a comfort to her.

A picture of Bernard painted by a local artist at a time when father and mother were for once united in the opinion that a handsomer, more promising boy did not exist, hung on the wall. Poor Bernard, who by last mail from India had written to his mother that his life in barracks was a hell.

The tired eyes wandered from that heart-breaking record of promise never to be fulfilled to the whatnot, holding Franky's toys. Was that dust on the lid of the paint-box?

She crossed the room, mounted a chair, took down the precious box, dusted it tenderly with her handkerchief, looked within. Such broken odds and ends of his gamboge, his yellow ochre, his Indian ink of which he had prattled to his father, questioning whether carmine or vermilion should be used for the roofs of his absurd houses; if Prussian blue or ultramarine should be for his seas and skies. She saw again the huge man and the little child bending over their pictures on Sunday evenings of long ago, heard the very tones of their voices. Her tears dropped upon the shabby old box, upon the little earthen palette on which the colours Franky had rubbed still remained. All the bitterness had died out of her heart. Only sadness was left, and a sense of irreparable loss.

CHAPTER XXVIII

At Laburnum Villa

Deleah as she walked homeward that afternoon (for she had overstayed her allotted time in Bridge Street, and the carriage which was to have picked her up at a certain point had gone on without her) determined that she must leave Cashelthorpe. The words sounded in her own ears as if she were

sentencing herself to leave heaven.

Her mother could not be allowed to marry George Boulton; she could not remain in the shop. How were she and Bessie to live? With the vanity of youth, which always sees itself in the foreground, Deleah thought she perceived that it was she who must get a living for them all.

In her small distracted head she decided as she walked along that she would hire a little house, start a little school. Perhaps some one would pay the first quarter's rent, and she could pay it back when the pupils came.

"Some one" in days gone by would have meant Sir Francis; but now, living under the same roof with him, seeing in what deference he was held even by his own sister, feeling his reserve, his aloofness from the low concerns of such as she, she had become extraordinarily shy of that great man. Through the daring of ignorance, trusting in that look of serenity and nobility in his face, she had formerly approached him. She believed in his goodness still as she believed in the goodness of God, but the awe of him she had always felt had descended, since she had lived beneath his roof, in a double measure upon her.

Of his sister she had no fear. She would speak to kind Miss Forcus. Miss Forcus would tell her what to do.

Simultaneously with the formation of this resolve she arrived at the neatly trimmed hedge of Laburnum Villa. For the moment she had forgotten that the place held any interest for her beyond that of the other little houses in their gay gardens she had passed. She glanced at the bright green of the trellis-work front, at the minute weeping willow in a corner of the grass-plot, at the roseplants destined to cover arches and to grow into a bower, by and by. By the front door a clematis had been planted, and the Honourable Charles was stooping over the plant, and striving to direct, in accordance with his own idea of how it should grow, the clinging of the tendrils.

Her light step was perhaps the one step in the world whose music could have withdrawn his attention from that absorbing occupation. He rose to his feet, turning sharply round; and as she wished him good-evening he went swiftly to the gate and swung it open."

"Come in," he said. "I have been waiting for this." He had at the moment such a commanding air, that Deleah had no thought but to obey him.

"I wish to show you my little place," he explained.

Deleah was late, as it was, and had yet some mile and a half to walk, but concluding from the dimensions of the place that no very long detention was threatened, did not demur. So long ago it seemed to her, who had since travelled miles along the road of Experience and Feeling, that the Bridge Street boarder had made love to her when he should have made love to Bessie. He had paid her the greatest compliment it was in his power to pay, and of late she had begun to understand something of what he might

have suffered; she wished to be kind to him and to make amends.

So, sweetly appreciative of all she saw, she walked at his side, down the little paths, helped him to remember the names of the annuals, admired the view of the back-yard through a vista of trellis-work arches.

"Do you like it?" he asked her.

Deleah, with her artless desire to please, declared that she liked it very much.

He turned away with a long-drawn breath of content "Come indoors," he commanded. He walked in front to lead the way, but stopped suddenly on the little path and turned to ask her if she knew how long it was since he and she had talked together.

"Quite a long time, isn't it?" Deleah answered him. "But I have not been living at home, you know; I--"

He cut her short abruptly. "It is five months three weeks and two days," he said. "But the time has not been long to me. Looking back it seems that the time has almost flown."

Deleah could not have felt flattered that this was so, but she told him she was glad to know that he was so happy.

"Not happy," he said, "but looking forward to happiness; working for it." With that he went on again, stopping at the hall-door. "I think I've remembered your taste," he said as he threw the door open. "I've carried it out everywhere as far as it was possible."

At that Deleah drew back. "I will look over your house some other time," she said. "It is late. I must be getting home now."

"Do you call the Forcus's place your home?"

"For the present. I am leaving there soon."

"The sooner the better. Come in."

He put a heavy and peremptory hand upon her arm and drew her over the threshold, across the tiny passage called the hall, into one of the two bow-windowed rooms.

"This is the dining-room," he said. "Sit down."

To free her arm from his hand she obeyed him, and with an effort to appear very much at her ease looked about her.

"What a sweet little room!" she said.

"You like it? I thought you would. Look at the picture over the sideboard."

It was a large print--much too large for the room--of "The Last Sleep of Argyle," and was faced on the opposite wall by a reproduction of "The Execution of Montrose."

"They're proof prints," he told her proudly. "I remember you went to see those pictures, years ago, when they were on show in Brockenham, and liked them. I've had the chairs covered with red leather 'stead of horsehair. It costs more, but you used to say red was cheerful."

"It is so very nice, Mr. Gibbon."

"In the drawing-room there is a piano. Come and see."

She went, because of that strange new peremptoriness of manner which she felt she had not the moral courage to disobey. The drawing-room had fresh flowers in a vase upon the centre table.

"Did you put the flowers there, Mr. Gibbon?"

"I put them there every day. For you. I have been waiting for you to come to see them. Everything is always ready. You like it all?"

"Yes, indeed."

"It is yours, then. It is all for you. From cowl on the chimney-pot--the kitchen-chimney smoked; I thought it would be inconvenient--to the bunch of honeysuckle on the table. All yours."

"Oh no, Mr. Gibbon."

"All yours. Every carpet has been laid down for you, every chair and table bought. Every seed has been sown, every tree planted. For you."

Deleah, speechless for the moment, looked at the man with eyes grown wide with dismay. His was no tragic figure. He wore the light-coloured, large checked suit affected at that period by young men escaping temporarily from the black-frocked livery of shop or office, his hair was brushed smoothly back and shone with brilliantine, his moustache was glossy with the same admired preparation. His face was extra pale, but Deleah knew it had the trick of paling suddenly and for small cause. She had seen it blanch at a chance encounter with her in the street, or accidental touching of her hand by his. She avoided meeting his eyes--those eyes said to hold something in their expression which redeemed his face from the commonplace--and the wild ardour of their gaze was lost upon her.

"Everything is yours, Deleah; when will you come and take it over?"

"Mr. Gibbon, I told you before. I have not changed."

"Nor I." His lips were lead-coloured and trembling; he was indeed trembling all over. He crossed his arms upon his chest to keep them still.

"You are going to be my wife or no one's, Deleah," he said.

She got up nervously from her chair; she tried to speak lightly. "I am going to be no one's, Mr. Gibbon," she said. "As I walked along to-night I have been making up my mind what to do. I shall take a small house for us all, and try to keep a little school. You shall see how well I keep my pupils in order. And, now and then, you shall bring me a nosegay of flowers from your garden--"

"That won't suit me," he said. "I give you no more flowers unless you take them all. Will you take them? Answer."

"Oh, Mr. Gibbon!"

"Oh, Mr. Gibbon!" and he mimicked her. "Is that the way to speak to me? After all the years of my worship, am I still 'Mr. Gibbon' to you?"

"I suppose so," was all poor Deleah could say.

He was standing with his back to the door. He turned swiftly and locked it, then holding the key in his shaking hand, crossed his arms again:

"Now!" he said, facing her; "we come to realities now. No more 'Oh, Mr. Gibbon!' no more talk about flowers. Listen. I, Charles Gibbon, love you with a passionate and desperate love that is not going to be played with. Do you, Deleah Day, love me? Say it out, once for all; Gospel truth; as God is in heaven to hear it."

"I don't love you."

"Do you hate me?"

Deleah was frightened, but she was angry too: "Just for the minute I think I do."

"All the same, hating me, will you marry me, and come to live in the house I have made for you?"

"No," said Deleah, pale and suddenly breathless. "I won't!"

He listened, panting as if from long running; his chest laboured beneath the grip of his folded arms as if it must burst. For a long minute he glared at her, speechless; and Deleah, glaring back at him wondered was this man with the working, ashen face really their decorous boarder, who had been so assiduous in passing the mustard and pouring out the water? What had come to him? Had she done this? Did he mean to kill her?

He came slowly nearer to her, and it took all the girl's courage to hold up her head, to face him. "I understand, at last," he said. "Now I want you to understand too. So listen to me; and remember; and see if I lie. You belong to me. Never mind what you feel about it. You are mine. You belong to me. Do you hear me?"

"I hear you, Mr. Gibbon."

"Say it after me."

"I will not."

"You belong to me. Belong to me. Belong to me. And while I live you shall belong to no one else."

He turned round then, and unlocked the door. But as she, with a haste which was hardly dignified, would have passed him there, he threw his arms around her, and pulled her fiercely to him, and madly kissed her face.

Frightened and outraged, she fought for liberty, and gaining it, dashed off. She flew down the little neatly rolled gravel path, and out through the freshly painted gate, and once on the road, as if more than life was endangered by delay, she rushed onward at break-neck speed.

Sir Francis Forcus, solemn and serene of face, riding homeward, had his attention drawn to a little figure which flew ahead of him. Riding up to her, he found that she who thus fled lonely as the shades of evening fell along the deserted road, was that little girl, his sister's protegee, who should have been safe under the shelter of his own roof.

She stood still, breathless and disordered, as he drew up alongside of her. "What has happened? Where is my sister? Why are you alone?" he asked, and looked with astonished disapproval at her scared little white face.

"I was late, and missed the--carriage. I am--running--home," she panted.

He saw that there was more behind, and dismounted. Girls were not trained for physical exertion in those days, they were not nurtured in the belief that they must not be cowards. Deleah was trembling with terror and exhaustion.

"Sit down," he said, and she subsided on the bank. He stood silently by her for a minute, drawing his conclusions. "You have been frightened," he said. "Who frightened you?"

"N-no one," gasped Deleah. "I--ran."

"From what? From whom?" And Deleah could not reply, could only feel the blessed security of his protecting presence, could only look up at him with the trusting, adoring eyes of a child.

He looked back upon the road they had both come; the daylight had not yet faded from the sky, although the shades of evening were beginning to fall; far down the road, where it curved towards the town, the lamps were being lit. By the gate of the last "villa-residence" on the road, a man stood, looking towards the pair by the bank.

"Was that the man who frightened you? That man by the gate?"

"N-no."

She might have saved her soul the perjury. Sir Francis, leading his horse by the bridle, walked back in the direction of Laburnum Villa.

"Come back! Oh, please come back!" Deleah cried; but Sir Francis, paying no heed, went on, till he stopped, bridle in one hand, riding-whip in the other, in front of the man standing on the pathway before his gate.

"You frightened that lady."

"That lady is no business of yours."

"You are my business, you scoundrel," Sir Francis said, and lifted with a threatening gesture the hand that held the whip.

The man did not flinch. He was no coward; he was much the smaller of the two; he was unarmed. "No," Sir Francis said. "Not to-night," and dropped his whip-hand. "But look out for yourself, sir. Take care. I shall have an eye on you."

For a minute he stood confronting the man, who looked back hardily at him. What else he had to say he said by the glance of his eye, by the set of his lips, by his scornfully carried head; then he slowly turned his back, led his horse from path to roadway, and swung himself into his saddle. As he settled himself there, he found the other man by his stirrup.

"Lucky for you you did not use your whip on me, Sir Francis Forcus," he said. "Sure as God, if you had done so I would have had your life."

Sir Francis, looking down on him, cut a light stroke upon the man's shoulder with his whip.

"You asked for it, and you have got it," he said. "Stand out of the way, will you?" and careless whether the other took that measure for self-preservation or not, rode on.

Deleah, unable to see distinctly what occurred, was relieved to find the interview so short, and Sir Francis so quickly beside her again. She had got up from the bank, and was walking briskly homeward when he overtook her.

"I hope you--were not unkind to him," she said timidly. "Mr. Gibbon lived in our house once--"

"Was that Mr. Gibbon? That man with the mad eyes?"

"He was our boarder. He was always very kind."

"To you especially kind?"

"To us all."

"And am I to hear why, as he is so kind, you were running away from him, this evening?"

"I had rather not tell."

He was a man of so much reserve himself that he respected hers. "Very well," he said; and after a minute added, "I am quite sure you were not to blame."

"I don't know," said Deleah, and hung her head, as she walked along.

To blame or not, she was horribly ashamed. She felt always in his society as shy and *_gauche_* as an awkward child, and was conscious that it was in such a light he regarded her. She would have died rather than that he should have known of that frantic struggle in Gibbon's arms, of that mad embrace.

Deleah, who had no advantage of excellent training, happened to be naturally musical. She played no difficult music, but her touch on the piano was good. Her voice, by no means powerful, was true and pure and pleasing. To Miss Forcus, who, in spite of the advantages of education, loved the wrong things consistently in music, and liked to be moved to tears by the plaintive songs of Claribel, it was a great pleasure to lie back in her chair, book or embroidery fallen to the floor, and watch Deleah's fingers tripping through the variations of Brinsley Richards's masterpieces; to hear her tunefully lamenting that "she could not sing the old songs," or in cheerfuller mood announcing that she might "marry the Laird" if she would--"the Laird of high degree."

The two ladies had the small drawing-room to themselves in the evening as a rule, but to-night, the fancy took Sir Francis to join them there. Deleah, nervous at playing and singing before him, was too shy to ask to be excused. She had been told that the dead wife had been a fine instrumental performer, and that every evening she had provided for her husband a genuine musical treat.

"I'm afraid I don't play any good music," she said. But Sir Francis, truth to tell, shared his sister's lamentable taste, and if, as he sat silent and pensive, beneath the shaded lamp on the round centre table, while the girl at the piano went through her simple repertoire, his heart was filled with memories of his lost wife, he certainly was not lamenting the works of Mozart and Beethoven which she had so skilfully rendered.

Deleah, however, did not know this, never doubting that her benefactor was a connoisseur of all the arts. Her fingers trembled upon wrong notes--all undetected, had she known--her sweet voice faltered through the songs she was wont to sing so pleasingly. She went off to bed, not daring to look the master of the house in the face, so shocked and jarred and weary she felt that he must be.

"Isn't she charmingly pretty and sweet?" his sister demanded of him. She could never hear praise enough of this new acquisition of hers.

"She has attractive manners, and seems a good young woman."

"I don't allow her to touch any of poor Marion's music, Francis."

"Oh!" he said deprecating such restrictions. "What harm would her playing Marion's music do?"

"I'm afraid she is going to leave us."

"Indeed? I have been looking on her as a fixture."

"She has been telling me the mother's shop has to be given up."

"It is a case of the shop giving up the mother, I fear."

"This poor little thing says she can't be happy living with us in luxury while the mother and sister are in difficulties. She thinks of taking a quite small house, and getting together a school of little children. It seems a hopeless look-out, Francis."

"It does," he acquiesced, and took up the book he had laid down.

"But, Francis, I wish you would show a little interest. We decided when that poor boy was killed we owed them what reparation could be made. I feel deeply something should be done for this girl. She is too pretty, too young, too delicate and dainty, to fight such a hard fight alone."

"She has her mother and sister."

"Nice women, I am sure, but--helpless."

"I would not call the mother helpless. She has held on, and done her best in that hopeless shop."

"You will see that everything will be pushed on to the shoulders of this little girl!"

"Well then--?" He looked questioningly at his sister's kind face over the top of the book he was reading. Then his eyes fell again to its pages. "I will think about it," he said.

After Ada Forcus had gone to bed he kept his promise:--sitting motionless in his chair, his elbow on the arm of it, his head upon his hand--thinking about it.

CHAPTER XXIX

A Prohibition Cancelled

"Any letter of interest?" Sir Francis asked of his sister, who, breakfast being over, was glancing again through the correspondence the morning's post had brought her.

"One from Reggie."

"He having a good time?"

"He says not. He says he hates travelling. Mountains and churches and picture-galleries, he says, bore him till he cries. He talks about coming home. I shall write and remind him he went for a year, and has only been away eight months. A young man with money in his pocket who can't amuse himself somewhere on the Continent of Europe must be deficient, Francis."

"Poor Reggie is not a very cultivated person. And I suppose he is--in love." He paused on that, seeming to turn something over in his mind. "He may as well come back," he finished. "I decided last night to tell him he can come back if he likes."

"If he likes!" repeated an astonished Ada. "Then, of course he'll come, and at once! He is best away. Tell him to stay where he is."

"I can't always expect to keep the boy in leading-strings. He has always been very decent in doing the things I wish; but, as a fact, I have no longer the slightest authority over him, or hold upon him, and he knows it."

"Then, leave it. Say nothing. Don't write for him to come."

"I decided, last night, to write to him."

Miss Forcus was silent to show that she did not approve. She never argued with her brother. "It is fortunate, then, that Deleah Day is going," she said presently.

"We could not possibly have Reggie here with her. That silly affair would be on again, in no time."

"As to that, I withdraw my objection. The boy must play his own game."

"Francis!" unbounded astonishment sat on the good, plain face of Ada Forcus.

Her brother left his place on the hearthrug, and walked over to the broad window at the end of the room. He stood there, tall, and fine, and upright, his back to her, his hands lightly clasped behind him.

"Deleah is a sweet girl, Francis; but in a marriage there is more than that to consider."

"Yes. There is a good deal to consider; but it is for Reggie and the girl to consider--not for me."

"But surely you, too, Francis!"

"Well, then, I have considered."

"It is not Reggie alone--but all of us. You must think for all of us, Francis. You always have done. It is not a connection to desire."

"I agree with you. The last in the world to desire. But it concerns the pair of them, primarily. He is--he no doubt believes he is--in love with her; and she is, I suppose, in love with him. No one has the right to interfere."

"Think how differently you married, Francis! A rich girl of high family."

"I did not marry for that. It happened--that was all. I married Marion for the same reason that impels Reggie to marry this girl. I remember how little such things weighed with me in my marriage; how, once having felt the inclination to marry her, I should have married my wife all the same if she had been, say, the daughter of William Day. It is because I remember that I decline any longer to interfere, or to take upon my shoulders any responsibility in this matter."

"You are wrong, Francis. Reggie won't thank you for it, later on."

"Oh, do I want any one to thank me!" Sir Francis said with sudden, all unusual petulance, turning round on his astonished sister, who jumped in her chair at his tone, instantly repentant. To incur the anger of the head of her house was the thing of which she was most on earth afraid.

"Do what you think right, of course, Francis."

"Of course I shall do what I think right."

He went to his own room, settled himself in his chair by the open window, tore open the morning paper which it was his custom to read there. The window opened upon a long oblong of flower-bordered lawn, enclosed by thick square-cut yew hedges on two sides; at the end a series of glass houses shut out the view. The eyes of Sir Francis strayed from the pages of the newspaper to the sunshine and shadow of the freshly-cut lawn. At the door of one of the greenhouses beyond, Deleah, in her black muslin dress and wide black hat, was standing in conversation with Jarvis, the head-gardener. Part of her duty, he had been told, was to wheedle Jarvis out of the flowers Miss Forcus liked to see in her rooms, but of which he resented the cutting.

Sir Francis looked at the pair--they were too far off for him to read their faces, but he knew how the girl would be playing her part, smiling shyly, with appealing eyes; how Jarvis was probably denying her, being human, for the mere delight of being asked. Presently the newspaper dropped from his hand, and he passed out into the morning sunshine, and walked down the flagged path dividing the lawn, the mosses growing grey and green between the stones.

It was a morning of unclouded skies, the soft air laden with the scent of flowers. A morning to be alive in--yes, to be happy in, spite of regrets and doubts and cares; spite, even, of death and loss and buried love. On such a morning a man might think of his dead wife, perhaps. Might say to himself, "the pity of it!" but he could but be conscious that he, himself, was alive still; that in him, solemn, responsible, middle-aged as he might be, the fires of youth were not yet extinguished. He must feel the fragrant wind upon his cheek, the scent of delicious airs in his nostrils, must even, in spite of himself, use the eyes in his head to see what was fair and sweet and gracious.

Jarvis, with his finger to his cap, retreated to his carnation-house, the entrance of which he had been guarding.

"So you are leaving us?" Sir Francis began at once, stopping before Deleah. "My sister has been telling me. We shall miss you very much."

"I shall never forget how good you have both been to me," Deleah said in her shy voice, and playing with the flowers in her hands. "But I think I ought to go."

"You will do what you think you ought, I am sure," he said; and her heart sank at the ease with which he acquiesced.

She turned to walk towards the house, and he walked beside her. "You will come to me if I can help you?" he said.

"If I might use your name in case no one will let me a house?"

"Of course. But you are not going to-day?"

She had not meant to do so, but since he seemed to expect it, found herself saying that she was.

"There is another matter," he said, "and it is that I came out to speak about. My brother Reginald is coming home."

"Really? Is that so?" She spoke without any show of interest. "I thought he had gone for a year."

"That was the original plan. But he went because I wished it--at that time. He has always been to me a docile, dear fellow, and I fear I presumed on that. I had no right to order his goings and comings--to order his life. None."

"I think it was Franky's death. I think he was glad to go--"

"That is as may be. I am going to tell him, now, to come back."

Deleah, feeling that this was a matter in which she had no concern, walked on, saying nothing.

"And now," Sir Francis went on, "I am going to ask you to alter your mind about leaving us. Since Reggie is coming back to us, won't you stay?"

Deleah lifted her head, and regarded him in silent astonishment.

He went on. "You have not forgotten what I said to you on a certain matter some months ago, although you have sweetly held yourself as if you did not remember. I now wish to recall the words I said then."

He waited. It was difficult to carry on a conversation in which she would take no part.

"I see that I was wrong. That which I feared might be for Reggie's undoing, I now believe would be for his good. Will you do me the great kindness to forget that former talk we had; or if you cannot forget, to act as though it had not taken place?"

Their walk had brought them opposite the morning-room window at which Miss Forcus was now standing looking out, wondering what Francis had found to say to the girl to whom he so seldom spoke.

Deleah with an effort found her voice. "That time--when you spoke to me about your brother--I had not promised to marry him."

"I know," he said very gently, for her voice showed him that she was distressed. "But Reggie wished it very much. And, perhaps, but for my having taken action, you would have done?"

"I don't know," Deleah said, her head hung over the flowers in her hands. Her hat was big, he could not, if he would, see her face. "Mama and Bessie wished it--"

"And--but for me--you would have wished it?"

"I don't know."

She gave him an instant's imploring glance. Surely he must understand how difficult it was for her to explain to him how she felt about Reggie! The Reggie he was so nobly offering her. The Reggie, that not only her mother and Bessie, but now Sir Francis himself wished her to marry, and that therefore, undoubtedly she would have to marry. She could not tell him this, could only stand before him--for they had come to a pause in the middle of the gravel sweep before the big hall door--with hanging head, pulling nervously at the stalks of her flowers, and repeat with a childishness he must despise, "I don't know."

"Well, we shall see," he said encouragingly. "But at least you will not hurry away? You will stay with us until Reggie comes home? Go to my sister and tell her so. Will you?"

"If you wish it," Deleah said.

Miss Forcus, who under no circumstance could have been cold or

inhospitable, received the intimation that Deleah was to stay until Reginald came home with less than accustomed warmth.

"Of course, my dear! You know I hated the thought of your going; but why is it to be for Reggie especially? Were you and Reggie such friends?"

Deleah admitted without enthusiasm that they were certainly friends.

"Then, no doubt he will be glad to see you," Miss Forcus said, and thought to herself that now she was going to have the daughter of a felon for her sister-in-law.

By way of solace to her family pride she turned from the impending, disastrous marriage of the step-brother to that satisfying alliance her own brother had made. The daughter of a baronet had been his wife--the sister-in-law of a peer. The baronet was a banker, and rich. If the little son had lived he would have inherited his grandfather's fortune which now had gone to the son of Lord Brace. Lord Brace, who was an Irish peer, wanted the money more than Francis, certainly, who had a sufficient fortune of his own, even without that considerable one his wife had received from her mother, and had left to him.

All such facts, which Ada Forcus generally accepted as a matter of course, she now produced for the benefit of Deleah, meekly counting the stitches of the Madonna lily, which when worked in beads, grounded in amber silk and framed in gold, would be converted into a screen, to hang on the marble mantelpiece in the Cashelthorpe drawing-room.

About the wife whom Sir Francis had loved and lost, who had lived for two years in this beautiful home, sitting to read, and eat, and sew, in her husband's company, walking the gardens by his side, cared for and tended and watched over by him, Deleah had dreamed many dreams. Beautiful as an angel she had pictured her, and with an angel's nature, to be so loved, so inexpressibly mourned by him. She had dreamed dreams, but had asked no questions. She asked them now.

"Was she so very beautiful--Lady Forcus?"

Not to say strictly beautiful; which had surprised them all, Francis having ever been a beauty lover. She had what was called a dear face. And such manners! Such a dignity! Such an air of high-breeding! "I used to say to myself, 'Small wonder that Francis is your slave.'"

"And was he?"

"He was, indeed. Bound to her, hand and foot; with no thought but to please her, no wish but what was hers."

Deleah sighed for very fullness of heart.

"But only because of his love for her, understand. Not because she had him in the very least under her thumb."

Deleah shook a sympathetic head. "I am sure he could not be that."

"He has never been the same since her death. Never! And never will be again."

"One would not wish him to be. It would spoil it," Deleah sighed.

Miss Forcus echoed the sigh. "Well, I do not know," she admitted. "People die, but the world has to go on, Deleah. If the child had lived it would have been different; but it seems to me a pity there should be no one to come after Francis, to bear his name, and inherit his fortune. Of course there is Reggie; but--"

She stopped there, remembering that in all probability the son of Reggie would be the grandson of William and Lydia Day--felon, and bankrupt grocer. The thought choked her. Had Francis remembered it? "Whoever marries Reggie will marry a rotten reed," she said impetuously. "I pity the girl who does it, from my heart."

"So do I," said Deleah quietly, and knitted her brow, chasing a tiny fugitive bead with the point of her needle.

Miss Forcus heard with surprise and satisfaction, yet was afraid to believe. What penniless girl, whose hand was her own to bestow, would refuse the wealthy young Forcus? Longing for further assurance, and greatly daring, she risked the question: "You knew Reggie so well, then, yet did not fall in love with him?"

"I? Oh, no!" Deleah said. She lifted her head from the frame over which she was stooping and looked calmly in the other woman's face; and Miss Forcus was struck with the perception of what a gentle dignity the girl had. A dignity less arresting, perhaps, than that she had admired so much in Francis's wife, but as effective.

"Ah, well!" she smiled, immensely relieved, and overjoyed to find she might again take her protegee to her heart. "We shall see who there is that will be good and great enough for you, Deleah. He will have to be both to deserve you."

"He will have to be both before I love him," Deleah said calmly, but with the colour in her cheeks. She put her head on one side to contemplate the lily growing so slowly under her fingers. "'I needs must love the highest when I see it,'" she said, half to herself.

For while she had been talking and listening she had been thinking of that sacrifice which she had but now thought was demanded of her; and she had made up her mind not to make it.

When Sir Francis came in, that evening, he found lying on his writing-table a little note with the signature "Deleah Day." "I hope you will excuse me that I have altered my mind and decided to go home at once," it ran. "I think I am wanted there. I hope you will not think I do not feel all your kindness. I do feel it with all my heart."

Carrying this scanty missive open in his hand, Sir Francis sought his sister.

"Yes, she has gone," that lady said. "She evidently wished it, and I drove her back to-day."

"Then how about Reggie?"

"You were quite deceived about Reggie, Francis. You are, indeed. Deleah will never marry Reggie. She as good as told me so. I never was more thankful. It would have been so terribly unsuitable. She told me she was writing to you. What does she say?"

Sir Francis did not choose to see the hand held out for Deleah's little note. He folded it, and walked to the window, looking out thoughtfully upon the garden, his hands behind his back, the letter, held by its corner in one of them, wagging up and down.

"She told me she had written," Miss Forcus said again, by way of reminder.

"She simply says she has gone."

"I shall miss her dreadfully. She is the dearest girl. Never have I seen one so lovely and so little vain."

"She is too lovely to be vain," Sir Francis said.

And at the tone rather than the words Miss Forcus lifted a startled head, and gazed and gazed upon her brother's stately back, upon the hands clasped behind it, holding the letter, wagging up and down, he would not let out of his keeping.

Over another letter which Sir Francis received the next morning, he laughed as he read. He tossed it across the table to his sister. "What a fellow!" he said.

"From Reggie? I wish you had not written to him to come home, Francis."

"He's not coming. Don't alarm yourself. He says the Worradykes have turned up at Nice--"

"They followed him! They've no doubt taken Daisy. I would stake my existence they've taken Daisy!"

"You are quite right. Daisy is there. Reggie has promised to go on with them to Rome."

"_Now_ she'll catch him!" prophesied the lady. "Good gracious! Supposing things were as you thought and Deleah had waited to welcome him home! What a quandary we should have been in then, Francis!"

CHAPTER XXX

Deleah Grows Up

It was Thursday afternoon: the day on which the shops of Brockenham closed at two. George Boulton, who had taken to visiting Bridge Street on the Thursday half-holiday as well as the Sunday, must be expected this afternoon. One way or other Mrs. Day would have to answer that proposition of his which had filled her with such a misery of doubt.

Very little on his part had been said at the time of the offer. He would be the happier for a lady at the head of his table, he had said; she and her daughters wanted a home. Both were perhaps too old for sentiment, both were old enough to take what chance of happiness and comfort life still offered them. "Think it over, ma'am," he had said. "I'll look in on Thursday. I don't anticipate you'll have thought of a better plan."

She had not, unless to drown herself was a better plan.

She had no impulse to suicide, but was a woman of unlimited selflessness, who, believing that her death would make life easier to her children, would have gone to it without any fuss.

Sometimes, with little Franky, on a Sunday afternoon, she had walked by the side of the river where it ran away from the ugly black wharves upon its shores to the meadows where Franky loved to see the toads slip down through the weeds to the clear water, loved to get his boots wet in trying to catch the darting minnows in his hands, loved to gather the forget-me-nots, and river-mint, and ragged robin, to carry home to Deleah. She knew exactly the spot, where if she was only sure it would be best for Bessie, for Deleah, for poor, poor Bernard, she would slip down the shelving bank and go wading, wading in, till out of her depth and weighed down by her clothes she would sink out of sight, out of trouble, out of life. She had no illusions about the enfolding in the "cool and comforting arms of death." She knew quite well the horror of it, the choke, with the rank, foul-tasting river in her mouth, its weeds and offal winding her limbs. But that would pass, and she would be out of it. Far rather would she be dead at the bottom of the river than married to her benefactor, Mr. George Boulton. If only she was sure it might be best for the children.

"I wonder what's to become of me while you're having your interesting interview with Scrooge?" Bessie said at dinner-time. "It's raining, so I can't go out for a walk."

"I am going for one," Mrs. Day said, having decided on that course at the instant of announcing the intention.

"But I thought Scrooge was coming?"

"I know. I can't see him. I really can't. You see him for me, Bessie."

"Really, mama, how absurd! Is the old man wanting to marry me? Are you to have the billing and cooing by proxy?"

There was no mistake about it, adversity had not improved Bessie; her mother had to admit to herself that she was even sometimes vulgar. "You might have spared me that, I think, Bessie," poor Mrs. Day said. She was deeply offended and hurt. She would not wait to finish her dinner, but went down into the shop and busied herself there till Mr. Pretty had put the shutters up. Then she dressed herself in the widow's bonnet she still wore, the shabby silk mantle with its deep border of crape, the black gloves so much the worse for wear, and saying no further word to Bessie went out.

"Of course I know where she's gone," said Bessie to Emily, her unfailing confidante. "To Franky's grave. It isn't the place to make her a lively companion when she comes back again; and it isn't very cheerful for me to have to sit at home and think of her there."

"'Tis mother-like, Miss Bessie." Franky's grave held attraction for Emily also, who visited it every Sunday of her life.

"Yes, but, Emily, oughtn't mama to think of me as well as of Franky? And I've no patience with her. I think she ought to make up her mind, and have done with it. Quite young girls, with all their lives before them, make marriages for money, why should she make such a fuss?"

"The young ones don't know what they're a-doing, perhaps; and your ma does," the sage Emily hazarded.

"And if the old man comes to-day what do you suppose I'm to say to him?"

"There never was a time yet when you didn't know what to say, Miss Bessie."

"It's all very well. Why should I be mixed up in it? I shall just say nothing."

"Then he can sit and look at you, and that's what he likes."

Bessie's eyes glinted: "But if he likes it--and he has always acted as if he did--then why? why? why--?" She spread out the palms of her plump, white little hands, making the dramatic inquiry of Emily, who, with a black rag dipped in whitening, was polishing the "brights," as she called her tin and pewter ware.

"Ah," Emily said; "he's one of your cautious ones, Boulton is. Them that are young and fascinatin' aren't the best of housekeepers, per'aps."

Bessie stood silent for a minute, watching the vigorous rubbing of a dish-cover. "You go and change your frock," Emily said, glancing up at her. "Put on that black-and-white muslin you look your nicest in--"

"I ought to wear all black for a year, Emily."

"You put on your black and white," coaxed Emily.

Mrs. Day went to Franky's grave as had been foretold, but went a long way round to it, going first for that walk by the river, which the child and she had been wont to take together. Finding that particular spot on the riverbank which had been so much in her thoughts since Mr. Boulton had made his offer, she sat down there with the deliberate intention of deciding which course to take, out of the three open to her. To be turned, with her children, homeless and penniless upon the world; to become Boulton's wife; to drown in the river.

An effort she made to keep her mind on these issues, but could only think, instead, of Franky. Not of Franky as he had played by the river, happily painted his pictures, rushed off noisily with the cutler's son to school, but of Franky sitting to eat his bread-and-butter and radishes, one spring afternoon, his plate on his knees, removed to a distance from the tea-table, because Bessie had declared that he smelt of putty.

It was an absurd little incident, forgotten until now, when it awoke in her memory to wring the mother's heart without almost intolerable pain. Banished! Not good enough to sit at the table with Bessie--her Franky, her baby, her angel boy! In her heart she knew the boy had not cared, that, a few tears shed, his meal was as welcome to him in one part of the room as the other. Yet that picture of him, sitting lonely, munching in his corner, beset her with pain too deep for tears; the little uncomplaining figure bitterly accused her, she was reproached by the reproachless eyes.

So she sat by the river and cried there, unable to turn her mind to the living children; to Bessie, so hard at times, but only because she was unawakened, did not understand; to pretty, pretty Deleah with her innocent allurements, her winning ways; to Bernard, who had written in his last miserable letter from India that he loved her best in the world. Of these she thought not at all; but only of the child eating his radishes in the corner, looking solemnly at her out of his big dark eyes.

He called her from his grave, and presently she got up and went there.

Deleah, dropped by the Forcus carriage at the private door in Bridge Street, went running up the stairs, and into the sitting-room. Bessie and Mr. Boulton, sitting side by side on the sofa in that apartment, flew rather violently apart at the interruption of her entrance.

"Well, Deleah! What a way to dash into the room!" Bessie said; a flurried Bessie with red cheeks, bursting into a scolding tone, to cover evident embarrassment.

"Where is mama?" Deleah, gasping with astonishment, got out; and Bessie, in the flurry and perturbation of the moment, flung at her the sisterly advice to find out.

Deleah, pale of face, eyes staring, gazed speechless from Bessie on the

sofa, in the black-and-white muslin recommended by Emily, to Mr. Boulton, now engaged in peering with sudden interest into the street. Then, shutting the door hastily upon the pair, she went to Emily, in the kitchen.

"How long has Mr. Boulton been here?"

Emily had not looked at the clock.

"Is he going to stay to tea?"

Emily would set an extra cup, on the chance of it. "You'd best go and find your ma, Miss Deleah; she's gone to the cemetery, and have no right to be there alone."

"I am going; and, Emily, I won't come into the house any more while that man is there; and mama shall not."

"Now _you're_ going to make a heap of fuss!" the worried Emily said. "I never see sech goin's on as we get nowadays. No peace anywhere."

"I'm not making any fuss. Only, you must tell Bessie to get rid of Mr. Boulton before we come home."

He did not go till Bessie, plump and attractive, a pink rose in her bosom, had poured out tea for him, but he had been gone half an hour when the mother and daughter returned. Mrs. Day, fagged with her long walk, was comforted by the holding of Deleah's warm young arm, strengthened by Deleah's brave talk. There would be another hard fight, but Deleah would not go away any more, they would fight together.

"We can live on almost nothing, mama--you and I."

There would be Bessie, her mother reminded her; but Deleah seemed indisposed to take Bessie into her calculations. She unfolded her scheme of the little house and the little school of quite little children such as she could teach.

"We shall be far happier than we have ever been in the shop. Some eggs and milk for you and me, and now and then a little butcher's meat for Emily. What will it cost! Surely we can manage that, mama."

"You are forgetting that there is Mr. Boulton to settle with. That horrible proposition of his must be somehow answered, Deleah."

"We will answer it to-night. I will help you to write the letter," Deleah promised.

They wrote it between them, after Bessie had gone to bed, whither she quickly repaired upon their return. The composition was mostly Deleah's, and when finished it ran--

"I did not feel equal to an interview with you, and I am sure you will

excuse my having failed to keep the appointment. On thinking the matter over I have decided that the arrangement you proposed to me the other day is a quite unsuitable one, and I therefore write to decline. Having had time for reflection, I have no doubt that you agree in the wisdom of this decision."

"That is all, mama."

"My dear, no! It is so very cold."

"Well, we feel cold--you and I."

"But we must not forget what he did for us. We must always be grateful."

"I know. Mama, I am so tired of being grateful." Mrs. Day sighed; she was tired of it too, truth to tell. "He is always throwing what he has done in our faces, rubbing it into our skins. It is our gratitude which has made him so detestable."

"It was kind of him to give that fifty pounds, and--"

"We will pay him back. We will pay him back to the last farthing, mama. Sir Francis Forcus is my friend; he said he would be; I will go to him, and ask his advice. Only I hate--I hate to bother him."

"Then, let us try to muddle on alone."

"No. I am sure he would wish me." She waited, head on hand as she sat at the table, looking down at, but not seeing the letter she had written for her mother to copy. "He is such a sad man, mama," she said presently. "He still grieves, and grieves, and grieves, for his wife."

"But he was kind to you, Deleah?"

"Yes. When he remembered. When he knew I was there. He loved her so much. Miss Forcus has been telling me how he loved her. She was so beautiful, so grand in manner and appearance, with such a fine character, so great and good. There is a lovely monument to her in Cashelthrope churchyard. I went to look at it this morning, after Miss Forcus had been speaking of her. A white marble angel with a heavenly face stands above the grave looking upwards, a lily in her hand. Do you know what I felt, mama. I felt I would die if I could give her back to him."

"Deleah!"

"I would," Deleah said, quite pale, and with a lip that trembled; "I would die gladly if that could bring her back to him, and make him happy again."

Mrs. Day looked at her daughter with a rather startled attention, and Deleah, glancing up, and catching her mother's eye, smiled brightly. "Come, now let us send off this letter," she said.

When it was ready she ran down with it, herself, to the red pillar-box,

opposite the shop-door. "That matter is done with," she said as the letter disappeared within the box, and she turned to re-enter. The light from the street lamp fell on her mother's name, black letters on a white ground, above the shop door. "Lydia Day, licensed to sell tobacco and snuff." "And all that is nearly done with," she added, "and whatever happens I am not sorry."

She felt curiously strong and capable; competent to work her way, afraid of no difficulties. "It is more than time I should grow up, and at last, I have done so," she said to herself. She went through the badly-lit little passage, and up the steep narrow stairs, with shoulders braced and head up. It was the having made, that day, a decision every worldly-wise person would have condemned, but that she felt in every fibre of her being to be a right one, which had given her that feeling of confidence in herself she had hitherto lacked. She had chosen between comfort, luxury, the approval and adulation of the world, with Reggie Forcus, and the hard up-hill fight for bare existence, with liberty and her own self-respect; and choosing, as she knew, well, she had felt herself to have grown in mental and spiritual stature.

"What has happened to me?" she asked of herself. "I feel like going out to fight battles, to-night."

"Mama," she said, going back into the sitting-room where her mother awaited her, "behold I am not a child any longer. I am grown up."

CHAPTER XXXI

Bessie's Hour

For the best part of the week, Mrs. Day, attending in the vague and preoccupied manner which had been hers since Franky's death to her few customers, marvelled greatly and with supreme uneasiness of mind about Mr. Boulton. He took no notice of her letter, he did not come to the house. "He is too much offended," she said to herself, wondering what form the vengeance she anticipated would take.

At length, unable to keep silence any longer on the subject, she questioned Bessie.

"I hope Mr. Boulton was not very much annoyed at my leaving him on Thursday, Bessie?"

"He didn't say he was," said Bessie, pertly.

"But was he? You could judge from his manner, surely?"

"If you ask me, then, I don't think he cared a ha'penny."

"I wrote to him, you know, Bessie."

"That finished it, I suppose?"

"Well, I must say I expected an answer."

"Mr. Boulton has been in London lately. Perhaps it slipped his memory."

"London? That explains it. But how do you know, my dear?"

"I happen to know," Bessie said, and escaped from further questioning.

On the morning of the day when Deleah and her mother were to look over the house which Deleah had chosen for the scene of their new start in life, the girl went down into the shop to help her mother take stock of her stores of teas and sugars and soaps. The enterprising Coman, having done his best to ruin the widow's trade, had intimated his willingness to take the business over as it stood, and at once; leaving the family at liberty to continue in the house until Christmas.

Having her younger daughter with her behind the counter, made her morning in the shop a different thing to Mrs. Day. She lost the weary air of hopelessness she had worn since Franky's death, talked cheerfully to her customers, was brisk and alert over the business she and Deleah had to do.

"It is surprising that Mr. Boulton, who has always insisted on having a finger in everything, should leave all this to us," she once said. "Our letter must have mortally offended him, Deleah."

"Never mind, mama; we will manage without him," Deleah promised. She felt such happy confidence in herself. "We will work," she said. "There never were two people who worked as you and I will work."

"And I am sure, in her way, Bessie will help," Mrs. Day loyally added; but Deleah was not quick to admit Bessie to her scheme.

"Twenty-five lemons," said Mrs. Day, having counted the stock of that commodity. "Two of them going bad. Say twenty-three, dear."

"Twenty-three lemons," repeated Deleah, entering that number in the stocktaking book.

"Three whole, and one half tin of ginger-nuts, at eight-pence the pound."

"Three and a half tins--Oh, wait a minute, mama." She held her pen suspended to look through the shop-window. She looked carelessly at first, and then with intentness. A closed carriage was passing down the narrow street, the wheel grating against the pavement had caused her to look up. "There is some one, all in white, in that carriage," she said.

"All in white? Have you got the ginger-nuts down, dear? Three and a half tins--"

"It was some one so like Bessie. I believe it _was_ Bessie, mama."

"Bessie isn't likely to be sitting in a carriage, all in white. Say 'right' when you've got the items down, Deleah. Window sponges at sixpence. Put down nineteen sponges at sixpence, Deleah."

"Wait a minute. I'd just like to run up to see what Bessie is doing. I only caught a glimpse, but--I'll be back in one minute, mama."

Within that time she was back, a scared look on her face: "Bessie is not in the house, mama." Mrs. Day looked up in mild surprise. "And Emily is gone too."

"Emily? Gone?"

"The street door is locked, the key taken, and they are both gone."

"Emily has no right to go off like that in the middle of the morning. Bessie should not allow it. I must speak to them both when they come home. We got as far as the sponges--"

"Mama, it _was_ Bessie in white in that carriage--her face was turned away, but I felt nearly sure. Some one was with her on the side farther away; that was Emily." Deleah looked at her mother, as if questioning in her own mind how much of the truth she could bear, before she went on. "Don't be upset, mama. I was going to tell you something. I feel sure Bessie is gone to be married to-day; and Emily has gone with her."

"Deleah!"

"Sit down for a minute. They have been so mysterious, all the week--haven't you noticed?--and so busy; no one knew about what--"

"Married! Married! How can she be married? There is no one for her to be married to."

"Do sit down. There is nothing to look so white about. Haven't you guessed? I have guessed all along. It is Mr. Boulton."

"Boulton! Mr. George Boulton?"

"Yes."

"Mr. George Boulton!"

"Yes. Mr. George Boulton. I keep telling you, mama. That day we wrote the letter, I ran upstairs unexpectedly, and they were sitting on the sofa, and that old man had got his arm round Bessie's waist."

"George Boulton's arm? Bessie? _Our_ Bessie?"

"Yes. Now, don't faint, or begin to cry. I am certain they have gone to be married."

"Bessie never would! She never would! It is _awful_ of her! It can't be!
It can't be!"

"It _is_. I am sure of it as if I were in the church, seeing it done. Oh, mama, _don't_ give way. _Don't!_ I have told you, so that when they come back, here as they will--they will! in half an hour, you may be quite brave, and not give way before them."

Deleah called Mr. Pretty from the cellar to the shop, and taking her mother's arm led her to the sitting-room. "Now if you feel you _must_ collapse or cry, mama," she adjured her parent with a touch of the scorn the younger generation felt for elders accustomed, in that day, to meet all crises with tears and faints, or at the least wild gesticulation--"if you _must_, do it now, and here; so that when they come you can be calm and dignified."

"_Our_ Bessie!" Mrs. Day kept saying, wringing her hands and looking up with appealing eyes swimming in tears. "Our Bessie! Our pretty, attractive Bessie! And that man! That _old_ man!"

"It won't do to go on like that when they come, mama," Deleah warned her. "You can't tell him he is old. You must not even tell Bessie so, now. Bessie isn't like you and me, remember, who would have been wretched and ashamed. She thinks of his money and his carriage. She does not think she has played an underhand game. She thinks she has been cleverer than the rest of us. She is pleased with herself, and proud, and Emily is proud of her. Well, if you must cry--cry, mama. Cry all you can now, so, on no account, you shed one tear before _them_."

By the time Bessie appeared--she came without her bridegroom, who had thought a meeting with the mother of his bride would be, under the circumstances, awkward--Deleah's exhortations had had their effect.

Bessie--partial to "scenes" and making them, of her own, on any occasion--expecting one now was disappointed. She came in, in her white dress and bonnet, her fair plump face flushed, her eyes twinkling in anticipation of the sensation she was about to create, and found mother and sister gravely awaiting her.

"Here I am! I am married, mama," she announced.

Instead of the outburst she had expected: "Yes, my dear, so I have been hearing," Mrs. Day said. "I don't know why you need have kept it secret from me, but now it is done, all I can do is to wish you every possible happiness, Bessie."

It was disappointing: very flat and tame. Mrs. Day got up and kissed her daughter, and Deleah followed suit.

"It would have been nicer for you to have mama and me with you at your wedding, I should have thought," Deleah said. "Isn't Mr. Boulton coming to speak to us?"

"No," said a slightly crestfallen Bessie. "He thought there would be a fuss."

"It is too late to make a fuss, Bessie."

"Well, we thought so; and that there was no good in his being bothered; so he's gone straight on to the station to wait for me. We go up to town by the 1.20. I join him in half an hour. The carriage will wait."

"That's all right, dear. You'd better have something to eat before you go."

Emily was summoned to bring refreshments. The tray was already, having been prepared before they left for church, and on it was a small wedding-cake bought with Emily's savings, and a bottle of port purchased from the same meagre fund.

The white sugared cake was to be a surprise to Bessie:

"A little present from me," Emily said as she set it on the table.

"Oh, you dear old thing! You must stop to eat some. Cut the cake, Deleah."

Deleah would not usurp the bride's privilege, and Bessie, attempting the operation without removing her glove, split it down the palm! "There, I've spoilt my glove!" she cried, and turned upon her sister. "That's your fault, Deleah. You should have cut the cake when I asked you." Then she began to cry. "I get married," she sobbed; "mama and Deda care no more than if I had gone out for a walk. No one cares. They sit there and stare, and won't say anything; no one cares."

"Oh, Bessie, my poor girl, God knows I care!" the mother said. "But what can I say? It is done; what can I say?"

"Say s-s-omething! Don't sit there!" Bessie sobbed. "Deda might sew up my glove, instead of s-s-sitting there."

Deleah had already found needle and cotton. "Take your glove off, Bessie."

Bessie tried to tear it from her hand. Her tears fell on the white kid.

"It is tight. I shall never get it on again. Oh, what shall I do, mama? I have to be there in half an hour. What's the time now? No. I can't eat the cake, Emily. You can eat it, and Deleah, when I'm g-g-gone. Little Franky would have liked some. Poor little Franky. I--I always loved Franky, mama. I'm--I'm crying now because of Franky."

They all cried then, and hushed and petted her, and made her drink a glass of poor Emily's wine, which still further flushed her cheeks, and made her laugh across her tears. Then they had to be stern with her, and scold her, lest she should be in hysterics. And through it all she kept looking at the clock on the mantelpiece. "Only five minutes more, mama! Deda, Emily, only five minutes more!"

"Dear, you're going to see the London sights," Emily comforted her, the tears raining down her own leather-coloured cheeks. "And your own kerridge, and all! And your man in livery a-waiting at the door! And your gentleman that fond of you, he could eat you a'most!"

But, in spite of these considerations, Bessie spent the last five minutes in the room she had so grumbled at having to live in on the sofa, her head buried in the pillow, her feet kicking, in the old ungoverned fashion, upon the horsehair cover.

Deleah fetched her own hat and the cloak which was to cover Bessie's white muslin for travelling, and eau-de-cologne wherewith to dab the tear-stained cheeks. "I'm coming with you, Bessie, to the station," she promised. "Emily must come too."

"I'm a-comin'," Emily, still in her bonnet and shawl, assured her. "Don't you never think I'm a-goin' to leave you, my dear, till I'm forced to it. And I may as well tell you, ma'am," she went on, turning to Mrs. Day, "that when my young lady and her husban' returns from their honeymooning, I'm a-goin' to live along of 'em. Sorry I am to part from you and Miss Deleah, but Bessie have always come first with me, and always will do."

Then the five minutes were up: "Good-bye, mama dear."

"Good-bye, my own precious Bessie."

"I've got three new frocks, besides this; and I'm to have some more afterwards. The luggage was such a trouble to pack, without you and Deleah knowing! I hope I've got everything."

"You'll write, Bessie?"

"And you'll come and stay with me, mama? There'll be the carriage to drive out in. It will make a nice change."

"It will indeed, dear."

"Is my bonnet straight? I had the forget-me-not wreath put in because you always said blue was my colour."

"Go now, darling. There is not another minute."

"Oh, Mama! Mama! Mama!"

"Go instantly, Bessie. Deleah, take her downstairs--"

The bridegroom, dressed for the character in blue frock-coat, lavender trousers, with gloves and tie to match, and a flower in his buttonhole, was in waiting to help his bride to alight. He, who had never struck her as looking so before, suddenly appeared quite old to Deleah, in spite of his careful array, and the whiskers which had been oiled and curled. Bessie with the forget-me-nots surrounding her plump, fair-skinned face,

looked almost a child in comparison.

"Late!" he said, smiling upon the ladies. "But better late than never, eh, Sister Deleah?"

"That depends on how you look at these things," said Deleah, for the first time in her life feeling the desire to be unpleasant.

"We sprang a surprise on you, eh?"

"We were not at all surprised, Mr. Boulton."

"It will have to be 'George' now, won't it? We can't have Sister Deleah 'Mr. Boulton-ing' me. Eh, Bess?"

"You may call him 'George,' Deda," said a magnanimous Bessie.

"Thank you," said Deleah, in the tone of one who is not at all grateful. She followed the happy pair to the platform. Both were too smartly dressed for ordinary travellers, and people, guessing them to be bride and bridegroom, looked at them with interest.

"How they all stare! I hope they find us worth looking at."

"I always have thought you were, my dear," Mr. Boulton said gallantly.

Quite a little crowd collected to see Bessie handed into the first-class carriage, on which the word 'engaged' had been pasted: "We shall be alone. I have seen to that," the bridegroom said, proud of his man-of-the-world ways.

Deleah climbed into the carriage with her sister. "You wish you were coming with us?" Mr. Boulton inquired facetiously.

"Not at all!"

"Your turn will come. How about Mr. Gibbon? Now that Bessie is out of the way you can have your chance."

"Good-bye, Bessie. I do so hope you may be happy."

"You're a lucky young lady, that's what you are!" Emily said, putting her head into the carriage. "You couldn't marry all of 'em what was in love with you, Bessie; but you've made a wise choice--"

The guard cut her eloquence short by slamming the door. Mr. Boulton, oblivious of the fact that Bessie might also have liked to show herself, filled up the window. Emily, determined that no item of the ritual proper to such ceremonies should be omitted, promptly threw a handful of rice in his face. It stung, half blinded him, but had the effect of driving him from his position, so that Bessie for one minute could appear. The poor face in the white tulle and forget-me-nots looked anxious, frightened, appealing; and as the train, rushing on, carried it from them the women

left on the platform looked at each other through eyes blinded with tears.

"Poor Bessie! She is such a child always," Deleah said.

"She is that, Miss Deleah. I tell you how 'tis with me and Bessie--spite of her having such a way with her with the gentlemen, and such a will of her own--I have always felt I haven't never lost the little girl I had to wait on when first I come to service with your ma."

CHAPTER XXXII

The Man With The Mad Eyes

The other women being employed in the daytime, the sitting-room had been more especially Bessie's domain. How strange and chilling was the thought it would be empty of Bessie for evermore. Her untidy work-basket peeped out from under the sofa where she always pushed it on the appearance of a visitor; the penny weekly paper in which she read of the fashions, and the romantic love-matches of which she had dreamed while making an absolutely sordid marriage herself, was tucked behind the cushion of her chair. Deleah stood within the doorway for a minute, without entering, feeling strangely bereaved and forlorn. Not much sympathy had been between the pair, but the ties of blood are stronger than is realised till "marriage or death or division" snaps the cord.

With a lagging step Deleah went forward into the so pathetically empty room. On the table some flowers were lying. Two deep purple blooms of clematis. The creeper so carefully trained to climb beside a certain hall door came into her mind. She had noticed on an occasion she would fain have forgotten, without knowing she had done so, that it bore two buds. Deleah looked at the blossoms with an odd feeling of repulsion. She walked round the table to the side that was farthest from them. Then lifting her eyes, she saw that Charles Gibbon was standing by the opposite wall. The open door had screened him from her on entering.

"Mr. Gibbon!" she said, and her voice faltered with dismay; only apprehension was in her eyes.

He looked at her without speaking. It was curiously disturbing to see him standing there, his back to the wall, saying nothing; the broad, short figure, at one time so familiar in that room, now so alien and strange, the commonplace, plain-featured face, tragic with its new grey hue, the eyes--Deleah remembered with a shudder some words recently spoken about the eyes! They were fixed upon her face.

"Won't you come and sit down, Mr. Gibbon?"

He advanced a few steps, and stood at the table opposite her.

She looked at the flowers. "You brought these?"

"For you," he said, speaking thickly. "They are the only two the clematis had. If it had ten thousand they would have been for you."

Deleah kept her eyes upon the flowers. She felt that she could not touch them. "You are very kind," she said.

"You would say as much as that to any stranger in the street who had kicked a stone out of your path, and I--I--." He was stammering curiously in his thickened voice. It seemed that the words he wanted to speak would not come. "And I--after all that I suffer--only kind?" he got out at last.

With something of the expression of a trapped creature in her eyes, Deleah looked past him to the door. He turned instantly, and shut it, and came back to his place opposite her at the table.

"Your sister is married to Mr. Boulton, to-day," he said. "At one time you could not marry me because of your sister. That impediment's gone. Another time, you had some other excuse. Again another. Come, what excuse have you to-day?" He leant across the table to bring his face closer to hers. "You don't intend to marry me, do you?"

She gazed at him with fear in her eyes, but did not speak. "You let me live beside you, set my heart on you, till there was nothing else on earth or heaven for me but you. You let me slave to serve a man I hated as a means of getting you. You let me get ready my house--every brick in it, every pound of paint laid on it, for you. You--"

"Mr. Gibbon, do wait! I think you are saying too much. I never deceived you. I never said I would marry you. I tried to make you understand."

"Listen! Have you always hated me? When you took my flowers and fruit--all the presents I lavished on you--tell me, did you hate me then?"

"Certainly I did not. I thought you very kind and generous."

"Do you hate me now?" When she told him 'no' he stretched out a shaking hand to her across the table. "Then--?"

Deleah stepped back from the hand and shook her head.

"Why?"

No answer.

"Why?"

"Oh, where would be the use of my telling you!"

"But you shall tell me."

"No."

"Then I will tell you. You think you are going to marry some one else."

Deleah lifted her head and looked at him with proud offence. "You are not to say that, Mr. Gibbon. It is not true."

"You think so," he persisted. "But you are not. Do you know why? Because I will stop you. I know! know! know!" He mercilessly slapped one of his shaking hands upon the table. "And I will stop you."

He turned away, walked to the door, stood staring at it for a moment, his back to her, then suddenly faced her again: "Sir Francis Forcus," he said. He walked to the table his eyes fixed on hers. "Sir Francis Forcus," he repeated. And once again, leaning across the table to bring his face close to hers, "Sir Francis Forcus."

Then he laughed in the girl's frightened face, and went out of the room.

Emily put an inquiring head in at the door.

"He haven't gone? Mr. Gibbon haven't gone, Miss Deleah? Well, now, when the mistress told me he was up along of you, I hoped 'twas another weddin' comin' off. You shouldn't have let him go so quick, my dear."

Deleah had a dazed look about the eyes. "He was horrible! I believe he is mad," she said.

Emily clapped her hands together. "Bessie's marriage have done that! I always told Bessie she'd send some of 'em to the lunatic asylum, or their graves."

"I believe he is mad. Which way did he go, Emily?" She ran down into the shop where Mrs. Day, if daughters were married or daughters were threatened, must never forget that she was licensed to sell tobacco and snuff, was still toiling away at her stocktaking. "Mama, did you see Mr. Gibbon go away?"

"No. Is he gone, my dear?"

Deleah dashed to the door, still open, although the windows were shuttered, and looked up and down the street.

"Do you want to call him back?" her mother asked of her, in mild surprise.

"I believe he is mad." Deleah was breathless, shaking with excitement or fear. "He was in the sitting-room--hiding behind the door--waiting for me."

"Mr. Gibbon! My dear, he couldn't have been. Why should he do that?"

"He was doing it. How did he get there?"

"He came in just as usual--there is really nothing the matter with him,

Deleah--to ask me if I knew where his pistol was that he and Franky used to shoot at bottles with when he first came, out of his bedroom window. You remember? I told him it was in his bedroom still, for all I knew; I told him to run up and get it?"

"Did he get it? Had he a pistol in his pocket while he talked to me?"

Emily had followed Deleah into the shop. "He'd no pistol," she put in confidently. "He'd never find it. I'd never liked the nasty dang'rous thing, with Franky into every mischief, and I hid it up on the top of the wardrobe. He'd never find it!"

"Run and see," Mrs. Day said. She began to be impressed by the look of fear on Deleah's face; the girl was trembling violently, now, her teeth chattering as if with extreme cold.

In less than a minute Emily was back. "He've got it," they heard her calling as she came. "The pistol's gone. He've got it. Sure as we're living, he's goin' to shoot hisself, on account of Bessie!"

"Nonsense!" Mrs. Day cried sharply. "Deleah, there is really nothing to be frightened about, my dear. The pistol was Mr. Gibbon's own. He naturally wanted it."

Deleah stood in the middle of the shop, lit by the half-open door and the jet of gas above Mrs. Day's desk. She was squeezing her hands together, her arms strained against her breast as if trying desperately to stop her trembling. "Could I get there?" she said to her mother. "Could I get there first?" Her body was bent forward as if with the impulse to run, but she waited, squeezing herself in her arms, her brow knit, trying to steady her thought. "If I can get there first--!" she said.

"Where, dear? Get where? What is it you want to do, Deleah?"

She seemed not to hear: "If I can get there first!" she said to herself; then, going stumblingly, reached the door, and was gone.

The two women left, stared at each other's blank face in the mingled lights of the shop. "She isn't running after Mr. Gibbon, surely!" Mrs. Day said, helplessly perplexed.

"There's no good in her a-doing that. Gibbon's heart's set on Bessie," Emily declared.

"Do go after her, and bring her back, Emily."

The great yard of the Hope Brewery was nearly empty. A young clerk, his pen stuck in the bushy hair above his ears, his hands in his trousers pockets, was whistling as he walked across it, stepping lightly from the shadows cast by the huge buildings to the sunshine of the open spaces. An enormous drayman was backing a pair of powerful horses, in order to bring his wagon under that portion of the wall over which a barrel hung suspended; two other men also of gigantic proportions, with red-shining

faces and aprons tied over their ample bodies, stood to watch the manoeuvres. A groom in charge of a saddle-horse by the entrance to the main building patted his horse's neck as he also looked on.

Deleah, flinging herself from the door of the four-wheeler which had brought her, dashed through the yard, consciously seeing none of these things, which yet photographed themselves on her brain and remained indelibly printed there till her dying day. She knew her way to the private room of Sir Francis, and made towards it, without pausing to heed the one or two men who endeavoured to stop and question her. In the ante-room to the inner sanctum, a confidential clerk who always sat there flew up from his desk.

"Excuse me, miss. A moment, please. You can't go in there. Sir Francis is particularly engaged."

When she took no notice, he tried to reach the door before her; but Deleah, too quick for him, dashing forward, opened, and shut it in his face.

Sir Francis was standing in his favourite position with his back to the mantelpiece, in riding dress, his gloves and whip in his hand. Deleah, bolting into the room, and falling back upon the door, the more effectually to close it upon the confidential clerk, had an instant's vision of him in his calm unassailability, in that unruffled perfection of appearance, which, while it had always awakened her girlish admiration, had ever seemed to remove him to an immeasurable distance. The sight of him, even in what was to her a supreme moment, had its habitual effect of pouring cold waters of discouragement upon her mood, of making her doubtful of herself and any claim she could possibly make upon his attention. She had been presumptuous in pushing herself into his presence. Of course he was safe. Of course nothing could hurt him. The poor Honourable Charles, the erstwhile draper's assistant, with his common, thick-set figure, his hoarse voice, his unrefined accent--it was an offence even to think of him in the same breath with this elegant gentleman. How could this one on his high eminence of aloofness and security be endangered by such an one as that?

To see and feel all this was the work of a moment. The moment in which she slammed the door on the protesting clerk, the moment in which also she felt the shock of awaking from her frenzied zeal that would have beaten down all obstacles to save this man's life, to the perception that her zeal would in his eyes seem an absurdity; that her presence there was superfluous if not impertinent; that she had made a fool of herself for nothing.

Sir Francis suffered this inexplicable noisy invasion of his privacy with a look of annoyance and surprise breaking up the composure of his face. Then, seeing who it was who had thus burst upon him, who leant upon the door she had slammed, panting as if pursued, turning frightened, appealing eyes to him, the expression of his face changed, the whole man seemed to change. With a look such as Deleah had never dreamed it possible he could wear he went forward to her; in a tone she had not known his voice to

take, he spoke her name.

"Deleah!" he said.

She looked at him; but in rapturous wonder at the light in his eyes, listening spellbound to the delight of her name so spoken, forgetting who she was, where she was, in the whirl of bliss where her senses momentarily swam. Then he held out his hands and took hers, and held them locked in his against his breast.

"My dear child, I was coming to you," he said. "You have come to me instead, my little Deleah!"

CHAPTER XXXIII

The Moment Of Triumph

"While you were in my house I reckoned up the years, many times." He smiled a little sadly, and shook his head, looking down at her. "They never grew any less, Deleah. There are twenty-five between you and me. It is too much! Too much!"

"No!" breathed Deleah, with upturned, adoring eyes.

"And, dear, they are not the only things between us--dividing me from you. A love I felt--a great love I thought never to feel again--in the past--" He looked away from her, over her head into the years that were gone. Then his eyes came back to the eyes that were lifted to him, and he grasped her hands tighter against his breast.

"There was Reggie, too," he said. "Poor Reggie! But I made what reparation I could. I gave him his chance. Did he ever have a chance, Deleah?"

She shook her head. "Never!"

"What will he say to us?"

There came a rap upon the door, and Sir Francis dropped the hands he held, and started back. "I am particularly engaged, Rogers," he said.

The door was discreetly opened to admit not Rogers, but Rogers's voice: "I beg your pardon, sir, but there is a matter of some importance; if you could come for a few minutes."

"I have told you I am engaged," the voice of authority protested. With a kind of discreet reluctance the door closed again, and Sir Francis, with the impatience of a lover whose ardour has received a momentary check, took the girl into his arms. With a hand pushed against his chest she held herself away from him.

"Why?" he asked her. "You are not afraid of me, Deleah?"

"Yes. Very much afraid."

"Tell me why, my dearest child?"

"Oh, you know," said Deleah, turning away her head.

"No! It is I who should be afraid of you; you, with your youth and beauty, and sweet and gentle goodness. I confess it--all those months you lived in my house, I was afraid."

"You said there were things between us--dividing us. You did not say what really is there. What papa did--"

As she faltered over the words there came a louder knocking upon the door, which opened almost at the same minute. Mr. Rogers's deprecating face appeared there, and behind it the face of a policeman.

"A minute, sir. I won't detain you a minute," the clerk said; and Sir Francis walked to the door with an impatient step and closed it behind him.

Deleah, left to herself--was it for an hour? was it for a minute?--looked with eyes dazed with happiness upon the hands that had been crushed in his.

"I used to think that to be loved by him would be heaven," she said. "And now--now I feel nothing. I am numb."

He came back very grave, his face unusually pale. "Your cab is waiting. I will take you home, my dear child," he said.

She crossed the big yard again at his side. The drayman was still at his horses' heads, the groom was taking the riding-horse round to the stables. On the opposite side of the yard beneath one of the arches of a heavy colonnade, a couple of policemen stood. One of them was making notes in a book. A group of workpeople stood near by; and Deleah remembered afterwards that there was about them and the rest an air of suspending something they were saying or doing while their chief and the girl at his side walked to the great entrance gates.

"A cab was waiting, by good luck," Sir Francis said as he put her in it, and Deleah awoke, it seemed to her, for the first time since he had called her name as she leant against his door, to full consciousness.

"It was mine," she said. "I took it to get to you quickly--before you started for home. I was afraid you might be hurt. A man--the man who used to lodge with us--came to me this afternoon, and he threatened you. I was so foolish--I believed he meant it. I was afraid. I thought, as you rode past his house to Cashelthorpe, he would wait there, behind the hedge, and shoot you. I seemed to see him doing it. So foolish of me! Of course he

was simply frightening me; he would not dare--" She lifted the adoring eyes to his face as he sat beside her. Who would dare indeed to harm that Excellence! "I was afraid he had gone mad," she said, excusing the folly of her thought.

"Poor fellow, I think he had," Sir Francis said. He held her face turned to him, its pure oval in his hand. "Was it love of you that made him mad, Deleah?"

She was too shy of him yet, and too modest to answer the question by word of mouth; but he knew the answer.

"He won't trouble you any more, Deleah," he said very gently. "He won't hurt me. He is dead."

She would not believe it. It was impossible. "He can't be! He was with me half an hour ago. He was well as I am, and very strong. He can't be dead!"

"He seems to have come to the Brewery-yard--why we shall never know. Perhaps with some mad intention towards me. Perhaps--. But it is all conjecture. All we know is that he is there now. Dead."

"Was he there before me? Did he see me running through the yard--to you?"

"No one knows. No one noticed him till they found him lying behind one of the pillars of the colonnade, shot through the head. I am going back there now. They want me."

He lifted her from the cab and stood beside her till Emily opened the door: "I will be with you again as soon as I can, my darling child," he promised; and got into the cab again and drove away.

Deleah, creeping up the stairs, shut the door of the sitting-room upon Emily, voluble of questions but getting no satisfactory answers. Shaken with emotion, weak and shivering, she stood looking round the empty room, peopling it with its familiar circle. There was Bessie's place, and there Franky's especial chair. There, by the little table on one side of the fire the boarder had sat every evening, book in hand, but eyes wandering ever in Deleah's direction. She spoke, or laughed, or sighed, and the change in his face showed that he listened. Bessie had to call his name sharply twice before his attention was gained. Franky would ask some question about the mixing of his paints. The man would answer with a kind of anxious politeness, getting up to look over the child's shoulder. Passing Deleah, he would stoop for the book he had purposely dropped by her chair. "I love you!" she would hear his fierce low whisper in her ear.

She had been too depreciative of herself, too innocent of the workings of passion, to have felt anything but irritation and annoyance at the signs in him of a suffering she could not believe in or understand. Was it possible, after all, that she, Deleah, whose heart was so tender, whose ways so pitiful, who saved the drowning flies and would not willingly have afflicted the meanest of God's creatures, by means of a pale and pretty face only, had wrought that havoc?

With a sob in her throat she came forward into the room. Upon the table were lying the two purple clematis flowers, backed by a spray of their own foliage and tied with the tendrils of the plant. Deleah recalled the repulsion with which she had seen them lying there. She put out her hand towards them, but drew it back. She could not touch them even now.

To each of us, however mean our lives and obscure our history, living or dead, the moment of triumph comes. To Charles Gibbon his came, when Deleah, forgetful of her new-found bliss, and the Heaven of Happiness opening before her, laid her head upon the table beside the poor blooms of the clematis flower, and as if her heart were broken, cried for the fate of the Honourable Charles.

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