THE TREBLE CLEF

By

EDWARD C. BOOTH



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THE TREBLE CLEF ***

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Transcriber's note

THE TREBLE CLEF

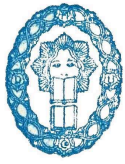
BOOKS BY EDWARD C. BOOTH

BELLA
THE POST GIRL
"*The Post Girl*" is the American
title of "The Cliff End"
THE DOCTOR'S LASS
FONDIE
THE TREE OF THE GARDEN
MISS PARKWORTH

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NEW YORK
DODD, MEAD AND COMPANY
1924

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To
FREDERICK AND AGNES DAWSON
IN FRIENDSHIP

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THE TREBLE CLEF

BOOK I

THE SAUSAGE BOY

1

LET us begin municipally.

On a night in late-Victorian November, whilst the years of our Lord still moved (some say more virtuously than these) among the prim and fast growing venerable eighteens, the Mayor of Daneborough was giving a party.

It was not a Banquet as had been anticipated, and for that reason some of the more substantial among the Burgesses and City Fathers disposed to murmur, saying the Dignity of the Office was being Brought Down. It was, in fact, a children's Party, a juvenile fancy dress Ball, and by not a few nonconformist electors in the Mayor's own ward this civic countenance of so reprehensible a practice for youth was deprecated, being translated as a direct reflection upon his predecessor in office, who held public happiness in as much abhorrence as a naked leg. Throughout the ex-Mayor's term of office no wine had reddened a goblet nor foot slid over the waxed floor of the

shrouded ballroom—which passed a whole year swathed in holland, save when it echoed the eloquence of frock-coated Missionaries and Temperance Orators, or simmered with the fervour of feminine meetings for the propagation of Christian Endeavour. But the present Mayor, who had a wife and family to consider, was a professed churchman of the Broad School, by which tolerantly comprehensive term he designated the whole aggregate of his personal opinions, and held himself superior to every form of bigotry not his own. The Party was ostensibly to celebrate the birthday of his eldest daughter, so that in late life she should look back with pride on having commemorated her fourteenth anniversary with civic honours, and it might also serve (the Mayoress hoped) to furnish her family with more social advantages than private life had hitherto provided for them.

Touching the night itself, nothing (surely) could have been more auspicious. There was an autumnal moisture in the air; a smell of fading leaf and smoke, mingled with a remote redolence of smouldering cartridge paper; a dim Guy Fawkes atmosphere derived from Chinese crackers and belated squibs that still sputtered abortively at street corners in survival of the fiery festival, or vomited their terrifying sparks through keyholes and letter-boxes of the unprotected, where emulators of the great Guido had thrust them. There was a thin yellow mist—the very emblem of municipality—that wrapped up each street lamp in a halo, like a sick face in a blanket, and gave it a swollen and lugubrious, yet a civic and seasonable look. Some of this mist, deposited solidly on the street flags, damped and darkened them, so that they gleamed dully beneath the rays of the gas lamps and the treacly light that stuck to shop windows and open doors.

Round one of these doors in one of Daneborough's smaller residential streets a group of children was gathered. It had begun with the most exemplary intent to

form and to maintain a double line between the doorway and an attendant cab, drawn up by the kerb, but under the influence of a tense excitement and the agitated compression of numbers it shifted its shape violently and incessantly, varying from that of a twisted horse-shoe to no shape at all. By the fascination with which its agitated components glued their eyes upon the door and strove among themselves for priority of place, it was plain that events of no ordinary importance were in progress. From time to time the door,—which, not less agitated by unseen influences than the crowd dependent on it, was never altogether closed,—opened mysteriously, and a child's head, emerging at a height somewhat lower than that of the knob, called out anxiously to the cab-driver: "She won't be long." Adding as though in communication with another and more authoritative voice, inaudible to the expectant crowd, whose utterance it received and transmitted: "You're to stay there. You're not to go. She's got her frock on!" To which the cabman, betraying signs of a natural moroseness or of impatience due to delay, and expectorating belligerently on the kerb, retorted in a voice a shade or two foggier than the night, and less genial: "Tell 'em to hurry up, d'y'ear? Tell 'em to look sharp. This isn't the only job, tell 'em. I've got three more orders for 7-20 besides theirs. How much longer are they going to be?"

Receiving no answer from the door, which was again pushed mysteriously to, he turned upon the horse, whose profile he scanned with an eye of growing displeasure, venting his wrath at last in an explosive: "Hod up!"

The horse, a flinching sad-mouthed animal of a useful nondescript colour that could, and did, (as emergency demanded) serve with equal propriety in a bridal coach or funeral hearse, thus vehemently awakened out of dreams, threw up its head at the objurgation and shook all its harness so violently as to startle cries of alarm from the group and precipitate several of the more importunate

members over the doorstep. The cabman appeared to take this natural action of his horse as a personal affront. Looking the animal up and down from end to end with an eye of withering scorn, he seized it by the rein which he tugged two or three times with vigour as if pulling a refractory doorbell, crying "Woa! What! Would you!" Still holding it masterfully by the rein with his right hand he threatened its evasive muzzle with a menaceful left fist that caused the animal to brandish its head wildly aloft like a butcher's cleaver, and to chew the lamp-lit fog with its yellow teeth to the great dismay of the crowd.

This altercation between the driver and his steed, which had seemed likely to be protracted, was brought to a sudden end by the reappearance of the forehead under the doorknob, that cried excitedly: "Hey! They're coming now. She's ready. They're wrapping her up. You're to stay there"—and ran back to take part in what seemed to be a ceremony of importance. From a staircase at the immediate end of the narrow passage now revealed to view there descended with some precipitation a considerable party of people; adults and children confusedly mixed; all animated by a very visible excitement. The children ran backward, clapping their hands; the adults were flushed and voluble. One of them, a man with a brown beard, carried in his arms a little girl enveloped in innumerable shawls, whose face against his shoulder shone singularly white, with a waxen polish on her brow, as though but lately resurrected from a sickbed. It was remarked by the spectators—stirred now to such a pitch of intensity that the foreheads of the outer flanks collided—that the two legs depending limply from the bearer's arms were clad in stockings of the palest blue, and that there was lace on her frock. Behind her came a little boy muffled up to the ears in an overcoat and led by the hand. On his head was a black and yellow cricket cap, and white stockings were visible beneath the great coat. An adult followed with a highly stained cricket bat, begging

the community on no account to forget it. The little boy's patent slippers squeaked loudly as he walked, and though he gazed fixedly at the crowd that awaited him by the door, it seemed to be some other self rather than his own that occupied, perplexed, this unaccustomed raiment.

The little girl, having been deposited in the profundities of the cab (where she made miraculous recovery of her limbs and animation in a moment), the little boy, lifted across the humid pavement, was bestowed beside her. There ensued an excited recapitulation of instructions, rendered by so many voices as to resemble not unremotely some chorus from an oratorio. "Be sure and look after her, Freddie." "Alice, be sure and look after Freddie." "Has he blown his nose?" "Don't push bat through cab-window, now! Hold it down." "Have they got their hankerchers?" A sudden voice of consternation demanded "Which on 'em's got the invitation card?"—a timely suggestion that served to throw the cab into convulsions, all the adults thrusting themselves through the doorway together so that, had the sad-mouthed horse but chosen this moment to move on, there must have been a heavy demand on the casual ward at the Infirmary. The cards, ultimately discovered in the right-hand pocket of the little boy's overcoat, where some adult and prudent hand had previously placed them, were for safety's sake transferred to the left, though even this procedure was not without its disputants, one asking: "Wouldn't he be better with them in his hand?" and another: "Aye, but what about bat?" and a third: "Why! Let him carry bat, and gie cards to Lucy," and a fourth, smitten with misgivings: "Bat! Why, what's gotten it? Where's bat now? Who's seen bat? Has Freddie got bat? As like as not he hasn't. Show us bat, Freddie!" And the bat being groped for at the bottom of the cab, where it had been suffered to lapse during the quest for the cards, and publicly displayed to the great peril of the cab-window: "Remember" (its owner was admonished) "there's two

cards. Yours and Lucy's. You're not to give 'em up to nobody while you get to Mansion House, think on, or they won't let you in....” At which the cabman, long smouldering under all this retardation of affairs, succeeded in his manœuvre to seize hold of the door handle at last, and had every appearance of being about to slam the door with prodigious violence when his intention was frustrated by a startling scream:

“His fingers! His fingers!”

The infection of alarm thrilled through the house party like a shudder, and even the children and the cabdriver were visibly awed. It seemed as if disaster had in truth befallen.

“I never seed his fingers,” the cabdriver murmured in sullen self-defence. “Where'd he put 'em?”

“It's not where he'd put 'em,” the originator of the scream replied, “but where he *might* 'a put 'em. My word, it's gave me quite a turn.” A chorus of outraged voices assented, “Why, no wonder. An' me an' all.” “Child might have had his hand trapped off!” “Folks can never be too careful how they shut doors when there's children about.” “Are you all right, Freddie?” “Hold up your hand. Which hand was it?” “His right. My word. Might 'a lamed him.” “Doors should never be slammed, missus. Not even if folks is in a temper. One never knows what might come of it.” “It's a good thing you thought to stop him in time.”

The cabdriver, humiliated and murmurous after this fruitless expenditure of anxiety and precious time, stood holding the offending door ajar. “Is his fingers all right now? Can I shut 'em up *this* time? I shall never get them other orders done to-night.” A frantic clamour of warnings, reinforced with every gesture of command and supplication, appealing hands and shaking fists, burst forth from the adult party. “Freddy!” “Lucy!” “Stand back, do you hear! He's going to shut door.” Which the irate driver

did with the suppressed violence of a blasphemy, and clambering upon the box drew the chaff-strewn horsecloth around his nether limbs with as much injured dignity as if it had been some minor and dishonoured prophet's mantle.

"The Mansion House," he was directed from below. "The Mansion House. Tell him the Mansion House. To the Mansion House." The cab, rumbling like distant thunder and grating sparks from the kerb with its iron tyres, lunged into the mist. Moroseness, wrapped in a horse blanket, sat statuesquely on the box; the spirit of protest thumped between the ribs of the bony horse and poured in trumpets through its quivering nostrils; dulled expectation and dazed excitement palpitated in the atmosphere of mildewed cushions within the cab; pride and envy followed the cab's progress from behind, where the adults viewed its transit with loquacious satisfaction and a disorderly retinue of childhood pursued the rumbling vehicle, drawn on by heaven knows what elemental instinct to attach themselves vicariously to greatness by any nexus however vague and slender, and be some part—no matter how fractional or remote—of the cherished glories of this night.

2

Of the children comprised in this animated group the greater number belonged to that class which imparts the predominating aroma to school feasts and Sunday schools. Their clothing, if not actually ragged, was overworn and threadbare, and in its totality impregnated the mist with a foist odour of garments too habitually worn. Their faces, despite the eager freshness of youth, betrayed even to the dingy cab-lamps the sickliness of skins too rarely cleansed; their hands displayed a dull and questionable flesh, and finger-nails edged with deepest mourning. They pertained in fact, to that order of youthful society in which Friday bathnights and Saturday pennies were fitful and legendary things; which must depend on its own exertions for all its

joys in life, being reduced to run here and there after funerals, dog-fights, street accidents and drunken men, and chase persistently behind elusive pleasure.

But one there was among their number—a little boy—to whom these attributes do not apply. At one time he had been among the foremost in the gathering, of the very germ and nucleus of its growth; a polite and unassertive onlooker devoid of speech or motion. But with each successive pair of hands he forfeited some part of his original advantage, until at last he occupied a modest station on the very outskirts of excitement, almost beyond reach of the candle-light from the cab's near lamp, that—when some flickering elongation of its beam kindled his face—revealed him no true component of the throng he mildly haunted, but a constituent foreign and detached.

Although the round cloth cap he wore, and the woollen muffler about his neck, and the knitted gloves and belted coat and knickerbockers—all of them black—were weekaday and new no longer, there was a care revealed in their selection, and a polite and conscious care in his wearing of them that hinted at home and a mother's something more than love. Surely that knitted muffler round his neck, its ends so scrupulously tucked away into the breast of his little coat, had been tied by a mother's hands; none other would have fashioned it so deftly to the work it should perform. His face, when now and then he turned it this way or that—and the interest displayed on it was never of the unabashed and public sort that marked the noisy naked curiosities of his neighbours—his face was scarcely less clean than the super-clean face of the little girl in the pale blue stockings who emerged tired and triumphant from the doorway in the arms of the bearded man. It was a delicate and fragile face; the brows finely pencilled; the eyes, enlarged and softened by their veil of lashes, brown and wistful, whilst a small and sensitive mouth whose lips looked as if they might have quivered at

a word confirmed the impression of a childhood still protected from the roughness of the world, and rendered more susceptible to it by a mother's sheltering love.

For a brief while after the cab had rolled away, he rested pensive and solitary on the kerb, and truth compels the admission that in his troubled heart there even welled a yearning (shameful and unworthy of a gentleman, he knew) to pursue this phantom and portentous vehicle so wondrously compounded of mist and lamplight and its own rumble to the very gateway of the Mayor's great house in the High Gate, and there be witness of the converging of all these individual glories, and let his lips vicariously touch the rim of that cup of brimming happiness which the mayoral hospitality extended not to him. Instead, he detached himself from his meditations with a guilty start, drew up resolutely in turn each wristlet of his knitted gloves with conscious care, and set off briskly up the street in a course directly opposite to that the cab had taken.

His step confirmed the impression produced by his features and apparel. Other boys—of the sort that had pursued the cab—might have broken into a noisy and irregular run, kicking loosely at the doorsteps as they passed by, or leaping up to bring their mouths for shouting purposes on a level with each letterbox, or jumping the scrapers, or whistling, or brandishing their arms. But the little boy in the black woollen gloves and knitted comforter displayed none of these attainments. Instead, he kept his lips gently but firmly closed, drawing the mist and expelling it through two small precise and sober nostrils. He walked very silently and shadow-like, preserving the conscientious centre of the path; his head politely yet not too proudly erect; his gloved hands closed and held in due subjection to his sides, without looking too much to right or left (save at a corner or street crossing, where in obedience to maternal law he halted and made punctilious

reconnaissance on all sides of him before committing his person to the perils of the road). For was he not Oswald Holmroyd, the son of the best of fathers, and had not his mother's love exhorted him never to lose sight of this fact, nor ever, under any circumstances, to forget he was a gentleman? And if his occupation this evening perhaps could scarcely claim to rank among the gentlemanly callings commonly accredited, might not this be all the better reason for striving to remember who and what he was?

As he pursued his walk, immersed in the filial task of Remembering, he was (nevertheless) curiously susceptible to cabs. Cabs, in fact, appeared to be on every hand, and the rumble of them persisted obstinately in his ears. Now, at a street corner, he would have to draw back from the kerb whilst some empty and oscillating vehicle, drawn by a galloping steed—smoking like a clothes-horse and steaming away into the mist as if it were the very source of it—rocked tempestuously over the crossing, hot from one journey and belated for the next. Or it was a vehicle of more substantial burden, its steamy windows showing blurred and blot-like visages behind the glass and internal hands rubbing peeping places on the vapoured pane, that rolled with a comfortable motion to the Mansion House, where the striped awning flagged humidly under the weight of fog, and the two policemen stood by the two portly and aldermanic lampposts, and a crimson carpet flowed all the way from the Mayoral staircase to the pavement's edge.

Oswald's errand took him through the upper end of the High Gate—where the High Gate becomes residential and calls itself Hill Street—to a big semi-detached house in St. Lawrence Square. Only a single and ineffectual gaslamp guarded each entrance to the Square, and as the houses were ranged on the three sides of a green enclosure, the mist—encouraged by the trees and herbage—lay

somewhat more thickly here, folding these residences away from common observation, and enlarging their foggy shapes when seen to preternatural magnitude. No sounds of noisy childhood disturbed the formal silence of this sequestered space, nor Chinese crackers sputtered in the gloom. The light that percolated here and there through blinds or through the fans over the front doors, or from some upper window where more than one gaslit globe could be descried gleaming like a sickly moon, spread no part of its comfort or hospitality abroad. And perhaps to the little Oswald, trying never to forget he was a gentleman, this effect of illuminative reserve—as though the globes and very gas-jets shone for nobody but their owners, and grudged each ray expended in surplus of necessity—might be exaggerated. Even gas-jets and front doors and railings and bell pulls can present an attitude of studious discouragement.

Yet there is, or surely must be, something in the quality of true gentlemanliness that neither night nor mist nor silence can conceal. For, noiseless though he tried to be (and was) no sooner had the little Oswald reached the dim profundity of the porch he sought, than there arose a sudden stir within: a violent and vehement commotion, it seemed to him, occasioned by his advent, that robbed his paralyzed right arm of any power to reach or ring the bell. Disconcerting voices broke out at close quarters behind the solid panels of the big front door, and almost simultaneously it burst open before his blinking eyes with the exclamation:

"It's Him at last!"

3

Yes, It was Him at last. Him in very truth. Through the embarrassment caused by this so cordial and unexpected reception pride stirred not unpleasantly within the small boy's bosom. Gentlemanliness, like Virtue, was its own

reward, then, after all. His mother had been right; her counsels were justified. Always, and under every circumstance, Be a Gentleman.

The flood of light let out upon his shrinking eyes dazzled him with the bright vision of an apocalyptic hall. The very light itself seemed luminously rich as though (albeit fed from the same main) of a quality superior to that which starved in the municipal gaslamps without. The great globe suspended over the chequered tiles seemed—to this recent denizen of the dark—bursting with its own effulgence; beneath its mellow beams he had the consciousness of rugs and staircases and polished banisters and clocks and curtains and impressive human figures in the overwhelming plural. The hand that had flung open the door so startlingly was red and fleshy, emerging from a white starched cuff which, in conjunction with a cap and apron, proclaimed itself the property of a maid. Simultaneously with the cry "It's Him!" she stabbed her glance into the misty void above Oswald's head as though accrediting him with a stature greater than he owned, and continued without a pause. "Do you call this 7-25? What's use of ordering?"

What's use of ordering!

At a rebuff so unexpected the little Oswald's spirit, so briefly stimulated, as briefly sank. Did he call this 7-25? He had no notion what it was or what they called it. What was the use of ordering? Why! What indeed! His mouth quivered; his brow fell; a flush—like some fabled monster with burning jaws began to swallow him wholemeal, from the feet upwards. It was Ended. Gentlemanliness was altogether routed and put to shame. There would be no orders—for, as the maid had properly declared: "What was the use of ordering?"

He proffered no excuse, but mutely stood, confessing fault and penitence with downcast eyes. And the maid's eyes—tempered in the crucible of years of experience for

answering doors and putting errand boys and beggars in their place—after a moment's conflict with the outer darkness, dropped upon the mortified cap and muffler and black woollen gloves, and cried in tones of almost incredulous disgust:

"Well I declare! It isn't Him mum."

A lady's voice repeated irritably: "Not HIM?" "Not Him!" echoed in shrill dismay from the lips of a little girl, poised in tense expectancy on the lowermost stair with her hand on the volute of the banister. "Surely! Whoever is it, then?" asked the lady petulantly.

"Why ... it's the Sausage Boy!" declared the little girl, running from the curtail step to the centre of the hall in order to take stock of the visitor who was not Him, and the Sausage Boy thus by name proclaimed deemed the moment opportune to be a Gentleman in earnest, according to strict prescription, which consisted in raising the round black cap with the black glove and lowering his eyes and breathing in a voice so politely attenuated as to be not very much more audible than Thought:

"Please ... Mother sends her compliments and wishes to know...."

What his mother, by these complimentary methods, wished to know did not immediately transpire, for there were things the lady in the hall sought to know too; other, more pressing, urgent things that absorbed the whole of her attention.

"Isn't he there at all, then?" she asked. The maid—first brushing the silenced gentleman to one side as she stepped into the porch to thrust a scrutinizing head beyond its pillars,—exclaimed: "Nay, that he isn't mum. He isn't anywheres."

The lady, whose left arm (as little Oswald, through his downcast eyelids dimly noticed) was hid beneath a cloud of fleecy wraps and shawls, made peremptory sounds of

displeasure with her tongue and teeth, and promptly subjected the maid to a searching catechism. Was the maid quite sure she had given the right time—though to be sure their own common sense might have told them! Had she particularly mentioned that it was for Mrs. Bankett, No. 3 St. Lawrence Square—though to be sure the name itself should be quite enough. "Everybody knows Mrs. Bankett, St. Lawrence Square." To which the maid, resenting this public reflection on her powers of ordering, retaliated with a degree of certitude only short of defiance. All these things had she done, and given the message twice over—to Him and to Her as well—and had stood by and seen it wrote upon the slate. "I told 'em particular it was for the Mansion House. And both Him and Her promised faithful it shouldn't be forgot. But them cabs is all alike, mum. There's no depending on 'em. They'll promise anything, cabs will. They want smartening up. That's what cabs want."

The little girl whose mind had been visibly distracted between anxiety about the cab and concern to have her importance properly acknowledged by this adventitious pair of eyes, advanced to the porch under profession of looking for the defaulting vehicle, and addressed Oswald.

"I'm going to the Mayor's Party. This is my dress. I am Little Bo Peep. Here is the crook I have to carry." She held forth a shepherdess's staff the height of herself, wound from the top to bottom with a white ribbon and decorated below the crook with a broad pink bow twice the size of that she wore in her crimped and golden hair. All around her pink skirt (as she was particular to point out to the little boy framed dimly in the porch like some old master against a background of mist and darkness) frolicsome fleecy lambs sported in white wool, their eyes glittering with glass beads, their tails constituting a tasseled fringe. Moreover, to guard against any possible misconception on the part of an unintelligent public, the hem of her frock

was boldly encircled with the legend (in gilt lettering): LITTLE BO PEEP HAS LOST HER SHEEP. Her shoes and stockings were of the palest (and it seemed to Oswald) costliest silk, of a shade for which his limited nomenclature had no name. White lace mittens extended from her knuckles to her elbows, and these she displayed in turn. "Look, I am to wear these. We only exchanged them this morning. The others were too large. Aren't you going to the Party? Of course you aren't. Weren't you asked? Listen! Is that the cab? O, I wish the cab would come. I shall be late."

All this intelligence and interrogation she poured out with such volubility that the most of it was uttered before the lady with the shawls had time to interrupt the colloquy, saying:

"Eleanor! Come away from the door. The mist is dreadfully thick. You might easily catch cold in those thin clothes."

And though Oswald, trying hard to be a gentleman, was troubled to decide in what appropriate words or manner he should acknowledge so great a condescension, his own pride, alternately encouraged and depressed, began to stir him pleasurably again. For he was yet too young and inexperienced to know that Vanity does not scruple to make use of the meanest mirror to reflect her glory, and that even the greatest of this world will stoop to warm the fingers of their pride at any comfortable flame, without too much inquiry as to the nature of the fuel that feeds it. And since, moreover, a flattered vanity is the father of affection, the little Oswald was filled on a sudden with a deep and fervent and perfectly embarrassing devotion to this fairy figure in her silks and furbelows. There was no doubt (his gratitude affirmed) that she was beautiful. There was no doubt that she was richly dressed. Much more beautiful, and much more richly dressed than the inanimate young lady with the pendent legs and sick and waxen cheek

pressed against the man's brown beard, who had been borne out of the gloomy gaslit passage and deposited in the recesses of the gloomier cab. And even she had stirred the sensitive fancy of the little Sausage Boy and kindled within his bosom that inflammable material of imagination ever ready to catch the quickening spark and burn to the most heroic and noble resolves. But O! Not like this one. Not worthy, indeed, to be compared with the richly decorated daughter of Mrs. Bankett of St. Lawrence Square, whom everybody knew.

Out of his ineffable inner glories he was awakened with a start by the sound of Mrs. Bankett's voice. Deceived by the dimness and silence of the porch into fancying it empty, she asked if the little boy were still there.

Yes, the little boy was still there, and deeming the moment this time positively at hand for him to be a Gentleman in earnest, raised his cap anew and recited in a voice as carefully modulated as before the pious formula committed to his memory: "Please ... Mother sends her compliments and wishes to know...."

He stopped again, for again—by the moving of her lips—it seemed there were things Mrs. Bankett also wished to know. She wished to know, for instance, (not addressing the mist-invaded porch, but the maid) if (perhaps) the Sausage Boy would run as far as Jobling's and tell the cab to come at once. The maid, without troubling to refer to the porch, told her mistress she was sure he would (mum) and turning to Oswald translated Mrs. Bankett's query into the present imperative.

"Missus says you're to run to Jobling's and tell cab to come at once."

"Does he know where Jobling's is?" Mrs. Bankett interposed.

"You know where Jobling's is, don't you?" said the maid. "Where the cabs come from?"

"Tell him the Livery Stables," prompted Mrs. Bankett.

"Livery Stables ..." said the maid.

"In Queen Street," Mrs. Bankett added. "Just beyond the pump, tell him, Mary."

"You've got to look sharp!" the maid admonished him. "Don't stop anywheres on the way. Go as quick as you can, and tell cab to come at once. Mrs. Bankett's, think on...." She impressed the directions on his mind.

"The name will be sufficient, Mary," Mrs. Bankett threw in from the hall. "Everybody knows my name. But perhaps ..." she added prudently, "he had better say St. Lawrence Square."

"You're to say St. Lawrence Square," the maid repeated.

"And the number ..." Mrs. Bankett said. "Not," her dignity explained, "that there's any need. But still.... On a night like this. They're so stupid. I must call round to-morrow. No. 3, tell him."

"You're to tell 'em No. 3," the maid interpreted as Oswald turned to go. "Cab's been ordered since before half past ten this morning, tell 'em. We're stood waiting of 'em, tell 'em. Say they ought to be ashamed of theirselves. What's the good of ordering, tell 'em. Say we shall order off of somebody else next time, unless they mend. Stop! Hark! Is yon cab coming?... No! I might 'a known it wasn't. Everybody's cab'll be coming but ours. Well? What are you standing and staring there for? Do you mean to stop all night? Be off wi' you."

4

Oswald raised his cap politely—albeit to nobody in particular, since nobody was looking at him—readjusted his gloves and commenced the descent of the four steps, that went black as ink the moment he trod on the first of them, being cut off from the source of light by the closing of the door. He had to grope his way to the gate, for the

brilliance of the big yellow globe so long looked at remained imprinted on the fundus of his eye, and interposed complementary blots between that and all he sought to see. But once in the square he took to his heels, inspired by the pressing importance of the service he had been called upon to render, and also by the noblest desire to repay the little girl in the pink party frock for the honour she had conferred on him. He would shew her how a gentleman could run. She should see with what speed a gentleman could deliver messages. He knew Queen Street and the erect wooden pump with the stiff one arm like a Chelsea pensioner—that in another month's time would be swathed in straw for Christmas, with a swollen look as if it had the mumps—and he knew Jobling's Livery Stables, and the cab was ordered before half past ten, and what was the use of ordering, and they were waiting of them now, and they ought to be ashamed of themselves. All the way he kept rehearsing his instructions, saying them over and over to himself with fervour, fearful lest any portion of the committed message might escape his memory as he ran. In his kindled zeal he longed beyond anything to deliver his instructions intact, down to the smallest particle. As he turned out of the square, such was his burning confidence reciprocating the confidence reposed in him, he believed he could do it. But with each successive step that took him nearer Jobling's the plastic facility of the phrases seemed to set and stiffen. And as he came in sight and scent of Jobling's yard—which was just off Hill Street, and not more than an easy three minutes' run from St. Lawrence Square—the message in his mouth was mixed up with horrible misgivings, and memory itself began to falter.

Outside, against the kerb, stood the pump: the wooden pump with whose rigid and rheumatic handle Queen Street infancy (under no obligation whatever to be a gentleman) was wont to play ride-a-cock-horse, shrouded now by the mist that clung broodingly about its person and enlarged its

bulk to preternatural proportions. And beyond the pump yawned the arched and vaulted carriage way to Jobling's yard exhaling pungent equine odours; a dark and disconcerting void that engulfed the little Oswald's figure and lent an echoing sepulchral character to his faltering footsteps over the unlevel cobbles with which the yard was paved—causing him to turn an anxious head for reassurance that the pump had not crept up behind him. Probing his way forward with both hands protectfully outspread, he came at the farther end of the vaulted carriage-way upon a stable lamp suspended on a nail. The lamp's glass was so opaquely smoked as to yield no perceptible light whatever; the brown flame, half smothered in a sooty deposit, emitted a moribund and lugubrious gleam. Had it been Him himself, hanging in expiring throes from a wall-hook, the effect could scarcely have been more disturbing to a Gentleman. But he mustered courage to apply his knuckles to the door which the expiring lantern was obviously intended to illuminate, and took the liberty to cough—hoping that the cough rather than the knuckles would betray his modest presence to whatever other presence had its awful habitation in the darks and silences of this place. Three times he knocked upon the door, coughing apologetically on each occasion to let those know who listened with what humility he ventured to disturb their peace, and held his knuckles already raised to give a fourth and final summons—a loud, conclusive summons this, that should be audible even to himself—when with startling suddenness an unsuspected door at right angles to the one he knocked at flew open without a sound, letting out an elongated track of light across the glistening cobbles with a magnified great shadow projected from the middle of it.

"Who's there?" demanded a voice after an interval of intense silence, in which neither Oswald nor the shadow moved. The voice was a woman's voice, sharp and terse,

that ripped the silence as if it had been calico.

"It's me," said Oswald.

"Who's me?"

"Oswald Holmroyd."

"Come your ways here," pronounced the voice, which evidently belonged to the 'Her' that the maid had spoken of, and when Oswald approached the silhouette confronting him: "Now then," it asked. "What do you want?"

"Please ..." he began, and relapsed into the pious formula, " ... mother sends her compliments and wishes to know...." With which, realizing the enormity of his offence, his powers of articulation failed him.... "It's the cab," he found strength to whisper after a pause.

"Cab? Cabs is all out," the silhouette informed him, which was the silhouette of a middle-aged woman in a coarse apron, with her sleeves rolled up to the elbows. "What time do you want cab for?"

"To-night," Oswald urged, with the breathlessness of desperation. "At once, please."

"Is it for the station?"

"It's for the Mansion House." The message, almost irrecoverably lost in the stirring episodes of these recent moments, surged back on him with all its pristine force. "They're waiting now."

"Who's waiting?"

"Mrs. Bankett."

"Which Mrs. Bankett?"

For the life of Oswald could he think which Mrs. Bankett, although he had Mrs. Bankett's own authority for saying "the Mrs. Bankett that everybody knows." Instead he relapsed impotently upon the address: No. 3, St. Lawrence Square.

"It is on the Slate," he prompted, with lips of such awed

politeness that they scarcely moved, and eyes of such delicate consideration for her feelings that they dared not look. She repeated "Slate?" and reaching out an arm beyond the door drew forth the very slate in fact, from a nail in the wall, that she held diagonally towards the invisible source of light with one hand and traced a way through a labyrinth of figures with the forefinger of the other. "Aye!" she said at length. "It's here, safe enough. He's got it. He's taken it down. It'll be all right. Maybe he's there by now. If not I'll send him straight as soon as he comes back. Cabs is busy to-night."

There was a pause. The interview seemed ended. The door was closing. It closed. Simultaneously the little Oswald was in gloom again.

His return to the Square coincided with the apparition of a cab—an empty, rattling and resounding cab that came up the Hill Street at a gallop, rocked uproariously over the crossing, and bounced up to the house of Mrs. Bankett whom everybody knew. It was Him. Him at last. Oswald's heart, depressed till now, leaped exultantly within him. Here were the fruits of his errand. The cab grated up to the kerb; the big door opened; coagulated light flowed sluggishly from the porch; the voice of the maid exclaimed, "You're a nice one, *you* are!" An injured voice retorted, "I've come as fast as I could. I couldn't drive no faster." There was a stir and bustle in the porch; a gleam of shawls and silks; a mixture of eager voices; the slamming of a cab door; the slashing of a whip, and the cab rolled past the silent Oswald and out of the square. The maid watched it from the gate till its mist-enveloped shape had turned the corner, exchanging words with some invisible figure in the porch that Oswald judged to be the Mrs. Bankett that everybody knew. Then the clash of the gate was succeeded by tripping footsteps and a ruffle of skirts in motion.

A fear stabbed swiftly through the heart of the little

Oswald. He turned a supplicating face to the porch, but the action came too late. He was left standing by the railings. His gentlemanliness had hesitated all too long to act or to proclaim itself. Fearful of intruding he had taken up his modest station at some few paces from the gate, awaiting only the departure of the cab to tender once again his twice frustrated message: “Please ... Mother sends her compliments ... and wishes to know....”

It had seemed to him that his presence was amicably recognized and admitted. The maid had looked in his direction twice as if she smiled. The little girl appeared to include him in the farewell waving of her mittened fingers through the window. And now they were all gone, the gate and front door closed inexorably against him. A lump compounded of impotence and self-compassion rose up into his throat. Could he dare to ring the bell a second time? No, he could not. It was impossible. He was too much of a gentleman. He had had too good a father. He had been too well brought up.

All he could do was to stand with his cheeks pressed despairingly against the gate, gazing at the porch and hoping.... Hoping that even now they might remember him; that even now the door might suddenly fly open, that voices might float out into the mist in search of him: “Little boy!... Little boy!”

But no such summons stirred the watcher’s heart. Much later in the evening—long after the dampness had accumulated once more on those portions of the gate dried now by little Oswald’s troubled cheek and gloves, the maid cried in the kitchen: “Lawks! Yon lad’s forgotten all about sausages. A nice thing trusting such as him with a message. As like as not he never went for cab at all.”

5

Is there anywhere defeat more dreadful than that

sustained within the region of one's heart alone?

The little Oswald, relinquishing his hold upon the gate at last, withdrew from the scene of this inglorious battle, humiliated and despondent. How could he justify such treacherous capitulation to his own cowardice? Whence came this terrible discrepancy between the heroic greatness of his thought and the pusillanimity of action? For it was useless that courage, from some craven hiding-place in his despair, called upon him in a trembling voice to be a twelfth-hour gentleman or die, saying: "What if the maid servant is angry? Anger hurts nobody. What if she cries 'It's Him!' *Be* Him so long as Him is a gentleman and raises his hat. Nothing a servant says or does can change a gentleman."

And though courage, gathering voice and importunity, in inverse ratio to its distance from the porch, expostulated with him thus, always his apostate footsteps led him (more laggingly as he neared it) in the direction of his home.

It was a house in a long street, and in a dark street too, when at last he reached it—though the darkness here lent no such dignity to bricks and mortar as it did in St. Lawrence Square, or such gloomy horrors as it did to Jobling's Yard. The houses stood in unbroken rank, shoulder to shoulder; every door succeeded by a window, and every window by a door in turn; each doorstep abutting on the pavement in company with a cast-iron scraper and cellar grate. Only at rare intervals did these houses present a glimmering of intelligent light towards the street. Now and again some door slammed in the darkness here or there, going off like a gun and rattling its own knocker with the force of its concussion, and invisible footsteps hurried this way or that—some of which, after the briefest journey, terminated curiously without a sound, whilst others were extinguished by a distant door-slam, similar (but fainter) to that which had brought them into being. The door knob that Oswald took at last in both his

hands to turn protruded from a door distinguished superficially by little from its neighbours. But the instant his fingers closed upon it—and this evening they did so more tardily and silently than usual—a sudden welcoming voice called out his name: a voice inflected to interrogation, and yet with a certitude that rose above all query.

"Oswald?"

With the door-knob in both hands still pressed against his bosom he pushed his way into the narrow passage beyond.

"Yes, mother."

"Is that you?"

"Yes, mother."

"Come my child! I was growing anxious about you. There are so many cabs to-night. Did you take the greatest care?"

"Yes, mother."

The voice that thus addressed the little Oswald was sweet and musical, but more striking than either of these two excellent qualities was its colour of unmistakable tenderness. Mother-solicitude so sweetened and suffused it that the dark, irradiated by this clear beacon of a voice, shed all its lurking terrors in a moment and became serene and harmless. Simultaneously with Oswald's entrance a chink of light, drawn perpendicularly like a chalk line from top to bottom of the right-hand passage wall, expanded to a vivid oblong, and the owner of the voice came into view at the foot of a flight of stairs. One side of her caught the bright illumination, the other lay in shadow. Still, her figure presented an effect of radiance, being covered with a white overall, whose sleeves—like the sleeves of Her who had appeared so startlingly to Oswald at Jobling's—were rolled up above the elbows, and both her hands and three parts of each forearm were floury white. But these were

very different arms, and this was a very different voice, and the look that accosted Oswald was a very different look. It fell upon him anxiously at first, seizing on every part of him to make sure he was, in truth, her very son, unaltered and unhurt, and melting over him thereafter in a visual embrace of fondest reassurance. She could not embrace him with her arms, for all she showed desire to do so, but she held these out for his admission and he walked passively within their bay to receive upon his uplifted face the fervent mother-kiss betraying the gratification of a hunger long denied. The expression of her countenance when it stooped to him, and of her voice when—the kiss bestowed—it said "My boy!" were curiously blended of love, compassion and exultant pride, as if with him pressed defensively to her bosom she flung a challenge to the world whose dangers he had so lately braved. Before such manifestation of unbounded love the recipient's eyes sank guiltily beneath the weight of their unworthiness; his lips quivered and forgot their function for very shame, until those other lips reminded them: " ... Aren't you going to kiss your mother, Oswald?" Yes ... he was going to kiss her. He kissed her, in fact, laying his chilly mouth against her cheek. She noted the inertness of the lips, and withdrew from the caress, crying he must be cold and tired after his long round, and how thoughtless of her to keep him standing in the passage when there was such a warm and lovely fire awaiting him inside. With which, solicitously guiding him with her arms, she pressed her son towards the open door from which she had emerged, that led—as it appeared—into the kitchen. In the brightly polished range a red and glowing fire lent its aid to the single naked gas-jet, that might have shed a cheerless ineffectual light but for the blazing co-operation of the coals. On the scoured deal table beneath the gas pendant stood a glazed pancheon containing paste, which, together with a paste-board, a large tin flour-dredger, a rolling pin, a

bowl of water, half a dozen round baking tins or more, of different sizes, carefully lined with greased paper, and other culinary implements, sufficiently explained the state of Mrs. Holmroyd's wrists and the work on which she was engaged.

Under other circumstances and in other hands this kitchen might, perhaps, have worn a bare and hardened look, for there was but little furniture in it, and that of the simplest kind. Its walls were colour-washed a cleanly buff; a buff blind hung before its solitary window; some cheap wooden chairs and a square of crimson-edged fibre matting beneath the central table, reinforced with two or three grocers' coloured almanacs and a row of polished spice canisters on the mantelpiece practically completed its equipment. The part-opened door of a painted cupboard afforded a glimpse of crockery and familiar blue sugar bags. Another door beyond this led down into a tiny scullery.

But the cheerful conjunction of lights and the spotless cleanliness of every object revealed by them, and beyond all the presence of Oswald's mother, transmuted these bare walls and meagre furniture into an expression of a something greater than themselves. This kitchen, one might affirm, possessed a soul; a countenance of almost human kindliness, that loveless labours had not soiled or soured; a voice capable of uttering—to the little Oswald at least—the dear word "Home." As he unwrapped the woollen muffler from his neck, his glance instinctively went the round of all the empty chairs as though in quest of some expected presence. The action, slight though it was, did not escape his mother's eye. She answered the silent question that it asked:

"Beryl has gone to bed," she told him. "I think she must be asleep."

As though in contradiction to the statement a far-away and childish voice cried "Mother" with long-drawn breath,

"Has Oswald come back?" Oswald answered for himself: "I'm here, Beryl!" The far-away voice returned: "Come here, Oswald. I want to say good-night." In Mrs. Holmroyd's eyes a look of sadness crept. "Poor Beryl! I had been hoping she was asleep. Don't ... don't say anything to disturb her, Oswald. She cried after you were gone to-night. Try and help her to forget it."

The call, mournfully protracted, floated down to them again.

"Oswald."

Leaving the comfortable brightness of the kitchen Oswald mounted the narrow stairs. On the landing his name was vocalized again, more softly this time, for the listener had heard and counted every footstep so firmly planted to establish and sustain his courage, and knew him near at hand.

"Oswald."

He passed into the bedroom through the door left partly open for the reduction of loneliness and for free communication with the maternal vigilance below, and made his way to the little brass-railed bed, beyond the defensive bigger bed, from which the voice had emanated. There he stretched out his arms in the darkness to where two smaller, softer, warmer outspread arms awaited them. At the first contact the head of the Sausage-Boy was drawn down almost fiercely into the dark shelter of a tiny bosom in which a tiny heart was throbbing fast. The arms encompassing his neck closed upon it with the energy of despair. His face was kissed persistently with lips that emitted breaths of curious hotness, and though within the depths of this embrace all was pitchy dark and Oswald had his eyes closed for sufferance of his sister's caresses—his lips reciprocating kissing sounds for every kiss bestowed upon him—he knew the kisses were but a substitute for tears, and his name at each reutterance partook more and

more of a plaintive and liquid character.

"Did you ... did you see anything, Oswald?" the fervent lips demanded, and the arms made as if to hug the information out of him.

He said evasively: "Some cabs."

"Going.... There?"

"I think so."

There was a sniff. And then:

"Did you see inside?"

"Not very well."

"Were there any little girls inside?"

"One or two."

"All dressed up?"

"Yes."

"How big were they? As big as me?"

"Some of them."

There was a second sniff. And after awhile a third. And Oswald felt the little bosom shake and quiver like a boiled pudding in its pan. He said, "Never mind, Beryl. Don't cry!" But there was a something hardening in his own throat too, and behind his eyes was the sting of fire. "Tomorrow we will go with mother to the market." Something hot and liquid, like a bead of molten lead, escaped from his constricted eyelids and fell into the fevered bosom below. The sniffs stopped abruptly, and after an intent silence the treble voice, instinct with a new alertness, enquired:

"What's that?"

"I don't know."

A hot hand, leaving its place behind his neck, groped over his cheeks and explored his eyes.

"You're crying too!" the voice charged him, with a satisfaction almost jubilant. "O, Oswald!"

The lump in his throat, growing bigger and more

persistent, allowed him to make no denial. Melted by each other's tears the Sausage Boy and his sister sniffed without dissimulation, savouring the ecstatic sadness of a sorrow shared.

6

It was a Friday, and Friday for the little Oswald took on the character of a very arduous day. It was a day, indeed, on which the work of trying to be a gentleman attained its weekly maximum. For two hours, or nearly, he had been traversing the streets of Daneborough, engrossed in the changeless yet ever changeful problem of how a gentleman should deal with knockers or ring bells too high for him—an anxious task calling for the nicest discrimination and skill. And all this, supplemented by his extra journey to the livery stables, and the tears shed over his sister's nightdress, did not conclude his labours for the day. There still remained a further errand to perform—and that quickly, for the hands of the clock were moving menacefully to the hour of eight, and at eight o'clock Oswald (as a fully accredited chorister) was due to attend the weekly choir practice in the chancel of St. Saviour's church.

The flour had disappeared from Mrs. Holmroyd's hands when Oswald descended to the kitchen, and a capacious wicker basket stood upon the scoured deal table, which Mrs. Holmroyd was lining with a clean white napkin as he entered. She smoothed the creases of the folded cloth, replaced the slotted lid over the wicker handle and slid the handle over the arm that Oswald silently extended. That done, she took the woollen muffler from its place of airing on the fender; held it—first this side and then that—to the ruddy cheek of the fire, and testing its preparedness with a critical hand, enwrapped it once again round Oswald's neck, tucking its fringed ends punctiliously beneath his jacket as before.

Whereupon, encouraged with an enquiring "Well, dear?" Oswald began his familiar Friday night's recital—that custom had crystallized into a formula almost as invariable as the polite "Please ... Mother sends her compliments" with which he presented the weekly message on her behalf. Mrs. Dunster was obliged and would take a large porkpie but no sausages. Mrs. Lockford was obliged and would be glad to have a medium pie this week and a pound of sausages. Mrs. Hibbert was obliged, and they were getting tired of pork, but Oswald might call next Friday. Mrs. Fletcher was obliged....

The recital proceeded; the list of orders slowly grew. Only one eighteenpenny pie stood now between Oswald and Mrs. Bankett whom everybody knew. He drew his breath and his colour deepened. The fateful name was raised at last. Mrs. Bankett ... whom everybody knew....

Mrs. Bankett had ordered no pork pie. No sausages. Only a cab. His words hurried now with his admission as if they had been legs. "I ran to fetch it for them. When I got back it drove away. They went inside and shut the door. I waited for some time.... They never came to the door again.... I came home."

His mother said "Without the money?" and gazed at him with a tragic and incredulous eye.

Without the money? Aye! Now he came to think of it, he had clean forgotten that. He had clean forgotten the payment for last week's order that was to be relegated to this; the four and sixpence of such terrific consequence to the mother of a son studying hard to be a gentleman. The taste of the bitterness of failure came back again into his mouth like gall. He had defiled his mother's trust in him. Her confidence in his ability had been betrayed....

She did not upbraid him as other mothers might have done. Too well she knew the bitter testament of the human heart—her own, and through her own, her son's who was a

living part of her and whose pains and sufferings she shared. She put her hand upon his shrinking shoulder and drew away the coat sleeve (with the wicker basket on it) lifted to his eyes as though to shield contrition from the sight of sorrow his cowardice had caused. “Never mind, Oswald. Never mind, dear. Mother is not angry with you. She is proud of you. You have done wonders. Mother can manage.... She can manage very well.”

He had done wonders. Mother could manage very well. But for all that it was a dubious eye that peered into the flabby crevices of mother’s purse, eliciting at last with finest use of forefinger and thumb some inconspicuous silver and three coppers. Three and ninepence in all.

Three and ninepence was very little for the work in hand, but it afforded the repentant Oswald an opportunity unparalleled to be a gentleman in earnest. Here was a chance indeed. With his three and ninepence in his tight right hand and this basket on his arm he could go firmly to the pork butcher’s ... to the pork butcher’s and say:

“Please, Mr. Waxford. Mother sends her compliments, and she wants just the same as she had last week. And here is three and ninepence....”

“ ... Three and ninepence....” Mother and son were looking fixedly into each other’s eyes by now, as Oswald’s lips repeated—or at least re-shaped—the words that issued from her. “ ... And ninepence. And if you please I will bring the rest of the money in the morning. Mother is rather short of change.”

Could he remember this message? He could. Could he repeat it? He could and did, in a chill and conscientious undertone animated by no more expression than a leg of mutton freshly drawn from cold store. The coinage so recently collected with such care and dubiously looked at was softly pressed into his unresisting hand. The cap was placed upon his head. Mother was short of change. It

would be quite all right. Mr. Waxford would understand.

Ah! this sad profession of trying to be a gentleman, that difficilizes every act of life and makes cowardice so dreadful. Not even to his mother dared this quaking paladin confess the mockery of his valour. He assumed the insignia of her misplaced confidence in him and went out, wondrously, into the mist once more.

This time he performed his errand with a curious sense of detachment, speculating impersonally as to the fate of it. His visit to the livery stables and his defeat at Mrs. Bankett's had broken his nerve. The vow that his craven courage tried to register and animate was but a feeble lifeless thing, the mere skimmed milk of resolution, all its strength and goodness lacking. He held his mother's love and trust on false pretences. And if anything were needed to convince despondency of its unworthiness it was the sight of Waxford's shop. What brilliance! What publicity! What merciless exposure of shrinking purpose and deceptive ends were here.

7

Think of a row of close serried naked gas-burners, twelve to the foot at least; all stertorously puffing out their bluey yellow flames into the night over a double front of plate-glass windows divided by a shop door, the slightest waft of air serving to enrage them and rouse them to a roar. Now they go blue, to the point of extinction, like a mendicant's lips in winter. Now a glissando ripple runs up and down their extended gamut. Now the entire row bursts out into the exuberance of irrepressible activity; a seething, hissing line of flame that seems to set the whole shop front in motion and galvanizes all its white and pendent carcasses into a lurid danse macabre. There must have been a dozen porcine corpses suspended from the bright steel hooks along the glazed shop wall within; their heads downward; their countenances fixed in a ghastly

stereotyped, sardonic risus; their nostrils dripping red blood into the sawdust heaped below each muzzle, as they awaited their momentous metamorphosis into modes of human life. Freed from the sin, the sloth, the gluttony of their purely animal existence they would turn to all sorts of things. The loins of this one might be translated into love; the ribs of that other might reappear on Sunday transfigured as a sermon, denouncing vice and propagating dogma. To-day they were but pork; to-morrow they would put on humanity, assume the substance of mankind, become incorporate partners in man's very soul; fortifiers of his faith; heritors, with him, of his glorious immortality.

To the little Oswald, attached with conscientious might and main to three and ninepence and the wicker basket, this spectacle of twelve impassive corpses—all of one size, all of one semblance, all reduced to a grizzled uniformity in death, their once voracious stomachs cleft and emptily outspread for public edification as if they preached a sermon protestive of the vanity of all things earthly—impressed his susceptibilities less than the gas-blanched mortuary in which they hung. More terrible than these twelve impassive blood-sealed jurors to him were the roaring lights without, that seemed to hiss and mock his courage; the pallid opal globes within, blazoning in sable capitals the name of Waxford. The callous ostentation of the shop dismayed him with its gleaming scales of brass and marble; its hooks and implements of spotless steel; its chopping-block of scoured and scalded cleanliness; its sawdust sprinkled floor, and last and dreadfullest of all—its proprietor's obese and proper person, arrayed in Friday's immaculate white vestments, unstained as yet by grease or gore; the starched and snowy tunic protracted by the not less snowy apron which—drawn tightly round his nether quarters—made no appreciable indentation on his noble convexity. By some process of assimilation as yet imperfectly understood by scientists or theologians, much

intimacy and close association with the world of pork had brought the rotund Waxford into striking physical conformity with what he dealt in. His eyes, deep sunk within their fleshy orbits, presented a glazed and porcine stare; his ears were large and hispid; his flesh possessed a bleached and waxen character curiously akin to that of the twelve inverted apostles lining his white-tiled wall. Slung up by his heels to the steel rod, with his head and forepaws to the floor, and his internal economy spread open to inspection on a cambrel, he might have cut no despicable figure in competition with the carcasses displayed to-night. As he stood, filling the shop door with his bulk, one hand immersed in the spacious pocket of his apron, where it toyed indolently with a copious provision of loose change, he was a form to strike dismay into the heart of three and ninepence. Three and ninepence, indeed, asked itself fearfully where the courage requisite to disturb that breadth of abdomen was coming from, and had not yet received its answer from heaven when the Waxford gaze, proprietorially roaming over the area of public roadway annexed from darkness by his blazing burners to form an extension of his business, fell at last upon the wicker basket on the irresolute right arm and lay there with such a substantial weight of look as almost to bow the basket down. The eye—that small, sagacious, active eye—recognized the Holmroyd basket in a trice, and read the meaning of that tightly folded hand. Out of the creases in his voluminous neck emerged a voice: peremptory, decisive.

"Now my lad!" it said, and without dissimulation my lad stepped forth. Who was three and ninepence to withstand a summons such as this.

Three and ninepence, turning itself over and over along with Mother's compliments, all in a tropical and coppery sweat, followed the surpliced proprietor into his place of business (that only by default of a few water-sprays and

some chloride of lime fell short of being a morgue) where the Waxford assistant industriously rotated the handle of a galvanized iron mincing machine.

"Please ... Mother sends her compliments ... and she wants ... just the same ... as she had last week...."

The message broke off abruptly as if by its own weight. Three and ninepence awaited horror-struck for an amendment that never came. Even the gas-globes blinked incredulously and rolled protesting eyes; the assistant applied himself blindly to the galvanized iron mincer as if staggered and appalled. Only Waxford made no sign. Only Waxford preserved his imperturbability, saying he knew what Mrs. Holmroyd wanted well enough. "Give us hold of your basket, boy."

In the most appalling silence, unbroken by a word, three and ninepence saw the awful activities precipitated by its rash pronouncement. Knives were sharpened with a clash and gleam of deadly steel; glittering choppers rose and fell; the brass and marble scales oscillated with tremulous irresolution before Waxford's judicial eye. Something was swept from the liberated balance and inhumed by Waxford's busy fingers in Oswald's basket. The white cloth was wrapped like a winding sheet about these committed remains, the lid was replaced.

"There, my lad!" said Waxford at the conclusion of this brief but impressive ceremony. "That's a bit of lovely stuff, tell your mother. She won't beat it anywhere in this town. Seven and elevenpence." A white and puffy palm, gleaming with the grease of its recent labours grew forthwith to gigantic proportions and eclipsed the basket beneath Oswald's gaze. Chink, chink, chink, chink. Coin by coin three and ninepence took laborious leave of its temporary owner and passed into the extended palm that would have made half a dozen three and ninepences look puny.

"Three and six," (the voice of Waxford continued) "and seven.... Three and eight. And one's nine." He gave the coinage a shake as if to jog the payer's memory and expedite completion. "Three and nine, my lad. And seven and eleven the skins and pork.—Is that all you've brought with you?" For the Sausage Boy had raised a quick imploring face to the face above him, and relapsed upon an abject "yes" that all his members uttered rather than his lips.

With a man of less experience and resource than Waxford who knows how long they might have preserved their two respective attitudes: this one with averted eyes: that one with inverted hand? Nay, given but another minute who shall say that the thought so fruitlessly beating against the closed walls of Oswald's brain might not have been heroically rescued by his tongue at last? But the individual confronting him was unfettered by any futile gentlemanly feelings—as the prosperity of his business and the twelve apostles testified. All these legs and sides of pork, these spiral stacks of vermilion boloneys, these bloated blood puddings and basins of glutinous brawn, these strings of anaemic sausages, these trays of scraped ears and translucent trotters, these bladders of lard—bald and resplendent as the dome of Waxford's head—had not been assembled with such profusion in this place by qualities of sentiment and diffidence. Their owner clapped the three and ninepence on the counter beside the glittering scales and said: "You're short, my lad. You'd best run home and fetch the rest. Seven and elevenpence tell your mother, and you've brought me three and nine. You needn't bother to take the basket. I'll take care of it for you till you come back."

The order, uttered without the least heat, brooked no contention. It was a plain precept according to the first principles of sound business. Three and ninepence—that was not three and ninepence any longer, but only heartache

wrapped up in a muffler—stood confounded for one moment. The next it stole silently from the shop.

8

Again Oswald took hold of the familiar doorknob with both his hands and turned it beneath the pressure of an overburdened bosom. Again he let himself into the narrow passage with the chink of light drawn like a chalk-line down the right hand wall. Again he was greeted by name; the chalk-line widened to a rectangle of light; his mother, once more floury of forearm, came out into the passage to welcome him. Her voice and her insufferable tender smile —falling on a bosom charged with sorrow to its brim— made grief overflow. Without a word, without a look, he passed into the kitchen; chose the far-most chair; turned his face to the wall, with his arm laid on the chair back and his nose buried in his coat sleeve, and wept inconsolably.

It had come at last, this horrible exposure. Fruitlessly he had battled with it, fought against it, seeing the inevitable evil draw nearer week by week. Now the doom had fallen; he sat disgraced. He had wronged most wickedly his mother's love. She knew; she knew. Her smile had been a sword of flame, plunged hilt-deep in the bowels of his delinquency. Every object in the house knew his disgrace and scorned him. The Swiss clock ticking on the mantelpiece withdrew its voice severely as though it ticked no longer for unworthy Oswalds and kept no time for those who put time to so little profit. The chair he sat on offered contrition an uncomfortable seat. The sharp edge of its rail cut into the arm reposing on it; the wall repulsed his forehead for all the world as if it cried: "Away! I will have no concern with cowards." He was disgraced, disowned, deserted. And woefully he wept.

At first the suasive softness of his mother's voice, the tender supplication of her arms, inspired but a more

obstinate refusal of the lips to put their cause for weeping into words or let the rim of comfort's proffered cup come near them.

But little by little, by monosyllables at a time, trouble was fished up from her watery depths, and Mrs. Holmroyd learned the truth of all these tears. They stirred remorse, not anger. Her mother's heart, smitten through this comprehensible sorrow of her son's, turned swiftly on itself. The fault was hers, not his. She had been heedless of his years. The tasks imposed on him were all too heavy for such slender shoulders; too heavy on occasions for her own. Her conscience, self accused, confessed a cowardice more culpable than his; a cowardice that went disguised too frequently as love, concealed behind the subterfuge of kisses, professing pride and trust in him—that all the while were but tricks to trade upon affection and rouse in his small breast the courage lacking in her own. Had she ignored the spectre over-shadowing this evening's errand? Did she not see, committing to his hand the dreadful three and ninepence and to his lips the still more dreadful message, her own dismay reflected out of Oswald's eyes? Was it fair to make her son the agent of commissions such as these because his guilelessness lacked lips to confess fear and owned but eyes, beseeching to be read?

Save for a cruel providence his feet were never meant to run the gutters. He was no errand boy (protesting conscience told her) unhampered by pride and undeterred by truth; no common runner of the roads to whom all streets were home; no blushless ringer of bells and hardened rapper of knockers. He was his father's son condemned to tasks for which his gentleness was never fitted. The arms she wound about his neck were contrite arms. The tears she spilled were tears of impotence and pity, to think her love could help so little. Surely an all-wise, merciful and loving Father might in His wisdom have devised some better means to manifest His care of her

and hers. Sorrow may be, as pietists allege, the soul's true sustenance, by feeding upon which it groweth godlike. But sorrow too—as well she was aware—can be a mean and pettifogging thing; a blister on the heel of aspiration that, for all its paltriness, causes the noblest aim to limp. To sustain a spacious sorrow is heroic; to resist some great temptation may be noble; but daily to adjust small means to little ends teaches the soul to stoop. The tallest stature may be lowered at last, and lofty thoughts lose their uprightness that are daily subject to mean necessities. Like the constant threading of fine needles the spiritual eyesight compelled to read life's petty print too closely loses its larger vision and risks becoming blind to God.

All this and more moved in the mind of Oswald's mother as she clasped her son. But grief is a quality hopelessly unpractical. Grief is for the opulent and leisured, who have the time for its indulgence and the wealth to buy for it the luxuries it needs. Combat with a selfish world (she feared) had made this mother very practical. Sometimes so sadly practical that she must weep in privacy to think how changed she was. She thought now of the absent basket and resolutely dried her eyes.

The dreadful practical part of her worked out a sordid sum in subtraction. Three and nine from seven and elevenpence. Nine from eleven, two; three from seven, four. Four shillings and twopence. Four shillings and twopence she needed. Oswald's eyes were fixed upon her now; she would avenge his tears and re-instate his honour, cost what it might. Decisively she doffed her overall, drew down her sleeves, assumed her hat and mantle, and—first commending the house to Oswald's sacred care—went out into the November mist.

The clock struck eight. At the Mansion House those chosen children would be joyful. In the chancel of St. Saviour's (prodigious and appalling thought) the choir practice had begun. On Waxford's counter the interned

pork slept dreamlessly in its cotton shroud, unexpectant and unperturbed.

9

The resolution displayed by Oswald's mother had not a lengthy journey to sustain. No lengthier, indeed, than to the next door—whither she betook herself with a firm step and a courage that the night air had not time to cool. Whatever may be, in other ways, alleged against it, the darkness is friendly to errands such as this. Under night's indulgent mantle neighbourly borrowing loses much of its terror; although as an offset to this advantage, we must remember that it is not less easy to refuse a favour than to ask one, in the dark. And for all Mrs. Holmroyd's confidence, she poised her uplifted knuckles with something more than deliberation before the panels of the next door, rehearsing her summons once or twice, with the nicest assessment of force necessary, before the fingers fell.

The summons that ensued betrayed her. At a crisis, it seemed, she was no surer than her son. The knock confessed itself the furtive suppliant's knock; the ingratiatory knuckle-usage of one with a favour to ask. The bearer of a benefit, the repayer of a loan, the bringer of good tidings, rap resolutely, joyously. The act is confident and free, not furtive and repressed, burdened with the fear of knocking too loud lest it raise expectation over high within.

Oswald had rapped three times at Jobling's. His mother rapped as many here before her summons reached the remote and dormant consciousness of the house. Slippered footsteps trod untidily towards the door, guided in the darkness by hands that slid along alternate walls. Her eyes, now capable of differentiating the degrees of darkness, knew when the door opened by reason of the deeper dark beyond—for all it opened very little. No wider, indeed, than to make way for a peering and suspicious nose that

sniffed the outer darkness without a sound, as if it had been a rat. Since the nose remained motionless and the door betrayed no disposition to open wider, Mrs. Holmroyd—with a quickening of the heart beneath her mantle—spoke at last.

"I'm sorry to trouble you, Mrs. Kenway," she said. The voice was soft, and in its polite depression singularly like her son's.

The nose, under this assurance, grew to half a forehead and one eye.

"What! Is that you, Mrs. Holmroyd?" And receiving Mrs. Holmroyd's answer that it was, became a whole head and part of a bosom, whilst the voice—casting its uncertainty aside—assumed a geniality almost dreadful to the soul of a borrower. Its note of welcome pitched a major key too high; a tone too bold for borrowing to sustain. Skilful modulation would be necessary to lead the theme, yet undeclared, into the confidential minor. "Why, bless me'm!" cried the head and bosom. "I made sure I couldn't mistake your voice, Mrs. Holmroyd. Step your ways in, marm." The invitation, loudly tendered, that accompanied the flinging open of the door—as though the earlier suspicion renounced all further need to exercise itself—struck courage in the face. Courage, dismayed by such utter confidence reposed in it, shrank hurriedly from an invitation so compromising to purpose.

"I only just called, Mrs. Kenway...."

"Come in, marm; come in!" the voice repeated. "You're very welcome. There's no need to apologize I'm sure. Don't stand outside in the damp."

"Thank you ... thank you," Mrs. Holmroyd said. "But I didn't really wish to trouble you. I only just called to...."

"You're not troubling me, Mrs. Holmroyd. I'm not to a minute," urged the insistent voice. "We don't see much of one another, for all we're such near neighbours. I was only

saying so to my husband this dinner time. Do step forwards, marm."

Again courage and politeness strove to escape the paralyzing toils of misplaced friendship; begging to be excused; alleging household obligations and the need for haste. Mrs. Holmroyd had just called.... Her little boy....

"Aye, to be sure," the voice agreed, which by its insistent geniality proclaimed that it suspected nothing and was animated by no more hopeful motive than friendliness and a love of gossip. "Your little boy's got back, marm. I felt sure I heard your front door shut and you calling of him by name a while ago. I thought it must be him. Voices sounds quite plain through the passage wall. I often hear your little girl call out to you after you've put her to bed. They've not gone to Mayor's Party then. I've not been home very long myself. A friend of mine's little son and daughter got an invite, and she asked me to go and see them before they went. Real bonny they looked.... My word! Hasn't there been some cabs! I don't know what *you* think about it, Mrs. Holmroyd," the voluble voice pursued, "but I've heard a deal of complaints. Why, I know a case myself. Seven in a family, and not a single invite. Me and you pays rates and taxes same as anybody else, and they don't forget us when it's gas or water at quarter's end. But let it be parties and My Word! They don't ask *us* to go to Mansion House and look at childer dancing!"

The current of her genial indignation swept on. It was a strong tide for a mere borrower to stem. Mrs. Holmroyd, supporting her bosom with one hand beneath her mantle, yielded to the wordy flood, her purpose submerged and foundering, her strength and resolution almost spent. Once or twice her courage faltered. Invention sought to fabricate some motive for this visit more consonant with pride. But such unworthy subterfuge would be false to Oswald. Could she, thereafter, face her son? It was curious how their two places were now reversed; how she feared the clearness of

her son's eyes, the judgment of his unspoken reproaches as he had feared hers; how she made her duty towards him, his confidence in her, the test and mainspring of her present conduct. And, blindly breasting the verbal current at last, she struck the dreaded shore and delivered her lips of the purpose that had embarrassed them so long. Not one listener in a thousand, possibly, (and in the dark) could have divined what motive force was requisite to articulate these polite and gentle words: "I wonder if I might venture to trouble you, Mrs. Kenway.... If you would be so kind...."

The request, squeezed from her reluctant mouth as if it had been blood, drew to its completion. In thought it had been dreadful; in speech more dreadful still. Five shillings, insinuated thus, seemed almost sinister. Her heart recoiled from this creation of her lips. This bastard offspring, fathered by necessity, shamed her. Furtive and mean it bespoke its dreadful parentage even in the dark. As it left her lips she was shamefully aware of a sudden alteration in the stillness. Some door of interest, she felt, had been abruptly closed. Where her words, before, had sunk into the bosom of a receptive geniality they were now repelled as from a sounding-board. "I'm sorry, marm," the darkness in the doorway said, and there was a subtle alteration in its tone as if the damp had chilled it. The voice had quitted its original key and was now descended into a key more regretfully minor than Mrs. Holmroyd's own.

"O, pray ..." Mrs. Holmroyd quickly begged, " ... don't mention it, Mrs. Kenway."

"Very sorry, marm," the darkness repeated, showing somewhat less bosom than before. "—Did I understand you to say five shillings, Mrs. Holmroyd?"

The question was asked in a tone that let it be clearly understood it owned a motive no more than formally polite.

"It is no matter, Mrs. Kenway," Oswald's mother

answered. “Yes ... I did mention that amount. It would have been a slight convenience. But pray don’t trouble. I merely thought ... Friday is rather an awkward night.”

The figure in the dark agreed with hearty compliance that Friday was an awkward night. Everybody (she reflected) found the same. She was very sorry indeed, marm. But her husband not being at home just then, and her having to do a bit of shopping shortly, you see.... Why! There. Mrs. Holmroyd would know how it was.

Mrs. Holmroyd knew thoroughly how it was. Knew too well how it was.

“Otherwise ...” the voice suggested, throwing open a vague doorway to the possibilities. Mrs. Holmroyd concurred with a rapid “To be sure ... to be sure. Please forgive me for having troubled you. I only thought.... It is really of no consequence. How damp it is to-night.”

It really did not matter. It was of no consequence. The three and ninepence by Waxford’s scales, the basket on his counter, the sausage and pork pies ordered, as yet all unbegun, her little Oswald keeping vigil on the kitchen chair—they did not matter. They were of no consequence.

Despite her growing practical-mindedness so frequently deplored, she was, at base, no bolder than her boy.

10

She let herself into her home with a due regard for the neighbourly vigilance, immuring herself not so noiselessly as to betray to these tell-tale walls a purpose defeated or a conscience shamed. For a moment after entry she stood, preserving the attitude of an anxious and expectant listener. But no voice acknowledged her return. Within was silence, so nicely graduated to her ear that it seemed almost deathly. Strange terrors take their toll of true maternal hearts. She tore the veil of silence urgently aside as if it were a sheet that draped some shape indefinite and

dreadful, saying:

"Oswald!"

"Yes, mother."

At that she drew breath of reassurance again. Thankfulness returned with courage, in a tide. Her joy to find him safe was almost great enough to sweep away the memory of her recent ordeal. She advanced with an exultant confidence begotten of her son's voice. At least she had Him. Him, and that other—not less dear—above. Within these walls was happiness indeed; a happiness made all the brighter by the darkness of the world without; a treasure that her soul guarded the more zealously because she knew it assailed.

Oswald sat where she had left him, on the wooden chair, before all this paraphernalia for the interrupted manufacture of pies. Traces of beknuckled tears still gleamed on his cheek-bones, but he had exchanged the attitude of despair for one of speculation, and his countenance expressed enquiry more than grief.

His mother entered the kitchen with a smile he had known before—though its precise significance he did not understand—the smile wrung out of adversity that, but for her children, might have been tears all told.

"Did Beryl call out to you whilst I was away, Oswald?"

"No mother."

"I want you to take care of the house for mother a little longer, Oswald."

She noted his eyes' quick reference to the clock, and her glance faltered as his own had done. "Ten minutes past eight already! I had no idea. You will be late for the choir practice, Oswald."

Late for the practice? Did his mother really mean to impose this further burden upon his unequal shoulders? She saw the courage die out of his face like an extinguished taper, and added hastily: "But to-night you

cannot go. Mother cannot spare you, Oswald." She made pretence to appeal to his magnanimity. "You will not mind for once, will you dear? It is for *mother's* sake."

He sniffed, touched to the very depths of his ardent hypocrisies by the appeal. O! what a hypocrite he was. O! what a hypocrite he knew himself to be.

When Mrs. Holmroyd accosted the November mist once more she bore beneath her mantle something of whose identity her son knew nothing, though his eye was vaguely conscious of its presence. He was aware she held some object of a just perceptible bulk against her bosom, for she had but one hand to lay upon his neck in going. And whatever the hidden bulk might be—not that his curiosity was sensibly stirred, for he was still at the age that reposes its implicit faith in a mother's wisdom and goodness—the object had small significance, for she told him as his eye rested on it: "It is nothing, Oswald. Mother will be back soon."

Always before to-night, in the times of stress, (and for Oswald's mother such times had not been lacking) she had registered and had kept her vow, that to this dire remedy she should never have recourse, fearful lest its specious efficacy might enslave her to the habit and lead her into evils deeper than those from which she sought relief. Crises as acute as this she had surmounted before, but the citadel does not always fall to the fiercest onslaught. It falls as frequently to some half-hearted after-sally, when the powers of resistance are at ebb.

Much the same way she took as that which Oswald had taken earlier, when his uncertain footsteps led him to Waxford's shop. But before Waxford's flaring frontage could challenge purpose or arrest courage she turned down one of the shorter side streets into a region where all the streets (or so it seemed) were side-streets—short and mean and lightless—and came to a halt at last before the gable of a small and questionable shop.

The shop was a corner shop, its door sunk in the angle of adjoining walls that made a salient eave above it. On either side, one in this street and one in that, two shabby submerged windows let out a shabby light. The door between them, whose upper half was rectangled into six panes of dirty glass, let out light of the same shabby quality, from the same shabby source, that a peep above the red curtains draping its lower panes showed to be an oillamp suspended from a darkened beam. From the ceiling of which this beam formed part there hung a host of things more sombre than the lamp. Garments they seemed to be: dingy overcoats and skirts, and boots and shoes in clusters, like the corpses of apparel that had made away with themselves. From the shop floor stacks of other lifeless clothing rose to meet them. The windows, too, were cumbered with the ghastly company of apparel; the very putting-off of extremity and despair, yet offered still again to clad the limbs of living wretchedness and lend chill warmth to miserable blood. Well might the spectacle of such a shop send a shiver down Mrs. Holmroyd's spine. This way was never meant for her. O! never, never meant for her. To cross such a threshold was to forfeit something of the cherished purity of a soul; to touch contamination; to part with somewhat of that principle which keeps life sweet and conscience clean.

She looked this way. She looked that. God knew it was no crime she contemplated; only an act of sacrifice. She laid her hand impulsively upon the brazen doorlatch, worn bright by the application of many fingers, and chose her moment for the fateful Now.

11

RELIEVED of that incriminating burden borne beneath her mantle—which when unwrapped at length, declared

itself to be a silver creamjug—the mother of Oswald emerged from this degraded place of dreadful barterings. Whilst she had stood without, all terror seemed resident within. Now, hesitating on the threshold of external darkness, all terror seemed without. Not till she had spurned the poisonous latch like an infected hand and flung herself into the bosom of the mist deep beyond every contact with the tainted yellow light, did reassurance return. With each step taken pride repossessed itself; she regained control of her breathing; dared at last to raise her head.

The roaring gas-jets, all flickering up and down the garish Waxford frontage, occasioned her no tremor. Her chin rose defiantly before the blast of flame. Tempered in that fiercer forge, her courage faced such fires as these undaunted. How had this vulgar creature dared to take advantage of her son!

By this time public interest had begun to respond to the animated blowing of these pursed and fiery lips. The greasy cleaver had chopped its way as far as the third apostle, and it was rising and falling with remorseless energy before the eyes of an attentive audience when Mrs. Holmroyd entered the shop. The sight of Waxford added to her stature, and lent a further assertiveness to her chin. Some guilty premonition passed through his frame as she approached and paralyzed his fleshy arm, for with the cleaver already raised the purpose in his hardened muscles faltered all at once and failed. The chopper descended harmlessly upon the block, and the hand that held it was swift to seize the confiscated basket. The gesture interpreted apology.

“ ... Your basket, marm.”

Mrs. Holmroyd acknowledged ownership with dignified reserve. At least the offending Waxford had a more discriminating eye than that other before which she had so lately quailed. He could distinguish a lady from mere

womankind, even though the lady was reduced to come upon her own errand at an hour of the night when ladies, strictly speaking, were supposed to be at home. The tribute of his polite discernment tended to allay her indignation. Perhaps Oswald's diffidence had been, to some extent, at fault. Certainly the porcine Waxford lacked none of the essentials of deference to Oswald's mother. She began, "My little boy ..." as a prelude to reproof, but Waxford's politeness (not altogether at its ease) insisted on sparing her the trouble of an explanation. "To be sure, marm," he told her, wiping the handle of the basket on the corner of his no longer quite spotless apron, and cleaning his fingers in turn: all ten of them, for the due manipulation of a lady's change. He quite understood. Her little boy had come without the money, and gone away to fetch it before Waxford could stop him, leaving the basket behind. He was sorry, marm ... could he send the pork for her? Alfred, take hold of this here basket and carry it for this here lady. It would be no trouble, marm. Just as she pleased, marm. Alfred, put the basket down again. The lady prefers to take it with her.

The quarter-jack from St. Gyles's chimed out the last quarter before nine as Mrs. Holmroyd walked hurriedly along the moist and sometimes greasy flags. All the agony of those recent moments fused, as she walked, into a transcendent calm. For once again the sacred home was saved. In a life built on such frail foundations and compounded of such fragile things, the least shock threatened disaster. And this failure of her weekly output of savouries would have thrown all her careful calculations out of truth; would have involved her in an endless train of embarrassments ridiculous and tragic.

Now she could return swiftly, joyously to the bosom of her family, to taste once more—after such bitter moments of separation—the true sweetness of home, and build up—whilst she baked—fresh dreams of hope and liberty for

those she loved.

BOOK II

THE BEST OF FATHERS

1

MRS. HOLMROYD had not lived all her life in Daneborough. Only the briefest, saddest and most tragic part of it. Nor had she, prior to this time of sorrow, made and sold pork pies. They were a part of her tragedy.

Less than an interminable year before, this ancient town of Daneborough had, to her, been but a name. Then one day, weighted by the weeds that proclaimed her recent sorrow, she had come to the town with her two children, leaving behind the best of husbands and of fathers in the crowded church-yard of the cruel city that had killed him.

The city was no crueller than other thriving cities are. And it had not killed him. But a fine grief does not stand abjectly on fact. It demands a spacious inconsistency to move in. To reduce the death of one so dearly loved to a natural process of imperfect nature seems like a denial of nobility; an utter dereliction of the duties of love. Mrs. Holmroyd's love transfigured her dead husband as a martyr whom, for his very virtues, a cruel city slew. He had died defending her and his, his last hours embittered only by anxious love for them.

The truth is, they had probably loved each other over well, these two. Their lives had been too deeply interwoven; each grown too dependent on the love and loyalty of the other. Marriages less ideal than theirs have this advantage at least: they offer a better preparation for

widowhood. Union may be strength, but it is at the cost of the individual, and to those who have once known the blessed liberty of bondage independence is a cribbed and cruel thing. Her husband's memory had been burden enough to bear, without those deeper obligations weighting it. For though Oswald Holmroyd discharged in full his debt to Nature, Nature was not, alas, the only creditor demanding satisfaction.

Death, even the most exemplary, is no solatium to a man's creditors. Rather does it seem a source of fury and annoyance to them that debtors should have liberty to die at all. The race of creditors is bigoted and ruthless. It recognizes but one virtue in the world: the virtue that is solvent. For a man to die without the least hatred of those to whom he owes money, for him to forgive all his enemies, to take the tenderest leave of wife and family, and steal unobtrusively away by life's back door whilst his creditors keep watch upon the front—is to them naught. Man's first duty to his fellow-men (they say) is to succeed. Those who hold such exalted views of life as to be above making money by methods disagreeable to their own pride, should be above owing it. Fine feelings, lofty principles, elevated ideals—these things are well enough for those who can afford them, but they have got to be paid for as surely as suites of furniture and Persian rugs.

They were right. Oswald Holmroyd admitted they were right. In the weeks before he died, no creditor could have passed more scathing judgment on his conduct than himself. He acquired almost a creditor's clairvoyance for seeing facts, who had till then seemed blind to everything but absurd ideals. What justification, indeed, is to be found for an architect who looks only at the sublimities of his calling, and who maintains the stubbornest resistance to adulterate its standard with the mercantile dilutions of the age?

What justification is to be found for an architect who

will not cry his abilities abroad nor hook fingers through the button-holes of mammon, nor conciliate councillors nor flatter aldermen nor hob-nob with the jerrybuilder. He had had a business and he had lost it, chiefly because of inability to reconcile his theories with life. He saw how success was to be won, and shirked it, always hoping that the principles he held by would prevail. More than once, in the bitterness of failure, he told his wife: "The time is gone by for architects. Houses are turned out by machinery, nowadays. There is no work for me.... I ought to have been a butcher."

The cry was but another plea for his incompetence. He would have succeeded no better as a butcher, no better as a baker, no better as anything at all in this degenerate world that refused to sink to the world's own level in order to draw inglorious profit from it. For there were architects—architects on every hand around him—who did succeed. Though, as he asked himself at times with the bitterness that disappointment breeds even in the gentlest of us: "But *how*!"

How? Ah well! Certainly not by leaving their abilities to a busy age to discover for itself. Not by drawing elevations of imaginary cathedrals during idle hours, or working out competitive designs for workhouses and public buildings, to be implicitly submitted in accordance with the published terms.

Perhaps marriage—such a perfect marriage as his had been—did not evoke the best in him. This atmosphere of love and sympathy might be too enervating for a man temperamentally tender. A wife of sterner mould was what he needed; a home less dear to him than the one he had. And perhaps, too, their dispositions—his and hers—were too unfortunately akin. His faults were her faults; his failings her failings; her sympathies and weaknesses his. She was too prone to take his side, to justify in him what prudence had done wiser to condemn. She half suspected

it, indeed. The dead weight of a too-loving wife (she dared to hint) had handicapped him. For her and for his children's sake he had essayed to do too much, to furnish them with comforts and a home beyond his means. They should retrench; give up this house that had been so dear to both, sink their pride; face life afresh on a lower level and with humbler eyes. The fateful topic, long imprisoned in their anxious looks, was forced to their lips at last. For the first time in his wife's knowledge Oswald Holmroyd buried his head in his hands with a dreadful gesture of despair and told her: "God forgive me Margaret. We can't go on like this. I am a failure. Help me to face it."

Who could have helped him better? Here was the true wife for the hour of trouble; the help meet for man. If she had once doubted him as he begged to be doubted he might (who knows) have suffered his defeat more easily. But she never doubted; she never accused. The faith that she had in him cut deeper than reproaches. It was the world's fault (she said) not his. But the time would come (she pledged her word) ... the time was coming.

All too true. The time was coming indeed, more quickly than either of them knew. It was not the first time that Death had rapped at the door of Oswald Holmroyd's life, and to that earlier summons charity might attribute not unjustly all those latter misfortunes that the architect charged against his own disposition, for he never regained ground after that first illness. Neither of them had been forgetful of the dreadful promissory note impending. But they had tried, both, to believe the bill of infinite renewal. And because it was not pressed upon their notice with the regularity of those other and earthly bills they dared to think at last their creditor indulgent or the liability annulled. Death is such an unmethodical creditor, to be sure, who, presenting his account for instant settlement and terrifying the wretched client almost to the point of payment, will waive the claim for years. But this time the

debtor entertained no doubt that the debt was to be collected. Death's call, at such a moment,—disclosing a visage not much darker than life's own—might be considered even opportune; a refuge from his own reproaches and an escape from all enemies. Death, in this selfish guise, revolted him. "I feel such a coward," he told his wife, "to leave you at a time like this."

For her this speech, monstrously distorted through the tears with which she looked back on it, presented always the blurred gigantic outlines of an epic. Here was death rapping at the door; beneath, at the street corner and all around, those other creditors planned and whispered. And she, defending the stricken man, strove with all the love within her to overcome his adversaries—even death—and free the citadel from its investment. She failed, of course. Death is no respecter of love, courage or womankind. And creditors are creditors. However much the gravity of Oswald Holmroyd's condition might be concealed from friends—always scrupulous respecters of a trouble likely to make demands on them—from these it could not be hid. From lip to lip the rumour spread. Specialists had been consulted. Oswald Holmroyd's state of health was critical for all parties concerned. Another creditor was in the field. A meeting without delay must be arranged. Some settlement must be arrived at.

The meeting was arranged, that took place (out of regard for his condition) in the dying man's dining-room, where wrapped in his dressing-gown with a shawl round his shoulders and propped in an arm chair the dying man awaited it. Never would his widow forget that assemblage of dark-faced men that gathered about the house in twos and threes, short of the appointed hour, and made one ringing of the bell admit them all. She watched them from the curtained fastness of her bedroom window, with a rage at heart. Love is so illogical, so partizan, that it never once occurred to her to consider these as fellow creatures

animated (conceivably) by a love not less intense or illogical than her own, which led them here in pursuit of their rights for the defence of homes as dear to them as this to her that their entry threatened.

When the last of them had been admitted, and the preliminary coughs and shuffling of feet had sunk into a silence that seemed to suffocate the very heart of the house, she stole downstairs and took her station by the door,—to bear her share of suffering with Him; to clasp her hands and watch and guard. At first the voices, subdued with consciousness of the disadvantage under which they laboured in presence of one so obviously stricken, rose no higher than a murmur. But after awhile, when the spectacle of the sick man had lost its first impressive novelty, and a sufficient consideration seemed (for all practical purposes) to have been paid him, a warmer current crept into the tones of speech. Here and there voices rose abruptly above the level of other voices, as if impatient of the arbitrary limits within which their common grievance was confined. One such voice—a soulless, toneless, grudging, disputative voice, surmounted the murmur from time to time as if actuated by intent to pitch the proper note of acrimony for the meeting. Its mere inflection, aiming to accuse the sick man in his chair, smote her solicitude across the lips, and made her draw sharp breath with a gasp of pain. More than once, agitated by a surging impulse to rescue her loved one from his martyrdom, she threw out her hand towards the door. She heard the tired accents of her husband's voice, and the accents of this other voice that negatived or scorned it, and mingled voices contending among themselves, and the sound of hortatory knuckles rapped upon the table. And regardless of the promise given to her husband, her outraged love could no longer be denied. Without reason, without warning, driven solely by the power of her woman's impulse, she turned the handle of the door and

made herself an active partner in his shame.

Her entrance, during one short moment, struck all this animation to stone. She had a perception—too instantaneously vivid, like the lightning flash, for her startled senses to register—of faces curiously turned, of figures seated and statuesquely standing, of arms extended, of a table littered with hands and papers, of a meeting transfixed in the supreme instant of intensity. At that, the force which had impelled her thus far failed. Her eyes sought and fastened on the figure of her husband, whose lips shaped her name reproachfully: “Margaret!” From him she turned her gaze again upon his persecutors.

“Please.... O! please,” she begged with a voice of shocked entreaty. “My husband is....” “Dying,” truth might have added. “Dying” was the dreadful word she stopped at, the word her helpless eyes confessed to them. “My husband is ... seriously ill” she said instead. And obeying the dictate of a sudden tenderness that burned almost to ferocity in its desire to share his martyrdom, and prove to these hard faced men her husband’s worth, she passed all swiftly to his side, drew his head into the protection of her arms, and kissed him.

2

More dreadful than his death were the mocking obsequies and bitter days that followed. While that serene countenance still shone from its pillow her security seemed unassailed. Here, with her beloved dead in the pure atmosphere of perfect sorrow, she felt raised above all reach or soil of earth. From the world’s petty frets and cares; from ignoble griefs and mean anxieties, she arose in company with the dead to this impenetrable halting place betwixt the grave and heaven. For three days, undying, she knew death; tasted its sweetness and tranquillity.

All this the funeral destroyed, rending pious illusion

with the rough hand of reality. The body, so passionately guarded, must be given up at last; this fine sorrow must suffer admixture with coarse and worldly impurities; with the muffled tramp of undertakers' men; with the creaking hearse, the oscillating coaches; the long, interminable progress through Clothton's busy streets—brimming with laughter and animation, prying curiosity or stolid disregard —into the dismal area slowly reached, whose heart was a minute-beating bell; where, beneath the inken tower of a sooty church, amid a congregation of soot-blackened tombstones, his last home yawned for Oswald Holmroyd at the foot of an untidy mound of yellow clay.

To the mercies of this sacred place, wrapped in the mantle woven from the belchings of a thousand chimneys, heart-rent and reluctant she left her dead. Reality, doffing his specious habiliments of woe as utterly as the sexton did, stood in readiness to remind her of her obligations to an altered world. The mourning coach, rolling on its too responsive springs, cast aside all pretence of consideration for wounded feelings. Freed from the obstruction of a hearse it bowled homeward with the gay inconsequence of a hackney cab. The uplifted blinds admitted a profane and staring light into the so-recent sanctuary of sorrow, and revealed its soulless void. Voices, that had for these three bygone days been murmurous, mere attenuated shadows of themselves, became voices once again, impinging too hard upon the flinching ear of trouble. Everything that had made death bearable, or sorrow sacred, Reality removed. These were mere drapery for the dead (Reality reminded her). To-day there was no dead to be considered. No corpse availed her now. She was alone. Hard facts, not sacred visions, confronted her.

She was Oswald Holmroyd's widow, and the lesson of his death was wasted on her, for she was very proud. Pride had been in large degree the secret of her husband's unsuccess. Pride had killed him. The pride that reposes too

confidently on its virtue like a strong man on his strength; that thinks sheer merit should succeed; that will not use its elbows to assist ability, or push when pushed in turn. Out of stern duty to the insolvent dead must she be doubly independent now. She asked no aid of charity. Her children were her own children. She should delegate to none their care and love. Such independence was very reassuring to relatives and friends, whom it enabled to take credit for an aid rejected, and to retire with the most praiseworthy forebodings, submitting to a woman's foolish obstinacy that nothing short of the gentlest persuasion could have overcome. Nor did her independence stop short of taking charity alone. It went to lengths that caused her late husband's lawyers to shake their heads and show a very laudable concern for this misguided creature whose quixotic duty sought to rise superior to the law. The law had been framed, they wisely pointed out, for just such contingencies as hers. Oswald Holmroyd's creditors would benefit under the law to the precise extent that the law allowed them,—which (though they could not yet commit themselves to say for certain) might conceivably amount to ten shillings or twelve and sixpence in the pound. Since her late husband's creditors were prepared to take advantage of the legal position so far as it affected them, surely it was for her to do no less.

But pride would not listen to such advocacy. Her senseless loyalty to the dead insisted on making his debts, like his faults and weaknesses, her own. The memory of that dreadful toneless voice, monotonizing its reproaches in the dead man's dining-room, stung self-respect to madness. Those dwindling hundreds of surviving pounds —the last remnants of her own small fortune, too sadly drawn upon in recent months—must lend their aid to free the dead man's name from the least whisper of insinuation. She would take shelter behind none of the law's invidious distinctions. Into their lives no division had ever entered.

He and she had been but one. Their joys, their sorrows, hopes and fears and consolations—all were shared. His defamation was her shame. She would not hide behind a debt-dishonoured grave. To the last pound they should be paid, some day, these dues, if God but gave her life and strength.

And so her pride prevailed, and the thin lips of the law, that a satiric faint smile frosted at the edges, deferred to this perverse acceptance of needless obligations, saying: "If she wished it so, Mrs. Holmroyd." And she wished it so. And it was so.

And when the last dread formalities of death and debit had been confronted, Oswald Holmroyd's widow took her two children by the hand and turned her back on all that earth held dearest to her.

The act seemed like desertion of the dead. But there was no alternative. A hundred reasons rent her heart and strengthened her resolve. The very friends that might have helped necessity offered a stumbling block to pride. So long as she remained in Clothton would she perpetuate a living memorial to his failure. It could not be. Her pride and love were all in conflict; each cancelling the other. She must go where humility might be free. Where love might sink upon its knees, if need were, on any service consecrate to him.

3

Through every act of woman's life there flows a hidden stream of instinct whose winding course the footsteps of her conduct follow. Her acknowledged reasons are but the straws that float upon it, marking a current beyond their guidance or control; a current that gives direction to her logic, and force to her convictions, flowing uninterrupted from the primal source of her sex.

So, the reasons that led Mrs. Holmroyd to Daneborough

were, in man's conception of the term, no reasons. For she knew little of this quiet market town beyond its name. But the name attracted her. Once, indeed, in his latter moments of despondency her husband had inclined to utter it, saying that this place (perhaps; who knows ...) might have served them better than grimy Clothton. Other reasons too there were, all of them drawing hallowed authority from death. An old, well-trusted servant in her mother's days had come from Daneborough, or near it, returning ultimately to her native place to die. Now, by that communicable grief that holds out hands to every other grief, and kindles tapers of affection above remote and long forgotten graves, the feeble glimmer from this distant tomb assumed a brightness almost stellar in its comfort. Those lips unsealed from their long slumber spoke again to Mrs. Holmroyd as they had familiarly spoken in earlier days. Led by such unexceptional woman's reasons, therefore, she brought her family to Daneborough.

At first she took refuge in apartments, till sorrow should be weaned; till it should be made conversant with its altered whereabouts, and learn the character and lineaments of the strange place from which its living must henceforth be won. These rooms were in the Horse Green —which is the open space abhorrent to maternity when Daneborough's horse fairs are being held, and quadrupeds with malice in their rolling eyeballs and puffed nostrils, and murder in their iron heels, thunder riotously up and down like hurricanes on four legs, attached to pigmy grooms by precarious headropes, threatening the brains of infancy. For anybody but Sorrow, with two small children to support, these rooms—albeit small—might have been comfortable enough, for only infrequent passers-by darkened their flat windows, and across the open square in front of them stood but the rampart of a stone-coped wall between the eyes of sorrow and the vista of illimitable green it sighed for.

But for sorrow these rooms were cramped and hateful. Clean, after their manner, they might be. Nevertheless, to sensitive nostrils they exhaled the alien odours of the lodging house: an odour of necessitous stuffs and hard-used furniture divested of all individuality by years of loveless service, hinting too dreadfully at her own future still unperceived and feared. Worst of all—though she knew this not till later—these rooms were graduates in sorrow like herself. They knew what it meant to have lost a good husband. Why, to be sure, the very best; whose virtues had been imposed on, and whose life had been laid low by qualities which, out of a native gentleness of soul (it seemed) he had lacked the necessary firmness to subdue. He had been too good to people; he had studied them too much, and himself too little. These rooms understood what it was to leave a good home. They had felt the same as Mrs. Holmroyd when fate summoned them to surrender their lovely large kitchen and two gas stoves and come here. They understood only too well what it meant to come down in the world. If their husband had only listened to the advice they gave him they might have been driving their pony trap to-day, for it was a good House they had to leave, possessed of an old established custom, with an off license and an excellent back door.

One might have thought that sorrow, companioned by a sorrow so identical and sisterly, should have found a well of healing in this providential place. But no. As though sickened with the proffer of a sustenance too familiar, her soul revolted. Sorrow possesses a religion of its own. That her dead husband should be reduced to partake of God's hospitality in company with a promiscuous gathering of eleventh-hour repentants, affronted her faith. Surely there must be differentiations even in the guest house of God.

At base, perhaps, the matter was no more than the competitive jealousy of widowhood in regard to the respective excellencies of dead husbands; one of whom

advocated the champion claims by assertion, the other by a shocked and shrinking reticence. But here, at least, she could no longer stay. The licensed victualler committed to the cemetery more than twenty years before she rose up to make this transitory home untenable for a husband so beloved as hers.

And then, too, she suffered a soul's hunger for some place particular to her own loves and hopes and doubts and sorrows, that she might consecrate with the hallowed name of home. Can it be conceived in these enlightened days, when woman has been educated to consider Home as part of her martyrdom—can it be conceived with what passionate longing the mother of Oswald fought to gain freedom from the odious bondage of publicity, even in so pedestrian a place as Daneborough, and gather round herself and children once again the pure untroubled ether of a home?

By such emotions animated at last she came to choose the house in Springbank Gardens that we have already seen by night. Not that Daneborough was for ever wrapped in mist or municipal fog. By day the Gardens—that at an earlier age were said to have been beautiful enough, but that the incursions of successive hordes of builders had driven into servitude behind brick walls,—shewed a not uncheerful face to the enquiring sun. Where Mrs. Holmroyd dwelt the houses were of three storeys, single-fronted. Higher up the street they dispensed with a story, and the bay window of the front room receded into a flat and inconspicuous sash. In one of these latter, by rights, she should have been. These were the houses (her prudence told her) meet for sorrow such as hers. But still the influence of early training clung about her, and impeded her actions like a wet skirt. Pride was yet recalcitrant. It stooped a little to necessity, but would not kneel. Those womanly and worthless reasons, thronged with memory and surgent with emotion, rushed up to

oppose reality. A dreadful optimism persisted through all she did. She must not choose a house too modest or too small. The handicap of such a dwelling-place might prove too heavy for her children. At all costs she must strive to keep before their eyes the memory and standard of that better, lovelier life from which (but for a while) they were exiled; of that best of fathers lost to them.

So the house in Springbank Gardens was chosen with the energy of fear, lest the precarious white paper, pressed like a wan forehead against the uncurtained window-pane, might vanish ghostly on a sudden and leave them homeless yet again. Out of the cherished wreckage of the old home was this new home made; from the familiar furniture of her girlhood's days, pensioned by love when Oswald Holmroyd offered her his heart. The Piano on which she had practised so many wretched, happy hours as a girl. The cradle of mahogany in which her mother and her mother's mother had rocked in infancy, and she in turn; and both her children after her. The old bureau belonging to her grandfather, and those Victorian ornaments devoid of any value outside the market of affection that had been relegated to a pious limbo at Clothton and were now restored, with tears of reconciliatory joy, to the intimate bosom of the new life.

True, in the first revulsive throes of pride she had talked of sacrificing even these, averring she would take nothing from a home which was in substance hers no longer. But after the first paroxysm of her pride more temperate counsels had prevailed. The law, if occasionally it oppress, does sometimes succour. And if the legal confidant of her dead husband charged—as to the last unwavering six and eightpence he ultimately did—for such service as legal skill could render to Oswald Holmroyd's widow, it was to him at least she owed the restoration of this precious furniture. For he had said: "I think you are making a great mistake, Mrs. Holmroyd. Why should you sacrifice your

own property of such trifling financial consequence to the estate, and of such sentimental value to yourself, when there is no need to do so?"

The presence of these familiar and treasured things—as we may be sure so astute and versed a lawyer must in his legal wisdom have foreseen—helped to fortify his client; to make the strange walls beneath their strange crude wallpapers bearable. At least, life was not altogether broken; not altogether severed from the sacred past. These old things reconciled her to the new. In course of time they would transmit their quality to the unfamiliar features of the house and permeate all its spaces with the spirit of intimacy and love.

4

The new home at length completed, she turned her energies towards the new life. It dismayed her.

For she had believed, when she broke free of Clothton, her chiefest difficulty was escaped. She had believed that Clothton's bricks and mortar and busy streets, its friends and memories and deterrent prides were the true realities contesting purpose. Coming to Daneborough, her love—it seemed to her, for those dear sakes involved—was capable of any sacrifice, was capable of doing anything. But now she was here; now she had made remote acquaintance with the human elements to be encountered: the eyes to be endured, the lips to suffer, the suspicions to wince under—she realized what philosophers of the practical school have long ago acknowledged: that Anything is Nothing. In the struggle for a livelihood gentlefolk with fine feelings suffer a heavy handicap against ungentle folk without. The willing doer of Anything is at a discount, pushed aside by the hardened specialists in Something whom no shame deters. And doubly does afflicted widowhood stand at a disadvantage before the world. Widows with encumbrance, in reduced circumstances, are notoriously to be

apprehended, as all well-wishers will allow. Especially in the first year of their widowhood does it behove the cautious to beware. They darken the doorway; they suffocate a room; the odour of their weeds is left behind them when they go, a depressing atmosphere of tears and sooty crape and deathbeds.

O, she was aware, this widow, in what small repute her state was held. She had herself—now God forgive her—in better days lent doubtful ear to pleas of suppliant widowhood, divided betwixt pity and suspicion. To-day she was become the thing she judged. Distressed gentility, offering vague service, inspired not confidence but doubt. She must pursue a firmer course than that; take up a bolder attitude. The inspiration followed on resolve. She would inaugurate a school.

Yes. A school. Not a pretentious school, straining the sinews of her purse and knowledge. A small and manageable school at first, till learning found its feet. Here was an enterprise not unbecoming in a lady, susceptible, even, of a certain dignity. Her very widowhood, indeed,—although she shrank from putting so exalted an estate to profit—should be of value to her here, affording anxious parenthood a surety of her seriousness in the supervision of youth.

Trepid, and with an anxious heart, she set about her task. To some, such labour had been light enough; to her, it cannot be described how onerous it was. In one regard, indeed, it was a sort of death she underwent, that all her vital processes resisted. Before she could be reborn to the new life she must first die to the old. She died at last, expiring on a selected doorstep, before the eyes of her two children.

Painters, poets, philosophers and theologians of all ages have depicted death with the gusto for a topic to their liking. Generations of writers, being happily at the time alive, have described the experience of dissolution with

such circumstance and detail as would convince the dead, were the dead only open to conviction. The majority of these have agreed to make Death terrible. In this, perhaps, they follow a wise instinct, for if Death be not terrible, what is he? A mere ethical nonentity, indeed, to be scorned by adults and flouted by children. There is, to be sure, an increasing company of writers who, for some reason, conspire to regard Death as a sort of super-sentimental tax collector, who comes with soft music, wreathed in persuasive smiles as beautiful as seven and sixpenny chaplets, to collect the earthly imposts due to heaven. He is conceived so gentle that little children, unafraid, take him by the hand. Old people, at the sound of his footsteps, sit up eagerly in bed to greet him. Let these two schools dispute among themselves. If Mrs. Holmroyd's experience is anything for living people to go by, then is Death indeed a most prodigious thing. She surged up to the house door on a tidal wave of blood, that seemed for the moment as if it had force enough to flood her to the very gates of heaven. Then, as her fingers sought and found the bell, the tide relapsed and left her impotent and stranded, the victim of a violent tinnitus as if a hundred sanctus bells were ringing in her brain. The world about her reeled and swam. This was death at last. No mere matter of wills and won'ts, of likings or dislikes, but the inexorable Must that puts courage and cowardice on one common footing. The door of the new world burst open. The old life was dead. Her children, watching hand in hand, saw their mother engulfed in this strange house, withdrawn from sight as utterly as if the Lord had sent a flaming chariot drawn by fiery horses down from heaven to fetch her.

Yet such is the innocence of youth, and so little effect have the most prodigious happenings on the untutored mind, that they saw nothing untoward in their mother's disappearance. She had merely paid a call and been admitted by a fresh-cheeked maid in streamers.

5

After this she died many times. She died daily. That there might be no doubt about her death, no way left open for withdrawal, she took official leave of life in the columns of the Daneborough Mercury, under the heading EDUCATION. Thus:—

> LADY. (Widow) patient and conscientious. Fond of children and teaching. Seeks limited number of scholars to educate in small home school along with own children. (Boy and Girl.) Every care and attention. Thorough religious instruction. For terms etc. Apply Box X. Y. Z.

Here was as painful a decease as any that anybody could ask for, entailing pangs to purse and pride alike. For it meant she must undergo an odious dissolution behind the gauze blind in the dingy office of the Daneborough Mercury, and suffer the agony and shame of having her announcement read aloud, to herself and two attendant advertisers, in the clerk's unmodulated voice, as if it were a police charge against her. The clerk, an adolescent who had apparently overgrown his strength for deciphering script, stumbled heavily over Mrs. Holmroyd's handwriting, asking "Patient and What? Patient and Scientific?" She corrected him with a flushed face, —"Patient and conscientious ..." loathing herself and the word that drew such odious notoriety on them both. "Oh, Conscientious, is it!" decided the clerk, whose critical faculty thus enlightened showed a contestant disposition. "It looks more like scientific to me." And, indeed, saying "Stop a minute. Let's make that plain,"—went over the prospective schoolmistress' imperfect handwriting with a pencil. That done, he concluded his recital of the charge, devoid of mercy or of punctuation, and laid down the black-edged sheet upon the counter at last, the better to take stock of his victim's general state of mourning and personal demeanour, asking her with his eye fixed upon her upturned veil if "she were the Party." She said she was. "Six shillings," said the clerk. "Will you call for them or have them sent by post?" He referred now to hypothetic

replies. She hesitated. “Postage will be extra” the clerk threw in. She said (on consideration) she would call. It had shocked her to note the dreadful havoc wrought in the morale of her purse by the abstraction of six shillings. Truly, the costs of death are almost prohibitive. And no letters of condolence acknowledged the obituary notice. She wondered why. She wondered if she had been wise to emphasize her widowhood, that dubious state too publicly associated with the distressed disposal of furs, cutlery, linen underwear and vertical overstrung pianofortes in ebony and gold. Or if the qualities “patient and conscientious” might not have been better expressed by “energetic and strict disciplinarian.” It had been, perhaps, imprudent to introduce so disputable a topic as religion into her advertisement. But the mischief was done. Nothing short of another six shillings could undo it. Newspaper defunction (plainly) was not for such as her. It was an expedient unprofitable and protracted. Education—like all life’s best and noblest things—was at a discount: a frail plank to clutch at in the drowning moments of necessity. Obviously it could not sustain the heavy advertising expenses that might be justifiable in the case of lodgings (which heaven forbid) or character delineations from handwriting, or second-hand harmoniums. It seemed plain she must henceforth repose her hopes exclusively on doorsteps and bell-pulls.

For such a quest she was but ill-prepared. She lacked the confidence of the born canvasser. Too many considerations oppressed her, she realized. Too many obstacles from the standpoint of those on whom she called. She was too ready to condone excuses; to justify refusal with a smile.

Moreover, she had no system. No system, that is, reducible to any standard of masculine order. But, sweep this test aside, and she was actuated in all she did by a system as complex and as baffling as woman’s own. She never visited the same street on two successive days, or

rang at more than one house in a single row, on a single afternoon. She showed a woman's partiality for contradictories; journeyed each day in a direction diametrically opposite to that pursued the day before. And far from any attempt to fix her personality on the consciousness of Daneborough, she deliberately varied her goings and comings, to the end that she might escape a too continuous publicity. If these houses requited her human confidence reposed in them and received her kindly, she raised her veil. Otherwise she kept it lowered, and took her leave in a crape seclusion without seeing or being seen. And yet, her utter lack of business aptitude apart, few women were better qualified to plead. For when her veil was lifted it revealed a singularly sweet and gentle face; the brows depressed by the weight of recent sorrow; the eyes perhaps a little weary, as though too tired for laughter; the whole countenance lit up by a smile like diffused sunlight, that softened and sweetened it without ever sharpening to that hard and brilliant beam in which the rays of malice or uncharity begin to glitter. Wherein the smile interpreted its owner truly. For Mrs. Holmroyd's nature stopped short of that assured development which does not scruple to enhance its stature by mounting on to the depreciated qualities of others. Nor had nature lent her the voice for saying unkind things. Had such a voice ever said them they would have been no longer quite unkind.

Timidly she prosecuted the canvass of her little school. At each fresh door her fears revived; her heart beat heavily beneath her deep black veil.

Yet the task, so hard at first to set in motion, once moved gathered a measure of momentum that made it easier. Imperceptibly the system that her sorrow so resisted, seeing no help in her, inaugurated itself. It stereotyped the procedure of her calls. It taught her—as it teaches all who have to live by asking—the comfort of a formula. No longer, in attendance on the opening of doors,

did she look vaguely to the spirit to lend her words; she had them all rehearsed and ready. Nor did her formula fail her within doors. This autocrat system, once admitted, governed her completely; coerced her with phrases that she had scarce believed her courage capable of uttering. She must apologize for troubling them at such an inconvenient hour.... But.... And so.... Having to undertake the education of her own two children.... It had been suggested to her.... That she might accept a small number of young pupils to share their studies. It would be company for them and added interest for her. She loved teaching. And children. Her little son was eleven; her daughter eight. Far too young, she felt, to send to school just yet. Therefore she had ventured....

Thus the system ran, imposing itself relentlessly upon her so-called better feelings. For it is only consonant with Mrs. Holmroyd's character that the discovery of her growing acceptance of this system should fill her with concern. She saw in it the ominous break-up of all true womanhood, of all fine nature. So long as grief remained a dumb and helpless thing, without leadership or direction, so long was it hallowed. But when widowhood admitted the dictatorship of worldly wisdom: when griefs grew practical—what, O! what was likely to become of character? She feared her own had suffered hurt already. She went so far as to enquire of her suspected conscience if these daily visits were being paid out of submission to necessity alone. "Am I," she asked herself with pious concern, "Am I growing to like them? Am I being led by a love of distraction; the curious desire to pry into strange houses; the secret longing for conversation? By any motive, in a word, except my duty towards Him and Them?"

It was a question on which she arrived at no definite conclusion—save to Hope and Trust Not. For one thing, about this time the slowly ripening fruits of system came to

maturity, and all her conscientious scruples were thrown into confusion by the acquirement of a first pupil. Such success seemed like a shaft of sunlight divinely sharpened to pierce sceptic doubt and sanctify courage. Success, whatever may be alleged against it by reformers and fanatics, has an effect not less stimulative of faith than of business energy. Within the week Mrs. Holmroyd's zeal was rewarded with a second pupil, and before the wave of uplifted thankfulness had left her, with a third.

It was a school already. Before such a token of prosperity how could she hesitate longer? Without delay she bought some benches for her school to sit on, and two scholastic tables of soft white wood. Providence, in a friendly mood and greatly pleased with Mrs. Holmroyd's gratitude, guided her footsteps to the window of a broker's shop where a glazed and jaundiced wall-atlas of the ancient world awaited her on a roller with pink tape, at eighteenpence. Also an imposing ebony ruler somewhat too heavy for the adroit rapping of knuckles, but useful to point with. A basketful of scholastic books, graded in size to suit all ages, completed the bargain. Filled with a new importance Oswald and his sister took turns at carrying these proud possessions home.

6

Thus the little school was founded. The varnished atlas went upon the wall in the room on the first floor that overlooked the street. The new planed benches flanked the two deal tables and contributed the bleakness apposite to learning.

Here, day by day, from half past nine till twelve, and from two o'clock till four, Mrs. Holmroyd directed the education of her charges. Of these, including her own two children, there were a dozen all but one. They constituted, for the most part, a mixed and sickly lot; the fragile

residuum of families too backward or too delicate for ordinary schools. There was the little daughter of a confectioner in the Market Square whose eyes were weak, so that their close application to books was out of the question, and she must sit stanching them with her handkerchief, gazing tearfully from her place as if she wept a parent dead and dear. There was a feeble little fellow, too, the son of a neighbouring plumber, who had swallowed part of his father's soldering outfit in infancy, and forthwith ceased to grow. There was the little daughter of a nonconformist minister, suffering from a respiratory affection that to-day would be unhesitatingly identified as Adenoids, who, furnished with a slate and pencil, was convulsed to the verge of suffocation in the tracing of a single pothook. Each seemed to suffer from some ailment or a habit. The manners of most were tainted. They came from homes of humble commerce and of petty trade, bringing with them their heritage of congenital idiosyncracies: the shameless sniff, the hiccough unabashed; an assortment of mannerisms as varied as it was unlovely. Mrs. Holmroyd feared the influence of all these imperfections on her children—but what was to be done? Such horrible habits (when providentially there should be more of them) represented the daily bread for her and hers. She must not quarrel with the crusts that fed them.

They fed them barely; they did not feed them quite. Twelve scholars all but one (and two of these her unprofitable own) at thirty shillings a quarter payable in advance or in arrear, or by arrangement, subject to a reduction for sisters, brothers, near relatives, or even friends, do not yield a superabundance. The afflicted offspring of the plumber, made sickly by the inconstant piece of metal in its fitful travel through his system, would absent himself at intervals from school. Despite the most solicitous enquiries on the part of Mrs. Holmroyd, who

wasted not a moment after school was over in calling with her children at the plumber's home, these absences (consolidated like the plumber's time-sheet) reappeared at pay-day in the guise of a plea for reduction. Similarly, the eyes of the pastrycook's daughter which debarred her from participating to the full extent in the advantages of Mrs. Holmroyd's instruction, furnished a tearful reason for rebate. The daughter of the nonconformist minister alleged the closeness of the schoolroom as a cause of headache; the nonconformist minister's wife wondered, in making reference to the subject, if Mrs. Holmroyd thought her room was really large enough to serve the cause of education. The cold acquired by another scholar was charged against the schoolroom's too prevalent fresh air. Only widows with two children and no means beyond the margin of a precarious deposit at the bank can realize the awful responsibilities incurred by the keeping of a school, where every sniffle overt or concealed is viewed by apprehension as the possible precursor of an epidemic calculated to bring scholasticism to ruin; where life's edifice, in short, is reared on no surer, stabler foundation that the whims and healths of fitful children.

Thus was she, by a natural transition, led on to pork pies and sausages. For it seemed clear that this home could derive no adequate security from a dozen assorted ailments. Some other method must be thought of. Her pride must make some further sacrifice if necessary. And as it was necessary, her pride came down to pork pies and sausages. Not ordinary pork pies. Not ordinary sausages. But pork pies and sausages such as had been made in more prosperous days, by the faithful servant of her girlhood, whose footsteps to Daneborough she had followed. Such pies as Hannah once had made—if Mrs. Holmroyd could but recapture the recipe—possessed a soulful flavour, a sanctity of their own. The finest ingredients—care, skill, love, clean hands and a strict conscience—were requisite

to make them as Hannah used to make them, and as they should be made. These qualities Mrs. Holmroyd had. Best of all, the pies might be baked in her own kitchen; in the bosom of her family. Composed faithfully to formula, and offered tentatively to the world at first through the medium of her little school, within a month Mrs. Holmroyd's pies and sausages had achieved at least a minor reputation. Every Friday evening when her scholars were disbanded for the week, and the spirit of learning in the deserted schoolroom drew the mantle of intensest silence about her shoulders and subsided into academic abstraction, the kitchen fire was coaxed to glow.

And every Friday, tea being over, the little Oswald donned his cap and gloves, and, when the dark nights needed—which, to his mother's anxious heart in the variable pork-pie season they generally did—his overcoat and knitted muffler, and made the round of all their customers, filled with manly self-importance and many fears.

BOOK III

THE CHORISTER

1

ON the Friday following the Mayor's historic party, Oswald brought his weekly rounds and obligations to an end and returned to the gleaming kitchen with his plenished pork-basket a full hour in advance of custom.

Nor, with the vista of sixty golden minutes in front of him, could he be persuaded to sit or rest, or do more than loosen the knot in his muffler. Neither the Swiss timepiece

on the kitchen mantelshelf nor the Parish Church clock had yet declared the half hour before he tugged the ends of his scarf again and protested that unless he set off instantly for the Choir Practice he must be late, albeit—according to all canons of gentility—it was yet a whole quarter of an hour too early for the son of the best of fathers to be abroad; home being the proper place for every true gentleman (as Oswald knew) which he would never consent to exchange for the promiscuous openness of streets without good cause. Streets, despite their superficial attractiveness, were tutors of wickedness; preceptors of ill habits. They spat; they swore; they fought; they whistled, smoke and drank. The life that flowed in them was no more fit to be imbibed unfiltered than the turbid rain water straight from heaven that ran down gutters. The spiritual function of streets was to make home more precious; its dear ones dearer. Let them be walked through, when alone, with an upright head and steadfast purpose. For streets, like passages in scripture, are dark and difficult for the lonely student to traverse, needing wise commentators to explain their meaning, or render them suitably obscure. All of which Oswald knew (of his own experience) as well as well. By their very fascination he was aware of the deadliness of streets, that pulled at his companionship with a score of intimate and too persuasive hands, begging him stay here and play there; look at this and listen to that; to do, in a word, the things that so many of his age and sex did systematically, and with such obvious delight. For the avoidance of which dangers when attending choir practice he was accustomed to leave home no earlier than was necessary to bring him with punctuality to the vestry door —truth compelling the melancholy admission that vocal service in the house of worship affords no proof of gentility, and that many of those who lend their lips for hire to the praise of holiness are not, as Mrs. Holmroyd was aware, fitting companions for sons of the best of

fathers.

Indeed, the proposal that her son should be reduced from the dignity of worshipping his Maker from a cushioned pew to the status of a chorister, cut straight through the tissue of her devoutest prejudices as deep as her tears; and not the less so because the blow to her spiritual pride was struck by the senior curate of St. Saviour's.

Such a thing, her troubled pride reflected, would never have been hinted in the best of fathers' time. For at this period her pride had not yet descended to the baking of pork pies. It was still very homeless and susceptible, as the Curate must have perceived, for he made haste to repair his blunder by assuring Mrs. Holmroyd that he had not intended to suggest her son should sing in the choir for a consideration, but as an unpaid, voluntary member. Already (he was at pains to make clear) the choir of St. Saviour's was happily strengthened by three or four sons enlisted from the families of parishioners of standing. A doctor's son, and a lawyer's son, he instanced—to adduce no more. In answer to her question he rather fancied there was no architect's son—as yet. But the Organist (Mr. Rencil) was, he said, a gentleman, a charming fellow, and a musician of accomplishment in whose hands Mrs. Holmroyd might entrust her little boy without a moment's hesitation. Indeed, to Mr. Rencil's persuasive charm and the high esteem in which his character was held, the curate acknowledged the infusion of this better class of singer at St. Saviour's to be largely due. It was having (said he) a marked effect upon the conduct of the choir and the devotional fervour of the congregation, and was contributing not a little towards the elevation of the worship of God.

The argument, planted in such unquestionable soil and nurtured with so much piety, bore fruit. That the senior curate of St. Saviour's recognized how distasteful any consideration of money must be for gentlepeople reduced

to feel the need of it, offered a great consolation to pride. Pride being so inconsistent as to reject the solid food essential to its support and resolutely subsisting on slops, Mrs. Holmroyd was more grateful for a few words meaning nothing than she would have been for a little money meaning a great deal. Perhaps, after all (she told herself) here was an opportunity. It might be providential. Oswald's musical talents might be quickened.

And on the next Sunday but one, palpitating under the importance of his novel vestment, Oswald took his place as a chorister in the chancel of St. Saviour's. It was noticed, when to the solemn reverberation of the organ, succeeding a remote Amen, the choir moved slowly into sight, that the lady in mourning with haste let down her veil, whilst the little girl by whom she was accompanied, drawing closer to her side and plucking her by the sleeve, exclaimed in a whisper of searching intensity: "He's there!"

2

For all Oswald had so much time at his disposal he walked with the urgent air of one for whose business the moments are not too plentiful; pressing forward with his wonted staid and concentrated gait; his whole figure infused with the dutiful self-consciousness that obviously moves by lofty precept and to pious pattern.

The night was of November mildness, draped with a haze not dense enough to hide the stars, that hung enmeshed in it here and there like raindrops in a cobweb, grey and beamless. About this mist was nothing municipal; nothing mayoral. The mayor's party, dead like the week before, and evaporated into the past with the fog that solemnized it, might be thought of on such a night without envy and without a tear. Two columns of descriptive letterpress, with a complete list of guests and several letters on mayoral invidiousness, addressed to the respective editors, beginning tartly: "Sir," and signed "Disgusted," or

"Ratepayer" appearing in the contestant weekly papers, that issued damp and smoking from the press that very morning, marked all that was left of last week's glory. A movement had been instigated (so the papers said) to present the Mayor's daughter with an album containing the photographs of all her guests, which, suitably inscribed and bound in red morocco with gilt edges and a brass clasp, would supersede the family Bible as an object of parlour veneration in her after years. All during the week desultory cabs, rumbling without urgency, had conveyed the bodies of contributors to the local studios, where their altered features were composed into a seemly dissimilitude of life beneath the professional hands of gentlemen who called themselves artist photographers and who were, in point of fact, pictorial layers-out. But these relics of a defunct glory —like the virtues of the dead, that inspired small envy— were bearable. Diluted by time, and converging to no ecstatic beam of splendour on a selected portion of eternity, they roused not any longings. To-night nodded its head as complacently as a tired child in a chair, untroubled by desires. The thick coverlet of last week's fog being lifted, distinguishable sounds even from afar rose up into the void above the sleepy town; the barking of distant dogs, the shouts of playing children, streets and streets away; the harsh thud of the steam hammer, falling with forty ton force on soft metal at the railway works; the clank and snort and reckless clash of colliding buffers from the shunting yard, where agile engines singled and assembled trucks with the vigilance of sheep dogs; the slow, stertorous breaths of some labouring locomotive, harnessed to half a mile of groaning mineral waggons that crept reluctantly behind it—always a feature of the night-time at Daneborough.

That Mrs. Holmroyd drew comfort from the clearer night and lack of cabs only showed how feminine and limited was her understanding of the nature of the outer

world her son walked in. With the removal of the dense and pall-like fog a protection not less than a menace was, for Oswald, withdrawn. If the fog had brought nearer the terrors of the unseen and the unknown, the absence of it left him at the mercy of the known and seen. The very outlets of the street he lived in held terrors of their own. There was the street made formidable with a public house called the "Breadloaf," largely frequented by wives of the district, that to unobservant eyes differed little from the dwelling houses it adjoined, save that it thrust out a lantern at the end of an iron bracket above an open door from which the coarse breath of laughter blew in gusts at times, redolent of beer. Out of this same door Oswald had with his own eyes seen reeling men emerge who staggered blindly as they walked, and sometimes fell, and rose again with horrible alacrity, drawing blood away from crimson mouths on the back of their hands. How can the full horror of such a spectacle be communicated to adults? Gentleman or no gentleman, such a moment is not one to stand on ceremony or reflect at length upon the best of fathers. Away! Away at once on feet of desperation, flogged forward by the awful menace of that bleeding mouth and crimson knuckles, to where, breathless and palpitating, the fugitive can halt to gather up his disassembled self and collect the remnants of gentility out of the seething turmoil of impressions. Every figure met thereafter bears resemblance to the drunken man. Even the lamp-posts rock and sway. The whole world is rendered unstable. The stars, dislodged by the turbid beating of the runner's heart stagger about the sky. And what a fearful colour is red. It is a terror of itself. No logic can stanch the bleeding of that mouth.

And but a street or so beyond there lies another zone of awful possibilities. It is of stone. A gloomy building, many-windowed, railed off from the roadway by iron railings, whose entrance two great iron lamp-posts guard.

Even the lamps exert an awful influence of their own, for they are round. Round, in this conjunction, is horrible. It means inexpressible things. It means, for one thing, that this is an Infirmary. Precisely what Infirmary means is yet (for Oswald) unsure. But people are taken in and out on stretchers, and crowds follow them, and sometimes women wring their hands, and children gaze with their mouths open, and dogs get trodden on, and the spirit of calamity seems to be let loose, and dire fears fasten on the heart, and life grows dim and dreadful. Oswald has been sucked into the vortex of the crowd that swept gentility along with it to the iron railings; and he has gazed enthralled at the globular lamps and at the plate-glass windows beyond, reflecting blank horror from their blanched panes; and he has been whelmed in the comments of the crowd—every mouth a running source of terror. The victim is dead; the victim is not dead; his neck is broken; his neck is not broken, it is his leg. It is not his leg, it is his arm. He has been run over; he has fallen from a scaffold; he has been drowned; his head has been taken off at the railway station; he has committed suicide. A woman, informed by neighbours on insufficient evidence that the victim is her husband, transfixes the crowd with a scream. The scream goes through Oswald and curdles his blood. He awakes to a consciousness of no stomach and a trembling at the knees. He is hemmed in by mouths and pulled at by strange hands. Filled suddenly with awful fear of the hydra-headed danger called a crowd, he remembers the best of fathers and fights his desperate way out from this contestant mass of curiosities.

How can the terror of the tramp of awed and urgent feet attendant on a moving stretcher be conveyed to complaisant, upgrown understandings? How can one tithe of these living terrors be expressed? They cannot be conveyed; they cannot be expressed. Dreadfullest of all, they must not be expressed. Why! To the sons of

gentlemen even words can be more terrible than mortals are, and silences more shudderful than sound. Sheets thrown sportively above the head, or lying limp upon the mattress, or a coat suspended, motionless, on a peg behind a door, or folded garments laid upon a chair in some room where the stealthy fingers of dusk begin to grope and stray, —these are no insentient harmless things as adults suppose, but plenipotentiaries from the kingdom of the terrors. They feel, they think, they live, endowed with a monstrous mobility that can make itself dead men, hanged men, drowned men, murdered men, or any sort of men to be afraid of, in a moment.

Aye! In a moment can they. And the sons of gentlemen, bound by the solemn covenant of their calling, must be secret as the grave, affecting to see the features of this altered world still tranquil and serene, as their mothers see them. Evening falls, and the bedly hour draws near. The good night kiss can be no longer delayed. The stairs, assuming eyes and a physiognomy, lurk maliciously in wait for sons of gentlemen. Would to God they had never passed the Infirmary, or seen blood wiped from a red mouth with the back of a hand, or brought themselves within the clutches of the Law.

For the very policemen whose leisured tread brings comfort to adults, and whom the upgrowns pass with an indifference bordering on contempt, lend dread gravity to street corners. They stand like carved monuments beneath a gas-lamp. A pang goes through the breast at sight of them. Conscience, startled by their immobility that is so sculptured and accusing, makes a hurried inventory of its crimes. How shall they be confronted? By what demeanour is their august indulgence to be won? By humility (it seems). By a self-effacement almost abject. By a stoppage of the breath, by a clenching of the palms, by a stepping on the toes, by a supplicative saddening of the mouth, by a supreme faith and trust in heaven.

His course beset and modified by such considerations, the little Oswald pursued his way to church. He boldly crossed the Horse Green (made complex with many cries) to its darker and deserted side, and pressed forward to where through a narrow neck or stricture it led him into upper Hill Street. To the right of him—already visited this evening—lay St. Lawrence Square. Doctors lived in Hill Street too, as brass plates of the most noble proportions testified. Here was St. Saviour's Vicarage, for whose due acknowledgment (being a chorister) Oswald always composed his lips, in passing, to a processional solemnity, in case the Canon might by any chance be at the window. Over the road, obliquely facing it, stood Mr. Rencil's house, through the Venetian blinds of whose upper windows golden bars of light shone forth like glorified staves of musical notation. Perhaps Mr. Rencil's self was there behind this gilded latticework of lines and spaces.

Something like a thrill passed through Oswald's bosom at the sight of this emblem of high musicianship, to which he elevated an allegiant and venerating gaze.

3

"Hey!"

Oswald was passing the historic livery stables, between the reverberating archway and the pump. Stripped of mist and imagination they showed less than half the size of the week before. The pump, as if conscious of being but a hack plaything for local infancy, hung its ball head and drooped its wooden handle like a seaside donkey during those sad spare moments when it has leisure to reflect upon its lot. Trivial little lights, peeping out of doors and windows of no importance (that had been too cowed to dare the darkness and show their craven faces the week before) now made friends with the evening and held companionable colloquies one with another, as neighbours do.

"Hey!"

The interjection, that had been successively a whistle, catcry, cockcrow and dogbark (all which, the hurrying Oswald had an uncomfortable feeling signified himself, and being so obviously pitfalls for gentility had resolutely ignored) came abreast with much breathing and a palpable hotness of cheeks, and fell into step with the object of its pursuit in such an ostensible manner as to make further preoccupation on Oswald's part impossible.

"Didn't you hear me call of you?" the newcomer enquired. "I've been calling of you all the way from Hill Street corner."

There was a friendliness in this accost so oblivious of social disparities that Oswald, shrinking from falsehood, acknowledged it with an interrogative "Have you?" into which he infused as much surprise as conscience would allow.

For this, that fell into step with him, was one of the dangerous influences feared by motherhood. This with the plaid kerchief round its neck, breeched in hybrid corduroy continuations that were too short for trousers and too long for knickerbockers, was a fellow chorister. Not a gentleman chorister. Not a volunteer, like Oswald and the doctor and lawyer's sons. A paid chorister, who wore a white apron and oversleeves and lurched round Daneborough each Saturday with a big meat basket on his arm and hip, and nodded to Oswald with intimacy even when Oswald was accompanied by his mother; never raising his hat, but singling Oswald out for invidious salutation as if mothers and sisters were irrelevant; pitching an amicable "hello!" in a voice that had no more respect for gentility than a flung stone has for a front window, and even whistling after Oswald with intent to ratify a treacherous compact of their choral brotherhood behind his mother's back. Whether this boy constituted a

friend or foe Oswald could never quite decide. Equally he seemed at home in Oswald's company, or the company of Oswald's fellow-foes, adapting his conduct to which ever society he chanced to move in at the moment; at times deriding gloves and a clean collar, and mimicking the hateful accents of gentility; at other times accosting gentility like an old and favoured friend.

And yet to-night, despite all complications of companionship this presence brought a certain comfort with it, assuring Oswald that the hour was not so utterly fantastic as he feared, and that he would not find the church foundered in darkness, all its gates shut and padlocked, the practice over, the choristers departed. Indeed the new arrival chided Oswald for his haste, enquiring: "What's your hurry?" and being met with a tepid reference to time, flouted this ancient proprietor of scythe and hourglass as one unworthy the fear of any but aged people and the very young. By the side of his undaunted comrade Oswald felt a pleasant sense of security. He walked, as one might say, in the shadow of a mighty hunter, armed at all points against Time's surprises and alarms; and this lion of life's jungle grew harmless as a lamb. The satisfaction Oswald derived from this aspect of their companionship caused him to sadden at the thought that the chorister in the corduroy extremities was no gentleman, and that any lasting friendship between them was impossible. A melancholy reflection that took on a deeper significance when the boy by his side, plunging his right hand for a space into the depths of his pockets, brought forth a palmful of coppers for Oswald's wonder, with the remark:

"See them? Do you know how much there is there?"

He clapped the second hand over the first and shook the coins vigorously, ostensibly as an aid to Oswald's judgment, but not less (if the truth be told) for the pleasure of appraising the weight and volume of his own property.

Oswald shook his head.

There was (it seemed) over a shilling's worth of coppers. All of it made by wassailing. Since Tea. He had only just left his sister in order to come to the choir practice. He went wassailing (so he told Oswald) every evening now. Except Saturdays—when he didn't get finished while eleven. Last year he and his sister had made over ten shillings apiece by wassailing. As soon as the wassailing season closed he followed Christmas boxing. By the tone of his enthusiasm it appeared that the prospects of the present season were excellent. The market feeling was optimistic. He hoped, in fact, to exceed all previous records. Anticipations of success so kindled magnanimity within him that he asked why Oswald did not go wassailing too. For the moment it almost seemed that the proffer of a partnership was pending and Oswald dropped his eyes.

For in that moment—and it was no more—a veritable progeny of suppliant thoughts, the lawless children of his fantasy, trooped around reason; importunate, persuasive. After all ... was wassailing forbidden to a gentleman? Was there no means by which wassailing might be constituted licit—like singing in the choir, or canvassing for orders for pork pies?

To test the case, Imagination transformed itself into a wassailer. A gentlemanly wassailer with a white collar and spotless pocket handkerchief, who showed so clean a face and rapped with such refinement that not a house but welcomed him within its doors to sing. Coppers, yes, and silver bits should line his pockets, and his mother's eyes should gleam with pride when he drew home from his wassailing each night and she saw the riches his lips had won. Tears almost started to his own eyes for very pride of this imaginative second self. The vision, bursting on him with a splendour wellnigh unbearable, was shaken to its foundations in the same instant by a startling disruption of

externals. In place of the composed features of his companion that seemed to wait on his response, he beheld a countenance ecstaticized with the revelation of a new and preponderant interest. It was the sound of noisy youth, prosecuting its reckless pastimes in the near neighbourhood of St. Saviour's and it acted on the corduroy trousers like a trumpet call from heaven. Casting Oswald's companionship to the winds he brandished both arms as an aid to motion and uttering the cry:

"Hey up! It's them. Come on! Hello! Ooli-ooli-ooli-ooli!..." dashed off in the direction of the sounds that had so stirred him.

Chagrined and solitary, the little Oswald withdrew into his empty mansion of gentility, that echoing habitation of many windows looking wanly out on the life by which it sees itself assailed; at once a prison and a home. There were times, and this was one of them, when the melancholy truth that gentility spells sacrifice oppressed him. Wassailing, Christmas boxing and errand running on Saturdays were roads to riches. In those detested corduroy breeches was deposed more wealth than gentility stood possessed of after months of pride and self-denial. Lovely as it seemed at home, beneath the glamour of a mother's influence and eyes, gentility was no attribute to take abroad. It stood at every possible disadvantage before the world. To the pushful it must cede; before the clamorous it must be silent; generosity must it show to the selfish; to the unscrupulous, honesty; justice to the unjust; compassion to the hard; pardon to those that wronged it. It must assist the poor and be too proud to take a penny from the rich. O, what a noble thing it was! How beautiful the world, if everybody in it might be gentlemen.

4

By this time his reflection had brought him beneath the consolidated darkness that was St. Saviour's, obtruding its

vague bulk into the sky and displacing some of the higher stars with its steeple. The church stood within its own acre at the junction of the Hunmouth and London Roads, occupying a space of ground whose shape approximated to the superficies of a flat-iron, being bounded at the broad western base by iron railings and on its two converging sides by a low stone wall topped with a triangular coping, apex uppermost, of small service to sitters. By a sunken wicket in the southern wall, opening on a path that led to the side porch and thence, past a stone trough and a mouldering scent of dead flowers, to the vestry, Oswald dutifully took his stand.

Save for the internal glimmer of the church and one cadaverous lamp, half sunk into the stone above the vestry door, whose pallid flame lit nothing but itself, intensifying darkness and casting deceptive shadows on the steps it was intended to define, the churchyard lay in unalleviated gloom, resort chiefly of the dead and sundry amorous couples, the latter silent as gargoyles and motionless as monuments, that haunted the shadow of the churchyard trees, beneath which (upon the southern side, where Oswald stood) they propped its leaning wall at intervals with the regularity of buttresses. He wondered where they came from, these mystic forms at once nebulous and solid, and where eventually they went to, and was as reverent in heart towards them as to the sacred edifice itself and the serried stones of which he stood in such venerating awe. Among these latter the more venturesome of the paid and early choristers were busy. The church reverberated with cries immoderate and profane, that rebounded from its stony buttresses as if they had been balls in a fives court, and the scurry of footsteps over the gravel as their owners rioted in the obscurity of consecrated ground, using ledgers like vaulting horses and so corrupting the decorum of this venerable company with their evil communications that the whole churchyard was shortly in commotion; headstones

leaping like humans, and marble crosses starting up with both arms menacefully extended to cry "Hey!" with the abruptness of choristers. Now and again some particularly audacious assault upon the vestry door brought forth the verger, irate and imprecatory, to pit his power against the ribald darkness that mocked him; declaring to the void—

"Now, I'm not going to waste my vocabulary on you. I know who it is. And Canon shall be cognizant an' all before the night's out. Don't think I can't certify you. I can. I can certify you all. I want no colloquy with any of you, and if I've got to come off this step you won't forget it."

Whereat the gravestones masquerading as choristers vomited derisive laughter, and a Gothic pinnacle consecrated to all the virtues disgorged an obscene word.

The close proximity of eight o'clock was marked by a multiplication of churchyard cries. Soon, in addition to the demoniac spirits that debauched the gravity of St. Saviour's tombstones, there gathered an independent cluster round the little iron gate where Oswald stood. Some of the more impatient among the newcomers, made frantic by the clamour of their kindred beyond, as dogs are irresistibly drawn by barking, scrambled likewise over the wall. Others instigated independent games in the roadway, which they alternated fitfully with more audacious sallies upon the gate and summonses of the invisible verger by name:

"Mester Prestwich! Hey-up! Mester Prestwich!"

Ultimately a shout went up like a triumphant sky rocket, tailed with ribaldry. It notified the opening of the vestry door, distinguishable as a rectangular stain of yellow beneath the blue-lipped lamp. This gave birth to a shadow whose increasing definition revealed motion, and being too dignified for gravestones (which leaped and danced outrageously) identified itself at last with the verger's

impressive person. The keys of office jangled authoritatively in his hand and any lingering doubt about his identity was dispelled at close quarters by the fact of his drawing breath with audible difficulty through a snuff-clogged nostril.

His nose, although this hour of darkness did small justice to it, was by daylight a most episcopal and proper organ. One might say without irreverence, it was an archiepiscopal organ. When it led the timid to their pews or headed a processional, or beckoned hesitating strangers out of the porch into the sacred edifice, its dilating nostrils seemed to elevate themselves above the common odour of mortality and sniff the delectable odours of heaven. But for this nose, indeed,—which the common race of choristers lacked the vision to appreciate—it is said the verger would have forfeited his holy office long before the little Oswald came to know him, for he was (if truth spoke truly of him, which truth is not notoriously prone to do) an individual in his earthly parts most spiritual, in his spiritual portions most infirm. Certain it is, that the verger's resignation was more than once accepted by the Canon before it had been tendered, with Christian finality: "I am very sorry, Prestwich. But this time I cannot overlook it. I have the welfare of this church and the feelings of this congregation to consider. If you are incapable of performing your duty it is all the more necessary that I must not fail to discharge mine. I have no alternative but to accept your resignation."

Which Prestwich translated to parishioners in the following terms.

"I've done my best to temporize with him, but I can't put up with the Canon any longer. He's too heterodox. Too heterodox by half. There's no reasoning with him. I've done my best to keep things together, for the sake of all parties concerned, but if church comes to the ground—as it's sure to do—Canon has nobody but himself to blame. He can't say I haven't capitulated with him. I have."

Whereat he would take the opportunity of bidding farewell to such parishioners as had any reputation for sensitive purses—either in the church or at their own homes, whither he betook himself for the purpose—saying it would be the last sad occasion on which he would be able to speak to them in an ecclesiastical capacity and it was not without deep deliberation that he had decided to sever his connection with a church and cause so dear to him. "I've given the Canon every chance. I've put up with more than most men in my position would have suffered, for the sake of worship and the congregation. I know the temper of the congregation better than he knows it. In my exceptional opportunities for intimate colloquy they repose confidences in me that they'd think twice before depositing in him. If I go, it won't be long before they follow. Church will be empty before many weeks."

And the next Sunday, that was to have marked his absence from St. Saviour's, and the church's first step upon the road to ruin, saw him floating through the aisles and transepts in his sable robes of office as before; balancing his wand and elevating his mahogany nostrils like the distended louvres of the swell organ at full. For that ceremonious member, more securely than the verger's verbal applications, prevailed over the Canon in the end, as an irreplaceable asset to the church's dignity. The Canon's self admitted: "Prestwich may occasionally drink, but the fellow has a manner with him. If only he'd kept himself in hand he might have aspired to a cathedral." The resignation was remitted. Prestwich was given one more chance. He sought the congregation's private ear, and called upon it in its private home, to announce the Canon's uncompromising surrender.

"He's come to his senses, you'll be thankful to hear," the verger communicated. "I had a long Conclave with him on Saturday, and he earnestly begged me to reconsider my dictum for the sake of the church and the parishioners. I

told him I was willing to make what sacrifices I could to augment congregational harmony and promote the unity of worship, but I could allow no interference with my office neither from him nor nobody. If that's interfered with all Authority goes. There's an end to cohesion. It's the stultification of worship. We might as well be nonconformists at once, and done with it. I've told Canon so. He's given his word, and so we shall see how he goes on."

From which it will be remarked that the verger possessed a literary wardrobe of no ordinary capacity for the clothing of his ideas; years of association with dignitaries of every degree having in fact afforded him an opportunity to pick up a marvellous secondhand assortment of verbal boots and shoes, shirts, vests and oratorical garments in general (some of historical association, others nearly new and scarcely shop-soiled) with which to mantle the dignity of his calling and garb sentiments worthy of his nose. Whether he always wore the garments of this miscellaneous wardrobe wisely, or in the nicest taste, is another question, but such stress did he lay on the importance of possessing what he called "a Vocabulary" that his indictment of a fellow-creature could be formulated in no more scathing fashion than an accusation of the lack of it. Whether the accused chanced to be a rival verger at St. Gyles's, or a disfavoured cleric, an officious churchwarden, or a male singer addicted to pomposity, the judicial question invariably resolved itself into; "What is he?"

"A man of no vocabulary!" said the Verdict. "A man you might listen to for a whole day and never hear a word come off his lips you didn't understand. Without a vocabulary no man—I don't care who he is—can call himself complete. As Archdeacon Oliver said to me one day in one of the frequent conversational colloquies me and him used to have together; 'Words, not Raiment, make

a man, Prestwich. Words are power. Words are character. Words are life. By a man's Vocabulary may we know and judge him.'

" ... But what," the verger would enquire with indignation and despondency, " ... what is the good of vocabularies in a place like this? They're wasted. They're thrown away. They're not worth a ha'penny to anybody here. They lead to no preferment. There's more than half of mine I can't use. People wouldn't comprehend me if I did. They'd stare. They'd beg my pardon. I've known them to do it. People that wears the cloth and nominates themselves Clerks in Holy Orders."

By now as a result of crowding round the gate and consequent displacements, the little Oswald—although the first comer to await admission—stood on the outer fringe of the throng attendant on the verger's dignified approach. The paid choristers, betraying an incomprehensible desire for entry, fought among themselves for precedence before the bars of the gate, as if they were caged animals and this were feeding time. Some of them even attempted to retain priority by laying hold of the wicket, whereat the verger (displaying wonderful accuracy and promptitude) rapped their knuckles loudly with his key, saying, in his nose-congested voice:

"Now then! Let's have no colloquy. Don't let me have to tell you twice!"

This done, he paused and fixed the impatient choristers with an eye which, even in the darkness—was felt to be terrible. An eye that seemed to deputize for his Vocabulary and produced a marked effect upon the crowd, converting the contestant choristers into statuary and freezing them to silence. On which, as if at last accepting these evidences as sufficient subscription to his office, the verger stooped and with a not too hasty hand undid the lock.

5

Only the lights above the choir-stalls were burning. The great nave, yawning inimitably beyond, seemed as if cut off from the chancel ogive by a velvet pall. Pulpit and brass lectern were wrapped in calico, that imparted to the familiar contours swelling beneath these pallid coverlets the vague immensity of the unseen. The church was a vast repository of whispers. The dropping of a hymnbook multiplied itself startlingly throughout the interminable building like the clapping of dead and apathetic hands. Coughs prolonged themselves into a chain of dismal groans as if the spirits were in pain. Not a sound within the chancel but was challenged by a dozen sounds beyond. It seemed the dread occupants of the outer tombs and mouldy crypts below were gathered all together to attend the practice. Oswald, feeling how inadequate were the powers of one gentleman to cope with such forces as these, shivered in his heart to think the verger had occupied this church alone, before yet Light was.

Now, in quick succession, the heavy echoes of the vestry latch resounded through the church as belated choristers trooped in, hot and breathy. The verger, immobile against the sanctuary, propped up from the altar-rail with an arm, turned his austere profile towards the vestry and fixed each newcomer with a look of interdiction that would have deterred any but a chorister, and checked even those. The harmonium, dislodged from its lair behind the organ by two of the senior boys, was borne into the chancel and deposited before the shrouded lectern under its layer of weekly dust. The psalter and hymnbooks, stacked chin-high like a pile of plates in a waiter's arms, were distributed throughout the choir, violently snatched at and fought for in transit, and much used about the head and person; old copies being repudiated and forcibly exchanged for new; new copies being rapidly converted into old through the heat with which their ownership was contested.

"That'll do now!" the verger's voice declared. "I've told you once. Next time I've got to address any of you it'll be digital." The organist's factotum, or right-hand man, appearing in the chancel during this sally, tendered to the indignant Prestwich a mild and ingratiatory "good evening."

"I won't have it," the verger said, ignoring the salutation as below the level of his outraged dignity, and an infringement on authority during the active discharge of itself. "And so you know. If there's any recurrence of it, out you go. That's my Dictum. It's quite immaculate to me Who you are. I'm not going to waste my time with you."

The folds of this ample indignation being momentarily relaxed as if Prestwich were on the point of disrobing injured dignity, the factotum found encouragement to renew his greeting: "Good evening, Mr. Prestwich," to which the verger recognizing the voice and deeming it of insufficient consequence to justify the least modification of his demeanour, contributed an abbreviated "evening," that sounded more like a reproof to interruption than an acknowledgment of courtesy.

"And so I've told you," he repeated. "I've told you all. I'm responsible for the preservation of this fabric and the behaviour of everybody in it and I won't stand the least dereliction of my office—not from the Archbishop himself." Saying which and decided more by the impediment of his refractory organ than by any satisfaction of an authority vindicated, he returned to the sanctuary, where he took up a position commanding the choirstalls in readiness to reassert himself again if necessary.

Meanwhile the organist's factotum laid on the harmonium the heavy parcel of church music wrapped up in brown paper, with which he had arrived encumbered, and taking ingenious advantage of the verger's authority, grafted his own upon it (though in a voice carefully modulated so as not to compete with what the irate verger

said) telling the boys; “Order, now!” and “Silence!” in a sort of apologetic undertone, obviously fearful lest Prestwich might resent anything suggestive of an infringement of his rights.

He was a lean and awkward youth, in an overcoat too small for him. By occupation he was a clerk in the Railway Mineral Office but by predilection he was an organist, and in a tentative and surreptitious sort of way his hair struggled to express this aspiring part in him by a redundancy about the neck, albeit the chief effect produced on the unmusical who viewed him from behind consisted in a certain greasiness of collar. Towards the end of every six weeks or so this opulence of lock became most noticeable; but provincial barbers unacquainted with the lives and habits of the Great Masters, are an unimaginative race, and at the end of this period he would appear one night at the practice with his hat sunk down to his accentuated ears; a neck so shorn and meagre as to suggest decline, and, thus transmogrified would begin his painful progress to musicianship from the bottom of the ladder once again. In return for musical instruction of a loose and interrupted sort he served as Mr. Rencil’s vade-mecum and handy-man; mended the church music; wrote some of the more formal of the organist’s letters; kept the choir books and did those semi-menial services which are prone to tumble to the lot of enthusiasm—enthusiasm being frequently no more than Folly, bound in calf and glorified with gilt edges. At times, sustained by the illusion of having an organ lesson, he would blow for the organist during a whole evening, and copy out tattered voluntaries into the late night hours as an aid to the understanding of musical composition. To his friends, or rather to such of them as had no contact with the choir, he spoke of himself occasionally as Choir Master and Deputy Organist. But he was in reality neither of these, although he fulfilled the servile offices of both, carrying all the heavier music to and

from the organist's house, bearing urgent messages to the Vicarage, running errands and supplementing the blower's services when required.

At unimportant week-night services he did, indeed, deputize on the organ bench occasionally, perspiring minims out of his forehead, and touching sundry pedals with a tentative and cautious toe as if they were explosives. But he was seen to greatest advantage when unlocking the panels of the console with the key his master had entrusted to him for the purpose; or when, with profound understanding, he pushed all the stops home after the concluding voluntary.

Having this evening unlocked the organ and made impressive and judicial selection of stops for the Master's use, he put up the humble harmonium lid and drew forth the white wood baton from its place of repose on the black keys in readiness for Mr. Rencil's use, and first tapping the music desk for the surreptitious indulgence of his own authority, besought the choristers to find the psalms for Sunday.

"The Psalms for Sunday!" he proclaimed in a voice so startlingly imitative of the absent organist as to bring the blushes up to his very hair. Anxious to expunge this flagrant act of plagiarism he added in tones by contrast supplicative and contrite: "Come along now. Don't let's waste any more time. Mr. Rencil will be here in a minute!"

6

Amid the ruffling of psalter leaves and the clapping of heads with them, and facetious appeals to the Deputy:

"Please Mester Wembling, what day'll next Sunday be?" succeeded by such stereotyped replies as "Good Friday," "Bank Holiday," "the forty-fifth of last January," with their consequent retaliations and the dexterous doubling up of psalters too confidingly held open in unwary hands—all of

which, under cover of disposing his own pages the deputy tactfully ignored; taking pencil notes of the chants and hymn tunes from the rough copy drawn from his breast pocket in the organist's handwriting—the Organist himself arrived.

His approach, between the clicking of the great latch and his appearance in the chancel, was sufficiently notified to the observant by the transformation in the verger's demeanour, who, having first fastened on the vestry door a gaze of renewed and concentrated displeasure in preparation for some flushed and guilty head, exchanged this and his stony attitude for an alert and welcoming posture as if at last he found himself confronted with a presence worthy of his recognition.

Mr. Rencil came accompanied by two boys, sons of the doctor and of the lawyer respectively, each of whom bore a Grammar School cap in his hand; a dog-eared much dismembered mortarboard that Oswald's eyes instinctively looked for and rested on with a gratification almost possessive. To the paid and corduroyed choristers this mortarboard constituted an object of envy and traditional hate. To Oswald it was an object of soulful emulation; a bond of learning and gentility. Some day—that dim, delectable some day awaiting wistfully its turn behind the throng and pressure of these more competitive, immediate days, like Oswald's self behind the crush of ruder selves that dispossessed him—he was to wear such a cap, and go to such a school, and acquire great wisdom, and make himself worthy of the best of fathers. Some day, too, he was to have music lessons from the organist of St. Saviour's, whom both as chorister and prospective pupil his loyalty proclaimed a musician without parallel, whilst his love, shyly disguised beneath its very yearning for expression, vested him with every virtue. The kindliness of the organist's eyes, the gentle droop of his brown moustache, the attractive softness of his voice, the

sympathetic friendliness of his hand—all stirred Oswald's affections to a degree of unspeakable devotion. For this worshipped hand, so smooth, so white, so marvellously certain of its way and whereabouts upon the keys, had rested more than once on Oswald's shoulder, as it rested now on the shoulder of the doctor's son—who lived (this latter) at the double brass plate in Hill Street where the empty medicine bottles went up the long passage to the red lamp overhanging a door at the end of it, coughing dreadfully, some of them, when Oswald was on his rounds at night; and came down filled, withdrawing their corks and exchanging sniffs and trial drinks with one another, as Oswald had himself observed and greatly wondered at. And the organist's eyes, through the large lenses that seemed to liquefy and soften them, had rested on Oswald's own with a tenderness not often to be met with in the eyes of men. One night, never to be forgotten, he had actually overtaken Oswald beneath the lamp-post that spread its parsimonious light on Canon Quexley's steps, and had (to the confusion of Oswald's wildest hopes) not only recognized but walked with him as far as the vestry door. Inspired by which stimulating memory Oswald ever took the same way, and gazed at the organist's window with an intensity that was already half a prayer.

Mr. Rencil called him "Oswald" too, as he called by their christian names the doctor and lawyer's sons. It was a tribute to gentility, and the proud distinction of volunteers. The paid choristers who thrust forth their predatory hands each quarter's end for the jangling hire that the deputy dropped into them, were unmitigated "Smiths" and "Higginsons," and "Browns" and "Butlers," and so on uniformly through the mercenary list of surnames. But, this distinction apart, no differentiation marked the organist's treatment of his choir. To all alike he showed the same kind smile, the same enlarged and lenient eye, the same soft voice. Even to the shoulders of the surnames his hand

was not a stranger; and yet—with, peradventure, the sole exception of the Canon's self—there was no presence whose mere approach drew the choir to a prompter recollection of decorum. As he came down the chancel with a comprehensive smile of greeting, he stopped before the little Oswald, dutifully erect with his psalter held before him and his lips pursed to attention, and took him playfully by the ear.

"Oswald, you rogue, you weren't at the practice last Friday. In the end we had to begin without you. Why was that?"

A voice suggested: "It was Mayor's Party." Another voice contemptuously said: "Think *he* was at Mayor's Party?" Neither of these two voices was Oswald's. Realizing his embarrassment Mr. Rencil released the boy's ear with the gentlest shake of reassurance, and turned to Oswald's neighbour, distinguished by a crimson flannel wrapping round his neck.

"Now Hopwood, how's the throat going on? Ought you to be singing? I see you have it bandaged still." So, with a word to one or other he approached the deputy and addressed himself to the work in hand.

The practice began. The deputy seated himself upon the blower's rush-bottomed chair, brought from the blower's gloomy purlieus behind the organ, whose depressed seat had been raised to harmonium height by the expedient of old church books and tattered voluntaries. Mr. Rencil tapped the instrument lightly with his tapered baton. It breathed a bronchial response beneath the pressure of the deputy's feet. They soared into the psalms for Sunday. From time to time the organist accentuated the pointing with his baton on the choir ledges or rapped the music into silence at some blunder too palpable for pardon, such as an aitchless "Holy" or a mispronounced word. At other moments he strayed towards the altar, and even wandered down into the darkling nave—far beyond the range of

Oswald's fearful eyes—sublimely unconscious of the unseen terrors lurking in it, from whose profundity his corrective voice emerged, trailing a train of stupefying echoes as if a cab were lumbering up the aisle. Meanwhile, sundry of the senior singers also sauntered in by ones and twos, with the leisureliness befitting honorary members. Their attendance—save on those special occasions when Mr. Rencil requested it—was subject to no such invidious rule of punctuality as brought so many of the choristers to practice in a perspiration, whilst their conduct at rehearsal was exempt from the harassing restrictions laid upon the juniors in front. During the psalms and canticles it was their privilege to remain seated, alternately singing and reverently discussing the latest news among themselves, such as murders, elections and starting prices, and occasionally dropping an admonitory hymnbook on the head of some chorister so unmindful of the respect due to Mr. Rencil and his Maker as to cease singing and lend his ears and open mouth to a conversation not concerning him. Most of these newcomers were obviously arrived at an age when their voices, in the lyric sense, could be of small service to God, but they helped to fill the surplices on Sunday, even if they added nothing substantial to the singing. They still retained, however, the impressive habit of clearing their throats as though the whole responsibility of choral service hung upon them, and speaking in the historic present of a vocal organ nobody ever heard. Still, as church was the only place where their singing would have been tolerated, they clung to it with the persistence of a worthless husband to a good wife, and were more regular attendants than the better singers to whom the world at large offered a wider sphere of temptations. These arrived later, usually towards anthem time, with the dissimulated consequence of Festival soloists, smoothing their hair and pulling down their waistcoats as if in preparation for the platform. All of them were united in their esteem of Mr.

Rencil, for whose personal attentions they vied, and in a general way the choir practice was more regarded as an opportunity for social intercourse and the interchange of words and smiles with the organist of St. Saviour's than as a means of perfecting praise for the worship of heaven—in which department not a few considered themselves proficient enough already. To-night the chief topic of conversation appeared to centre in the health of Alderman Bankett—not the husband, but the father-in-law, of the Mrs. Bankett whom everybody knew—who occupied a detached house along the Hunmouth Road, and had been dangerously ill for some days. Taking advantage of a lull in the singing Mr. Rencil turned to ask the men if there were any further tidings of the alderman's condition. One had heard nothing since midday; another understood the alderman was sinking; a third shook his head. "There's bark in front of the house," interpolated one of the choirboys (not Oswald) suddenly. All eyes turned upon the speaker.

"When was that?" asked one of the seniors, judicially.

"To-night," answered the boy. "Ever so deep.... You could kick it."

"There's been bark there this two days," said another of the men, indifferently. "That's nothing to go by."

"It's a bad sign, is bark," commented the judicial member. "A very bad sign. When it comes to bark for anybody.... I'm very sorry. It's generally fatal."

They were on the point of resuming the interrupted singing when the vestry latch snapped heavily again and a heated chorister, holding his cap screwed tightly in both hands as if he were wringing water out of it, came swiftly into view. For his composure's sake this entry coincided with an inauspicious moment. Mr. Rencil, glancing at his watch and then turning his thoughtful eyes through their gold-rimmed lenses upon the delinquent, said in a voice

whose unaltered softness lacked nothing of reproachful severity:

"You are late to-night, Anderson. How is that?"

Without directly answering this question, but wringing his cap the harder and sliding into place amidst his fellows, the chorister was heard to say:

"Alderman Bankett's dead."

Before the chancel could recover from the effect produced by this portentous tidings, the verger—reappearing dramatically before the altar rails—gave out in an impressive voice:

"It is my painful obligation to announce that Alderman Bankett passed away at 7.45. His death removes one of the oldest members of the Corporation from our midst, and his demise will be a conspicuous deprivation to the Council."

This tribute to the defunct Alderman was ceremonial solely—Prestwich's private estimation of the late Alderman Bankett (whom he stigmatized as an upstart of no Vocabulary) being well known.

The late delinquent, regaining assurance in the sudden alternation of a demeanour occasioned by his news, and seeking to wrest back some of the popularity unscrupulously appropriated by the verger, took advantage of a nasal stoppage on the latter's part to exclaim:

"Bell's ringing for him now. You can hear it."

7

Almost to a man the choir drew its breath and listened. After a while there dropped into the breath-held stillness of the church a dull and leaden sound; the portentous slow pulse of St. Gyles's passing bell. All were visibly impressed, but none so profoundly as the little Oswald, who clasped his book as if it had been a mother's hand and listened, open-mouthed and silenced, to the solemn knell that went through his small frame like a throb from

eternity's heart, accompanied with vague shapes of policemen and blood-smeared men and infirmaries and dark ways home. His own heart reciprocated the throb, and his lips shaped themselves to the unspoken word "Dead!" The word had a deep significance for him. Alderman Bankett, whom he did not know, was Dead. The news was terrible. What tidings for his mother. Instantly he wished the practice over that he might hasten the proud moment of breaking it to her.

The punctuation of the bell, like a full stop awaited, released all these captive breaths which, growing more audible and more difficult of repression, broke out in coughs and converse. Alderman Bankett, though of late an infrequent worshipper by reason of infirmity, had in earlier days paid pew-rent at St. Saviour's. His son—the husband of that Mrs. Bankett in St. Lawrence Square whom Oswald and everybody knew—was one of the present churchwardens, and formed a familiar feature of the service, walking on Sunday behind a stiff outstretched arm holding an offertory plate. The Alderman's death involved considerations for St. Saviour's.

"I suppose, Sir," said Mr. Blenkinsop the Rate Collector, half rising from his seat and addressing the Organist, "I suppose, Sir, we shall have the privilege of the Dead March on Sunday?"

For nearly forty years Mr. Blenkinsop had monopolized a place in St. Saviour's choir on the strength of an apocryphal voice, to which he administered the pitch by means of a pipe kept in his waistcoat pocket for the purpose, as if he fed it from a bottle, and sustained on lozenges that disseminated a melancholy odour of paregoric through the chancel when he sucked them. By virtue of this pitch pipe, and these lozenges, Mr. Blenkinsop (with due respect to the organist of St. Saviour's, whose word he held sacred, and whose utterances, humbly assimilated to-day, were re-issued as

expressions of his own authority to-morrow) Mr. Blenkinsop based his claim to musical consideration. Mr. Rencil, turning his thoughtful glasses upon the Rate Collector said he assumed that the Dead March would enter into the service on Sunday.

"Morning and evening, Sir?" enquired the Rate Collector eagerly.

"We can spare an alderman or two," he declared, "for the Dead March." He wished to make clear that it was the March in Saul he meant. "None of your Mendelssohns or Beethovens!" he exclaimed emphatically. "They aren't in it, Sir. They haven't the grandeur. They don't go through you. But Handel's different. That's what I call Sublime Music. We can't have too much of it. It's an education. It's a Sermon. It lays hold of a man. After he's heard that he can go back to his Sunday dinner with something to think about."

Questions were raised, too, concerning anthems; and the spirits of the choir rose visibly to discussion of services in This and That. Somebody in F, and Somebody in D, and Somebody (jocosely) in L—which drew the accustomed draft of small-beer laughter from the stalls. In the midst of these deliberations the figure of Prestwich suddenly appeared, dusting both palms together as if applauding his own entry, who, drawing confidentially near enough to Mr. Rencil in order that a whisper, guided adroitly by a hand, might reach the organist's ear, announced in a voice partaking of the quality of a whisper only in the outward manner of its delivery:

"The Canon's coming, Sir."

He added, in tones of as much injury as the need for haste allowed, "He says the main gates is to be opened of a Friday, now. Just in case he wants to use 'em. He can't fiddle about with side walks, he says. First it's Lock this one; then it's Lock that one; then it's Lock 'em all. Now

it's Leave 'em all open. There's no materia medica about his goings on. He's too ultramontane to be argued with. That's what's the matter with him. I'm about.... Here he comes!"

The apparition of the Vicar of St. Saviour's at a choir practice, albeit a contingency to be reckoned with, was rare. Accepting his ignorance of music as sufficient proof of the art's inferiority, Canon Quexley concerned himself little with the choral disposition of St. Saviour's worship but left this matter largely in the hands of Mr. Rencil. From time to time, as an act of policy, he showed himself within the church on Friday, to encourage effort and stimulate attendance, but such musical questions as were referred to him on these occasions were briefly dealt with, the Canon betraying no great desire to dwell on matters so far below his comprehension. But that his presence imposed a fresh criterion of conduct was evident by the behaviour of the choir. The choristers assumed an upright posture, taking their books in both hands. The smiles still lingering on the men's faces were extinguished like surreptitious candles in a school dormitory. The Deputy dropped his under lip and expressed respect by a lowering of facial intelligence. The Rate Collector, after a moment's hesitation, rose to his feet; the others limply following.

8

The Canon came into view from behind the choir vestry, still wearing his hat, which as he passed before the altar rails he solemnly removed. He advanced with a careful and calculated tread; a tread deliberately posited like the premise of a syllogism, for use in consecrated places and on ceremonious occasions. Within the fabric, indeed, he walked as he spoke; weighing each step as if it were a word, and lifting up his eyes from alternate feet to heaven and down again, as though in conversation with higher powers. An Inverness cape amplified his portly person

with its voluminous folds, one wing of which (exposing its silken lining) lay negligently retroverted on a shoulder. In the matter of profiles he showed inferior to Prestwich, who in this respect at least might have changed places with his vicar not at all to the church's disadvantage. He lacked Prestwich's classic nose and chiselled nostrils; his own organ being blunted by a certain flaccidity. The bile-tinted cheeks, somewhat pouched and baglike, shook as he walked, and the folds of his neck overhung his Roman collar. But his forehead, most cathedrally domed, reflected the choirlights from its gleaming surface, with the intensity of a halo. He coughed, on coming between the choir stalls, with a resonant cough suggesting crypt-like depths of dignity and understanding; a cough of purpose rather than necessity; the very verger of a cough, imbued with the importance of what it portended, and the function it served. And it served, too, in some sort as an indirect acknowledgment of the choir, which—save for this and a grave inclination of the head, as if some stranger had saluted him—he did not explicitly notice. His countenance relaxed as little to the expression of social amenity as his cape; both, indeed, being rather utilized to eliminate the human element from his person as a thing calculated to compromise dignity and prejudice rank. In his official dealings with the world he bestowed smiles sparingly, and certainly discouraged any interchange of them with the choir, which he condescended to acknowledge purely as an abstraction, like sin, in which convenient form it might be apprehended by the intellect without any derogatory passage through the organs of sight,—these approaches to his private person, indeed, being kept discreetly curtained against intrusion, like the vicarage windows looking on the street, behind whose panes it was but rarely pedestrians might catch a glimpse of his canonical head. They were cold eyes, of a steely colour and a metallic hardness, that seemed as if capable of calculating the small currency of

life to a ha'penny; being by nature more adapted to compute figures than subserve rapture. In unguarded moments, as he spoke or listened, it was noticeable that they strayed from his control like children from the vigilance of a governess, to busy themselves with increasing interest in external trifles—such as boots and shoes and ties and watch-chains and partings in the hair—until, coming at length into direct collision with other eyes not less active and enquiring than themselves, they were peremptorily recalled and withdrawn from intercourse behind their fleshy lids as if these had been the governess's flounces.

As he drew near to Mr. Rencil (whom alone he recognized or greeted) it was observable that he held the pince-nez in his ungloved right hand; a white and flabby hand whose etiolated flesh suggested too much seclusion from sun and air, reminding Oswald irresistibly of the waxen pork exposed to view in Waxford's shop. Mr. Rencil, receiving the august visitor with a look of pleasant, mild enquiry, adverted to the recent tidings, saying he was sorry to hear.... The Canon, with a remote crimping of his eyes and a slight action of the hand and pince-nez, indicative not precisely of impatience, but of an understanding of all the considerations involved in this topic, too complete for words, assented.

" ... To-night. At 7-45. Yes, yes. It was to be expected.... And now, with regard to Sunday...."

No words were expended in reference to the late Alderman's virtues. It might have been, for any allusion made to the subject, that he had not any. The Canon dropped his voice to an introspective murmur that taxed (as it was designed to do) the ears of the listening choir, who, though obviously not included in the conversation assumed an intelligent part in it for their credit's sake. Stray words of confabulation escaped.

"The interment.... Most probably the Corporation....

With regard to Sunday....”

Here the Rate Collector, whose mouth opened each time the conversation blew his way, in a desire to vindicate his forty years’ membership, believed he had entrapped the Canon’s elusive eye at last. He seized the moment to clap a retentive supposition on it, saying:

“I suppose, Sir....”

The supposition fell with strange abruptness as if a hymnbook had fallen on the chancel tiles. The Canon, seemingly aware of some intrusive sound, but blank as to the source of it, turned pained enquiring eyebrows on the organist as though seeking confirmation and enlightenment. Mr. Rencil interpreted the Rate Collector’s petition, whereupon, deigning to acknowledge it from this official source, the Canon answered:

“To be sure. To be sure.”

“To be sure ... the dead march on Sunday, Mr. Blenkinsop,” the organist transmitted. “So that will set your mind at rest,” he added with a smile.

“Morning and evening, Sir?” the Collector summoned confidence to ask, in a voice of larger assurance by virtue of what had been conceded to it. Once more, the question was referred to the Canon’s ear and the canonical murmur vouchsafed acquiescence, saying: “Certainly.... Certainly.” Then, as though feeling that some small comment might at this juncture without impropriety be committed to the choir, he said in a voice addressed to nobody in particular, but dedicated to the service of all: “The late Alderman was for some years associated with this church.”

A vague murmur, apparently appreciative, rose up like incense from the choir stalls at this communication. Many of the members were obviously engaged in thinking what remark they might contribute with prestige to themselves. One said: “Ah! It’s a sad affair to be sure. A very sad affair!” with his face saddened to the expression he judged

most creditable to his own sentiments and most appropriate to the Vicar. Other members, not to be outdone, threw in touching contributions to the sadness of Alderman Bankett's death, like coins to the collecting plate, feeling the eye of the church upon them. The Tax Collector, thinking it his turn once more, assumed a deeply moralizing attitude and voice, and depositing his hand upon the book he sang from, as though to attest religious truth, declared:

"It's what we must all be prepared for when it pleases the Almighty to call us."

If this show of devout submission were intended to recommend the speaker on the grounds of piety to the canonical ear, it only showed that Mr. Blenkinsop's forty years' experience of pitch-pipes and paregoric lozenges within this sacred edifice had been in vain. The name of the Deity, coming from secular lips, brought to Canon Quexley not comfort but a manifest uneasiness verging on apprehension. Already the extending area of the conversation had imparted a restless movement to his glasses and a certain instability to his feet. Wincing under the name of the Lord—as a doctor might do under receipt of a prescription for his cough, tendered by some misguided patient—he raised his canonical hat with an impulse almost suggesting for one moment that he meant to put it on; regarded its outer and inner surfaces, and moved in an atmosphere of exclusive meditation towards the altar. This fit of deep abstraction having brought him safely out of range of the Tax Collector and any indiscreet deities he stopped, gazed fixedly at his feet and at his pince-nez, still out-held, and said over his shoulder:

"Of course ... Mr. Rencil...."

The sentence was not completed. In its unterminated state it furnished an implicate request for the Organist's ear.

"Of course, Mr. Rencil ..." the Canon said again, and balancing his pince-nez began to move once more towards the altar. Canon and organist, engaging in a conversation of greater freedom as they left the choir, passed out of sight towards the vestry door, followed by Prestwich—who, all this while, had not been idle, but associating himself with the canonical person by a studious propinquity, as if the canon's rank were incomplete without him, had addressed various menacing, intense and expostulatory gestures towards the junior choristers, commanding them in irate whispers to "stand up", "turn your head round," "cease talking there," and "be still."

With the conclusive snapping of the vestry latch and Mr. Rencil's return, it was as if a great blanket had been lifted from the spirits of the choir. All were sensible of the honour conferred by the Canon's visit—which they might now enjoy at leisure, freed from the constraints and responsibilities his presence imposed. Mr. Rencil announced that the first part of the funeral service for the deceased Alderman would probably take place at St. Saviour's—though the alderman was to be interred at the Cemetery—and in this case he might have to ask for the assistance of the choir. The interment was provisionally arranged for Tuesday. Would those who thought they could conveniently be present put up their hands?

Various hands, of various sizes and complexions, were lifted into the prominence of the choirlights, some tentatively, others—perhaps ashamed of the spectacle they presented, or repenting a too rapid decision—were, after hesitation, withdrawn. Oswald, not too certain in his mind what it was that was being demanded of these hands, and a prey to the politeness that shrinks from the least assertion of self, did not raise his own hand with the rest, albeit offering the organist a timid and beseeching eye. But Mr. Rencil, counting up the erect palms and finding their number few, appealed to him by name, asking if he did not

think his mother would spare him on Tuesday. Thrilled with this direct appeal, and burning with the loyal desire to concede any service that Mr. Rencil might require of him, Oswald answered in an undertone "he thought she would." The organist turned his smile upon the Rate Collector. "I'm afraid it's no use my asking *you*, Mr. Blenkinsop!"

"If it's to be the Dead March in Saul, Sir," said the Rate Collector—first to the organist, and then to every face in turn of which the choir was composed,—"there's nothing will keep me away."

BOOK IV

THE ALDERMAN

1

COMING or sedately going on his various errands about the town, the little Oswald had occasion frequently to pass a large buff-painted building in the High Gate that stood out with imposing dignity from the adjoining red brick shops and business premises; touching shoulders with them, and yet for all its contiguity aloof and consciously detached, like a constable in a crowd; its spacious breast confronting the ancient Pict Gate, down which it gazed towards the Market Place out of bland and lofty windows with a look at once self satisfied and serene. This was the Mansion House.

Above the curtain of faded red moreen that lent municipal discretion to the lower panes of one of the windows flanking the square, flagged vestibule, the little Oswald had glimpsed in passing, with awe for a spectacle not commonly revealed to youth, the tops of human heads.

Venerable, bald and grey-haired heads, for the most part, of an amplitude larger than normal. These were the heads of the City Fathers in council assembled. The City Fathers, too, in their complete embodiment Oswald had occasionally seen, mounting the broad steps to the Mansion House, or descending gravely to the street. As befitted the standard set up by their heads and the spacious edifice in which they met, they seemed to be a bigger breed of men, as if municipality required a larger race of representatives to serve her. Some of them wore suits of substantial broadcloth and shining chimney-pot hats, and boots wonderfully broad. Their movements were deliberate to the point of being august. They walked in knots of twos and threes, their hands behind their backs, their heads inclined to a common centre, conversing earnestly in undertones and throwing out before each other's eyes from time to time their open palms and outspread fingers. Upon their broad shoulders the whole burden of a borough seemed imposed. It was plain to every onlooker that some vital interest to Daneborough hung in the balance—such as a pump or lamp-post, or the mayor's Port wine.

Among these gravely ponderating groups in earlier days, and even in the days of Oswald's wonderment—though more rarely, by reason of his growing infirmity—the late lamented alderman had formed a frequent figure, beneath the historic silk hat that had dispensed its lustre during three terms of mayoral office, and been doffed as many times to royalty. His massive shoulders sloped grandiosely under the frock-coat of imperishable broadcloth that survived him after more than thirty years of civic sun and rain. His dictatorial cough betokened him a street away, as if a loosened tile had crashed to earth. It made the ceiling of the Council chamber ring, and left noises as of church bells in the heads of listeners unprepared, and formed the alderman's curt substitute for "No" to every applicant, and sole answer to every question where the spoken negative,

implying courtesy, might savour of weakness. This was the same cough that killed him, which lends force to the adage that a good servant makes a bad master. In the Council chamber and in his business it did the work of a more fluent advocate. It crushed opposition; it discouraged hope. But it presumed at length upon the confidence reposed in it. It grew from humble beginnings, like its one-time master, to aldermanic proportions. It disputed his authority. It contradicted him flatly at street corners and in public places, and coughed him down, so that breathless and impotent he must lean upon his stick, or prop himself with a hand against a wall. How or where he had made acquaintance with this despotic partner, nobody rightly knows. But it seems first to have come into public prominence in the very Market of whose committee he was uncompromising chairman when he died. There were burgesses who remembered it in the struggling days of both of them, attendant on an open stall in the Market Place, of such unprepossessing and promiscuous nature as to bid defiance both to hope and definition. This stall, scowling beneath a home-made canopy for protection from the elements, exposed such disconnected goods as smoked and flattened herrings; socks and calico; cabbages and onions; bottles of ink; pens and potatoes; eggs and sometimes chickens. Whether, therefore, the deceased alderman was at this time a greengrocer, fishmonger, hosier or stationer, must be left for later biographers to decide. In all likelihood the stall marked already a stage in the Bankettian evolution, being the apotheosis of a pedlar's basket. But it is from this period that dates his association with history, and that his cough began to make itself felt in the municipal life of the town. As the obituarist of the Daneborough *Mercury* said in a memoir which, even at the present day, can still claim to be the most important contribution to posterity on the subject of Alderman Bankett:

" ... It was doubtless here (i.e. at his stall in the Market Place) that the deceased gentleman first acquired his profound and intricate knowledge of public life and character which stood the Council chamber in such stead in later years, and was given so ungrudgingly to the service of the Borough."

As senior alderman, the death of Isaac Bankett was municipally held to be an event of deepest significance to the town, calling for public commemoration—not alone out of respect to the dead, concerning whom in his private capacity members of the council preserved their own opinions, but out of respect to the living. That is to say, out of respect to the bleeding body corporate from which this limb had been so tragically torn. Theoretically, the town was thrown into mourning. On Sunday the bells of St. Gyles's rang a muffled peal. Hymns and anthems were selected with appropriate regard to the memory of the dead alderman. All the spiritual leaders of the town, pressing gregariously on each other's heels, filled their respective pulpits with mortuary bleatings, stimulated by the fear of rival oratory, and striving in their rhetoric to outdo rather than be outdone. Morning and evening the organs of most of the churches emitted the solemn march, the congregations standing, and on the Tuesday that was to see the mortal remains of Isaac Bankett committed to the vault prepared for them in the big cemetery, the town awoke with a thrill of expectancy as for a circus or a Race Day. All through the morning wreaths and crosses in brown cardboard boxes threaded the streets of Daneborough from every florist in the town, and handed themselves in at the late alderman's side door. As the hour advanced the public ways and thoroughfares began to darken with silk hats and other sombre habiliments of woe, all making for the Mansion House.

Here every blind was drawn. The great door, thrown open, its ancient brass knocker bound lugubriously in a

crape bow, yawned like a sepulchre. Two constables, with the solemnity of monumental effigies, kept guard on each side of the broad stone steps, bringing up their arms in a grave salute as members of the corporation passed between them. Within the sepulchre, wearing his gold chain of office that encircled his broad neck and swung against his massive dewlap like the label on a prize bull, the Mayor received the aldermen and councillors, and the delegates from neighbouring boroughs and public bodies, with many more of Daneborough's elect who, on one ground or another, associated themselves with the corporate state on such ceremonial occasions as saw refreshment laid out on the Mayor's sideboard. Behind the lowered blind of the Mayor's parlour, in the gloom made more gloomy by three dim oil paintings of departed worthies, that loomed obscurely out of their gilded frames upon its walls, blinking in the premature and pallid illumination dispensed by the gaslit chandelier, all the assembled faces wore an unliving look, as if the sickly light were itself defunct daylight awaiting burial. But the atmosphere, albeit subdued, displayed an almost cheerful melancholy betokening a sorrow reconciled. Mourning, recovered from its first stupour, had reached the pleasant reminiscent stage in which the departed alderman, sustained with sandwiches and warmed with wine, was made one of the assembled company. Being yet unburied, decorum imposed complete suspension of the critical faculties. All his rigid acts and sayings were sanctified with the company's content, and dressed in tones of meditative sorrow. The Mayor's attendant, in his rusty black, blended the hush of mourning with the assiduousness of service, suggesting refreshment so furtively to sorrowers that it looked, and sounded, rather as if he were soliciting a loan than proffering hospitality. The aldermen and councillors, freemen of the Sideboard, whose right to refreshment was inalienable, turned up tumblers and tilted decanters with the assurance of

campanologists, helping themselves with a fine magnanimity to Port and Sherry, and pushing the salient angles of sandwiches into their municipal mouths, which they masticated along with memories of the dead.

Whilst this official company discriminated in sandwiches and accepted liquid sustenance at one another's instigation, as if conforming to a pious rite, a growing crowd collected before the Mansion House. The advent of the local fire brigade in full regalia, armed with brass helmets and battle axes, and tramping two and two, sent a thrill through the expectant throng, which was agreeably intensified by the tolling of the minute bells from St. Gyles's and St. Saviour's. A sense of urgency crept into the air that permeated even the seclusion of the Mayor's parlour and made the company round the sideboard restless. Watches were produced and compared; glasses depleted. A low rumble, like faint and distant thunder, announced that the retinue of corporation pair-horse mourning coaches, chartered from the local livery stables to await the Mayor and civic dignitaries at St. Saviour's, was on its way. The crowd, with that not always reliable instinct that comes of numbers, caught knowledge of the restlessness within, and constricted its cordon round the Mansion House. The cry escaped from extended throats:

"They're coming."

And in effect they came. Two by two—led by the mace-bearer in his funebrial robes and black cocked hat, with the gilded emblem of corporate pride upon his shoulder, swathed in crape, the civic fathers slowly showed themselves to sight; pausing for one impressive moment on the topmost step as if to fix the solemn significance of what they stood for on the intent vision of the gaping crowd, before reducing their statures by descent and conceding place of prominence to those behind. First came the Mayor, with whom walked the ex-Mayor whose support

was deemed necessary to enable him to bear the burden of such public sorrow and so many eyes. Behind them, in descending scale of dignity came the aldermen and councillors, on whose heels in turn the salaried officials trod, with a tail of delegates (some of whom bore wreaths) and those burgesses previously mentioned, possessed of a prescriptive title to refreshment at the Mansion House on all occasions of public sorrow. These were augmented in the High Gate by a respectful contingent of petty tradesmen (municipal contractors in esse and posse) among whom the silk hat of solemn circumstances saw itself gradually superseded by the less pretentious covering of felt; and by the lesser corporation functionaries, such as gas inspectors, clerks, carters, road-men, the market keeper on a wooden leg, sundry caretakers, and the Town Crier in a tail coat with electro-plated buttons, a red and white striped waistcoat and a top hat bound with silver braid. The procession, briefly halted on the pavement and marshalled into order by the manipulation of beckoning hands, put forth its feet at last. They were in motion. The long anticipated funeral had begun. History, so recently suspended and inanimate, awoke once more to consciousness and did her part. There were children dragged by the hand or galloped on a jolting arm who would in later days recall participation in this striking scene with pride. The solemn body, elongated incredibly by the process of locomotion, crept sinuously over the pavement. The muffled mace, swaying with portentous rhythm above the sable hats and gleaming helmets as the procession took the hill, was already half way up Hill Street before the Town Crier in his tail coat and striped vest had settled on his length of stride, and the proper leg to go with it. From the flagstones, trodden by so many solemn feet, a slow and measured tramp resounded. To see all these public dignitaries reduced to one common measure of mourning, adopting the same pace, the same

step, consciously or unconsciously borrowing the same bodily movements from one another; looking up and looking down, was a spectacle symbolic and profound. Here, animating one coherent whole, of a shape so undulatory and elastic as to be almost reptilian, was the very root and fruit and flower of Daneborough's municipality. The sum total of importance comprised in this creeping monster that fed on paving-stones at the rate of two feet in every second, was incomputable. Every department of the borough, every feature of the town's vitality had its representative here, in one or other of the oscillating segments of which the procession was composed. Gas, water, drains, macadam, markets and abattoirs—all marched imposingly incarnate to pay respect to Alderman Bankett's clay. So embodied and substantialized the elusive spirit of bereavement was presented in a shape emphatic, and rendered palpable to the meanest intelligence. Those among the thoughtless who had never reflected rightly on the nobleness of an alderman, or understood the magnitude of his functions, had small excuse for any failure to realize these now.

Already a thick scum of the populace simmered round the railings of St. Saviour's, whose western gateway—thrown widely open—was strewn with the rice that had been showered about the shoulders of an early morning bride. Within the sepulchral twilight of the Church a preternatural stillness reigned. Sunk in the pews, or kneeling on submerged hassocks, were many figures—feminine for the most part—who seemed by their attitudes of immobility to have been there for centuries. At intervals the form of Prestwich floated up and down the aisles behind his extended wand, engaged in the divided duty of allocating seats to stray worshippers, and maintaining contact with the Canon—already robed and waiting in the clerical vestry along with the Canon Vicar of St. Gyles's—and the outer world. Eight choristers (of whom Oswald

formed one), spaced out over the choir stalls to suggest sixteen, sat motionless in their bleached surplices with their faces fixed upon the Western Doors; already unbolted and in readiness to be flung open at the first sign. Behind the depleted rows of choristers, displaying a maturer and more spacious interest, sat as many men. The Rate Collector, kindled already with anticipations of the seraphic fare to come, turned the look of a connoisseur upon the organ each time it creaked under the strain of its distended bellows. Already he had exhorted Mr. Rencil to surpass himself and give the congregation something they could take away with them; something they could look back upon and remember; something they couldn't get at home or hear in any other church throughout the kingdom. "Something worthy of yourself, Sir. Something Sublime. Don't be afraid to let the Corporation have it." Seated out of sight upon his oaken bench, silently composing and recomposing his stops, the Organist's thoughtful glasses seemed imbued already with something of the solemnity of the music he was about to play. Behind him the Deputy, following his every movement with the veneration of the neophyte, pushed a frequent head into the chancel and kept watch upon the Western Doors. In his place of dark and solitary confinement the Blower, with forehead pressed against the wooden casement of the organ, followed the fluctuations of the plummet, and kept the organ's lungs inflated. It breathed, this stertorous beast of bronchial pipes and wooden articulations; breathed hugely, like a great leviathan, ready to expel its breath through sonorous diapason and wailing reed at the first behest of its master's fingers. They sank into the keys at last, on a hurried intimation from the Deputy. The air, so long imprisoned in the heaving confines of its leathern bellows, rolled out in solemn sound. The Alderman was coming. He was here, this stern-faced preacher of the practical; this contemner of the sentiments; this intolerator of all soft voices and sweet

sounds. He was here, enveloped in the music he had hated; transfigured by it; received into the bosom of its vast and sheltering softness.

"I am the Resurrection and the Life.... No man cometh to the Father but by Me."

The phrases fell with dry cadence, trampled underfoot like dead leaves by the heavy feet of the perspiring bearers, and lost in the surge of other feet behind. At the steps of the main entrance, the great coffin shewed itself to the crowd from its elevation like an ark of gleaming gold. For a moment it shone forth with the uplifted splendour of benediction beneath the slanting beams of the late November sun. Then it passed into the inky shadow of the porch, that ate it foot by foot and swallowed the final remnant of its lustre.

2

Upon the little Oswald this funeral of Alderman Bankett produced a powerful impression. It was his first confrontation with the real solemnity of life. His father's death had fallen on him at an age when life's realities are merely dreams. Miserableness filled him; he wept inconsolably; he kissed a marble countenance ice-cold and dreadfully reminiscent of someone previously known and loved. On a sudden life became incomprehensible like a page of print, elementary at first and simple to read, that later loses itself in long and unintelligible words. But with this last reality he had been formally connected. He had been a sentient part of it; his co-operation had been sought; he had contributed aid to Splendour.

From the first dread tolling of the late Alderman's knell, to that terrific moment when his coffin floated up the aisle as if borne upon the bosom of an inken flood and wafted slowly onward by waves invisible, he had occupied a world of solemn wonder and expectancy. It was a world,

perhaps, too grave for one so young and so susceptible, enjoying none of those rude reactions within the reach of his fellow choristers, who liquidated all their emotional liabilities on the spot, and ran up no long credits; cashing reverences into levity, and changing golden silence into the noisy coppers of sound at the first chance. Once his mother's doubts upon the wisdom of his appearance at such a solemn gathering were overcome, she prepared her son for the event with as much diligence as if he had been a candidate for the Bishop's hands. Whilst other choristers and youth in general shouted and ran, as if no Alderman lay dead, Oswald kept his soul aloof from every deed and sound that desecrated sorrow and threatened its state of grace. He took to church a mind so piously subdued and blanched, so resolutely divested of every bright happiness and tinted hope, that it constituted a corpse in itself. The deceased Alderman had not more completely purged himself of earthly taint than Oswald, who lent almost bloodless lips to mourn him, filled with the belief that as much was demanded of his sadness as of his voice, and that grief, if it be sung at all, required the devoutest sadness to sing it.

"Think of your father, Oswald!" his mother had enjoined him in her last commendatory kiss, and he thought thereon till his lip trembled. The word Alderman, so unfamiliar to his ears and lips before, and so remotely apprehended, drew now into the foreground of his mind, acquiring such awful stature and significance as it came that other words made way for it.

For him, Alderman Bankett was an entity compounded of bells, churches, organs, dead marches, choirs, coffins, bark upon the roadway, chains, maces, brass helmets, policemen—everything, in a word, that had been so poignantly introduced to his emotion during these recent days, and had served to give his very life a fresh and solemn substance, dividing it and disintegrating it from the

life so unsuspectingly and brightly lived before.

And all this power, acting undiminished over such a gigantic field of operations, derived itself from a homemade hand cart and a market stall. Nay, if Elizabeth were to be believed (whose acquaintance we have yet to make—and in all things touching earlier Daneborough, her word seemed final) it derived itself from less than this. It derived itself from a basket that had tramped the country roads and exchanged buttons and tape against eggs and chickens, which later it hawked about the purlieus of the market place; paying no stallage, but perambulating through the crowd and nudging the elbows of bargain hunters.

A basket! All this power out of a basket. Riches, greatness, office, honour. A new feeling took hold of Oswald in regard to baskets; a feeling akin to veneration. Hitherto he had viewed baskets as dubious associates, like choristers; things to be patiently endured for his dead father's sake and discarded at the first opportunity; things whose inherent dreadfulness was only condoned by the punctilious method of their carriage. But now it was as if the scales had fallen from his eyes. He visioned baskets as exalted possibilities. What virtue once had done, virtue again might do. He would be virtuous and rich, like this defunct prototype; he would enter the Council. He would be an alderman; all his father's enemies should be confounded; a superb monument in marble should rise ere long above his father's grave; his mother and his sister should be proud of him.

No wonder that this funeral touched his emotions so deeply, for it was, in part, his own. Not Alderman Bankett but rather Alderman Holmroyd, the best of sons begotten of the best of fathers, filled this awesome coffin whose shape and slow approach shook tears from the beholders. He was both what they buried and the glory surmounting burial. In the vivid alliance of his emotions with all that

moved them he was every thing his eyes saw or susceptibility apprehended. Time past and time future clasped their tenses together like stricken hands and became overwhelmingly one in time present. These bells, slow beating, were for him. These tears; these whispers; these solemn silences; these stirring feet; these helmets, hats, dead march and mace. When his own time came to die nothing must be changed in all that had happened or was happening now. From the first portentous tolling of St. Gyles's bell upon the silence of a suspended choir practice, to the last terrifying rite, no deviation from approved pattern must take place. Not a single ingredient of present glory must be lacking.

Led by desire to dedicate this solemn day to commemorative sadness, Mrs. Holmroyd had at noon dismissed her school until the morrow, several of her scholars, indeed, having discoursed enthusiastically on the subject of the "fune-ral," and stating their intention to be present along with parents and friends. The service at St. Saviour's was timed for two o'clock, and the hour had barely struck when Mrs. Holmroyd (filled with a laudable anxiety not to disappoint her son, who had begged them to await him outside the church) set forth upon her sacred errand accompanied by her little daughter.

The great *cortège* had already been absorbed into St. Saviour's when she and Beryl arrived. The string of empty mourning coaches solemnized the roadway round two of the churchyard walls; a great crowd clung to the railings, and scattered spectators traced desultory patterns about the tombs. Among these Mrs. Holmroyd's feelings could not suffer to mingle, but on the southern side of the church, across the road (and nearly opposite to the iron wicket where Oswald took his pensive stand on practice nights) the pathway bounding the high wall and garden-doors of the houses in St. Lawrence Square rose and dropped over a little hill. This hill, scarped perpendicularly to the road on

the Church side, and faced with a stone wall whose parapet followed its abrupt contour, though it afforded no great temptation to hardened sightseers who love treading on each other's toes, and breathing down each other's necks, and for whom a contested proximity furnishes half their joy, provided an ideal place for a remote sorrow shunning earthly contact. Here on this summit Mrs. Holmroyd and her daughter kept their vigil; not stationary, (an attitude suggestive of mere sightseeing) but expressing justified attendance by a slow pacing to and fro. The deep reverberations of the organ reached them; they were stirred by the sound of sublimated singings; the impressive emblem of mortality emerged at last, weaving its slow way down the gravel paths in the soft sunlight behind the intersecting branches of the stripped November trees. Mrs. Holmroyd clasped her little daughter with an instinctive gesture of sorrow and protection. The great procession drained itself away; the churchyard lay at length behind the moving *cortège*, empty and desolate.

Beryl said, "Let us go ... into it," and Mrs. Holmroyd's own desires subscribed, and they descended the little hill and passed through the wicket and mingled with the placid, undemonstrative tombs. In the sunlight these seemed to meditate, like blind men that see nothing but their own introspections, on which they smile. But their rapt contentment brought trouble to Mrs. Holmroyd too, as well as peace. She thought of that other grave in distant Clothton, its very shape by this time subsiding into the clay as if discouraged with its long and fruitless effort of expectancy, in the way that sick hope—too frequently bestirred in vain—sinks back on a despondent pillow. Every time she dwelt among these memorials of the dead her heart upbraided her. All the dead were mourned but hers. Cross and ledger, kerb and headstone, marble and granite, offered themselves for her selection. Always she was making choice; always resolving. And still despairing

love remained inactive. O! some memorial he must surely have....

Mr. Rencil, walking with a stranger and followed by the Deputy who bore beneath one arm a load of bound organ music of the size and substance of a paving stone, passed down the gravel drive to the main gate. He turned on Mrs. Holmroyd his customary softened gaze through the blandness of his broad glasses; raised his hat and (divining her errand) greeted her by name.

"Oswald is coming, Mrs. Holmroyd," he told her in the soft voice that was the counterpart of his look. "He is only just helping to put some books away for me. It will not take him a minute." Here was no remark to cause tears, and yet ... something in the organist's recognition and the gentle look and kindly voice made Mrs. Holmroyd's eyelids burn. They recalled other eyes, another voice; sweeter and happier days. And also, perhaps, a little foolish pride was gratified in her. For Mr. Rencil, albeit they had no formal acquaintance, and had exchanged no real words, invited always her acknowledgment when they met, saluting her with a courtesy that assured her she was still a lady. Again, strengthened with emotive power, her thought for Oswald's future was revived. Without delay his musical education must begin in earnest. Every time she encountered the gentle meditative gaze of the Organist of St. Saviour's the resolution struggled to be realized. The eyes of the organist, soft though they were, seemed on occasions veiled with the enquiring mildness of reproach; as if this hope of hers, escaping with her looks, were known to both, and he asked her how long she meant her son should lack this teaching so essential to his welfare. Not long, not long ... (she told herself). For this dread burden, borne with so much circumstance through the town to-day, had caused the very air to droop as though it bore some solemn part of it. Death is a great instructor, that recalls careless life to its forgotten duties. She would

take profit from the lesson taught, with God's good help.

Meanwhile, awaiting Oswald, they had wandered to the south porch. Whilst they looked the dull door opened, and who should emerge—pitting his small body against its heavy hinges—but Oswald's self, his face still pale from its recent part in such solemnities. Above his slight and fragile figure the deep profundity of the church, filled with a dusky, oceanic green like deep sea-water, loomed for a moment beyond the opened door, showing how vain and weak a thing is man. They exchanged greetings of restrained joy, and Beryl's eyes, fixed still upon the space occupied so recently by the solemn vision of the nave, besought her mother that they should enter. She did but lend a voice to the yearnings in her mother's heart, and subduing their looks and movements to the place they entered, they passed into the twilight of the church, whose grave features still retained like Oswald's face traces of the recent ordeal undergone. No other living figures tenanted the dim box pews, but from afar—as if remotely reaching them from the invisible next world—a sustained cantilation rose and fell, draped in its own echoes like robed and floating angels, that was the voice of Prestwich in the clergy vestry, descanting to the blower and the man-of-all-work on the subject of vocabularies viewed in their regard to funeral orations. He deplored that Canon Quexley was so ill-equipped in this department of his office, and (expressing keen disappointment with his oratory on Sunday) wished the congregation might have benefited by the discourse of such a divine as Archdeacon Benefit, whose vocabulary (it transpired) accorded death the support that such a theme demanded, and that critical listeners had a right to expect. From a picture of Archdeacon Benefit, "who was a Christian and a Gentleman as you don't often meet in collusion with such scholarship," he turned contemptuously on Canon Quexley with the scathing question: "What is he?"—the answer

falling true to formula: “A man of no vocabulary. You can cover all the words he uses with your hand. And when I say Words, mark you, I mean Words. Words suited to a man’s intellect and status; words that can be looked up to and respected even by those that doesn’t understand them. Canon relies too much on rank and personal appearance. Not but what I’m willing to concede he looks transpontine in the pulpit, and he can give out hymns and parish notices in a manner calculated to impress parties that haven’t heard him preach, and doesn’t know what preaching should be if they have. If I had to sum up Canon Quexley in a word I should.... What’s that? Is it somebody in church?”

3

It was only the heavy latch of the south door that, escaping Oswald’s fingers, too conscientious in their efforts to preserve solemnity, fell resoundingly on the hasp as Mrs. Holmroyd and her children left the church. In one of the endmost pews—not the pew in which she held her sittings and took her place on Sunday—Mrs. Holmroyd had immersed herself for prayer, whilst Oswald and his sister, abashed and silent, turned sidelong eyes upon the bowed head, curious to know what form of invocation issued from the hidden lips. Her prayer was brief, but earnest; for she made the most of moments threatened with intrusion. As hurriedly as she had knelt she rose at last and showed a face refreshed and tranquil to her children; a face that sought to share with them the spiritual sustenance just received. The verger, gownless and de-glorified, interrupting for a space his peroration on the subject of vocabularies, quitted the vestry and showed a scrutinizing nostril in the chancel, that pierced the dimness of the nave as if it had been a dilated eye. But the authors of the disturbance were already gone—as was also when he returned: (after a rapid interchange of courtesies between

fluttering thumb and forefinger and receptive nose) his late audience, which had decamped by way of the vestry door; a fact bearing witness to the melancholy truth so constantly deplored by Prestwich that vocabularies were no longer respected of the vulgar.

This day, with all its strange and powerful emotions, Oswald never forgot. It seemed as if the whole wide world he walked in had been transformed and sabbatized. Even the ordinary facts and things of life wore unfamiliar Sunday clothes. A new air, that might have been imported straight from Heaven for all it breathed of earth, replaced the old. Yesterday it had smelled of warm humidity and dead leaves; to-day it exhaled the beatific odour of faint spices; clinging with the soft insistency of a shroud, that draped the whole world with sanctity, veiling its earthliness from view and simplifying its contours. Sorrow, sweetened and purified, seemed consecrate to high ends. The barriers of mortality were broken; life and death seemed curiously and inseparably one. This was no longer Daneborough they walked in, but some heavenly city of the hereafter where anger had no place, and from all evil thoughts they lived remote.

They passed into the broad Town Acres. A soft St. Martin's breeze upraised itself from time to time, like hands in benediction, commending loves and blessing hopes. The burnless late November sun gathered already the folds of the hazy mantle that shortly he would wrap about his declining head, and, gilding the stubble, tinged with pale gold the narrow path they trod. Three plough teams, biblical in their solemnity, moved slowly over the surface of the brown soil, followed by a cortege of restless crows, like this afternoon's mourners, and flights of distracted pewits that seemed to wring their very wings with woe as they uttered their despairing plaint. In the distant furrows a blue mist lay already: in attentuated wisps it floated immobile and nebulous above the hollows

of the soil, like disembodied thoughts. Drawn each to each by the reflected loss of somebody their lives had never known, their looks and voices vied in softness and compassion. Not once did Oswald contradict his sister; not once did Beryl snatch the wilful final word. Each feared to break that incredible perfection of behaviour which, thanks to the propitious death of Alderman Bankett seemed now unquestionably theirs. In this new and glorious perfection they lavished on their mother a quiet but insistent love that made her feel how blessed above all women she was in them. When, their saintly wanderings over, they came back to their home in Spring Bank Gardens, Oswald and Beryl strove to retain hold on the comfortable but evasive perfection by every service proffered and relinquished. From its allotted drawer in the kitchen dresser Oswald drew forth the white cloth with the devotion of an acolyte and spread it reverently on the table in the front room as if he draped an altar. The cups and saucers, piously deposited, seemed metamorphosed into sacred vessels, that tinkled when the spoons touched them, like sanctus bells. He stole on tip-toe with his chancel tread, apprehensive lest by any lapse into the secular employment of his feet he might break the protecting spell of sanctity encircling him. No one could have divined with what uplifting goodness he was filled. It surprised himself; abashed him, even. Never more, from this memorable day, should he give way to sin. Upon this broad and level path of goodness would he henceforth walk, as Alderman Bankett and his father had walked before him. The whole secret of virtuous living was revealed. How easy and how blessed was it to be good. Filled with this spirit he folded his hands and closed his eyes, and had got as far as "For what we are going ..." when Beryl, consumed with equal fervour to be good, pulled his hands apart and intercepted the supplication with her eager voice: "No, no. Let *me*, Oswald!—'For what we are going to 'ceive may the Law make us truly thankful...."

The grace got no further on her lips than that. The hands darkening her eyes and hiding from expectant piety the sweet things on the table, came asunder on a sudden to allow a glance of fearful apprehension to emerge.

"My purse!" she cried, looking wildly from Oswald to her mother, "Who has it?"

4

Who had it?

Nobody had it, in effect. Nobody but herself to-day had seen it. This precious receptacle of all her recent savings, including a farthing dressed in tissue-paper and some coloured beads, must now be resting on the pew-edge at St. Saviour's, where she remembered to have confided it to the admiration of the Almighty during her mother's prayer. The loss, reproaching an overtrustful piety, plunged her into tears. Her mother's tender "Never mind, darling!" pricked contrition deeper than the sharpest of words. She thrust bereaved knuckles into either eye and made patent preparations to be inconsolable.

Oswald, a grave spectator of this disturbing grief, felt his security on a sudden threatened.

" ... Oswald will run and fetch it for you, Beryl," he heard the voice of Fate, making usage of his mother's lips, declare. He shot a hasty look at his mother's imperturbable sweet face, that not all the funerals of the world could awe, and with a pendant head rose blindly from his seat.

" ... Not now, dear. After tea."

After tea! Was his mother mad? Had the sorrow of this afternoon so weighed upon her that she was grown oblivious of approaching nighttime and the dark? Already the little tea-table drew more light from its own white cloth than from the window, whose upper panes seemed to have turned ashen with the reciprocation of his own fears. Even at this moment the dying day offered but a dubious light

for purse-hunters in a dim church that had contained a coffin, twelve firemen, a mace with its jaw tied up, and heaven knows how many sepulchral forms in crape. Now! Now! He must go now this very minute. A hundred reasons urged it. It was a race with the expiring lights of day. Fear, disguised as goodness, professed for its weeping sister's sake there was no moment to be lost. If only his cowardice had had the courage of its convictions, to proclaim itself always what it was, how easy life might be; divested of every pretention that made it terrible. He said with a carelessness almost jaunty, "I will not be long, mother." His mother answered, "we will wait for you, Oswald." Beryl, suffused with sudden gratitude at the thought of her recovered purse, flung impulsive arms around his neck. She ran to fetch his cap, his gloves. Love dressed him like a warrior for the fray; love opened the door for him; love—cruel that love ever is—made his going easy; sped him on his deadly errand. He set off at a step quicker than consideration for such a solemn day approved, with an anxious reference to the light allotted from above.

Out of the pores of the autumnal earth a twilight haze began to creep; the sky in the West was streaked with the last pink parallels of the setting sun; the lamp-lighter hurried on his zig-zag course, bearing his ghostly glimmer at the end of his long pole, and touching one by one the municipal gas-jets into life. The day-light was ebbing fast. It was the solemn hour when things put off their daytime dress and draw the dusk about them; peeping abroad with sinister nocturnal eyes, in which all gleam of friendliness is quenched; when thoughts creep out of their subliminal hiding places, like the mist, and fold the soberest fancy in a grey and ghostly garb. The ghost of Alderman Bankett, ridiculing coffins and the masonry of cemented vaults, arose—no longer vested with inestimable virtues, but making preliminary trial of the shape that all dead people,

be they good or bad, seem to turn to indifferently in the dark. Even the cries of the Friday night choristers came back to earth, with a vitality increased: hooting owl-like in Oswald's ear, and producing dreadful death-rattles by means of forefingers agitated violently in open mouths: "Oooooo! Hey-up! Yon's alderman, sither. Alderman Bankett's after ye."

By this time his urgent footsteps brought him to the gate through which so many gruesome forms had come and gone this afternoon. The sky was closing down upon him; the church itself, enfolded gloomily in its own buttresses, showed as remote and unencouraging as Prestwich. What a church! Why were churches built so big? Why did they set them so far from human companionship and aid? He touched the gate with a trepid hand, and a surge of thankfulness arose in him. Providence had harkened to his prayer. Jubilate deo, the gate was locked.

In the revulsion of delivery, fear grew reckless. What better justification indeed, did the most self-respecting fear require than this? Ex uno disce omnes should have been its maxim. But filled with faith in Providence and meretricious longing to prove its mettle in a campaign where glory could be had so cheap, fear must needs run round to the side wicket, sunk in the southern wall, beneath the darkling shadow of the tree, and touch that too. Whereat the wicket moved on its hinges and made way for him like a trustful child.

To say that he was startled would be, in the verger's parlance, a degradation of vocabulary. As well might the Corporation have gone in state to Alderman Bankett's funeral preceded by a brass meat-jack tied up in a pudding cloth as attempt to publish Oswald's feelings by so inadequate a word. Before the dread discovery he stood transfixed and appalled. What signified this open gate, on whose integrity his confidence had so relied? No sign of Prestwich and his flickering taper lent assurance to any

window. What further act did conscience now demand of him? In silence he stood and wrestled with this awful problem.

The sky above soaked up darkness as if it were ink in blotting paper. Not a soul passed by. The church emitted no human sound.

He looked intently through the narrow avenue of tombs through which the pathway struck, knowing all his future hung upon what happened now. And suddenly, gathering the very panic of his fears about him for protection, he burst through the gate and sped through the astonished tombs. With an eye that knew nor right nor left he flung himself against the latch of the south door, that yielded as the treacherous wicket had done. In turn the red baize door ceded to his fury. Fear, like a drift of storm-blown sky-wrack, blew into the darkness of the church. Expostulatory groans burst out on all sides of him. Disturbed corpses, as if the church had been some wrecked hull sunk fathoms deep below the surface of the sea, rose up out of every pew and floated in a ghastly company to the roof. Fear could afford to shew no piety in such a place. It pounced into the darkening pew that prayer and love had occupied this afternoon. Something softer than a prayerbook was dislodged, that fell as with a startled gasp upon the floor. It was the purse. But terror had no time for exultation. His groping fingers closed on it; an unseen, bony hand, hard as the pew ledge itself, rapped a painful blow upon his head in rising. The baize door tried to bar his passage; he struck it with both fists. He spurned the southern door, leaving it to shut itself as best it could. The tombstones, gathered ready for his egress like assassins, closed their ranks upon him as he ran, with determination to hem him in. But he outstripped the last of them by a hair's breadth, and dashed into safety through the wicket (that he had the presence of mind to close against them) panting like a spent hare.

He had done what never in his sober mind he thought it

possible himself could do. It was a deed incredible, heroic. Through the breathless subsidence of his terrors rose a mighty exultation. The best of fathers would be proud of him, above.

As he turned from the gates his foot struck an object on the ground that intuition told him was no pebble. Although he lacked sight of it, some subtle sense—doubtless heightened by the recent enterprise in which all his senses had been developed to such a transcendent pitch of susceptibility—divined that something rolled away upon its edge, and subsided with the minute ring of metal. What if it should chance to be a coin! A penny; a sixpenny piece; a shilling. He stooped, tracing with sharpened eye the path his intuition said the moving object had taken, and his fingers—making eager furrows in the gravel, discovered it at length. Circular it was, as intuition had suspected; of about the circumference of a florin. Metallic was it too, for it reflected the last beams of daylight like an oblique bull's eye. He picked it up for scrutiny, stirred by strange feelings of elation and hope. This was no common coin. He saw now precisely what it was. It was the substantial headpiece of a solitaire—just such a solitaire, in fact, as clipped his own small cuff; but more than twice the size, and richly chased. An article, perhaps, of priceless value. He could not estimate its worth. Pounds, possibly. All the same he wished it had been a shilling. There was something definite about a shilling; something final and conclusive, on which one's judgment could repose. Besides, such treasure-trove as this pertained to somebody, whereas coins seemed universal. He looked about him carefully on every hand to make sure his conduct had attracted the attention of no spectator. There was none in sight. For all he had been brought up to the pious maxim that finding is not keeping, he experienced the proud thrill of satisfaction that accompanies a discovery unshared, and thrust the solitaire into the deepest corner of the purse. Now, indeed, his

wondrous work was done, and with this two-fold triumph could he hasten home.

BOOK V

THE COUNCILLOR

1

THE morrow's daylight brought emancipation from many fears. Alderman Bankett in his bed of masonry, seemed—for the nonce—remote as the moon. His memory might be evoked without a qualm. Yet logically, if there be any intrinsic awfulness in the condition of death, the late lamented alderman—being one whole day deader than before—should have been four and twenty hours more terrible to all juvenile respecters of his latest state. But the fears of youth are as illogical as the loves of mothers and the arguments of men.

Meanwhile the solitaire—that had passed the night warmly in Beryl's purse, beneath her pillow—resumed its interest and importance. It was disclosed to the next door neighbour as a personage of no small erudition in local affairs, who tested its quality with her tongue, and described the hall-mark "eighteen carat, marm. You may be sure it's not been bought for nothink. The pair would cost somebody close on five pound." With Mrs. Holmroyd's assent she took the trophy round to sundry neighbours likely, in her opinion, to cast light upon it—or at least to share (and even amplify) her curiosity. But none was able to affix ownership.

"What I should do, marm," she confided to Mrs. Holmroyd in a voice lowered to suggest discretion, which

was her nearest attainment to the exercise of this excellent quality. “I shouldn’t say nothink to nobody of a while. As like as not there’ll be a reward offered if you keep quiet a bit.”

From such a course of action Mrs. Holmroyd’s spirit recoiled. “Reward!” she said, shocked the more because her children both stood by, and so corruptive a sentiment must be repelled at once. “I would not think of taking it, Mrs. Kenway. The stud does not belong to us. We could not possibly accept money for a thing which is not ours.”

Her neighbour, scornful of such weak-spirited morality, expressed a very different view upon the question.

“When a thing’s once lost,” she said, “it’s nobody’s, marm. Them that finds has as good a right to it as them that loses. If they was to say nothink, nobody would never be the wiser.” The solitaire, reclaimed by Mrs. Holmroyd with a “Thank you” of quiet dignity that was a rebuke,—all told,—circulated through the inquisitive fingers of her scholars in turn, who subjected it to every test of curiosity, and were not indisposed to constitute it their exclusive study for the morning; but these combined efforts brought no enlightenment. The father of one of them (it transpired) had a pair of studs like these—though not the same—and larger. The uncle of another had a diamond pin. Somebody’s sister owned a pearl necklet and had been to London by the Railway Trip three years ago. The conversation, obviously developing into a concerted movement against Time—whom it sought to outflank by every manœuvre known to scholarship—was brought back firmly to its pot-hooks and slate pencils. Discipline had been restored, and the academic stillness of the room was broken only by the sniffs and scratches and laboured breathings of preoccupation when suddenly all heads were startled by a dreadful announcement.

“Please, Mrs. Holmroyd! Willie Johnson’s spitting on

his slate and rubbing it with his hand!"

The infant thus detected in this most repulsive of academic crimes, secreted his slate instantly beneath a defensive fore-arm, and, showing a face of incredible malevolence over his shoulder, cried:

"I aren't then! You're a storyer. I haven't spit once this morning. I haven't spit since yesterday. It's you that's spitting."

Mrs. Holmroyd, shaping a countenance of appropriate horror and distress at these revolting revelations, said "Hush! Oh hush!" But before she had time to address her scholars on the reprehensibility of the act alleged, or expound to the full its pernicious influence on health and morals when developed into a habit, a voice accompanying an outstretched finger cried dramatically:

"Look, Mrs. Holmroyd! It's the Bellman. He's stopping. He's going to shout something."

Even the culprit, moved by the announcement, struggled from his seat to catch a glimpse of this far-famed official. The scholars rose as one to gather round the window. Over the colliding heads of her academy Mrs. Holmroyd peeped into the street below, where the portly functionary who had paced at the rear of Alderman Bankett's funeral yesterday was now to be seen, looking first to this side and then to that, and taking stock of all the windows, as a primo tenore rolls impressive eyes around the tiers of breathless boxes before melting into an aria. He wore his municipal silk hat bound with its silver braid, and his municipal blue tail coat garnished with the bright electro-plated buttons, and the municipal red and white striped waistcoat. But in addition he wore on his right hand to-day a brazen gauntlet that turned out to be the bell of office held by its clapper. This, first transferring to his left hand and thence back again by way of the handle to his right, he swung with solemn emphasis for the space of nearly a minute; at the end of

which time, stifling the bell's vibrations in the folded hollow of his left hand he threw up his head like a bull at feeding time and cried forth his proclamation in the stentorian foggy voice for which he was renowned, and by whose virtue and his impressive corporate ventrosity he had prevailed over half a score of rivals in open competition before a Sub-Committee of the Town Fathers in the Horse Green, where his masterly manipulation of the bell, his side-whiskers and excellent demeanour (even at the extreme range of two hundred yards) evoked favourable comment from critics previously (and subsequently) fortified for their exacting duties by recourse to the mayoral parlour.

He vocalized monotonously over two tones—these being, as Mr. Rencil might have pointed out, the unaccentuated subdominant and accented tonic—in much the same way that Oswald pointed the psalms. His vocal organ was so resonant, and as he declaimed the words he so turned his head and mouth towards the four quarters of the compass in rotation that by far the larger part of what he uttered was lost to his hearers in the schoolroom; who, truth to tell, were more active in imposing silence than observing it. But it was agreed he had begun his proclamation with the word "Lost," and "Tuesday" had been mentioned, and an address in Daneborough given, and some of the scholars vowed there was mention of a Reward. None betrayed the least doubt as to the nature of the publication. It concerned Oswald's solitaire. The owner, alive to its loss, was having it cried to the town. There was only one course to be followed.

"Run, Oswald dear," said his mother, "and ask the Crier who it is, and where the stud is to be taken." Adding in a commendatory undertone as he moved to do her bidding: "Don't forget to say Please and Thank you, Oswald."

Filled with importance to be the unquestionable discoverer of so notable a solitaire, Oswald ran downstairs

bareheaded and into the roadway to the spot where the Bellman had been. But he was there no longer. Actuated by conspicuous powers of locomotion he had travelled already some distance up the street, and after a moment's hesitation at the sight of his objective so far remote—giving an uneasy glance at the schoolroom window, that seemed alive with rapping knuckles and agitated heads and hands—Oswald started in pursuit.

Now there is more difficulty in negotiating a Bellman—once he is in motion—than the thoughtless deem. As Oswald pursued the retreating shoulders he was dismayed to note how big and broad they grew, and how much more bulk the functionary offered for respectful eyes to dwell on, viewed from the roadway in the rear, than from the vantage of the schoolroom window. Also, the blue of his official coat assumed a cut and tincture too constabulary; and Oswald grew uncomfortably conscious of the absence of his own hat. With a beseechful gaze, therefore, upon the Bellman's tail buttons, that stared back on their pursuer with the stony disregard of eyes, Oswald kept up his pursuit at a dog-trot pace between walking and running, nicely regulated by the Bellman's own.

"He is sure to stop at the next corner," Oswald assured himself. "I must not lose sight of him."

But the Bellman ignored the next corner as completely as if it had been no corner at all, and passed on with a step betraying not the least abatement. Nor was Oswald's peace of mind improved by the fact that other children, without the least official claim on the Bellman's attention, but stimulated by his own pursuit, joined in the chase, thus compromising his mission with the vulgarest curiosity. Depressed by this new company at his heels, it was not until Oswald had begun to lose both ground and hope that the Crier stopped at last and smote the air with his bell.

This time Oswald could better mark the notable effect produced by it. Doors opened; curtains were pulled aside;

heads in dustcaps issued from upper windows; bare arms wrapped up in aprons multiplied at passage ends. From everywhere and in no time an audience assembled to collect the words expelled by the Bellman's powerful lungs. And strangely stirred, Oswald heard the message, spaced by stertorous breathing, that the object of his long pursuit declaimed. It was as follows:—

LOST!
On TUESDAY afterNOON
Betwixt the MANSION HOUSE
St. SAVIOUR'S CHURCH
And CIMITERY
Or THEREABOUTS.
Between the HOWERS of ONE
And TWO THIRTY, p. m.
Part of a GOLD
SLEEVE STUD
Oo-HEVER shall FIND SAME
And will RETURN it
To number THIRTY
HUNMOUTH ROAD
Will be SUITABLY
Re-WARD-ed.

This proclamation ended, the Bellman reclaimed his bell once more from its resting place in the cradle of his folded left arm and passed quickly on to arouse the interest and stir the echoes of other corners. The congregated women, reducing their circle now that the Bellman was no longer constituted the attractive centre of it, prepared to discuss the news at length.

"A gold stud," said one.

"It'll tek some finding, missus," said another.

"A deal more finding than what it would if it'd been brass," said a third.

"They don't name Reward," said a fourth.

"They know better," said the fifth.

Speculation was indulged in as to the identity of the advertiser and the chances of the stud's recovery, and the listening children were stimulated to activity with reproaches on their indolence.

"Don't stand staring there. Be off wi' you. Use your eyes and look for stud. You'll let somebody else get it if you're

not sharp."

Oswald, magnetized by the conversation, stood for some minutes a silent auditor. At first a wondrous pride possessed him. He it was who had the stud, whose vigilance discovered it. His eye, sharpened to a point of supplication, almost besought these loquacious ladies to connect his presence with the thing discussed and to interrogate him. But for all he was by far the cleanest member of the company, they gave him no attention; his presence passed without comment. Not until the children were commanded to "be off and look for stud" did his pride undergo a sudden transformation and turn to guilt and shame. He had forestalled these children. The stud was his already that they were about to look for. Their diligence must be in vain. O! how angry they would be with him if they did but know. All longing to be questioned left him. He stole away.

2

The bricks of the houses on the Hunmouth Road were redder than the bricks of houses in other quarters of the town; for to this eastern side of Daneborough, more than any other, the energies of the builder and the ambitions of the prosperous were directed. As each aspiring tradesman advanced in turn to a degree of prosperity that could contemplate detachment from the business source of it, he turned his eye towards the Hunmouth Road as inevitably as in decrepit age men give a thought to Heaven, to which (indeed) this pious retirement on the Hunmouth Road might be regarded as the first stage. Even the lamented Alderman Bankett, albeit never to his latest breath employing fourpence for any purpose that threepence ha'penny was competent to serve, submitted to this custom, prompted by the laudable desire that his last days might be spent in some spot nearer and more befitting his Maker than the potato shop in Lower Tomb Street.

The house whose number had been proclaimed so lustily by the Town Crier during the course of the morning was within but a few years of being as ruddy as the ruddiest. It was a detached double-fronted villa overlooking the extensive Town Acres, from which only the Hunmouth Road divided it. Above one of its gables the slated roof gave birth to an aborted turret, protected by a cast iron balustrade, on which the individual fond of elevation and unsubject to vertigo might take the air on all fours, or with the aid of binoculars and favoured by the weather, obtain a view of the horses streaming across the Race Course on Sellinger Day. Not that anybody ever did; this superb prospect remaining the prerogative of brick-layers and an occasional plumber. On the bevelled coping of the lower front wall immediately flanking the iron gate, from which a painted palisading sprang, was carved in deep and monumental letters the number that the Bellman had announced, whilst on the coping at the opposite side of the gate, in the same deep and chiselled lettering, were the words BRIAR DENE, offered evidently as a picturesque alternative to visitors with no head for numbers. From the gateway an asphalt path, cutting a curt lawn in two, led to the front porch. Ferns in place of flowers spread their fronds at the foot of the window bays, and wreathed a rockery outrivalling the turret in pretentiousness—and even superseding the house itself in topographical importance, being used by every postman, constable and errand boy as a bearing in their negotiation of the district. For this rockery, dissociating itself from glittering felspar and oyster shells with which rockeries of the period usually ravished the eye of the beholder, aspired to architectural heights by its incorporation of crocketed stone finials and gargoyles and molten glass and twisted lead and bell-metal from the ancient church of St. Gyles, that had been destroyed by the fiery hand of God within the living memory of man. Elizabeth's own eyes, in fact,

had seen the belfry fall, and her two hands were able to depict its collapse with a graphic intensity that thrilled Oswald's imagination and lent an added terror to the dark. It is true that scarce a garden of self-respect or consequence in Daneborough but was regaled with relics from the same source; nevertheless, few offered them to the public eye in such impressive form, and "Rockery House" was not less frequently an appellation of the home of the solitaire than the name and number incised upon its garden wall.

To this house, as shortly after midday as her scholastic labours allowed, Mrs. Holmroyd made her way accompanied by both her children. Beryl carried her hands in a little woolwork muff sedately borne before her—not that the morning air was cold, or that her fingers felt the need of such defence against the weather, but as an adjunct to importance. Oswald, wearing his Sunday gloves and cap, guarded in his pocket the momentous solitaire, wrapped in cotton wool and fine paper. They had no knowledge of the famous Rockery to guide them, and relied solely on the number retained by Oswald from the Crier's proclamation; but the numbers along the Hunmouth Road, intercepted by gardens and by other roads leading out of it, multiplied so slowly that Mrs. Holmroyd began to entertain a doubt of the accuracy of her son's memory or hearing—a doubt which, truth to tell, whilst denying, he more than shared with her. When at last they reached the mystic Thirty it struck their eyes with such a strangeness, and the gate and rockery and garden seemed to bear so little relationship to solitaires that all of them gazed in silence for a moment at this unconvincing goal of their journey.

" ... Are you *quite* sure, Oswald?" Mrs. Holmroyd asked. He was. That is to say he tried his very best to be. For other numbers had now begun to press their claims unpleasantly upon him. Without further question his

mother pushed open the elaborately foliated gate, and solemnly they walked in order up the asphalt path to the front door, whose upper panels were resplendent with cut and coloured glass.

Succeeding a delay not without significance to one well versed in the liturgy of housekeeping, the door was dubiously opened by a maid of diminutive stature, occupied in pulling over a plump red wrist the second of her sleeves. Being, doubtless, more accustomed to the call of tramps and travellers at this hour of noon, her countenance expressed amazement to find the step so liberally occupied, and she stared at the visitors with as blank a look as if she had been asked a question in Old Testament history. Nor was her perplexity lessened when Mrs. Holmroyd, realizing her own ignorance of the family on which she called, sought on this subject to be informed. After a facial struggle with an intelligence so ill equipped for such a query that more than once it seemed the maid was on the point of leaving her interlocutor in order to refer the subject to higher authority indoors, she replied to Mrs. Holmroyd's question with the one word. "Burfords." Burfords evidently signifying the plural. Mrs. Holmroyd felt thereupon emboldened (and the more so by reason of a now more noticeable smell of cookery) to enquire if Mrs. Burford were at home.

"There isn't a Mrs. Burford," the maid said after a struggle. "She's dead." The intelligence seemed tragic until, perhaps noting the shocked adjustment of Mrs. Holmroyd's face, she modified its abruptness by saying: "She's been dead a long while. She was dead when I came." "There's Mr. Burford," she vouchsafed helpfully, "if you mean *him*. But he won't be home while dinner." She further added: "There's Miss Burford ..." and having communicated the information was gathered up into conflict with her own intelligence again. Indeed, all the while she held the door she appeared to be tormented by

some secret intuition to shut it, and every time she spoke she seemed to lend ear to subtle atmospheric disturbances behind her as if a will were active in the ether whose messages she sought to pick up. In reply to Mrs. Holmroyd's enquiry whether Miss Burford were at liberty the maid's face suffered a spasm, accompanied by the words, "I'll see." For some moments her actions maintained a conflict between closing and re-opening the door. Finally she compromised the difficulty by leaving it ajar, and was absent some considerable time—during which the smell of dinner grew frenetic. When next the maid returned she said in a repressed voice suitable to a house of mourning: "You're to step inside." She led the way past a pretentious mahogany hall-stand, radiating branches like a genealogical tree, from whose bristling pegs hung a couple of notably large and masculine felt hats above a big bluff-handled masculine umbrella that kept company with several substantial walking sticks, and introduced Mrs. Holmroyd to a room on the right of the entrance hall, saying in a voice now depressed to a whisper:

"You're to take a seat."

The room thus offered to the advancing visitors enhanced the funereal atmosphere of their reception by the fact that its venetian blinds were three parts drawn. Over the centre of the carpet a holland drugget had been spread, whilst most of the chairs were similarly draped, and the room was permeated with a fine haberdasher smell of stuffs and fabrics not yet deprived of their pristine odours by too frequent usage. Barely, however, had they time to seat themselves in accordance with the maid's instructions and take in the details of their surroundings before the door was pushed open again, and the maid's head reappeared to utter the enquiry:

"Miss Burford asks what name please."

She took the name dubiously, and the door—not closed

immediately on her retirement—was pulled mysteriously to, a few minutes later, by an unseen hand. Mrs. Holmroyd fancied she heard the sound of acute whispers and a furtive footstep on the stair, succeeded by muffled sounds above, that might have been somebody making hasty journeys between a wardrobe and a dressing table in some bedroom overhead. But she told herself she was not paying attention to such things, being engaged in framing suitable expressions of regret for having called (she was disposed to fear) at a time so inconvenient; and composed her countenance to that benignant look expectant of nothing, with which cultured callers sit in wait.

Whilst she sat thus the door opened swiftly, all at once, without warning, and a lady entered. In her hand she held a handkerchief whose formal stiffness suggested it had but this moment been shaken out of fold, which (on catching sight of Mrs. Holmroyd) she instantly applied to her nose and inclined her head over it with an air of distance, as if she bowed across a garden hedge. The salmon-tinted flesh upon her face and neck reflected cookery; her hair, drawn tightly from her brow and held in the grasp of a hard chignon behind the head, was sternly practical, suggesting that its owner viewed hair less as an object of adornment than of repression. How old she was seemed (in her particular respect) a question without relevance. Probably she had never been young. Her face was featureless; the dark broad eyebrows were its strongest though not perhaps its pleasantest character, beneath which the brown eyes moved with the restless activity of the hyperconscientious housekeeper. Almost their first act, after admitting Mrs. Holmroyd and her children into their brief area of recognition, was to make a rapid survey of the room, as if in search of domestic shortcomings.

“Well! I declare! Excuse me....” Without allowing Mrs. Holmroyd to explain the object of her visit she passed to the window and drew up the venetian blinds, with a minute

eye on the carpet to regulate the light admitted by what its susceptible colours could with safety bear, smoothing the curtains at the same time with rapid touches of imperfect satisfaction as if her fingers burned to do their work more thoroughly than the constraint of visitors allowed. “Whatever is the girl thinking of! To leave visitors sitting in the dark.” She begged Mrs. Holmroyd to pardon the untidiness of the room into which she had been shown, and the disgraceful state in which she found everything. “I must ask you to excuse us, please. My maid is new. Well ... *new!* I have had her three weeks. But she is no better now than when she came. She seems to have no idea. This room ought to have been thoroughly turned out yesterday. It was my day for it. But of course ... in view of the funeral....” She looked at Mrs. Holmroyd, who expressed her sympathetic understanding of the situation. “ ... The room had to be left. I really don’t know whenever we shall get straight with the house again.”

She smoothed the holland covering of the sofa and seated herself out of politeness to her visitor, with more concern for the cushions than if they had been human feelings. But it was plain to see this act of sitting was a mockery, imposing only an irksome restraint upon a nature so practical and energetic. Her interest, distracted between the exigencies of politeness and the concerns of housekeeping, came to an abrupt standstill at mention of the solitaire, which, Mrs. Holmroyd said: “I understand you to have lost, Miss Burford.” Miss Burford disclaimed ownership in so far as herself was concerned with an asperity that seemed to defend her commonsense against the charge of being responsible for such a loss, saying she knew and had prophesied how it would be.

The solitaire, it seemed, belonged to her father —“Councillor Burford,” she explained, adding the civic title for Mrs. Holmroyd’s enlightenment and her own gratification, and stanching pride with her pocket

handkerchief that the information might have a moment's grace in which to sink into her visitor's intelligence. Only the previous Sunday, it transpired, the solitaire had been found on the dining-room carpet by the maid. "And as I told my father: if it could be dropped on the carpet in the dining-room, it could be dropped anywhere. He has," she added, with a bridling of satisfaction, "a second pair for business. Why couldn't he have worn those! They are quite good ones. To be sure, Alderman Bankett was an old friend. We have known him a number of years." Having thus demonstrated the superiority of her feminine intelligence at the expense of her parent, she broke off to enquire: "Do you say the stud has been found?" Mrs. Holmroyd said, "I think my little boy has had the pleasure of finding Mr. Burford's stud. I hope it may be so.—Oswald!"

Thus prompted, Oswald rose mutely from the chair edge on which he had reseated himself after Miss Burford's entrance, and timidly produced the box containing his discovery. Taking the proffered box with more anxiety than thankfulness, Miss Burford undid the careful wrappings in which the treasure was preserved. Her fingers, strong and resolutely active, seemed perfect instruments of precision. Before the stud was half unclad, her face, darkened during the early operations, lit up with a gleam of certainty. Yes. She was sure. She could tell. She extracted the trophy with the triumph of a dentist for a tooth. It was her father's stud.

Gratification at its recovery came only second (one could see) to that for the victory won by wisdom. With this damning piece of evidence she would be able in due course to confront parental folly and justify all her prophetic asperities. But the look of righteous triumph gave way to a startling change of expression induced (as it appeared) by some disturbance that her microphonic hearing recorded in a remote part of the house. She elevated the stud with a

dramatic gesture, imposing silence.

"There! Did you hear that? What *is* she up to? I *told* her. Particularly. Excuse me, please. One moment." Laying the stud incontinently on the sofa, she passed swiftly out of the room. After a brief absence Miss Burford returned with the same swiftness that had borne her away; her mouth distorted by what Oswald at first mistook for a smile, but which at close quarters showed itself to be something infinitely more complex and superior; being, in fact, the ineffable expression which confirms, on the part of prophetic wisdom, the realization of its worst fears. Miss Burford's ear had not deceived her. She had known. She had expected it. One of her large, last new dinner plates. No thanks to the maid it had not been the meat dish. And she had expressly *told* the girl. Her very last words before coming into the room had been: "Don't go and break anything whilst I'm gone."

With an uncomfortable sense of being, indirectly, responsible for this catastrophe, Mrs. Holmroyd expressed her deep regret, coupled with renewed apologies for having disturbed Miss Burford at so inopportune a time; which, she explained, was in her own case less of choice than of necessity. Accused by the delicate politeness of Mrs. Holmroyd's voice and the ladylike grace with which she now prepared to take her leave, Miss Burford summoned all her forces of gentility. Her visitor must please excuse a state of things for which her kindness was not at all to blame.

"I am afraid I have not even thanked you for your trouble," she said, and asked a number of questions with regard to the finding of the solitaire. After Mrs. Holmroyd, with an occasional reference to Oswald, had told her, "I believe ..." Miss Burford said, assuming a perceptible control over the edges of her mouth, "I am not *quite* sure. I rather fancy Mr. Burford entertained some thought ... of offering a slight reward. I don't know whether he has done

so. Half a crown, I think, was in his mind. Not more."

Parrying the suggestion with evasive eyes and a quickening of the voice, Mrs. Holmroyd begged Miss Burford not to mention it. "You are very kind.... But it is *quite* unnecessary."

Miss Burford's mouth, pursed until then, appeared to derive confidence from her visitor's polite refusal, and regained a measure of its arrested volubility.

"Some small acknowledgment," she pleaded. "I feel sure Mr. Burford.... But of course. If you would *rather*. Still ... after all your little boy's trouble. Perhaps you would allow me to give him at least ... a shilling?"

The little boy in question, being brought by these words directly under the influence of the heavy brows, dropped his eyes and relapsed discreetly into the arms of Providence. For, gentleman though he was; gentleman though he always strove to be, his heart beat in a cage of mortal clay. The reward had dwindled from half a crown to a single shilling. Did this sweeping reduction constitute so great a change in the intrinsic nature of the sum as now to reconcile it with gentility? It did not. His mother's voice deprived the visionary coin of its last value. One shilling melted, like the substance of life itself, to nothing; a dead hope diffusing a sad autumnal odour; a memory to be trodden underfoot like the beech leaves in the Burford garden. All that was offered to him was a hard, dry hand that he moved mechanically up and down like a pump handle and relinquished. As they passed into the tepid outer sunlight and paid Miss Burford the final courtesies of leave-taking, she said to Mrs. Holmroyd, "Pardon me.... I'm afraid I've forgotten what name you gave. It was on my tongue when I came into the room. Not Hanson? To be sure! Holmroyd! What was I thinking of!—You don't happen to know of a good servant, do you, Mrs. Holmroyd?" Mrs. Holmroyd, to her great regret, did not. With a few more words of thanks and superficial tributes to

the mildness of the weather, they parted. Mrs. Holmroyd, shepherding her children in front of her, moved towards the garden gate. Miss Burford holding the door open no longer than sufficed to show her the visitors' backs, closed it with an alacrity and silence almost sinister, and betook herself to the room just vacated at such a rate as to reach its window before the gate had closed upon them; from which point of vantage she subjected their persons to the dark and searching scrutiny that in their presence politeness had denied her. Nor did she relax the tightened guiders of her neck until they were no longer visible, when she instantly let down the blinds and went in turn to the seats her visitors had sat on; effacing the impress of their bodies from the holland covers with a critical hand, and even stooping to investigate the places where their feet had been. After which, and many touches of adjustment to the furniture—so minute as to produce no effect perceptible to any eye but hers, she left the room with an expression of disgust and proceeded to seek an outlet for her indignation in the kitchen.

Meanwhile Mrs. Holmroyd and her children walked back towards the town. They had but shortly left the Rockery House behind them, and were indeed still contained in the retrospective silence of their thoughts, when they encountered two substantial men—City Fathers, one might have guessed them at a glance—walking corporately abreast. The outer of these two, who stepped momentarily off the kerb to offer Mrs. Holmroyd better passage, having noted already the house they came from, bestowed a keen glance of enquiry on them as they went by. A few moments later, Oswald (stealing a backward look at these two figures that were so reminiscent of yesterday) was much stirred by the fact that they were come to a standstill before the very gate his own hand had just now punctiliously closed, and he imparted the intelligence to his mother in an excited undertone. Beryl

spun round on her muff at once, and was not less agitated with what she saw, exclaiming: “Mother, see! They’re both looking after us.” Mrs. Holmroyd, walking with her head more consciously erect, and a higher colour in her cheek, reproached her children gently for the impropriety of an act whose tragic effect on Lot’s wife should furnish a lesson for all time.

Within, her pride reiterated: “A Shilling!”

“ ... Perhaps you would allow me to give him at least ... a shilling.”

3

That same afternoon, shortly after the little school had resumed its studies, there came a knock at Mrs. Holmroyd’s street door. All the scholars looked up with one accord to cry in chorus: “Please, Mrs. Holmroyd, there’s a knock at the door.” In which way they recited most of the happenings in the house and neighbourhood. “Please, Mrs. Holmroyd, somebody’s just put something through the letter-box.” “Please, Mrs. Holmroyd, the rag and bone man’s going by.” “Please, Mrs. Holmroyd, there’s a milk cart.” From time to time, too, it was the custom of their friends and relations to call during the course of study, to ask if one or other of the students might be liberated to pay some visit or to take a walk. A knock at the door, therefore, was always pregnant with possibilities and very welcome, and Mrs. Holmroyd had never any lack of volunteers to answer the summons on such occasions. This afternoon she turned her eye on Oswald, who rose obedient to the silent bidding and went downstairs. Filled with speculation, he opened the front door. No daylight came in with it. A wall of darkness seemed to seal the door-frame up and block his outlook to the street beyond. He found himself beneath the shadow of a human shape which appeared to be standing with its back towards the

door, and as though made conscious of its opening by the inward suction of air, turned round to proclaim itself no less a personage than the gentleman who had moved off the causeway this morning, and whom Oswald had seen (on looking back) with his hand upon the gate of Briar Dene.

At close quarters, measured against a doorway that gave passage to Oswald's person with such liberal space to spare, he seemed enormously enlarged. Across his waistcoat there swung a heavy chain of gold on a level with Oswald's forehead, revealed to view by the fact that both his coat and overcoat were worn unbuttoned. He had a close-cropped square-cut beard in which black hairs and grey contested on equal terms; and his eyebrows, in which black still predominated, bore a striking resemblance to those before which Oswald had lowered his gaze in the holland-draped drawing-room this morning. "Now, my lad!" he addressed Oswald, "Does Mrs. Holmroyd live here?" The voice though blunt and businesslike was not unkindly. It dispensed unceremoniously with the letter H in both "Holmroyd" and "here," and yet seemed not altogether devoid of a sort of authoritative substitute for the aspirate; a sort of assumptive H in the speaker's eye and bearing; as if his dignity could not descend to humour the whims of words, which, for his usage must be broad and free of finery, built for solid wear and tear like the boots he stood in.

Oswald said politely that this was the house where Mrs. Holmroyd lived.

"Tell her," the figure instructed him, "Councillor Burford would like a word with her."

Thereupon, by rights, Oswald should have invited the owner of the name in a clear voice to enter, but whilst being perfectly lucid as to this part of his duty he felt the most inexpressible helplessness for the performance of it,

being temporarily under the influence of the conduct of Councillor Burford's own maidservant in a similar predicament this morning. Hardly knowing what precise step might now be expected of him he therefore opened the door to its widest extent, and flattening himself against the passage wall, by this means and a timid supplication of eye besought the Councillor to enter—which the Councillor did forthwith in a very deliberate and impressive manner, filling the passage so completely that Oswald had for safety to turn his nose sideways as the visitor brushed by. Nor could he, pinned against the wall by the Councillor's broad shoulders, extricate himself from this painful position in order to close the door, for the Councillor, taking stock of his new surroundings with the critical absorption particular to a man of property, appeared to be oblivious of Oswald and the obstruction his own figure caused. Nothing, Oswald knew, constituted a grosser breach of politeness than to force one's way past stationary individuals, but the situation was rapidly becoming desperate, and at last he was left with no alternative but to dive below the spreading skirts of the overcoat, whence he emerged palpitating on the farther side. Arrived there, it had been his purpose to throw open the parlour door, but a simultaneous movement of the Councillor served to block this avenue in turn, and Oswald solved a difficulty now become insuperable by running upstairs.

" ... Councillor Burford, mother."

She assumed appropriate surprise. "Councillor Burford, Oswald? Are you sure?" Yes. He was sure. So sure, indeed, that his head turned uncontrollably towards the landing, expectant every moment of a heavy tread. The look betrayed him to his mother, whom it prompted anxiously to ask: "Where is Councillor Burford, Oswald?"—and reading the truth from the open page of her son's silence: "You've never left him standing in the passage, dear? O, go down at once, Oswald, and show him

into the room." Nevertheless her movements were so swift —or perhaps Oswald's descending footsteps lagged a little —that she greeted her visitor in the passage before he had disappeared through the parlour door which Oswald held open for him. The Councillor still wore his square felt hat, as if imbued with the opinion that a passage entrance constituted no integral part of a house, and that to uncover the head in such a neutral space was a foolish waste of politeness; but he doffed it the moment Mrs. Holmroyd came down the stairs, saying "Good afternoon, ma'am," in a voice that Oswald envied. "I've not called to intrude upon your time, ma'am," he said. "But from what my daughter tells me I believe it's you I've got to thank for bringing back that stud, and I felt I must just look round on my way to business to let you know I'm very much obliged. I rather fancy I met you as you was coming away from my house this morning, but of course I hadn't the pleasure of knowing who you was, at the time."

He broke the laws of grammar with the same resolute authoritative air with which he disregarded aspirates, yet the sound of the fault was less flagrant than any attempt at its written representation may convey. A character of rugged confidence in himself condoned to some extent his misuse of the mother-tongue, which he ordered with the brusque assurance of one used to be obeyed, and without compromise treated language as his servant and not his master.

"Of course ... you'd know I'd offered a reward," he told Mrs. Holmroyd. "Five shillings was the sum I'd fixed in my mind. But my daughter tells me she couldn't prevail on you to accept nothing." He paused there as though to offer Mrs. Holmroyd an opening for any change of mind upon the subject, and reading unaltered resolution on her lips passed on: "So there's no more to be said. Except that I'm very much obliged to you, ma'am. Very much obliged, I'm sure."

Mrs. Holmroyd expressed herself obliged in turn for the Councillor's visit, modestly renouncing at the same time all credit for the stud's recovery in favour of her son, upon whom the Councillor turned an eye intended to be encouraging, but which, dissociated from any smile that Oswald could discover, proved a heavier and more embarrassing burden than his own eye could support without flinching; more especially as, after a period of silent inspection, the Councillor apostrophized him "Young man" with the enquiry, What school he went to?

The question involved some difficulty. Strictly speaking, Oswald went to no school—as himself was painfully aware; being already arrived at the outer fringe of that inward state of mind which shirks admission of the shameful fact of being educated at home in conjunction with a younger sister and infants of both sexes. All his schooling pertained to the future. He looked beseechingly at his mother for guidance in perplexity.

" ... Just at present," Mrs. Holmroyd interposed, and never was the sound of clarid water more welcome to thirsty soul than the gracious clearness of her voice to Oswald, "he does not go to any school." Perhaps she felt as Oswald did the nakedness of the fact exposed thus feebly to the scrutiny of the dark brows bent upon it, for she threw over its frail limbs the phrase: "He is rather delicate." It was a phrase Oswald had heard before, and in the same conjunction, that served as a sort of swaddling-cloth to truth. He stole a glance beneath his lashes at the dark Councillor to see what effect the statement made upon him; and, not without a certain pride to be possessed of such indifferent health, assumed a posture of delicacy in keeping with it. "He is only twelve," he heard his mother say. "For the present I am educating him at home ... where," she forced her lips to add, "I have a small school of my own. It is chiefly intended for delicate children who need rather more care and consideration than could be

given them elsewhere." The Councillor contributed a terse "Indeed!" in a voice that seemed to own small sympathy with the needs of sickly childhood. Oswald, still bearing the burden of the visitor's regard, had an uncomfortable belief that it lay on him with a degree of disapproval only short of anger. At least the dark grey beard baffled him, giving access to no human expression that Oswald's eyes could decipher in the rapid reference made to it. He therefore strove to reach the visitor's softer feelings by a demeanour of sadness.

"Later on ..." Oswald was relieved to hear his mother say, "he will (of course) go to the Grammar School." There was an air of fine conclusiveness about the statement, and particularly about the interpolated "of course" that surprised even Oswald. Never had he heard his mother allude to his scholastic future in such emphatic terms. It was true, then! Perhaps he would be going next term. There seemed something so masculine and vigourous about the thought of going to the Grammar School that delicacy seemed altogether incompatible with it. Whereupon he threw aside his facial sadness and the wasted attitude symbolic of weak health and assumed a convalescent, more heroic, mien which (surely) could not fail to commend itself to a spectator of such powerful discernment. But the Councillor only said "Indeed!" once more. "What's he going to make, ma'am?" he asked—a question so irrelevant and difficult to answer that Oswald could but repeat it to himself with silent lips, keeping a sharp eye on his mother's face.

"It is rather early to think about that just yet," Mrs. Holmroyd remarked with indulgence.

"Not too early, if he means to make a good start, ma'am," the Councillor declared. "They can't begin too young. That's my opinion, and I begun young myself—so I know. Make up your mind as soon as possible, m'lad," he said, addressing Oswald, "and then stick to it. No chopping

and changing. It's the only way."

The counsel was intended, doubtless, to display interest and good-will, and to bestow upon the finder of the solitaire, in lieu of silver, some solid piece of golden wisdom from one whose office lent a special weight and value to what he uttered. But the words tapped Mrs. Holmroyd's conscience accusingly. They shocked her heart with a sudden alarm as though her son's life had been threatened by a passing cab.

"He sings in the choir at St. Saviour's," she made haste to say defensively. "He is a voluntary member. And he helps me at home, too," she added, feeling that the earlier testimonial found less favour in the Councillor's eyes than she had hoped. "He is most useful to me." Oswald's pride, stirred not less by this tribute to his usefulness, overwelled the lips of silence all at once and became speech.

"I go errands on Friday," he said, "and on Saturday as well." He shaped the words shyly, offering the information not to Councillor Burford, whom he lacked courage directly to address, but (though not looking at her) to his mother. "With the basket."

"Errands, do you?" said the Councillor, his interest at once excited by this practical and familiar word. "What sort of errands? Who for?"

"Only for me," Mrs. Holmroyd answered quickly, with a flush that seemed to wish to interpose itself between the present conversation and some topic feared. But the fatal word "pork-pie" had already escaped from Oswald's custody, and the Councillor's gaze, directed on her across the upturned brim of his extended hat, seemed to demand an explanation. She gave it hurriedly, her words stumbling somewhat in the act. "I do not bake many. Only a few ... for those who, who care for home-made pies."

"Pork-pies!" said the Councillor, tersely, but with interest. "What's the price of 'em?"

Of all questions it was the one she dreaded most.

"It depends," she said evasively, " ... upon the size. I make them in several sizes. Some of my—" "customers" she could not bring her lips to call them; "clients" was no woman's word; "acquaintances" made the commerce too promiscuous; "friends," in this delicate connotation, seemed the only title left to her. "Some of my friends prefer a large pie, and some a small."

"What's the price of your small?" her visitor demanded.

She took a breath and murmured: "Eighteen pence." Her eyelids flickered. She hated prices more than pies. She could give; she found it hard to take. To pay was gracious; to be paid, shameful.

"Eighteen pence," repeated her visitor. He uttered the price so openly, and with so little recognition of its shameful inner meaning, that her heart took courage. And to this stolid Councillor figures were the fundamental facts of life; the principle underlying all reality. He saw no shame in them; they formed the basis of existence. They were, for him, the test of character; the very making of a man. And if Mrs. Holmroyd blushed—as blush she did—to breathe her eighteen pence, the blush was wasted. Eighteen pence, the Councillor's face appeared to testify, was a very respectable, substantial, well-established figure; a sum not to be despised or treated lightly even by a prosperous member of the Daneborough Town Council. "Eighteen pence," said he again, as if this were a financial matter calling for deliberation. Mrs. Holmroyd's chief fear was that he would straightway place an order for a pie. Not because his appetite persuaded, but because she had been good enough to decline his proffered reward. But in this, too, her irresponsible finer feelings played her false. For, having said "Ah!" and "Indeed!" with great spaciousness, the Councillor directed his attention suddenly towards his hat, as if it had spoken to him, and said: "But I mustn't detain you any longer, ma'am. You've your business to

think of, and so have I." With which, wishing Mrs. Holmroyd good-afternoon, and thanking her again (ma'am) he turned to go. Mrs. Holmroyd prompted her son: "Oswald, dear ..." and Oswald, quitting the company of the chair his politeness had brought forward for the Councillor's reception, hastened to reach the front door in advance of the departing figure. But the broad shoulders and spreading overcoat effectually filled the passage, to the obstruction of all politeness; and their visitor let himself out without any rearward look. That he was not unaware of Oswald's activity in the back-draught of his ample skirts seemed indicated by the fact that he left the door open behind him as though for this ensuing hand to close, and betook himself gravely down the street.

4

On Friday, Councillor Burford called again. He did not present himself as before, during academic hours, but on his way home to tea, which with him, as with most of the City Fathers, was a substantial repast exhaling the odours of hot meats. The little Spring Bank household was already seated at its modest meal. The scholars were dispersed for the week-end; the schoolroom was a place of echoes only, whispering round a defunct fire in a shrinking grate. But the sitting-room beneath, despite the patent scantiness of furniture, diffused a homely comfort; its walls and ceiling reciprocating the flickers of a cheerful fire, small, but ruddy red and stout of heart, that put out tongues of flame and piped, from time to time, exuberant music through the bars on flageolets of smoke.

The solemn footsteps arrested at the street door caused the little family to suspend its eating and seek each other's eyes. Beryl cried: "Who's that!" Oswald stared mutely over his teacup. Mrs. Holmroyd said: "I can't think who it will be ... at this time. It is too early for the post." But she knew it was Councillor Burford. She laid a restraining

hand on Beryl's wrist, already making preparations for a descent from her high chair. "Oswald will go, dear." She lit another gas.

"Now m'lad."

Yes. It was Councillor Burford's voice that echoed in the narrow passage. Intuition had not deceived her.

"Is your mother at home?" Oswald's answer was not audible, but they heard a leisurely foot introduced into the passage, and straightway the passage seemed to be choked with a gigantic presence rubbing both its walls. Mrs. Holmroyd hastily set down her teacup, half turning to the door. For Oswald had left this open, and the visitor, catching her eye over the descending teacup, drew back with apologies.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am. Your son didn't tell me you was at tea."

Mrs. Holmroyd assured him that no apology was necessary, their tea being nearly over—a statement that caused Beryl's eyes to make a startled tour of plates and dishes.

"Please come in, Mr. Burford, and excuse the tea-table. This is our only room."

"I aren't going to disturb you," said the Councillor, removing his hat, which he appeared to have the habit of retaining until the last possible moment. "I'm just on my way home to tea myself." And saying this, as if it implied a resolution to advance no further, he stepped across the threshold and moved to the fireplace, where, planted firmly with his broad back towards its blaze, and the square felt hat held out brim uppermost in his large hand, he took a comprehensive survey of the accessories of Mrs. Holmroyd's table; the teapot, the hot water jug, the jar of home-made jam, the sweet cake, the bread and butter and toast. The regard was leisurely and undisguised, and yet (to do it justice) it lacked all quality of rudeness. On the

contrary, this overt look, which no more respected the finnicking conventions of politeness than his lips flattered language, or his dress paid toll to the follies of fashion, possessed a character of reassurance, as though his eyes were not displeased with what they saw. Indeed, one object on the table so far attracted his admiration as to cause him to indicate it by means of a movement of his hat.

"That's a nice cream jug you've got there, ma'am."

Mrs. Holmroyd's eyes fell upon it, and a flush (born not of gratification alone) crept into her face.

"It belonged to my grandmother, Mr. Burford," she said. She did not add that it had belonged to someone else, less connected with the family, since then, but the doleful thought was in her mind, and under pretext of touching the admired object with a soft, appreciative finger, she evaded the visitor's glance. For there was something in the weight of it disconcerting to sensitive memories. But the remark, surely, had been no more than a coincidence.

"Do you use it every day then, ma'am?" the Councillor enquired.

She answered "Yes.... At least, nearly every day," for Beryl was looking at her now, and eyes of innocence shine with such insufferable wisdom at times. "It makes a pleasant change."

The Councillor remarked, "Indeed!" In its dryness and angularity the word seemed curiously reminiscent of the figure of his daughter, who, as if evoked by it, rose up ghostly between them. Mrs. Holmroyd understood the significance of the comment. It implied that no such piece of silver would be degraded into common service on Miss Burford's table. But whether she stood rebuked or favoured by the comparison nothing in the Councillor's face betrayed. He left the topic as abruptly as he had approached it, and his next words showed him to be far away in thought.

"About those pies, ma'am. Did I understand you to say you was baking on Fridays?"

A slight flush rose to Mrs. Holmroyd's face as she acknowledged the task and day.

"I thought I hadn't been mistook," said the Councillor. "I've been talking it over with my daughter, and we've decided to give your pies a trial. We'll begin with a small one, to see how we like it. If that's satisfactory perhaps some time we'll try another."

There was a cautiousness about the order, intensified by its association with Miss Burford—as if this hard-faced lady had been a witness of Mrs. Holmroyd's discomfiture —that stung her pride. But the offence chargeable in the Councillor's words seemed to infect his answer not at all. He faced her with the straightforward mien of one neither intending nor suspecting offence.

"Eighteen pence I think you said it was, ma'am," the Councillor remarked, and thrust a large hand into his trousers' pocket, where some loose coinage disturbed by its intrusion made a painful jingle.

"O, please do not trouble about that, Mr. Burford," she protested, "anytime will do. In fact, I would prefer...." What precisely she would prefer remained unspoken. But the large hand groping in the spacious pocket ceased its activities at once, as if (to be sure) Mrs. Holmroyd's suggestion were a wise one.

"Just as you like ma'am," the Councillor obliged her. "You can have the money now, or you can have it later. Why, as far as that goes," he reflected, "perhaps, if you're agreeable, we might work it off by contra. It'll be as good a way as any. You'll be wanting groceries, I suppose. Tea, coffee, sugar, rice, sago, baking powder,"—he ran through a glib list of domestic necessaries, including some prime Wiltshire and several recommendable sorts of cheese. "I only keep the very best, ma'am. It pays me, and it pays my

customers best in the long run. I don't think I've been favoured with any of your custom up to the present, but I shall always be happy to serve you. Or anybody. For choice and quality I've a business that takes second place to none in Daneborough."

Mrs. Holmroyd betrayed a soft confusion in acknowledgment of her neglect of the Councillor's business. It was true she had had no dealings with him up to the present. But she excused this apparent discourtesy by alleging the smallness of her needs.

"That may be," said the Councillor, obviously determined to see in their smallness no bar to custom, " ... but they mount up. Business is business, and there's no call for you to buy a pennorth more of me than you want, just because I've a bigger stock to pick from. I'm ready to supply the big orders, and I'm ready to supply the small. There's no difference in the quality whether you want much or little. If you're satisfied where you are, ma'am," the Councillor said with a fine display of magnanimity, "why! stay where you are. I don't want to interfere with nobody else's trade." Mrs. Holmroyd breathed her appreciation of this laudable sentiment.

"But if," he added, with a more decisive tone, as though perhaps afraid his recent toleration might be misinterpreted, "you think there's anything in the grocery line could be improved on, why! I shall be glad to see you, ma'am. There's not many customers comes to me once but what they come again. I aren't in the habit of losing them."

The matter was agreed. On the basis of a contra account established by virtue of an eighteenpenny pie, Mrs. Holmroyd consented to give the Burford shop a trial. His solicitation of her custom flattered vanity, and his sturdy handling of the subject put her gratefully at ease. Where herself approached the topic of her livelihood with shame, this borough councillor marched squarely to the subject of

business with a tread as firm as that which took him to the Mansion House.

"And before I forget," said the Councillor, rubbing a sleeve round the circumference of his hat. "Did I understand you, or somebody else, to say anything about a school?"

Profiting by the lesson just received, and the resolution built on it, Mrs. Holmroyd lost no time in confessing her ownership of the little school.

"What's your terms, ma'am?" the Councillor enquired.

She was not yet, it seemed, so proficient in the new culture as to be capable of quoting terms without hesitation and a momentary dropping of the eyes. But she only dropped them to the table edge, which she stroked with a soft motion of the hand as if to mitigate the harshness of the sum mentioned. Thirty shillings, in short, the sum was.

"Per Term or Quarter, ma'am?" the Councillor asked her. She answered "Term" with the added comment that, reckoned quarterly, the sum amounted (virtually) to a pound. "How do you make that out?" the Councillor corrected. "Three thirties is ninety; ninety's four pound ten. There's a matter of ten shilling difference, ma'am." She agreed instantly. To be sure. Mr. Burford was quite right. Of course.... And stroked the table edge again. It was another lesson in practicality that she must take to heart. Actuated by which resolve, inasmuch as the Councillor's last word had been "Indeed!" and nothing more favourable to thirty shillings had passed his beard since then, she said: "Of course ... in the event of two pupils from one family...."

"Aye, but it isn't two," the Councillor disillusioned her promptly. "It's only one. In fact, it's not even that. It's an enquiry. That's all it is." Mrs. Holmroyd quite understood the situation, and expected nothing more of it than had actually transpired. At the same time, if Mr. Burford

thought that the terms mentioned were more, perhaps, than those he had in mind would be disposed to entertain, she might consider some small....

But to her disappointment the Councillor flatly withstood this hint of a reduction; “Terms is terms, ma’am,” he said uncompromisingly. “And if folks doesn’t feel inclined to pay ’em that’s no reason why you should make ’em any less. It isn’t business. You could have as many pupils as you liked if you’d take ’em for nothing.” He delivered the homily with the terse satisfaction of a man who takes pride in his own common-sense, displaying it for Mrs. Holmroyd’s edification as Miss Burford might have shown the furniture reflective of her care. And Mrs. Holmroyd’s agreement seemed so emphatically assumed in what he said that she could do no other than assent to it, albeit this subscription to a fixed and arbitrary price caused her dependence to quake as if the principle thus put into her hand for self-defence had been a fire-arm which (even in extremity) she doubted her courage to discharge. Nor was her faith in its protectiveness increased when the Councillor, still talking over his extended hat, went on to say that in the case under consideration “Probably it wouldn’t make a ha’porth of difference if you reduced your terms or not. There’s so many schools nowadays, ma’am. Here’s all the Church schools and the Corporation schools and the English schools and the Grammar School and private schools in every street. People can have edjication for nothing nowadays, and when they can get it for nothing it’s not very likely they want to pay for it.” Not, he explained in a tone displaying some slight, but only slight, consideration for Mrs. Holmroyd’s academic feelings, that he was in favour of all this Edjication himself. “It’s overdone, ma’am. There’s too much of it. It’s a craze. People seems to think edjication’s going to be a cure for everything. It’s not. What it does in nine cases out of ten is to fill folks’ heads with nonsense. They’d

rather waste their time learning things they can't understand and wouldn't be no good to 'em if they did, than turn to honest work and do the things they can. Where's all the domestic servants and shop assistants going to, ma'am, since edjication's been introduced? Here's my daughter, ma'am. She gets a servant in one day, and the girl's mother comes to fetch her box the next. Why? Just because my daughter expects to have things clean and decent. Some day there won't be any servants to be had. They'll all be milliners and school-teachers. That's what edjication's got to answer for."

In the instant of departure the observant eyes that had more than once rested on Beryl's solemnly uplifted face in their constant journeys round the room, admitted her to a glance of definite recognition at last.

"Your daughter, ma'am?" he made enquiry.

Mrs. Holmroyd, gratified with his notice of her child, said "Yes," and lit up the object of his attention with an indulgent smile as though commending it under this favourable light to the Councillor's regard.

"You've only these two, then," Mr. Burford remarked; and when she had confirmed the number: "Let's see," said he, "I think I'm right in supposing you've lost your husband, ma'am?" If she had not answered him by words, the look of sorrowing admission with which her face adapted itself to the enquiry would have spoken for her.

"He has been dead ... nearly two years," she said softly; and the impulse proving too strong for her devotion to withstand, she could not refrain from calling attention to the presentment of the best of husbands.

"That is his photograph on the mantelpiece ... just behind you, Mr. Burford. It does not do him justice."

He turned hat in hand, and gazed a moment on it; she, intently watching. But his only comment was an ultimate "Indeed!" which, truth to tell, proved poor requital for the

needs of love.

"I'll bid you good evening, ma'am," the Councillor said, turning from this melancholy topic to matter of fact with evident relief. "Don't disturb yourself. I know my way out." To Oswald, awaiting him in the doorway he said, "Well m'lad! Have you thought any more about what I told you? Have you made up your mind yet?"

With burning ears Oswald had to confess the shameful fact "Not yet," being so completely unprepared for a repetition of this perplexing question as to have no other answer ready for it. "It's time you did," the Councillor admonished him. "Every day you lose you're letting some smarter lad get a start of you." It was a terrifying reflection, that shook the fabric of Oswald's peace of mind. He wished he could decide whether their newly made acquaintance spoke sportively or in earnest. But the square beard divulged no secrets, and for Oswald's age humour is as a locked door unless a smile be the key to it. The broad conciliar figure launched itself from the doorway and merged its contours into the gathering mist. Quick! Let this door be closed; let the closer of it hasten back to the parlour; let him find his gloves, his muffler, cap and overcoat, and begin without a moment's waste to overtake this constant stream of smarter boys whom each succeeding second of inertia saw started on the road to fame ahead of him.

5

On Saturday there was no school. The restless movements of imprisoned scholars, sniffing over slate and page like rabbits engaged upon green food, gave way to the sound of water and the vigour of scrubbing-brushes symbolic of the charwoman, who, wrapped in a large black shawl that her wrinkled arms wound round about her from within, and treading painfully on feet that years of imprudent intimacy with damp floorboards and washhouse

flagstones had made into repositories of rheumatism and barometric pains, came each Saturday to scrub the schoolroom floor and discharge those coarser duties to which Mrs. Holmroyd's respectability had not yet bowed. Once in each fortnight too, she came to undertake the heavier washing, bearing underneath her shawl a pair of ancient pattens, with which Oswald and Beryl indulged in glorious foretastes of their own growth during the dinner hour. At eight o'clock, or earlier, a muffled wrap bestowed upon the street door by the washerwoman's knuckles through their folds of shawl, announced her advent. Respectfully the street door opened. A voice affirmed: "It's only Me'm!" And feet were heard, most punctiliously, to brush themselves upon the mat.

This knock, and voice, and these feet, were Elizabeth.

Her hair when she removed her faded bonnet of antiquity, was silvery white. Her eyes were drawn, and the flesh falling away from them hung below each iris in crescents of red. But the face was not withered, and to those old enough to be conversant with the processes of age its features showed clear traces of earlier beauty. The speaking voice that issued from the sunken lips was singularly gentle and lent to her soft enunciation of the word "mum" a quality not servile. Seldom did Mrs. Holmroyd note the white head bent above her floor but that conscience smote her for being the instigator of its task. These silver hairs shone like prophetic texts to her, which with many an inward tremour she applied to her own life, asking: "How will it be with me, when someday my forces fail?" For she saw that the world demands, with stern injustice, the hardest labour from the least fitted. The aged and the weak, descending through the successive strata of more tolerable occupations reserved for the strong and able, sink inevitably at last to those uttermost depths of toil that only age and feebleness could stoop to undertake. Elizabeth had no vices save a jug of ale for her midday

meal (that she fetched at the required moment from an adjacent hostel beneath the all-sufficing shawl) and an intemperate thirst for work. Two husbands had she buried in her time; each, in turn, a helpless burden on her, and each as inconsolably lamented as if all virtue had died with him. Now, in her declining strength, the only favour she asked of the world was liberty to earn her bread. The only fear she had, was not of work but that the world should disbelieve the working capabilities of white hairs. More than anything she dreaded this aspersion on her strength, and there was something tragic in the physical efforts her frail form put forth to demonstrate its fitness for toil. She prayed to die as she had lived; a worker. And yet, for all her protestations of strength and her display of a spirit that seemed immortal, there were signs that the flesh began to fail. Her eyes lacked their ancient sharpness for spying cobwebs or penetrating corners. Her vaunted scrubbing-hand, for all its vigour, suffered lapses and betrayed the conscience it sought to serve, leaving inexplicable spots uncleansed, that Mrs. Holmroyd's self by stealth removed.

For years she had charred in Daneborough's selectest circles, passing from one domestic cataclysm to another with faith and enthusiasm unimpaired; perpetually toiling on the dusty underside of the seamy canvas of life, and so perverted by long habit that she had come to regard blue mottled soap and pancheons for flesh-shrivelling water as the insignia of some holy faith. Scarcely a kitchen of Daneborough but she was acquainted with; scarcely a family but she had worked for. She knew to its deeps the domestic economy of some scores of pretentious houses, and those dread domestic secrets that society spends its life in trying to conceal. The turned carpet, the patched stair, the worn blanket, the frayed curtains, the niggard larder—she knew which households suffered from these secret maladies, and could lay her unhesitating hand upon the cupboards in which their skeletons were kept. Among

other members of the Corporation she had charred, at one time, for the late lamented Alderman Bankett, until his relict—knowing by personal experience the disabilities of old age, and suspecting that Elizabeth could not, for all her protestations, remain much longer exempt from them—mercifully discharged the charwoman's white hairs from work so much beyond their strength. And Elizabeth had charred for the late Mrs. Burford and her daughter, too, until—in a moment of unpardonable weakness—her pride could not deny itself the gratification of imparting that, in her younger and more comely days, she had been sought in marriage by the Councillor's progenitor, and that had he but pressed his suit a little longer Miss Burford might have acknowledged Elizabeth for grandmother. The statement, being indisputably true, served naturally as a paralyzer of relations. "From that time'm," Elizabeth confided to Mrs. Holmroyd, "it was no use me trying to suit her. I could read it in her face. She never rested while she got shut of me."

With which the face of the enthusiast, rent with a hundred seams and convulsed beyond recognition, would be flung into her apron—that shook hugely and horribly with silent sobs. On Oswald this dramatic scene, not infrequently enacted, had a marrow-curdling effect very disturbing to the lower jaw and rendering deglutition difficult. What stirred him most of all in this recital was the prepotent fact that the extinct founder of the Burford fortunes had begun life with a handbell and muffin basket. Baskets, in fact, seemed to lend foundation to more than half the fortunes of the families of Daneborough. With such examples to inspire him, what was there (aided by the sausage basket) himself might not achieve?

"It's true'm!" Elizabeth was wont to assure his mother, fearful lest so wonderful a story might defraud her of the credit and the sympathy that were her due. "It's as true as I'm stood here. He asked me three times. He asked me last

time at the corner of Cattle Market. He had basket on his arm and bell in his hand, and he puts basket down as it might be there, and when I shakes my head he picks basket up again in a temper and rung bell fit to break it. But would I have him? Not me'm! Not likely. I wouldn't have given up my two husbands for such a one as him. Not if you'd paid me."

And though Elizabeth might wrap tumultuous sobs in her tormented apron to think how harshly she had been used by this granddaughter-in-hypothesis, it must at least be admitted that such a relationship, unsupported by anything in the table of affinities, was one that exacted a niceness of handling beyond the competence of most human nature to bestow upon it. Perhaps in acting as she did, Miss Burford took the only human course; for if the enthusiast had so far lost sight of the virtue of discretion as to impart such a confidence to Councillor Burford's daughter, was she likely to be less communicative to servant-maids, whose obedient respect was hard enough to claim already?

"I know what it is'm!" the enthusiast averred, withdrawing a withered, shaking hand from out of the folds of her shawl, her lips writhing one above the other in their efforts to retain composure and repress the rising sob. "She's done with me. She's finished with me. She'll never let me work for her again. And I shan't go and ask her'm. I shan't beg. I'd die sooner."

"O, surely, surely!" Mrs. Holmroyd said, seeking to pour the vials of hope and comfort on the stricken woman, "it is not so bad as that, Elizabeth. There must be some mistake. You should not look on the dark side of things."

"She promised to let me know'm," the shaking shawl replied. "I know what that means. I know what it means to be let know. That's what they all say when they want to get shut of me. Everybody's getting shut of me." Her reddening eyes swam down to the responsive shawl. " ...

You'll be getting shut of me next'm."

And the dreadfullest part about it was that beneath this fleshless, bloodless sentiment, Mrs. Holmroyd descried the outline of the bony skeleton of truth. Yet the precariousness of her own existence, that should have taught her wisdom, taught her to be merciful instead. Without mercy, indeed, how could she dare to hope? The eye of her apprehension perceived Elizabeth as a terrible extension of her own self, displaying in most poignant form the tragedy of her own desires and fears. Never should this door be closed against her so long as her failing limbs and lurid fervour had strength to reach it. Oswald and Beryl she imbued with an ultra reverence for these silver hairs that some dread day (who knows?) might be her very own. Always they addressed the folded shawl and faded bonnet as Mrs. Betson, and asked her scrupulously how she did, and were so deferent and well behaved that now and again the ancient charwoman could not swallow her meat for the lump in her throat, and set down her midday beer untasted on the table, overcome with momentary gratitude for the kindness this household showed her, and begging Mrs. Holmroyd:

"O, mum! Don't get shut of me for Childer's sake. I'd sooner be let know by any place but this."

6

Of all days in the week the one that Oswald and his sister loved the best was Saturday. Sunday dwelt a day apart, rather to be respected than beloved; unreckoned with the other friendly human days on which mankind has freedom to enjoy itself. If rain must fall on any day, by all means let it be a Sunday; piety being independent of the weather, and Sunday bringing with it no market penny as Saturday did. For Saturday was market day, and whilst the aged enthusiast charged herself with responsibility for their home, Oswald and his sister went a marketing with their

mother, one on each side of her; Beryl on the inner side of safety, Oswald on the outer and protective flank, preserving as a gentleman should the guardian place each time they crossed from one causeway to another by a manœuvre almost military in its precision. They did not wear their Sunday best, but a modification sufficient to mark the status of the day, for the cream of Daneborough's housewifery would be abroad with purses, grocery books and satchels, and Mrs. Holmroyd looked forward as much to the taste of public pride in her two children as the enthusiast looked forward to her midday ale. Each glance of praise bestowed on Oswald or on Beryl went straight into her heart, like the amber beverage into the enthusiast's stomach, warming it and filling the recipient with comfortable thoughts of God. She gave Him thanks to find no children in all the town looking nicer than her own. Often when they were thus out together, she would seek occasion to let them walk in front of her that she might indulge motherhood to the full sight of them, and let her eye feast on this treasure that belonged to her.

For this forenoon shopping furnished but a further instance of her pride. Indeed, the next-door neighbour openly rebuked the prodigality that chose to purchase at a time when all the proudest purses in Daneborough were on parade, and said: "You're very foolish, marm, excuse me!" It was the next-door's wiser way to fare forth late at night, when Mrs. Holmroyd's children lay abed, taking with her a carpet bag as if departing on a visit to the sea-side. With this she attacked the market at an hour when its powers of resistance began to flag; when the flaring lamps of paraffin began to spit and falter, and the fishmongers, hoarse with a whole day's crying of "Now you fish buyers!" had ceased to fling pump water over their weeping stalls, or with watering-cans to try and coax the gaping cod and halibut back to life under the delusion that they were in their native element once more. Instead, they now displayed

alacrity to thrust their flaccid remnants into any hesitating bass that paused before them, or into the market perambulator that passed by, charged with green vegetables and sleeping childhood, crying: "Here you are, missus! It's been waiting for you. Fresh from the sea. You needn't go any further for a bit of prime halibut."

And the butchers too, in smocks that had been snowy white this morning, but were daubed all over now with the bloody finger-smears betokening a busy day, would be similarly reckless in their disposal of last legs and beasts' internals, before the market closed. Sometimes, approaching midnight, if the application of an eye to Mrs. Holmroyd's letter-box revealed the glitter of an inward light, the next-door neighbour would administer a muffled summons, on fire to claim the triumph of some dubitable purchase at a price that should have stirred all righteous ears to envy.

"There marm! And there! What do you say to that! And look you here! Is that a piece of good fresh meat? Smell it marm. As fresh as when it was killed. What do you think I paid? You'll never guess." And Mrs. Holmroyd never guessed. She never even learned the first rudiments of the lesson that the next-door neighbour's rhapsodies essayed to teach her.

"You ought to come out marketing with me, marm!" the next-door neighbour urged, filled in this hour of conquest with the proselytizer's zeal. "I'd learn you how to go about things. You'd soon pick it up. Pork, too, marm. You'd buy it for half the price you pay at Waxford's if only you'd go at a proper time."

It was the next-door neighbour's pride, this nocturnal marketing. She gloried in it. To feed on meat at pence per pound cheaper than the folly of the morning buyers paid for it brought her more joy than a noble deed does to the virtuous. Nor could she comprehend the curious obstinacy of her neighbour, who, for all that Mrs. Holmroyd seemed

to share her triumph and applaud her wisdom, yet pursued each Saturday the trodden path of error; going out in the forenoon with her children to buy her Sunday's dinner from the High Gate butcher, and her fish from the High Gate fishmonger, and her vegetables from the High Gate greengrocer, all of whom, in the next-door neighbour's parlance: "makes you pay for the gold lettering on their window, marm." And it was useless that Mrs. Holmroyd sought to let her heart believe she did these things, in some sort, for her children's sake. She did them, as the next-door neighbour vexedly divined, for pride. Perhaps, in this, she was not totally to blame. A culpable providence had scarcely helped her to be humble.

For when she came to Daneborough, she had, all told, no more than thirty pounds, and of this sum the greater part transformed itself into the Spring Bank home. But Providence, like an irritable teacher, alternately too lenient and too firm, and so spoiling the character committed to its care, inspired (in Mrs. Holmroyd's favour) a frail annuitant to die. This was a maternal great-aunt whose death advantaged Oswald's mother by the fabulous sum of eighty pounds, some shillings, and those odd pence in which lawyers and business men of principle delight to prove integrity. The reversion of this pittance that came to Mrs. Holmroyd not a day too soon—for already the quarter's rent was due—sufficed to set the beneficiary's fears at rest, restore her faith in heaven and place Aunt Caroline among the saints.

In due course, the financial remains of Aunt Caroline were committed to the bank. They were interred in the Banker's Vault as eighty pounds, some shillings and the scrupulous odd pence. But the deposit note that Mrs. Holmroyd brought away as her certificate of burial was but for seventy pounds. Already the awful process of decomposition was set in. Before long, the mourner stood by the side of Aunt Caroline's mortal resting place once

more, and the Deposit Note when she retired said sixty-five. Now the wretched mourner began to see the true significance of death and to wish Aunt Caroline were still alive.

For the knowledge of this money at the bank had wrought in her a curious moral harm. It bred in her the feeling that her present life was specious and deceitful, as if she were living it by too mean a standard below the level of necessity. When she baked her pies or took the money for the little school, the memory of this hidden store rebuked her. It encouraged her to entertain a false ideal of independence. What were a few pennies paid for better meat, measured against such a background at the Bank? How could she deny her children milk and butter of the best or shame them by unneedful shabbiness when this sponsive sum protested? It lent a countenance to all her native generosities, to all those beautiful impulses of love and kindness that overgrew transplanted prudence like rank and native weeds. She was, all else before, a woman and a mother. Of business she knew nothing. Least of all could she comprehend that implacable form of business imposing the stern denial of every better impulse. Perplexedly endeavouring to be practical, she clung to the creed of her heart's childhood: that kindness is a sort of providential currency, purchasing what it gives; that the eternal Banker never dishonours one promissary note of love, that the bread cast fearlessly upon the waters will come back, as it is written, after many days.

7

Councillor Burford's shop stood in the High Gate almost opposite to the Bank so familiar to Mrs. Holmroyd's fears, and but a stone's throw from the Mansion House, of whose severe detachment and superiority it seemed to have borrowed not a little. Two bayed and consequential windows, each endowed with the abdominous convexity of

an alderman, imposed their corpulence upon the pavement, and, scorning the meretricious finery of modern trade, attested a sober, well-established business. Nothing in the shop's external features had been changed since the death of the first Burford, who might have risen from his cubicle in the cemetery and walked to his ancient place of business in the High Gate without suspecting that twenty years rather than one night had passed since last he hung his hat behind the counter and tied the strings of his apron into a concise bow across the pit of his stomach. This resistance of the shop to popular encroachment formed no small part of its proprietor's pride. Just as the next door neighbour vaunted her nocturnal marketing, and Mrs. Holmroyd drew satisfaction from purchases made by day, so the Councillor reposed pride in his unaltered windows transected into a multitude of panes that spoke their owner's long descent and attested an unbroken business lineage of fifty years. For the ostentatious nakedness of plate-glass that defiled so many frontages competing with his own he had no more tolerance than for a woman indecorously underclad, whose immodesty displayed more breast than bodice. The vulgar tendencies of contemporary trade, flaunting its wares without reserve before the eyes of all and sundry in a shameless effort to seduce inconstant custom and tempt those feeble-minded purchasers whose judgment fell before profusion, he steadfastly opposed. Business was no affair of trumpery window-dressing and unblushing price-tickets that ogled every passer-by. These things prostituted it. Quality did not lift its skirt in public places and show ankles of seductive cheapness to lure debased admirers. Quality, like a prudent woman, stayed indoors, displaying herself alone to those imbued with her own virtue that sought her there. The soul of business, in the Councillor's conception, dwelt not in conflict but in character. Its foundations were personality. Customers had recourse to him as clients interviewed a doctor; seeking qualities and

prices from the lips of his experience, and accepting the value of his judgment in all the things he dealt in, before their own. The big bowed windows, that might have been loquacious with labels, preserved instead the grave discretion of a surgery; such goods as they acknowledged were communicated soberly to the world without other recommendation than themselves. Yet in case these sober utterances might fail to make impression on the thoughtless, above the door—in characters for all to read—was gilded the date of the shop's establishment, proclaiming without a doubt that here was no mere upstart trade.

But though the Councillor's pride took stand unyielding before this frontage, and he said "It shan't be done no different whilst I'm alive," by which he made allusion to his son, who had betrayed at one time, tepid indications of a leaning towards plate glass, his pride (on the other hand) swelled with the consciousness of those internal modifications that bespoke the business's expansion. The living room behind the shop wherein the Burford family ate their dinner when the Councillor was a boy and the Councillor's father carving the midday meal could keep an eye upon the counter through a sort of retail hagioscope or one-pane window, prepared to wipe the gravy from his mouth at any moment on the appearance of a customer and pass into the shop, still masticating with a certain grandeur as he served,—all this was swept away, and but a transverse girder demarked the line once drawn between domesticity and trade.

Elizabeth remembered well these early premises and had often been served across the counter by the one-time aspirant for her hand, whose passion, constrained by marriage and the declining fortune of the once-desired, lost itself at last like an indistinguishable tributary in the broad delta of business dealing. His eye towards the end, could rest upon the faded object of his earlier adoration with the

dilute politeness for a casual customer, taking her coppers and talking of the weather visible beyond his windows as though no other topic had ever come between them, whatever his inner thoughts might be. Thus it fares with all romance, that is either slain or outlives itself. And there is no more painful spectacle than a superannuated passion propped on reality and crippled with the rheumatism of disillusionment. Yet when the founder of the Burford business died, Elizabeth craved respite from her day's employment to see his body taken back to earth, standing by the cemetery gates whilst tears more frequent than the minute bell dropped on her faded shawl. Hers was the last eye, indeed, to look upon the coffin before the clods obscured it.

God bless us, what have we here but pride again? What took her to the cemetery but her pride, agreeably garbed in weeds of sentiment, "to see the last of him" and replenish its meagre store with the memory that this occupant of a polished coffin had more than once besought her wrinkled hand, and that had but her hand been less exclusive she might have wept beneath a widow's veil and gone home in a pair-coach to spill tears over funeral biscuits instead of trudging on tired feet to the wash-tub?

Her loyalty towards the dead man took the form of a pious doubt of his son's ability to succeed him. "He'll never be his father," was her expressed opinion. "He's nothing of his father in him." And at that time, perhaps, there seemed some ground for the prediction. "The Shop," old Joseph Burford might have affirmed in the historic language of a deceased monarch, "c'est moi." He had made it. He was it. All the majesty of the business seemed incorporate in his own person. When he quitted the counter to take his meals the shop assumed an empty and uncertain air, like a face with its mouth open. The younger Burford seemed no substitute for the elder, whose delegated authority he wielded with such diffidence as to deprive the

instrument of its function. It was too obvious that he shone by reflected light, deriving the greater part of lustre from his father's eye, whose brightness also extinguished him. Even in the weighing of a pound of tea or the rashering of bacon, the paternal optic hovered hawklike over his uncertainty, ready to pounce upon a fault. The younger Burford expressed a cypher in the shop. Customers of standing asked the elder Burford how he did, and asked the younger Burford (in the elder's absence) how his father did. They never asked the younger Burford how the younger did, for there seemed as yet nothing sufficiently established about his identity to justify solicitude.

But with his father's death a noticeable change was wrought in him. He assumed his father's gold watch; his father's apron; his father's trenchant tones and authoritative eye. The transition was rapid. From the moment that he became the accredited recipient of condolences on his father's death, making subdued but suitable acknowledgment; imparting to customers the circumstances of his father's illness and latest hours; his age, and the length of time he had been established in business—which, he took the opportunity to assure them gravely, would "be carried on as usual, with the same regard to quality"—the younger Burford disappeared. It seemed almost as if the son were buried, rather than the father. When customers enquired for "Mr. Burford" it was the son who looked up from his counter with acknowledgment of the name. His figure, gradually expanding, absorbed and incorporated the business as his father's had done before. When he was out of it the shop seemed empty. From his presence teas and coffees drew such authenticity as they had; hams lacked all virtue unless he handled them; customers lent no confidence to bacon until the Burford hands had laid their blessing on it, with the unction of a bishop. The mechanical laudations of his hirelings behind the counter fell flat and lukewarm by

comparison with the master's manner. When they displayed a piece of "rolled" or "smoked" their tepid commendations seemed to diffuse dubiety on both sides of the counter. "Thank you ... but I'll wait for Mr. Burford. Mr. Burford knows exactly what I want," was a frequent formula. The assistants were resigned to it. They even seemed to await it and welcome it when it came, as a merciful solution of their difficulties; thankful to lay the merchandise down and escape the responsibility imposed by it. Not infrequently they prompted customers whose hesitation increased their own: "Perhaps you'd like to see Mr. Burford. He'll be at liberty in a moment...." and looked unfeignedly grateful when the recommendation was accepted.

Thus the second Burford came in time to be the repository of hundreds of domestic tastes and idiosyncracies, as a lawyer comes to know the secrets of his clients. He knew whose palate exacted fat bacon, and whose streaked; who favoured chicory; whose taste in teas inclined to China or Ceylon; what cheeses, and the state of their maturity, respective customers demanded, with a wide discrimination in tinned merchandise, jams, biscuits and dried fruits. Long before the elder Burford's death he had taken unto himself a wife and become the father of a son and daughter. His wife's death in some sort paved the way to a municipal career, which he appeared to choose as an alternative to re-marriage. Certainly he could have espoused no second wife more fitted to consolidate his business. The smallest article he sold seemed stamped with the integrity of the Council Chamber. To be served by a full-blooded Councillor, and ma'amed augustly by a City Father is not displeasing to the populace. For the expenditure of a trifle it might feel itself in contact with the Mansion House and enjoy a brief intimacy with the power that imposed the rates. Elizabeth's prediction was disproved. Old Joseph Burford's son had over-stepped his

father. Some day the Parish Church bells would peal and he would walk behind the mace, no longer Mr. Councillor, but Mr. Mayor.

8

The shop was familiar enough to Mrs. Holmroyd. Scarce a Saturday but she had passed its windows and bestowed a glance upon the merchandise displayed behind its many panes. She had never shopped there, however, and the consciousness of this, added to the consciousness that her visit was expected, seemed to imbue this errand with something of formality. A slight, but perceptible, feeling of nervousness crept over her as she opened the old-fashioned door, glazed and checkered like the windows on each side of it, and led her family across the threshold. In the earlier days of the Councillor's father a dribbling bell on a loose neck would have announced her entry with insensate laughter. Before his death this obsolescent sentinel of custom had already given way to a spring gong. But even though the spring gong struck but once, that once (with the growth of custom) became so continuous and distracting that it was dispensed with, like its predecessor. Now only the door interposed between the counter and the outer world, but the present proprietor clung tenaciously to this as to a last tradition of self-respecting trade, and stubbornly opposed the growing fashion of the open frontage that made a place of business as common as the street, and gave admission to dogs with no manners to speak of, and the undesired.

Already the two counters coped busily with their Saturday morning's trade, and the half dozen high, uncomfortable chairs were occupied by parcels, sitters, or umbrellas.

Councillor Burford occupied the place of honour behind the first counter on the right hand side of the door, over which he presided in solitary state, merely snapping his

fingers for assistance when he needed it. With his Saturday's white apron tied round his ample midway, and wearing his Saturday's white shirt, its sleeves rolled up above the elbows, and the V-shaped opening in his waistcoat cut deep enough to let two studs be seen, he displayed a strong resemblance to his late father. Upon his nose at its lowermost extremity sat a gold pince-nez, whose function at first sight seemed scarcely apparent inasmuch as its lenses oscillated a couple of inches below his eyes, and he appeared to look at everything and everybody above them. These glasses were a phase of Councillor Burford with which Mrs. Holmroyd and her family had not yet made acquaintance, but they were well known to all frequenters of the shop and members of the Council Chamber. Now and again he lifted them from his nose, which they straddled precariously like an indifferent rider on a steed too big for him, and raised them with a gesture of deliberation as though, once these hindrances to sight had been removed, his unobstructed judgment could clearly see. Judgment thus afforded the sight it looked for, he replaced them on the extremity of his nose, where a visible groove on each side of it was by long usage fretted for their reception. But lengthy deliberation seemed not a pronounced characteristic of the Councillor, whose decisions appeared to need no distant seeking, but were all ready for immediate delivery like the goods he sold, and required only to be served out. At the time of Mrs. Holmroyd's entrance he was engaged in conversation with the wife of the Hill Street Doctor whose son sang in St. Saviour's choir. A biscuit canister stood upon the counter, on which his bared forearm rested with an air of confidence.

For one thing Councillor Burford never was. He never was servile. He was none of your bowers and scrapers, your handwashers and wringers of aprons. His politeness bore ever a certain air of brusquerie; his brusquerie a

certain character of politeness. The two qualities were inseparable in him. He addressed his customers with a voice only less peremptory than that in which he spoke to his assistants. It was rare that he lowered it. His phrases, terse and trenchant for the most part, were sliced with the blade of sharp decision and served in such a way as he would stab the knife into a slab of butter and offer its point to some hesitating patron with a curt: "Try it yourself, ma'am." And his ma'ams made no invidious distinctions. He never shirked them even to aprons and shawls, nor by slurring sought to disown their utterance. On the contrary, when Councillor Burford said "Ma'am" the word cut through the shop and had a curious effect of emphasizing the utterer's own importance rather than acknowledging hers to whom it was addressed. His "ma'ams" implicated nothing personal; they subscribed simply to a convention and compromised his own respect no more than the "dearly beloved brethren" of the pulpit commits the preacher to love his fellow men.

Behind the counter on the opposite side of the shop facing his father, the younger Burford served, and assisted reminiscent history to repeat herself. Here, save for a little march in time and some internal change, all was as it had been in the ancient Burford days. Dignity and self-importance turned automatically to the right; modesty and vacillation, after a spasmodic moment, shrunk to the left, or hung irresolutely on their heel before the communicating counter served by mere assistants, who took the dregs of custom, packed up consolidated groceries, and hurried to their master's elbow at the cracking of his thumb and finger. It was instructive to note how completely the Councillor's personality permeated his shop; how it controlled and actuated the movements of his helpers, as if they had been prolongations of his own limbs rather than independent human beings. Despite his thirty years the younger Burford had been trained in such

subjection to the elder's word, referring every doubt to the paternal certitude, that within the precincts of the shop he seemed to doff all individuality with his coat and hung his judgment meekly on his father's nod, just as he committed his coat to the hook behind the private office door. Merchandise confided surreptitiously to his inspection from time to time by doubting assistants was not less dubiously eyed by him, and, after mysterious whisperings behind a hand, taken up to the high altar to be passed or vetoed by a terse pronouncement on the Master's part.

The junior Burford had just been up to the chief counter to collect authority for the disposal of a box of fairy candles when Mrs. Holmroyd entered the shop. Noting this unfamiliar presence he accosted her politely on his way back to the subordinate counter with the enquiry: "Are you being attended to, Madam?" His voice, though aspiring to a higher plane of culture than his father's, lacked the parental ring. It had no timbre of self-confidence, and its politeness was plainly but a servile substitute for personality—to which he would not dare to aspire during his father's life. He used the unabbreviated "Madam" with an air of such repression as made the two syllables sound feeble by contrast with his father's one. Mrs. Holmroyd was on the point of making answer to the younger Burford —"Mr. Arry," as he was designated in the shop—when the Councillor, still reposing his sleeveless forearm over the biscuit canister, raised his voice out of the general level of his conversation with the doctor's wife to say: "I'm attending to Mrs. Holmroyd myself in a moment." The announcement appeared to catch the younger Burford in the back. With a hurried murmur of apology he quitted Mrs. Holmroyd and obliterated himself behind his counter. After a few brief moments the doctor's wife departed, bestowing an intent regard on Mrs. Holmroyd and her children, that seemed to ask of memory if these were patients of her husband or not. Oswald plucked his

mother's sleeve and drew her ear towards his lips that he might whisper who this rustling lady was who passed them in a waft of petticoats and scent. Already the Councillor, pushing the biscuit tin dismissively aside with the utterance of a name that caused it to be run for by a white apron and borne away across the shop, invited Mrs. Holmroyd: "Now ma'am!"

He stood awaiting her, all business; overlooking his precarious glasses that shook to the least word or gesture; his pencil and duplex entry-book in hand. Mrs. Holmroyd advanced to the counter, her children following, and unwound the little paper scroll enumerating their week's supplies. The list was not a long one. It struck her painfully, in fact, as being too curt and unimportant for the impressive attention bestowed upon it. Its end came with startling abruptness, particularly as the pencil had taken up an expectant posture on a fresh line, and the Councillor's voice demanded: "And the next, ma'am." There was no next. She murmured her regret, with a gentle air of cogitation that seemed to seek requirements overlooked. The Councillor, still holding the pencil to his note-book, peered over his gold-rimmed pince-nez into space, as if lending his own more active and qualified mind for the assistance of her introspection and prompted memory with such articles as his wide experience taught him a housewife might be likely to require.

"Soap, ma'am? No soap. Candles? No candles. Dried fruit? No dried fruit. Currants? Raisins? Sultanas?"

All these, he gave assurance were of the very best. Her conscience smote her in the end to let so many best of things go by, as though she were insensible to quality; and feeling at length that some more suitable acknowledgment of the Councillor's trouble on her behalf was called for than unvarying negation, she let a wavering choice be seen at the suggestion of a cream-cheese.

"Fresh in from the country this morning, ma'am!" the

Councillor affirmed. “The very best. You won’t be disappointed. I can recommend them.” His thumb and finger snapped like the hammer of a pistol. “Fletcher!—Two cream cheeses for this lady to look at. Large and small. Sharp.”

One of the white aprons thus apostrophized, pushed another obstructive apron flat against the wall and bore the ordered cheeses to the head counter, each outspread upon a hand. The Councillor, slipping his pencil behind an ear, turned up the green rush wrapping with fingers of expressive admiration, and displayed the delectable texture of cool cream to Mrs. Holmroyd’s gaze with a gesture so convincing that refusal was unthinkable. She thanked him. They looked lovely. She would take one.

“A large one, ma’am?”

In the matter of pork pies the Councillor had betrayed no hesitation. He had said, as Mrs. Holmroyd’s recollection quickly prompted her “Let’s begin with a small one.” But in respect of cheeses he posed the question with the larger in his hand, as if her answer were assured, and she chose “the large one, please.” It seemed that all the practical lessons learned from Councillor Burford counted for nothing when she tried to put them into practice against their master.

His busy pencil added up the items of her bill. “Sixteen and ninepence, ma’am.” She laid down a sovereign, that left her softly as if it had been a sigh. He rang it on the counter, caught it dexterously again and rapped it smartly into the till. “Sixteen and nine, and three’s seventeen. Eighteen. Nineteen. Nineteen and six. And six’s Twenty. Thank you, ma’am. Rather better weather again this morning. The things shall be sent on to you at once. Boy!”

Up to this moment the Councillor had gazed at Mrs. Holmroyd’s two children with an eye so distant and rejective that, for all the recognition it paid them, they

might have been at home. But as their mother turned to go, he raised the wagging pince-nez from his nose, and extending it indicatively across the counter in their direction, asked: “Do you young people know the way to eat sweets?”

The young people, awed by the sudden application of that smileless eye, and embarrassed by turbulent desires, hung their heads with one accord. Oswald contributed a whispered “thank you.”

The Councillor prized the stopper of a big glass bottle, loosened the stubborn contents with the point of a great knife, and thrust his hand within the flask as far as the swelling forearm flesh would let him, with a great action of liberality—as if there were no limit to what generosity desired to bring forth. Once or twice, in the endeavour to dislodge these refractory sweetmeats, he smote the bottle with a resounding flat hand and shook it forcefully. It was therefore not devoid of a sense of disappointment to Oswald and his sister that after such promising preliminaries no more than half a dozen sweetmeats rewarded the Councillor’s labours on their behalf. But he dispensed these across the counter, three into each politely upturned palm, with an air of condescension that restored magnificence to the offering, saying, as though to allay Mrs. Holmroyd’s unspoken fears:

“These’ll do them no harm, ma’am. They’re genuine boiled sweets. You can’t beat ’em. All pure sugar. Fourpence ha’penny a pound. The very best.”

She thanked the donor warmly and prompted her children, “What do you say to Mr. Burford?” They said “Thank you” in turn, still under the conflicting emotions stirred by the gift.

“Good morning ma’am.—Now ma’am?”

The second Ma’am was directed to Mrs. Holmroyd’s successor. No allusion had been made to the pork pie. Mrs.

Holmroyd's pride was glad of that, having been haunted by the fear that this subject might be raised in public to her discomfiture. She left the shop with a feeling of curious satisfaction for something accomplished; for some purpose —she knew not what—achieved.

9

Left to the milk pudding, hash and peeled potatoes in the kitchen; her pail, scrubbing brush and marbled soap in the schoolroom upstairs, the enthusiast had not passed the morning without incident. More than once, under stimulus of what she had to tell, she hurried to the front door, and screening her red eyelids with a steaming hand against the sunlight that mixed imperfectly with the November air, she gazed long and earnestly down the street, as if, by the sheer intensity of her regard, she sought to bring her tardy mistress home. The moment Mrs. Holmroyd crossed the doorstep, Elizabeth appeared at the passage end; her arms and apron in such commotion as might have been occasioned by a high wind.

"O'm! What do you think! You'll never guess!"

At first sight the emotions agitating the aged figure appeared to Mrs. Holmroyd's eyes so tragic that she had a momentary sinking of the heart. But Elizabeth's countenance, shaking off the conflicting moods that mobbed it, emerged from the momentary tumult with such a look of triumph as gave her back half a score of her most active years. She seemed revitalized; her face shone with the high serenity of a saucepan lid.

"Miss Burford's been. I'm to go and char for her on Tuesday." "O'm!" she exclaimed, discarding the impediment of her coarse apron and uplifting both hands to heaven. "I wish you could 'a seen her face when I opened door. You never saw anybody so took aback in all your born days'm. She hadn't a word to say for herself. She

went all colours. She could 'a dropped. She says, 'Dear me! What!... Why, is that you Elizabeth?' 'Aye, it's me'm,' I tells her. 'I thought you'd given up going out working,' she says after a bit. 'I should 'a done,' I says, 'if *some* folks had had their way wi' me'm. But I've a few friends left'm. I've never wanted a day's work since you said you'd let me know.' She coughs aside of her hand and says: 'I'm glad to hear it, and to see you looking so well.'"

" ... And then'm, she asks if you was in, and I tells her you wasn't, and she says: 'So you work for Mrs. Holmroyd, then?' and I says: 'I haven't missed a Saturday with her for many a week. And Monday's once a fortnight, regular.' She says: 'O' and 'Really' and 'Indeed.' 'What was I doing on Tuesday?' I tells her Nothing as I knew of'm, and she says: 'Do you care to come and work for me?' 'Not unless I'm wanted,' I answers. 'I don't care to go nowheres until I'm asked'm.' O'm! It would 'a done you good to see look she gied me. I know her. I haven't spring cleaned beside of her for nothing. She would 'a liked to toss her head up and walk away, but she swallows her pride and says: 'There's no question of you not being wanted.'

"Aye ..." the enthusiast continued, " ... and I knew in a minute what was cause of her asking me. Servant's left her. She's all with herself. She wouldn't 'a had me back without she was forced. She hasn't forgotten'm. And she hasn't forgiven. She didn't say a word about it to me, and I didn't to her, but it was in her eye all time."

The triumph consequent upon Miss Burford's visit so thrilled and occupied Elizabeth that the primary object of her calling was quite lost sight of. Her reading of Miss Burford's mind did credit to her eyesight. The discovery of this claimant to her grandfather's misplaced fancy in Mrs. Holmroyd's house was indeed a matter of unpalatable surprise to Councillor Burford's daughter, who had derived deceptive security from the charwoman's absence,

deeming a danger lessened that is not seen. But here, to her mortification, she found the enemy entrenched in the least suspected place of all. For the safeguard of a grandeur that might otherwise foolishly compromise itself, she would have liked to know how much of the secret of the first Burford's ridiculous attempts at misalliance had been imparted to this newcomer. Some knowledge of the situation was, in fact, essential to her future line of conduct with Mrs. Holmroyd. If the secret were inviolable (which she had too small a faith in the integrity of her sex to suppose) dignity might assert itself; if betrayed, then dignity would need to be diluted with a little diplomatic friendship. People who possess secrets to our disadvantage cannot be altogether treated as strangers.

As for the real object of Miss Burford's visit....

"Lor'm!" the enthusiast exclaimed when Mrs. Holmroyd ventured to enquire concerning it at last, " ... I thought I'd told you. She came about the pie."

The pie?

"She won't be wanting it'm. Leastways, not this week. She said it was her father's mistake. She'd told him, but men was all alike. She didn't know what her father wanted to meddle with such things for. He'd nothing to do with it. She'll take a small pie next week instead, if it's all the same to you."

Next week. If it was all the same to her.

The pie that was already made. The extra-large small pie for eighteen pence with which Mrs. Holmroyd had sought to propitiate this new customer and extend the boundaries of her hopes. The pie that had been her justification for this visit to the Bank and to the Burford shop this morning. Oswald and Beryl, staggered by the tidings, yet knowing not what precise attitude to adopt in face of it, studied their mother's countenance as if it were a sum.

She was very dignified. She let no sign be seen. Drawing

off her gloves with sweet serenity she thanked Elizabeth for delivering the message. “I am so glad Miss Burford called and that you are to work for her again. I always said it had been a mistake, Elizabeth.”

But Miss Burford’s was not the only mind that the new conjunction of relationships had troubled. Mrs. Holmroyd, too, saw elements in this re-shaping future to vex her peace. Not less than the hard-faced daughter of the Councillor had she a secret ambry of the soul to guard, hiding its bony relics from the eyes of men. And before the enthusiast took leave that night, though swathed already in the faded shawl and bowed to the attitude of humble resignation for the attended sacrament of silver, Mrs. Holmroyd took advantage of the pious curtsey and murmuring lips of gratitude to breathe the name “Elizabeth!” with a lowered urgent voice.

“Mum?” responded the enthusiast.

“If you go to Miss Burford’s on Tuesday ... you will be sure ... not to say a Word.”

“What about’m?”

“About the.... About the service you did for me the other week.”

“Service?” enquired the enthusiast, perplexedly. “You don’t mean ... cream jug’m?”

“Hush, Elizabeth!” Mrs. Holmroyd turned an apprehensive face towards the kitchen door, left partly open behind her. “It is strictly between ourselves.”

“Lor’m!” the enthusiast consoled her, “I’d clean forgot while you reminded me. It’s not the first time I’ve fetched things back for people—yes, and put ’em in for them as well. I did it regular for Mrs. Coldthorpe, and never breathed a word to nobody. *She* could trust me’m. She’d no need to warn me. You’re the first that ever has.”

More and more disquieted with the enthusiast’s evasion of her fears, Mrs. Holmroyd felt a dreadful apprehension

seize her.

“Elizabeth.... Have you broken your word to me! Have you told ... anyone already?”

To her dismay signs of agitation began to invest the shawl. It heaved convulsively.

“I know what it is’m!” she heard a suffocated voice exclaim. “You’re wanting an excuse to get rid of me. I’ve seen it coming on. You’ve never been same since you called at Rockery House. She must ’a told you something then. You’ve made it up betwixt you.”

At which the shawl, overcome with its own emotion, danced grotesquely as if it blew, empty, on a clothes line; nor could it be prevailed upon to partake of comfort until the rejected pie was insinuated beneath its fringe, when the tears of reproach changed their grief to gratitude, and the sobs became articulate enough to cry:

“O! mum. You’re too good to me. I don’t deserve it. You’ve only got to say the Word and I won’t go there at all.”

BOOK VI

THE ORGANIST

1

CHRISTMAS, that arch old time-server, hiding his pagan principles beneath a Christian livery, lending self-indulgence an air of specious goodwill, and proclaiming peace out of the satiety that succeeds good appetite; Christmas, that benevolent impostor, came and went, bringing to humanity by way of gifts such things as it

already had; merry-making to the merry-makers; riches to the rich; sorrow to the sorrowful; bronchitis to the bronchial; hunger to the hungry; death to the dying. The little school broke up with games and laughter. The wooden benches, scoured and scalded, were stacked upon the deal table. The sallow atlas, sponged tenderly with lukewarm water as if it had been a face, resigned itself to the tedium of Christmas with the air of a dyspeptic to whom all indiscretions of rejoicing are forbidden. From the schoolroom landing to the bottom stair the faded Brussels carpet was relaid in case Miss Burford or some other chanced to call.

The cares of life, multiplied like flocks of hungry winter birds, thronged in the season's wake. Coal grew profligate, burning away to nothing in no time like the best of resolutions. Gas so wasted his substance in riotous living that two of him were needed to make a light at all, whilst down in the cellar the insatiable meter ticked like an eight-day clock. Water froze and refused to be placated without a plumber. Pies and sausages were at a discount. Father Christmas, surfeited with geese and turkeys, positively sickened at the thought of pork. Scholastic bills would not be issued until the end of the holidays. It was uncertain when they would be paid. Frosts, snows, rains and fogs, compliments of the season, Christian Awake, Waits, Herald Angels and Brass bands filled life with foreboding and tarnished the brightest hopes. Twice Mrs. Holmroyd had recourse to the Bank, whose swing doors admitted her with a satiric politeness and mocked her as she went, with undissimulated scorn. Economy, in its blackest semblance, dogged her. Oswald and Beryl must look for no Christmas gifts this year beyond their mother's love. She prepared their hearts for resignation with tender care, but as the season of universal fellowship drew near her inflammable heart took fire like a yule log and filled her with such a warmth as gleamed far beyond the limits of herself.

Christmas came but once a year; her children should not be denied its blessings. The Christmas fire, blazing in her bosom, consumed all petty prudence mean and base; it blazed to a zealous profligacy that burned up every argument thrown on to quench it. All that she had not, she yearned to give. For Oswald she bought a volume of "Robinson Crusoe" and a paint-box; for Beryl a big new doll with flaxen hair, and a pair of cloth gaiters. Surely God would bless the gifts. Roast duck sanctified their Christmas dinner, followed by a plum pudding spiked with blanched almonds. Elizabeth helped to roast the duck and eat it; being further blessed to inarticulateness with silver and a pair of Mrs. Holmroyd's boots. No errand boy, qualified with the remotest claim upon remembrance, rapped upon the knocker to wish the house a merry Christmas in vain. And Oswald, proud of the mission but dry-lipped with the responsibility laid upon him, bore a silver emblem in his hand for transmission to the snuffy Prestwich "with mother's compliments" on Christmas morning. He had grave doubts whether the dignity of this official might not be affronted with such a gift, but the snuffy Prestwich palmed it like a conjuror before Oswald could credit the coin had left his fingers, saying: "My respects to Mrs. Holmroyd and the compliments of the season in return" through the one nostril this trying time had left open to him.

But all this—though it filled Mrs. Holmroyd's heart with seasonable and festive fumes, seeming to constitute her a mystical partaker of the world's bounty; a sipper of wassail from humanity's cup—all this, whatever strength it lent to spiritual parts, made the purse falter. And when Christmas day was gone by, and the choice of dishes of this joyous banquet of kindred souls removed, her heart turned heavy after its emotional excess, like a head on the morning that succeeds the circulation of the flowing bowl. Pious exuberance, sad and disillusioned, settled down to its daily

diet of hard fact. She heard the muffled bells of St. Gyles's ring out the mournful passing of the old year. She heard the clocks at midnight proclaim its life extinct. She heard the bells thereafter crash out into a paean of welcome to the year new born with a boisterous gaiety that sought to crush all sadness under sound. But through the clangorous riot of tones and supertones the solemn muffle of the dead peal rang. For her, a mother, this birth so lustily commemorated was a portentous thing. Long after the bells were stilled, and their ropes swung drear and languid in the draughts that blew upon them through the whistling louvres; and the clattering footsteps of the ringers had echoed down the narrow spiral stairway, and the ringers (stooping their heads) had issued one by one through the oaken door at the foot of the tower, putting their collars up and staring at the stars their concussive chimes had shaken, and that trembled still like raindrops on blown gossamer—long after this she lay and listened to the ringing of a phantom peal; interminable Bob Majors and Bob Minors of the memory, whose melancholy reiteration of the past pervaded all the present with tumultuous sadness. Nor were her tears the only tears that fell upon a pillow in that house, bruised out of aching eyelids by the cruel beauty of the bells. On his narrow bed in the little narrow bedroom above the scullery, divided from her own by the door that nightly custom left unlatched, and sunk two steps below the level of her floor, a wakeful Oswald lay, soul-stricken before these solemn judges of the past that called him to account before the bar of conscience.

His mother's blood flowed in his veins; her hopes and fears were his. This music of the bells, that never failed to stir her to an ecstasy of sadness so sweet as to be nothing short of pain, filled his heart, too, with sublime wretchedness to overflowing. The pathos of the past, the tragedy of the present, permeated every portion of his small being. His very limbs grew sentient, and his soul—

become substantial—suffered horribly from stomach ache. O, to be something! To Be something. Another year (the bells averred) was dead and gone, and still he was Oswald Holmroyd the sausage boy, dependent on his mother—who should have been her succour and support. No nearer being an Alderman; no nearer being an Organist; no nearer being a Canon, Verger, Town Crier, Fireman, or Anything. Filled with remorse that dripped in tears from his contorted eyelids like the great drops wrested by Elizabeth from the writhing garments her wrinkled hands wrung above the wash-tub, he consecrated resolve anew. Imagination, wrought by despairing conscience to an intensity impatient of reality and daylight, seized its imaginary basket. No trials should dismay, no sufferings deter him. This visioned basket was his answer to the bells. Like a new year a new Oswald had been born. The old Oswald was already dead. Henceforth.... Hark! What was that? What had so shaken the four corners of his bed? Assuredly it was a sob. It was the sob accompanying re-birth; the sob with which (it seemed) the old Oswald had been delivered of the new; a startling, undissimulated sob that brought imagination to its senses and stopped the source of tears in no time. Motionless he held his breath, cowering from discovery into the smallest compass of his being.

"Oswald!"

Did lips of inward apprehension breathe the name, or lips of outward reality? So softly did it touch his hearing that he felt unsure, but his heart fluttered like a bird beneath the closing fingers of the fowler.

"Oswald...."

His mother's voice it was, soft as silence itself, persuasive as sleep, fearful of ruffling the lightest slumber. At first his guilty wakefulness vouchsafed no sign. But his own silence accused him, and filled with awful fear lest on this first solemn morning of the New Year she might leave him utterly to the tortures of self-reproach, he made

believe to hear her at last, answering in a still, small voice: "Yes, mother." There was undeniable wetness about the voice.

"Are you awake, Oswald?"

"Yes, mother."

"I thought I heard.... You are not, not crying, Oswald?"

"No, mother."

Two steps were taken. The presence that filled his doorway suffused his narrow room. Its outstretched hands, putting the interceptive warmth aside, brought their warmth to his pillow.

"Where are you, Oswald?"

"Here, mother."

Here on his back, with his nose in the sheet that his fingers plucked above him; his eyes wide open, prostrate as a corpse. That posture, alone, confirmed her hearing and her heart. She stooped to kiss his face. Her lips slipped upon the wetness of its marbled cheeks, and their taste was salt. She knew too well, by now, the taste of tears to harbor doubt.

"What is it, Oswald?"

"Nothing, mother."

She needed to ask no more. Nothing (in the language of the soul) means Everything. Everything the soul can suffer, of darkness that dismays and the brightness it cannot bear. Her own misery became protective in a moment. Her arms encompassed him. His weakness was as a welcome well of clear comfort, whose draught refreshed and strengthened her; for nought in the world so sweetens sorrow as its kind. Without a word their mutual troubles made exchange of comfort, and tears staunched tears.

2

Of Miss Burford during these wintry days no more was

seen. Yet the expectation of her visit, sinking like the last embers in a grate, was replenished on the brink of expiry by some reference on her father's part, either in the form of a question: "My daughter hasn't been to see you yet, ma'am?" or affirmatively: "She means coming to see you one of these days, I know. But there's so many callers at this time of the year, and being without a regular servant too, ma'am...."

On the other hand, the Councillor himself, as though led by a sort of second nature to the Holmroyd door, became a visitor quite customarily to be reckoned with. No discoverable purpose brought him, yet his visits seemed so adequately to explain themselves that speculation after his departure was left in no painful uncertainty as to whether the call signified a pie or a pupil. Nor did he induce the tension of uncertainty attaching to a double knock, for after his third visit he made no use of the street knocker at all. Somewhere in the neighborhood of tea-time after the lapse of a few days his tread might be expected. The muffled thumping of his broad shoulders against the passage walls sufficiently announced his coming. At the parlour door his knuckles rapped a firm but courteous intimation as though, before all, the owner's politeness sought not to take advantage of the assembled company or come upon it unaware. After which, attention being thus summoned to his presence he would open the door two inches to admit the enquiry:

"Are you at home, ma'am?" in a voice loud enough to clear all misunderstanding. But it was not until his hostess answered, begging him to enter, that he put all further formality aside and disclosed himself to sight, wearing his hat. "Don't let me disturb you, ma'am," was his unalterable formula. "I'm just on my way...." With which, his overcoat spread open, his hands plunged into the deep pockets of it, he moved at once to the hearthrug (that prescriptive place of man's authority in the domestic

circle) where, towering above the sitters at the table, on whom and which he looked down with a bland and interested gaze, he took off his hat. From his post of observation on the hearthrug he begged they would continue their meal, and supervised their eating of it with a regard as watchful and participant as if the food were destined rather for his own mouth than theirs. The first embarrassment occasioned by his large presence being overcome, table politeness—put on its mettle by the honour of performing before so important an onlooker—exerted every effort, and Oswald and Beryl ate their best. The Councillor was not a waster of words like his daughter—who, apparently for the reason that words cost nothing, inclined to extravagance in this direction. If he had nothing to say, nothing was what he said; quite content, it seemed, to participate in a silence that bespoke itself friendly and companionable. He alluded to the gas, and asked Mrs. Holmroyd with municipal interest how she found the quality, ma'am. Was she satisfied with the town water? Who, if he might venture to inquire, ma'am, was her landlord? Indeed! What rent (if she felt inclined to answer the question), did he ask her for this house? Indeed! That was a nice bright fire she had. And a nice clean burning coal, by the look of it. Was it Silkstone or Manvers? "That's not my butter you're using there, ma'am, surely!" "I thought I wasn't mistaken. Judging by the look of it I should pronounce it a bit rank, ma'am."

That he did not partake of a cup of tea along with them reproached no fault of invitation on Mrs. Holmroyd's part, for she never failed to pass the compliment, albeit in the end with the uninsistent voice that takes refusal for granted; since the mere suggestion of hospitality was enough to make the Councillor brandish his hat as if reminded of the flight of time, and even put it on in preparation for departure, protesting he had not come for that, and his own tea would be waiting of him (thank her

all the same, ma'am). On one occasion, however, about the middle of the Christmas holidays, when Mrs. Holmroyd had said, "I am afraid it's no use my offering you a cup of tea, Mr. Burford ..." he answered, "Not at all, ma'am. I was just on the point of going." And put his hat on, beneath which he had already proceeded as far as the door when suddenly to everybody's surprise, he took it off again and returned bareheaded to the hearthrug. "After all, ma'am," he said. "I've declined your kindness a deal of times. I don't want to seem to throw it in your face. It's very good of you to ask me. Thank you. Just one cup, if you please." He added the prodigious compliment in a plain voice that scorned collusion with flattery: "Your tea-table always looks so clean and tempting, ma'am." Mrs. Holmroyd, though flushing to an unexpected compliment paid with such obvious honesty, sought to decline acceptance of the Councillor's tribute as if it had been monetary, saying she feared there was not very much about her little table to tempt anybody. "It is very simple," she remarked.

"Simple," acquiesced the Councillor, who laid his hat upon the coal box and declined to be relieved of his overcoat on the ground that he did not propose to stay, ma'am, "What's better than simple so long as simple's good? It's honest. There's no fuss and nonsense about it. It doesn't pretend to be anything it isn't." With which he sank spaciously into the easy chair that Oswald, obeying a secret sign from his mother, pushed up timidly for the guest's reception between the table and the fireplace, and sat back for some moments at ease, his broad toes to the fire, his hands interlocked across his watch-chain, his eyes directed to the ceiling, as though he subjected the new experience to the test of critical enquiry. Nor did he fail to bring a full judgment to bear on the fare provided, and such a final opinion as he pronounced upon its excellence was neither lightly nor easily come by. True, Mrs.

Holmroyd's teacups were only small, but he accepted three of them with no more persuasion than accompanied the first, saying "Thank you, ma'am. Is that my three and tenpenny?" Being assured it was, he settled down to a more complacent enjoyment of it. "I felt I couldn't be mistaken in my own tea. Nobody couldn't wish for a better. I don't care where they bought, or what price they paid for it." The bread, too, won his commendation. "Do you bake it yourself, ma'am?" Receiving her assurance that she did, and that it owed its excellence to his special best roller-milled superfine flour, he consumed it with redoubled satisfaction; and even undertook at this point to remove his overcoat out of tribute to Mrs. Holmroyd's table and the comfortable brightness of her fire. "I see your room's meant to be sat in, ma'am," he conceded, and looked around it with obvious intent to assimilate all the comfort visible. Mrs. Holmroyd explained that it was the only room she had.

"And the only room you want," the Councillor decided, "if two's going to be a trouble to you. Comfort is comfort, ma'am, just as quality's quality. Where there isn't quality, quantity won't help improve it."

From the consummation of the meal he turned his interest more directly to the fire, which truth to tell blazed with a most sociable and contentful warmth, and appeared to repose his thoughts in the attractive brightness of its flames. Something in his posture, or some half-conscious movement of a hand towards his breast pocket prompted Mrs. Holmroyd's hospitality to suggest that if Mr. Burford smoked at all ... "I do, ma'am," the Councillor replied immediately. "But rarely in the house.... It's not," he added, with a voice darkened by experience, "every lady that cares for the smell of smoking indoors. Particularly cigars. They say it clings to the curtains, and tarnishes the picture frames and furniture." Mrs. Holmroyd begged at once that he let no such objections on her behalf deter him.

For her own part she found the smell of tobbaco-smoke not disagreeable. In fact, she liked it. Her husband used to smoke occasionally.

“Why,” said the Councillor, reapplying his hand to the breast pocket and drawing forth a bulky leather cigar-case, “you show your common-sense in that, ma’am. I think so too. But all ladies doesn’t share your opinion. My daughter doesn’t. She says it’s no use trying to keep a house respectable if men insists on smoking in it. She says houses was never meant for it. You might as well cook in the drawing-room....

“ ... I won’t deny,” he said, “that she keeps my house clean. She studies it a deal more than her own health. There’s no house in Daneborough gets better looked after. It gets looked after too well. But as I sometimes tell her, Cleanliness isn’t everything. If a place has got to be made uncomfortable because it’s clean, let’s have a little less cleanliness and more comfort. A house didn’t ought to be a museum, ma’am, to my way of thinking, for folks to peep at and go about in on tip-toe. It ought to be lived in and enjoyed. Like this.”

The eulogy, coming from such a source, and bearing the indisputable stamp of sincerity, did not fail to gratify the recipient; and even to cause Oswald and his sister to turn eyes of reawakened interest around the little room. Each tried hard to see it through their visitor’s eyes, and Oswald (suddenly succeeding) realized the conviction that it was in truth a very wondrous, lovely home he lived in. He was less assured, and conviction stumbled over disappointment, to hear his mother in her gentle voice reply:

“I’m afraid, Mr. Burford, your daughter would scarcely regard my little home as a house at all.” She could not refuse the petition of her pride to add: “I did not myself when first we came. I found it very small.”

And in truth, as Oswald discovered on looking once

more around the parlour, (this time through his mother's eyes) the room seemed very small. Probably his mother was right. Miss Burford would consider it no house at all.

"There's only one way to judge a home, ma'am," said the Councillor oracularly, "and that's to know if you're comfortable in it. If you are, then it's a home. If you're not, it doesn't signify a brass farthing how big it happens to be." He appeared to be speaking now with his eye upon a page of experience invisible to Mrs. Holmroyd. "I take it you're very comfortable here, ma'am," he said. Oswald awaited his mother's answer to this direct enquiry with solemn interest, and was inexpressibly relieved to hear with what fervour she assured their guest of the happiness derived from these familiar walls.

"I thought so, ma'am," the Councillor commented. "If you wasn't happy here, you'll excuse me for saying I should think you hard to please. But you'd make any home comfortable. It's your nature, ma'am."

After the successful experiment of this first repast, Councillor Burford showed a diminishing diffidence in partaking of Mrs. Holmroyd's hospitality. He rarely said No to the proffer of a cup of tea "to set him home," as he expressed it; and was usually prepared to enjoy some minutes in the easy chair with his hat laid on the coal-box, and his feet to the fire, and his overcoat thrown open, sucking contentedly at his cigar in the intervals of asking after the coal and gas and waterpipes and the general health. His presence lent a certain comfort to the little home, a bulwark-confidence encouraging to dependent hearts, but there was one topic he touched on that filled his listeners with a secret consternation,—and that was Oswald's future.

He did not invariably allude to it, but there was (particularly in every silence) the fear that he might; and the uncomfortable fear of it became a spectre. Whether he reverted to the subject through sheer conversational

poverty, or through any deeper solicitude for Oswald's welfare, not even Mrs. Holmroyd could decide, but the consequence for her remained the same. Questions as to Oswald's health were easy to dispose of, since once the Councillor had uttered them he seemed to take small interest in the answer given. But when he asked of Mrs. Holmroyd if she had lent any further thought to her son's future—which his lips affirmed was not that distant, comfortable form of it with which irresolution veiled the question, but a future so immediate and concise as to partake of the perplexities of the present—her self-possession lost countenance, and her smile grew strained. However casually introduced and tranquillized beneath the rhythmic puffing of the Councillor's cigar, the subject took conscience by the collar; it walked with a flat constabulary tread familiar to Oswald's fears. Mrs. Holmroyd, struggling to keep the shrinking edges of her smile over composure, twisted her wedding ring with gentle uncertainty.

"Oswald's father," she said on one occasion, "was, of course, an architect."

"Indeed," said the Councillor. "And do you think of making him an architect too, ma'am?"

He had taken the cigar out of his mouth, and held it now extended between his cleft fingers in an attitude that seemed to put too much responsibility upon her answer. She faltered, with an uneasy look at Oswald. On this point, she confessed, they had scarcely come (as yet) to a decision. She trusted, of course, to make Something of her son. He had undoubted talents.

"Talents, has he?" asked the Councillor, abruptly confronting this pretentious word. "What are they, ma'am?"

Demanded at the pistol's point like this she knew not what they were. Nothing, she feared, that any language of

the flesh could adequately utter. But the Councillor's cigar, attached to space by a silken damoclean thread, still challenged her from the fork of his extended fingers.

"He is very fond of poetry," she said, feeling the utter feebleness of words to express the wonders of her son's attainments or to justify her pride in them. "He reads a great deal. And he writes too. Just before Christmas he wrote a little hymn.... He has a decided talent for drawing. And for music...." She struggled through the tottering list of accomplishments that not all her bosom's ardour could kindle to convincing warmth. The Councillor's eye remained at the end of her tribute coldly unmoved. "Indeed, ma'am," was all he said, and put the suspended cigar back to his lips once more with the air of one whose interest has been lent in vain. With an effort to retrieve a situation that her defective advocacy had so prejudiced, she made haste to inform the visitor that later on ... though probably not this term, it was (as she had told him) her hope to send Oswald to the Grammar School. At present she was not sure ... she rather doubted; she was afraid she could not quite afford to do so.

"Then why try, ma'am?" the Councillor taxed her uncompromisingly. She attempted hurriedly to repair the error of a misgiving overstated.

"Of course," she qualified, " ... perhaps by making sacrifices."

"Sacrifices!" the Councillor repeated, taking the word from her and seeming by the tone of his voice to expose the unworthiness of it. "Make nothing of the sort, ma'am, believe me. Why should you? It's a big mistake for folks to sacrifice themselves for their children's edjication. If it can't be done without sacrifices, don't do it at all. You'd be a deal better advised to keep your money, ma'am. It'll be more use to you. What's edjication, when all's said and done? It's nothing. As often as not it gets too proud to work, and thinks it ought to be paid for knowing

something that's no use to anybody. Give your lad good meat and serviceable clothes, ma'am, and send him to a sensible school where they'll teach him to read and write and figure, and knock the nonsense out of him. That's my advice. Let him start to earn his own living before he get ideas. My father never made any sacrifices for me, and I've lived to be thankful he didn't. Why should you make sacrifices for your son, ma'am? Learn him to make sacrifices for you. It's his duty. The only sacrifices that does a man a ha'porth of good is them he makes himself. I went behind the counter when I was twelve. It's done me more good than a hundred sacrifices, or a score of schoolmasters. Teach a lad that he's got to be his own schoolmaster. If there's anything about him he'll learn a deal quicker from his own mistakes that he's got to pay for than from a teacher."

Not, he was careful to explain, that he advocated the total abolition of schooling. Let Oswald be sent to St. Gyles's School, or the English School, or St. Saviour's School for the matter of that—albeit he was prompt to emphasize the fact that St. Saviour's would not be *his* choice.

From such educational sentiments, as may be supposed, Mrs. Holmroyd recoiled, doubly at a disadvantage by the knowledge that any argument in favour of a loftier view of learning must, to reach its object, pass first through the Councillor's own imperfections. Nor was Oswald less disquieted by these views in reference to his future, and his anxiety hung like lead upon his mother's question whether the schools just mentioned were "*quite* the schools, Mr. Burford!"

"I went to St. Gyles's School myself," the Councillor affirmed, "when I was a lad—but that's getting on for fifty years ago. The edjication's gone down there, in my opinion, since then. I sent my son to the English School ma'am, and if I'd a dozen of 'em I'd send 'em all to the

same place. You can't improve upon the English School. If you want a good cheap school where your son will be taught to write and figure and be a sharp, smart, obedient lad ... send him there. That's my opinion, ma'am."

It was his opinion. She thanked him for it with such gentle graciousness that Oswald's heart misgave him, believing from her tone of voice the visitor's advice had been accepted, and that assuredly before long he would begin his dreadful education at the English School.

After the Councillor had taken leave, with his two hands plunged in the two side pockets of his outspread overcoat, Mrs. Holmroyd for a long while sat gazing at the fire, slowly twisting her wedding ring upon her slender finger. No reference was made to the dire topic of discussion, and Oswald dared no more broach this than he would have dared to penetrate the darkness of the cellar for confirmation of the terrors contained in it. Instead, he opened his mother's Christmas gift of "Robinson Crusoe," and immersed himself in its magic pages to demonstrate how good a reader he was. And he besought his mother to sharpen a pencil for him that he might portray the Mansion House on a sheet of cream-laid note paper, and prove what an artist he was. On the other side of this notable production he drew the wonderful memorial he meant to raise above his father's grave, and the house he should acquire for the three of them to live in, out of the rich rewards of being a gentleman. But bedtime made his doubts insufferable. And at last, when he came to kiss his mother's cheek and say good night, the tenderness of her embrace lent a panic courage to his lips.

" ... Am I going to the English School, mother?" he asked. He asked the question in a rapid undertone, with downcast eyes that feared to take any part in so momentous a demand. Receiving no answer after awhile he glanced at his mother's face, and was dismayed to find it bore no resemblance to the gentle countenance last

looked on. A dreadful change, indeed, had in the interval come over it, disruptive of serenity. Turning hurriedly from his wondering gaze, as if it hurt her, his mother passed to the mantelpiece, in tears.

3

The little school had already reassembled, and pride was growing anxious to be insulted with the first payment of its last term's labour, when Miss Burford called. True, the Councillor had intimated the likelihood of his daughter's visit more than a week ago, saying: "I think my daughter will be giving you a call on Monday, ma'am." But such notification had been tendered before without result, and though Mrs. Holmroyd made due preparation to receive the visitor she was not surprised when the afternoon passed with no louder summons at the door than imagination administered. Miss Burford did not call on Monday because, being still without a maid, she had decided that the Drawing-Room could not go for a single day longer "without being something done at" in her expressive and forceful idiom; nothing having been done at it since the room was turned out, with Elizabeth's aid, the week before.

Nor did she call on Tuesday, because Tuesday was Elizabeth's day, and Elizabeth's sight grew more and more defective, needing Miss Burford's sharper sight to supervise it, and Miss Burford's raptorial forefinger to pounce upon the glaring instances of the enthusiast's omission.

On Wednesday Miss Burford did not call because, pfff! the dust in her father's bedroom was indescribable. Where men picked up all the dust they brought into a house she did not know. No sooner did she take a brush to the carpet, just to see, than it rose up in clouds. She had to go out upon the landing to cough. Never had she seen such a sight in her life. What would a doctor think if her father

happened to be ill, and they showed him into such a room!

But on the Thursday, by dint of rising an hour earlier than her wont and working—as she phrased it—"like a Trojan," she succeeded in paying her long deferred visit to Spring Bank Gardens at last.

Being somewhat antagonistically aware that Mrs. Holmroyd was a lady with a very composed and trying manner of speech, and a countenance so politely soft as to yield no visible imprint of any impression stamped upon it; and being much exercised in her mind as to how much of the Burford history (if any) had been delivered into her keeping by Elizabeth, whose rejoinders to oblique enquiry on this point were vague and unconvincing, she prepared herself for the visit to Mrs. Holmroyd with punctilious exactitude of toilet. She brushed her company skirt inside and out with the same thoroughness that she would have devoted to a carpet. She exhumed her hat from its place in the camphorated wardrobe where it lay swathed in a couple of silk kerchiefs, re-titivating its torpid millinery with endless deft and still dissatisfied touches. She sewed new lace frills inside her bodice sleeves and neck; breathed out the creases in her kid gloves; polished her company boots, and providing herself with two handkerchiefs (the one for usage, if required, in the street; the other to draw out for the first time in Mrs. Holmroyd's sitting-room), she set off at last with a morocco leather card case in her hand, accompanied by an elderly lady and a precocious female child with straight legs.

Chiefly because her sitting-room was rather less orderly than she would have wished any unsympathetic eye to see it, Mrs. Holmroyd had the presentiment that visitors would take her at a disadvantage this afternoon. The moment that the knock resounded through the empty passage below, her uneasy conscience leaped instantly to its feet with the cry: "Miss Burford!" She would have wished to pay her personal appearance some trifling attention before

descending to receive her visitors, but being acquainted with the nature of Miss Burford's eye she hastened downstairs at once to protect her parlour from its depredations. It was even as she had feared. Miss Burford, of all the chairs within the room, had chosen with unerring instinct that one which afforded the finest view of its defects. The elderly lady, in the reposeful posture of age that seems ever grateful for an opportunity to seat itself, occupied the easy chair familiar to Councillor Burford's bulk; her head on one side; her eyes partly closed; of a disposition to snatch slumber if undisturbed. Upright on a chair by the window sat the young lady with the straight legs, silenced by these new surroundings which she imbibed intently through eye and ear, and awaiting developments with an expression of interest more alert than anxious. The first chill greetings were exchanged. Miss Burford bowed. The old lady rocked her head, which —set in motion—continued amicably for some time after like a china mandarin or a rocking horse. The young lady's body grew rigid, whilst her glance darted birdlike onto each limb that moved or mouth that spoke.

It was indeed with reference to the prospective new pupil (who resolved herself shortly into the young lady with the upright back and active eyes) that Mrs. Holmroyd's visitors had called. The young lady, it appeared, was the granddaughter of the old lady in the easy chair, and there had been a question of sending her to school. Certainly it was high time. *Something* should be done with her.

"She's more than I can manage, at times, Mrs. Holmroyd," the old lady confided in a placid voice. "So we thought somebody else should see what they can make of her."

"Of course, nothing is settled at present," Miss Burford threw in guardedly for Mrs. Holmroyd's benefit. "But something *will* have to be settled," she added in a tone

whose warning purpose was now directed to the young lady with the upright back. “She can’t go on like this. She’s being utterly ruined. People are beginning to cry shame of her.” From the chair occupied by the young lady issued a sound faintly resembling “they aren’t, then!” which, Miss Burford’s keen ear detecting, she silenced with a tart: “Don’t contradict me. I say they are.”

“You’re putting her up to it,” said the young lady with the straight legs. “I heard you talking it all over as we was coming.”

“She’s a thoroughly spoilt girl,” Miss Burford pronounced with a patch of temper in her hard cheek, ignoring the young lady and addressing herself exclusively to Mrs. Holmroyd, to whom the prospective pupil’s faults were exhaustively disclosed with a candour that made not the least concession to the object of it. The young lady, it transpired, was possessed of a curious and difficult temper. Her father had the same temper. Her grandfather had it too, “but not so bad.”

“She doesn’t get it from me,” the old lady explained. “Mine’s not that sort at all. It never was—even when I was younger, and reckoned to have one. It used to be sharp, I won’t deny. But when it was over it was over and done with, and I didn’t bear the least grudge against them I’d spoke to.” But her granddaughter’s temper, Miss Burford explained, was of that protracted and indefinite variety most baffling to diagnose or deal with. It appeared that the culprit was capable of sulking a whole morning without letting anybody as much as suspect she was sulking at all.

“I sulked for two days, once,” the young lady interposed, who, far from showing any resentment at this exposure of her failings, took the most interested part in their display.

“Two days!” the old lady enquired incredulously. “Are you sure, now, or are you telling a story? When was that?”

“Last year, when you wouldn’t let me go to the circus.

You haven't gone and forgotten *that*!"

The old lady's enquiry melted in a gaze of almost rapturous remembrance as she confirmed this shocking boast to Mrs. Holmroyd.

"And so she did. To be sure. I forget things, without she's there to remind me. She was a very naughty girl that time."

Miss Burford with visible acerbity called on Mrs. Holmroyd to bear witness to this display of ridiculous indulgence, crying: "Did ever you hear!—You spoil her!" she said, turning on the old lady with indignation. "I've no patience with you. You're to blame as much as her. You positively encourage her."

The old lady, subsiding comfortably upon admission as if it were a sofa for the mind to rest on, confessed to Mrs. Holmroyd (seemingly not displeased with Miss Burford's rebuke): "Why! What can you do when there's only one? It's not the same as if she was a whole family. You're forced to spoil 'em a bit when they're by theirselves."

"She wants a good slap bottom," Miss Burford averred with a vigour that imparted momentarily to her hard face the uplifted menace of a hand.

"I don't, then!" the young lady declared, not less emphatically, as though in no doubt respecting the nature of the remedy suggested. "I wouldn't have one. I never have had one. I wouldn't let nobody give me one."

"You'd have what you were given if I'd to do with you," Miss Burford affirmed concisely.

The old lady, rocking a head of indulgence towards both parties in the dispute, as if appreciating the merits of their respective contentions, admitted that perhaps she was "a bit to blame." But did Miss Burford seriously suggest she should take active measures at *her* time of life? She was past that now. She hadn't the strength.

"I get so short of breath," she confided to Mrs.

Holmroyd, "without That." And explained a momentary convulsion of her features with the one word "Rheumatism!" Adding: "In my knees. Just *there*."

After further conversation (with the young lady's pert assistance) a varied assortment of other defects was brought to view; including indolence, untidiness, and more than suspicion of a general disregard for truth.

"She tells downright falsehoods, Mrs. Holmroyd," Miss Burford declared indignantly. "You can't believe a word she says."

"Falsehoods we won't call them," the old lady remarked with lenience. "Although there's no denying she makes up some naughty stories to deceive her grandma. But it's no good. People that tells stories always gets found out sooner or later."

The young lady interposed: "They don't. There's two you haven't found out yet. Two you never will find out."

"Two?" said the old lady with revived interest. "Which two's them?"

The young lady, becoming oracular, replied: "*I* know."

"My word!" exclaimed Miss Burford with an explosion of her dark face," ... if only I'd the handling of her." Falsehood she pronounced with indignation to be abominable. "When you can't believe what people says to you, there's only one thing they're fit for. Let them be domestic servants straight away and be done with it."

This pronouncement modulating into a key dear to Miss Burford's heart introduced a long thematic digression in which the ostensible object of the visit was lost sight of. But on its reintroduction Mrs. Holmroyd was relieved to hear a tone of greater confidence and certainty. In fact, the young lady of the straight legs appeared to take the issue of the interview so much for granted that she asked Miss Burford: "When have I got to come?" To which Miss Burford's answer was, "When you're told. And not

before." For the Councillor's daughter had still much curiosity to gratify, and did not believe in arriving too hastily at decisions, even where these had been already taken. Did Mrs. Holmroyd's terms include slates and school books? Would there be any reduction in the event of unavoidable absence? Respecting the schoolroom; did Miss Burford understand it was upstairs? Being assured that it was, she asked if they might be permitted to view the room, inspired (as Mrs. Holmroyd was aware) by the laudable desire to probe as deep into the mysteries of Mrs. Holmroyd's house as possible. The aged lady, on learning that a visit to the schoolroom involved not only the forfeiture of her chair but the laboured ascent of a flight of stairs, begged Mrs. Holmroyd to excuse her, tapping her bosom with a plaintive hand and shaking her head over it, saying she would rather sit where she was. Mrs. Holmroyd excused her cheerfully, and would have been not less willing to excuse Miss Burford, but the latter had already risen to her feet with an air of energy that put any such lingering hope to flight.

4

Partly owing to the confidence engendered by the acquisition of this new pupil; partly owing to the depression disseminated by the New Year's bells; partly owing to the Councillor's enquiries respecting Oswald; partly to the fact that Mr. Rencil, being brought face to face with Mrs. Holmroyd and her children one recent Saturday, raised his hat and wished her a bright New Year; but largely to those emotional true reasons that woman hides from the sight of mankind with the instinctive delicacy for underwear, Mrs. Holmroyd called upon the Organist of St. Saviour's that same evening.

In view of the doubtfulness of its issue the visit was kept secret from her children, who consequently did not accompany her. Beryl she committed to the care of

Oswald, both in turn being confided to the overlordship of the next-door neighbour, who undertook to look in upon them from time to time, and held herself ready to answer their first summons in the event of need.

Despite the fact that Mrs. Holmroyd's errand was totally unconnected with pies or pupils, and that she came to enquire terms and not to state them, she stopped before the Organist's name-plate at last with some of that trepidation which, in these days, was become a reckonable part of her. She had been actuated by an impulse whose fierce fires, subsiding now, left her a little enervated, a little questioning, perhaps. The figure of the Councillor, that had not been without its influence in driving her to this door, rose up before her as she reached it, with a look of outraged reason; its silent lips shaped to the expostulation: "What? After all our talks ma'am? Music lessons? Sacrifices? It's madness." She plucked the bell with hesitating fingers. After all.... This was but an enquiry. Nothing (as Miss Burford would have said) had been Settled. All she sought to know was Mr. Rencil's terms. At the worst, if these turned out to be too high, she could express her gratitude for the information and, of course, her little boy was rather young at present. Later on ... if Mr. Rencil were at liberty to take him....

In the midst of these improvisations the brass plate on which her gaze was fixed, reading and re-reading Mr. Rencil's name, receded suddenly from sight, and was transformed into a white apron. That no Miss Burford controlled the internal economy of this house seemed adequately proved by the almost friendly smile with which the maid acknowledged Mrs. Holmroyd's enquiry, as if it were a pleasure to answer it. Mr. Rencil was at home. Would the visitor please walk in. It was evident that the maid had been trained not to damp the ardour of any caller showing the least disposition to indulge in music lessons. In fact, the welcome with which she made the Organist's

house free to Mrs. Holmroyd caused the latter to entertain a sudden qualm lest she were being admitted on false pretences, and she asked somewhat anxiously if Mr. Rencil were engaged, but the maid seemed too intent on the joyful task of conducting her visitor to pay any heed to such a minor question. Begging Mrs. Holmroyd to follow, she tripped up the staircase in advance with a nimbleness that allowed no recall, and was already lost to sight in a ruffle of skirts when Mrs. Holmroyd set polite foot on the first stair. The carpet on which she trod was Axminister, and for all it made no pretence of being new its quality of noiselessness and soft pile that comforted the foot were already noticeable to one whose occupation denied her the consolation of a stair-carpet in term time. It sent her memory back to the days when she, too, had trod on carpets as thick and soft as this, and infinitely richer; when the fact of their softness and their soundlessness had evoked in her no dreamy sense of unreality as now. The house itself was smaller, far, than the house her happiness had once been mistress of, but by comparison with the present home in Spring Bank Gardens, it appeared spacious. The staircase mounted (not precipitously, like her own) from an ample entrance hall, and the rail of the balustrade on which Mrs. Holmroyd laid her hand was of polished broad mahogany. Had such a balustrade been hers how Oswald might have slid down it. In place of the two deal benches at right angles, that occupied the small landing in Spring Bank Gardens, was a carved-oak Jacobean chest between two carved oak chairs. An impressive eight-day clock with a copper face ticked away in a corner with the bass voice of a magnificent escapement. By the door of the room on the first floor overlooking the street, whose transverse bars of light so fascinated Oswald on Friday evenings, the maid awaited Mrs. Holmroyd with the smile for an old friend recognized after a long absence.

"Mrs. Holmroyd...."

From an upholstered wicker chair by the fireplace a lady arose who had been stooping, until the moment of Mrs. Holmroyd's entrance, over a piece of fancy work in coloured silks. Mrs. Holmroyd recognized her immediately as the Organist's wife, whom she had often noticed at St. Saviour's, sometimes sitting in the nave, sometimes in the chancel pew beneath the decorative stars and lilies of the organ pipes. She was still youthful, showing coiled hair of an attractive brown, and soft blue eyes dilated, probably, and made more lustrous by the close nature of the needlework on which, so recently, they had been engaged. Her dress was of deep magenta with velvet at the wrists and neck. Between the slender white thumb and finger of her right hand she still held, with a precise and delicate touch, her needle attached to a strand of pale green silk, but she threaded this deftly into the stuff she worked on as Mrs. Holmroyd came forward, and held out the hand released from it with a very spontaneous and friendly welcome. "Do come in, Mrs. Holmroyd. I think my husband is in his study. He will not be long." The hand thus extended to Mrs. Holmroyd was hot, and there showed more colour in the cheekbones of the organist's wife, emphasizing their salience, than Mrs. Holmroyd cared to see. She commented to herself: "The poor thing is delicate. I do not like that colour. She should not stoop too closely over needlework. It is bad for the chest."

The two women seated themselves in a sociable silence, disturbed only by the rustle of adjusted skirts. Each, as she sat, sought some friendly phrase with which conversation might be set upon its feet. Mrs. Rencil, dropping impulsively on one knee before the fire, picked up the occasional poker and split one of the coals into a blaze. Mrs. Holmroyd expressed the polite hope that her arrival had not put an untimely end to Mrs. Rencil's work. The organist's wife reassured her. She had been on the point of

putting her work away when Mrs. Holmroyd was announced. “I only took up the needle for a moment. My husband and I are going out to dine this evening.... With Canon Quexley,” she explained. The remark, innocent though it was, seemed to send a chill and alienating breath over Mrs. Holmroyd’s expanding sympathies. Pride of poverty, ever too sensitive, believed it detected a note of conscious satisfaction in the words that made the blazing fire and the face of the organist’s wife in a moment less friendly. She tried to think the fault was hers, and to extinguish the unworthy flame of jealousy lit by this casual statement in her breast. The mere word “dining” oppressed her with its superiority, seeming to elevate itself unpleasantly above her present state in life. Since her husband’s death she had never dined.

Without laying further stress upon this theme so lightly introduced, Mrs. Rencil picked up the piece of work on which she had been engaged and held it out for the visitor’s criticism and advice. The act, so simple and impulsive, reproached Mrs. Holmroyd’s unworthy feeling, and gave back instantly to the fire and Mrs. Rencil’s face their former friendship. The mother of Oswald had been mistaken; her foolish pride had played her false. With desire to make atonement for her base suspicion she contributed her interest whole-heartedly to the piece of work, that declared itself to be a table-centre in egg-shell silk, embroidered with pansies at each corner, and edged with old gold. Mrs. Rencil, using the needle as a pointer, explained the scheme of decoration, and descanted on her choice of silks. Did Mrs. Holmroyd care for this green? Did she think the violet too vivid? What would Mrs. Holmroyd recommend for the centre? Roses or chrysanthemums? “I am sure you can help me, Mrs. Holmroyd. I always feel that you have such excellent taste. I do so admire the way you dress your children.”

This unexpected tribute to her taste and children from

the Organist's wife, touched Mrs. Holmroyd profoundly. She could only bow her head, clinging with gloved thumb and finger to an edge of the table-centre under pretence of its protracted scrutiny until the lump of bitter sweetness in her throat dissolved. The fire, about whose gleaming coals celestial amoretti, and not mere flames, frolicked and played, seemed to irradiate a divine warmth to the very heart of her solitude. The face of the Organist's wife, transformed by the ecstatic eyesight of a soul for true fellowship with its kind, assumed a rare and sudden beauty. All at once she had the reinstated vision of a home. It filled her like a sweet and suffocating fragrance, permeating all the passageways of memory. For the first time since her husband's death, she sat in sensitive communion with a sister-spirit; turned soft silks with fingers of equality; drank in the sound of sweet and friendly accents; raised to her lips the chalice of companionable life.

The room in which they sat, and that these tremulous emotions so strangely stirred and tranquillized, was spacious. By day, Mrs. Holmroyd imagined, when the sun poured its gold through the big bowed window that swelled out upon a balcony, it would be luxurious with light. That this upper apartment of the Organist's house aspired to the dignity of a drawing-room was shown by the prevalence of cushions and insubstantial furniture. The conventional white marble of the mantelpiece was hid beneath terra cotta hangings, in which Mrs. Holmroyd discerned traces of the same hand that worked upon the table-centre. An upright pianoforte, posed in what a photographic artist would describe as a three-quarter attitude, with its keyboard diagonal to the window, displayed its broad back draped in voluminous folds, like some spacious dowager in an opera cloak. This garment also served the ingenious function of a show-case, photographs of all sizes being exhibited at all angles,

protruding from plaits and pockets of silk. Such opulence of drapery, which a later age has come to hold in holy horror, was the last symbol of refinement at the time of Mrs. Holmroyd's visit. It represented the social revolt against the gloom and austerity of an earlier Victorian age; the transition between one state of error and the next, when every innovation seems like an inspired prophet, treading the thralls of custom underfoot, and summoning society to follow to the kingdom of everlasting perfection whose gleaming gateway lies at hand.

At the first trumpet-challenge of true taste the whole drawing-room in which Mrs. Holmroyd and the Organist's wife were seated would have fallen prostrate like the walls of Jericho before Joshua's obbligato; but in the days of which our history treats it contributed its part to a living movement, and these decorative trumperies that filled it were emblems of something infinitely greater than themselves. The wife of the Organist of St. Saviour's was a domestic pioneer, seeking beauty in unfamiliar and audacious channels; a futurist, as the present age would call her, offering her ideals to the contempt of the age that follows, and even to the protests of the age that was her own. The daughter of Councillor Burford would have been outraged at much that she found in Mrs. Rencil's drawing-room. She would have contended that all these pleats and folds of drapery were fertile harbourers of fluff; that with these bright, audacious, perishable colours the sunlight must be resisted like a foe. Even Mrs. Holmroyd was sensible of a courage that quailed before this unequivocal expression of modernity, and, whilst admiring, confessed her own cowardice. She had never been herself, a devotee of the work-box and crewel-bag; never an innovator, but rather a faithful worshipper of the things made sacred by association and dear by love. Mrs. Rencil, on the contrary, whilst lavishing every love and care upon her home, was animated by the spirit of unresting progress. Her ardour

transcended all sentiment in the prosecution of its ideal. No attachment blinded her vision to the superannuation of a piece of furniture. The moment it lagged behind the march of progress, pensioned off in some oblivious asylum it must be, or rejuvenated under flounces. Finding in Mrs. Holmroyd a sensitive and sympathetic spirit, the Organist's wife submitted her drawing-room to the visitor's judgment with the same ingenuous charm that characterized her showing of the centrepiece. She had the rare gift of appealing for opinion in terms that seemed to lay great store on the value of the taste invoked. "*Do* tell me how you like this material, Mrs. Holmroyd!" "I *must* show you our new Cosy Corner. We only fitted it up before Christmas. I would so love to have your suggestions."

5

Mrs. Holmroyd had already noticed the pretentious piece of furniture that filled the space between the chimney breast and the opposite wall; a conglomeration of cushions and blue-enameled wood-work, terminating in a frieze of beaten copper and a cornice expanded into a book cupboard with glass doors, topped by a railed gallery for the display of indiscriminate vertu such as vases with silk ribbons round their necks; French sabots enriched with bronze paint, and Dresden figures which Mrs. Rencil's needle had equipped with Gainsborough Hats, silken petticoats and knee breeches.

"It is all our own work," the Organist's wife explained, with the confiding pride that seems purged of its grosser particles and retains only a pardonable and childlike pleasure in a task of love joyously accomplished. "My husband's and mine. Of course, we saw the design in a catalogue. Arthur—" The friendly confidence implied by her use of the Christian name stirred Mrs. Holmroyd's gratitude as if it had been an unexpected gift offered to the soul. It vibrated through all the quivering strings of her

emotion, “Arthur,” “Arthur,” “Arthur,” like the familiar echoes of a bell that chimed from a beloved place long quitted. O, how beautiful a thing was the music of a husband’s name uttered by lips that loved it. She was sure that the Organist’s wife loved it. All the things visible in this house were blossoms from the tree of love that had its roots deep down in the fertile soil of human hearts. This happiness of others, though it revived her sorrows and accentuated solitude, was as precious food to her. She listened almost with eagerness to hear the Organist’s name again.

“Arthur did all the woodwork and the brass.”

“Your husband?” Mrs. Holmroyd enquired, astonished at this revelation of so unexpected a side to the Organist’s activities. “Do you really mean ...?”

Mrs. Rencil smiled with transparent satisfaction for the surprise her visitor displayed.

“Didn’t you know, Mrs. Holmroyd? Of course, it wasn’t to be expected you should. My husband is never idle for a minute. At times I rather fear he overtaxes his strength. He has a workshop downstairs (you must see it some day) where he does his metal work and wood carving in his spare time. It was he made the oak chest and the chairs on the landing outside. Perhaps you noticed them. He does all the repairs of the house.”

“How fortunate you are....” Mrs. Holmroyd said with emotion. “You ought to be very thankful.”

The face of the Organist’s wife was lit up with an amused, admissive smile.

“That is what Arthur is always telling me, Mrs. Holmroyd. He says that a wife who cannot be contented with six husbands has no right to be married at all.”

“Six husbands?” repeated Mrs. Holmroyd, with face and voice of consternation.

“That is only his fun. One of them, he says, is a

musician. Another is a carpenter. The third is a metal worker. The fourth is a painter and paper-hanger. I forget just at the moment what the other two are. There must be more than six, for there is nothing, Mrs. Holmroyd, he cannot and does not turn his hand to."

"How beautiful," Mrs. Holmroyd said. She breathed the words with the reverence for some priceless work of art, paying tribute far less to the skill submitted for her admiration than to the picture of domestic happiness revealed. "You must be wonderfully happy in your married life."

"I would not change it ... for all the money in the world," Mrs. Rencil admitted with unaffected faith. "My husband promised, before we were married, to take care of me. He has kept his promise. In fact, I know he spoils me.—But it is so sweet to be spoiled," she confessed with an attractive smile, " ... that I dare not resist too much, for fear he might take me at my word. Not," she added, "that he ever would. He insists on pretending that I am delicate, and treats me sometimes as if I were an invalid. It is lovely to be treated so, Mrs. Holmroyd—when really, all the while, one is well and strong, and able to enjoy it." She looked at Mrs. Holmroyd with an arch face inviting her visitor's appreciation, and saw for the first time then that the eyes appealed to were shining wet with tears. Instantly she curbed her smile, subduing it to the chastened service of sympathy.

"I am afraid you will think me very selfish," she said with a note of trouble in her voice. "My happiness forgot that your sorrow could hardly share it. I fear I have awakened painful memories.... Do please forgive me."

"Not painful memories," the mother of Oswald corrected her. "Very precious memories, Mrs. Rencil. You have reminded me of some of the dearest days of my life." She staunched her tears and smiled reassuringly at the Organist's wife through brave and glistening lashes. "I

think my dear husband must have been very like your own. The happiness I shared with him does not die. Your happiness seems only to be a reflection of it." She added: "You do not know how much joy and comfort I have derived from my visit. If I have wept a little it has not been out of the emptiness of sorrow, but the fullness of joy. And I could only envy you if I had never known the happiness you have."

No further reference was made on either side to Mrs. Holmroyd's sorrow. But tears are the universal language of their sex, and these two women came nearer to an implicit understanding of one another through this portal of emotion than had prosaic lips recounted the life history of each to each.

"But my husband does not come," Mrs. Rencil exclaimed giving utterance to a thought that had already begun to trouble her visitor. "What can be keeping him?" She raised her head, as if her ear detected some sound upon the staircase, and vocalized a persuasive "Arthur?" on the interval of an octave. In such wise Mrs. Holmroyd had been wont to call her husband by name in the happier days. The little touch of nature awakened all her kinship. She said to herself: "No woman who sings her husband's Christian name like that, but cares for him. It is a happy home. There is love in it." All the same, no voice responded to the invocation, and the Organist's wife had already risen with outstretched fingers towards the bell when a door slammed below.

It was instantly succeeded by a shrill scream and a prodigious scuffle of feet, in which a large pair appeared to be in noisy pursuit of a small. The scream came nearer, repeating itself at brief intervals with every manifestation of alarm, and burst at last into the drawing-room, where it materialized into the figure of a frenetic little girl with fugitive feet and streaming hair, bearing a brass box in her hands, who, apparently without any assistance from sight

but guided by instinct alone, plunged into Mrs. Rencil's arms crying: "Quick, mother! Look what Daddy's made!" Outside, the larger feet appeared to be negotiating endless flights of steps with an effect of crescendo as though drawing loudly nearer, whilst a voice beyond the door declared: "She has defied her father. She shall have nothing to eat but broken chords and diminished sevenths for a fortnight." With which, protesting that his daughter's disobedience had turned him into a wolf, and that he would eat her up along with the furniture, the Organist of St. Saviour's came into the room at a rapid rate of progression on his hands and knees, emitting noises calculated to dismay all evil-doers. He had advanced after this manner to the middle of the room when his wife's laughing protestation, "*Ar*-thur!" caused the wolf in him to hesitate and lift its head. "Don't you know that Mrs. Holmroyd is here? What ever will she think!"

The Organist's little daughter, safely ensconced behind her mother's skirt, laughed with shrill delight at her father's public discomfiture. Mrs. Rencil and her guest laughed too—though the laughter of the latter welled up from a deeper source; from that same source, or nearly, whence tears of thankfulness and joy derive. As the warm sunlight is to those who have known but the lifeless seclusion of the sick-room, so was this intimate warm sunlight of family love to Mrs. Holmroyd. Repudiating the floor the Organist sprang lightly to his feet. His laughter participated frankly in the amusement of the situation as he held out to Mrs. Holmroyd the hand that so lately had been a lupine and predatory paw. He begged his visitor's forgiveness for any alarm he might have caused her. He had been quite unaware of her presence in the room. But it was very necessary for him to exert his authority in that house. "My wife openly disobeys me," he confided. "If I tell her to rest quietly on the sofa, she insists on stooping over her needle in the most uncomfortable chair. Naturally

with such an example it is not surprising that I am defied by my daughter, aged four."

"I am not four," the culprit protested. "I am seven."

"You see how she contradicts me, Mrs. Holmroyd," her father declared. "As a matter of fact, she *was* seven a few weeks ago. But in view of her rebellious conduct I have instituted a system of fines. Since she has no money in her own right, and all mulctings come out of my own pocket, I am compelled to deduct the amount from her age. Within the last few days her balance has been as low as three years. To-morrow I dread to think what her age will be reduced to. As you may believe, it is a subject of grave concern to her parents. At this rate we see no prospect of her ever growing up. It seems probable that she will spend the whole of her life in short frocks, and end her days in the cradle."

6

Already, as we have seen, Mrs. Holmroyd stood on complimentary speaking terms with the Organist of St. Saviour's, but the personality he represented for her was largely inductive. Such human disposition as she endowed him with reposed on no surer foundations than his voice and smile, and she ventured to wonder, in thinking of him now and then, whether his identity (if ever it should be disclosed) would disappoint the faith invested in it. But his voice, his hand, his smile—beatifically enlarged through the gold-rimmed lenses—and the sympathetic humour diffused through it, that seemed as if it could never be acrid or unkind, but always veiled in its own softness like sunlight in May mist—all these reassured her she had not erred.

Nor was she by any means the first to appreciate the Organist's personal charm. This smile, so uninsistent and yet so diffusive, and a conversational readiness whose

whimsicality seemed never at a loss to strip occasion of formalism and put the moments at their ease, had contributed perhaps as greatly to his reputation as his musical attainments—which few among those who lauded them were in the least competent to judge. The members of his choir, without exception, swore by Arthur Rencil, and would have returned him perilously near the head of any poll of the world's musicians, living or dead, in which their suffrages were allowed free play. As the Tax Collector remarked sententiously:—

"A man that's written Anthems and published Music of his own, that's to be bought publicly to-day in shops, is no ordinary musician. We ought to make the most of him while we've got him. Westminster or St. Paul's will be claiming his services, in my opinion, before long."

For in addition to being a wood-carver, a carpenter, a metal-worker, a painter, a paper-hanger, an organist, a teacher of the theory and harmony of music, a professor of Singing and Voice Production, Arthur Rencil was also a composer, wielding a prolific pen. Songs, elementary teaching pieces, books of simple voluntaries for amateurs and village organists composed in soporific minims very comforting to performers endowed with more devotion than technique; and anthems, choral services, chants and special ceremonial hymns for village choirs and organists of the same calibre flowed without ceasing from his pen into the religious world. Such compositions, it is true, himself assessed at no great value. They were written, if truth be told, much less with an eye to fame than to the comfort of his wife and home. And yet, though he never failed to speak of his own productions with smiling disrespect, he possessed a natural aptitude—bordering on genius—for bringing his pretentions before the notice of admirers without revealing any of the ugly mechanism of vanity. His trumpet was incontestably of silver, and not of blatant brass, which, when he blew upon it, emitted very

pleasant notes much more akin to the breathings of modesty than the noisy fanfares of pride. If, for instance, they chanced to be rehearsing one of his anthems for any special service at St. Saviour's he would beseech the choir in his soft voice (rendered still softer by the kind, persuasive smile): "Now I want us to do this anthem our very best on Sunday. Not because I wrote it. Beethoven or Mendelssohn might have done it nearly as well. But I'm told it is to be given in no fewer than eight parish churches and one Minster. We mustn't let the Minster beat us."

Whereupon the Tax Collector, fired with zeal and confidence in his own voice would affirm:

"If there were twenty-four churches, sir, and all the cathedrals in England put together, it wouldn't be more than the work deserves. If I may venture to express my own opinion, Mr. Rencil, (and I make bold to say I voice the sentiments of the whole choir) it's a sublime composition. That A flat is worth waiting through an evening service for. Don't be frightened of it, sir. Give it out boldly on the organ and it won't be our fault if we don't sing it. We hadn't need to fear no competition from no Minster so long as we've got the Composer himself seated at the organ."

Such was the power of Mr. Rencil's attractiveness, indeed, that all who in the least came under it extended this quality of persuasive personal charm into the music he played and wrote. There was something irresistibly winning about his face, whose expression might have been rather one of sadness and melancholy but for the smile that perpetually crept through it and warmed all its features to a pervading gentleness. Upon Mrs. Holmroyd this expression, alike so tender and so bravely smileful, had the emotional effect of sunlight when it rests on some familiar scene and makes it poignant. Albeit there was little likeness between the two men, the Organist of St. Saviour's recalled her husband. When he looked, or

moved, or spoke, she caught innumerable glimpses of her husband. The acts themselves might differ, but their source of animation was the same; the stream of love and kindness that like a lance of sunlight pierces the dark mass of humanity and makes luminous the elect that intercept its warmth and render visible its brightness.

Whilst Mrs. Holmroyd admired the latest object of the Organist's skill, that the Organist's little daughter at his instigation brought to the visitor's knees, she saw him turn his glance for a moment to Mrs. Rencil and ask in a quickened undertone: "How are you feeling now, Ethel?" His wife answered lightly: "Quite well, Arthur," and seeking Mrs. Holmroyd's eyes which this brief aside had caused to leave the object of their examination (a glove box in brass repoussé) laughed with gratified admission. "You see, Mrs. Holmroyd! My husband insists on being too anxious about me." For the first time since her husband's death was Mrs. Holmroyd permitted this evening to look upon the sacred picture of a home. A flash of divination showed her these two, husband and wife, in all their daily intercourse; at their meals, in those bright moments snatched between lessons, when each called upon the other's name for sheer companionship and love. She heard the sound of their commingled voices in gladness and anxiety; she partnered all their precious joys and sorrows lost to her. Of truth this visit had borne most blessed fruit. Emotion laid hold of her. At all costs she must contrive to give Oswald the advantage of a musical education in such a home. Its influence might be incalculable. And when politeness had sufficiently admired the product of the Organist's handiwork, she ventured to disclose the object of her visit. It was sympathetically received. The Organist's wife paid an impulsive compliment to Oswald. "What a sweet intelligent face your little boy has, Mrs. Holmroyd. I often find myself looking at him across the chancel. He ought to be musical.... Don't

you think so, Arthur?"

The Organist laughed.

"If he comes to me for lessons," he said, with a glance at Oswald's mother, "there can, I think, be no doubt about it. All my pupils," he confided to Mrs. Holmroyd, "have talent. Some of them have great talent. In fact, I positively refuse to take any pupils who have not talent." But he paid a warm tribute to Oswald in his capacity as chorister. "His conduct in the choir is so exemplary, Mrs. Holmroyd, that I sometimes find myself wondering what sort of a rascal he is in private life."

In the atmosphere of congenial sympathy Mrs. Holmroyd's bosom could not resist the impulse to confide:

"At first ... it was something of a trouble to me to see him in the choir. He seemed so young. If his father had lived ..." she paused for just the fraction of a second to steady her emotion, " ... things would have been very different for Oswald. Different for us all."

Mr. Rencil acknowledged in a lowered voice, "So I am sorry to understand, Mrs. Holmroyd."

The Organist's wife, applying the soft poultice of mutual sorrow to the wounded bosom (that old established woman's remedy for hearts bereaved) said with sad understanding:

"My husband lost his father only last year." And encouraged by Mrs. Holmroyd's expression of reciprocal sympathy, added: "Arthur wrote an anthem in memoriam. —What key was it in, Arthur?"

In a grave voice the Organist told her, "E flat."

"E flat. Of course. How stupid of me to forget. I always forget keys. It was sung the Sunday after Alderman Bankett died. But you would hear it, Mrs. Holmroyd."

Mrs. Holmroyd had heard it, to her solemn satisfaction, and was not surprised to learn that so moving a work had

been given at the Mirfield Parish Church only the Sunday before, and that it was to form one of the test anthems for the inter-church choral competitions in May. By way of the memorial anthem in E flat they returned, more self-possessed, to the subject of Oswald. Mrs. Holmroyd failed to realize that she occupied towards the Organist and his wife the hopeful place that the aged lady and Miss Burford and the straight-legged granddaughter had occupied towards her this afternoon, and that the Organist's wife was saying mentally to herself: "Another pupil for Arthur! He will be so glad. I hope it comes to something." Aloud, she paid a warm tribute to Mrs. Holmroyd's wisdom in seeking to give Oswald the advantages of a musical education. At the question of terms an air of marked obscurity descended over all. Mrs. Holmroyd's finger sought her lip. The Organist's wife stole a glance at her husband as if to say: "What do you think, Arthur?" The outcome of the thinking appeared, in a gentle voice, to be that "it depended." The Organist's wife, discreetly interposing before her husband's incautious sympathies should have a chance to prejudice the issue, took occasion to acquaint Mrs. Holmroyd:

"Of course, my husband's regular terms" (she laid a lingering stress on the word "regular") "are three guineas." She turned a brightened glance towards her husband for confirmation. "Aren't they, Arthur?" The Organist concurred. Those were the terms he usually asked from regular pupils. True, he did not go so far as to assert that he always got them. Mrs. Holmroyd's face, politely dubious, fell at the sound of three guineas. They were the terms she had feared all along. It was the Grammar School over again. Music seemed no cheaper than learning.

"Those, of course ..." explained the Organist's wife, on whom the descent in tonality of Mrs. Holmroyd's countenance had not been lost," ... are my husband's regular terms." She seemed to turn now towards a

consideration of his irregular terms as though, perhaps, some more promising solution of the difficulty might be found in this new direction. “Perhaps.... I daresay.... My husband might.... What do you think, Arthur?”

Arthur thought Mrs. Holmroyd needed not to let the question of terms trouble her. “You see Oswald is in the choir, Ethel.” “To be sure! how stupid of me,” the Organist’s wife exclaimed. “I was quite overlooking the choir.—My husband generally makes some slight reduction to the members of his choir,” she informed Mrs. Holmroyd, whose hopes began to rise again. If Mrs. Holmroyd could arrange for her little boy to meet the Organist’s convenience in the matter of times—

“My husband is so busy,” the Organist’s faithful spokeswoman threw in. “He has scarcely a minute to himself. I don’t know how he manages to fit all his lessons in.”

—If Mrs. Holmroyd’s little boy could do this, and take such times as Mr. Rencil had at liberty, he would suggest....

“Two guineas and a half, Arthur?” his helpmeet prompted. The Organist said he had even thought of two guineas in Mrs. Holmroyd’s case. He was sure Oswald would give him very little trouble.

“How does the suggestion strike you, Mrs. Holmroyd?” he enquired, and suddenly yielding to the sympathetic current passing through them all, he threw aside business dissimulation. “Do tell me if I am asking you more than you came prepared to give,” he said. Perhaps it might have been but Mrs. Holmroyd’s over-sharpened fancy that believed his wife turned a quick look in his direction as though to recall a too impulsive generosity to reason. But if the look were aimed with this intent it softened instantly on the Organist’s face, and turned back to Mrs. Holmroyd with seeming eagerness to cull the first fruits of gratitude

from her eyes for this beloved husband's goodness. Nor did Mrs. Holmroyd's countenance disappoint her. It displayed her grateful sensibility of the Organist's consideration. "I never expected.... I scarcely know how to thank you...." she said.

Two guineas. It was more than she had any right to pay. Whatever terms might have floated vaguely in her mind, they certainly were not these. She knew they were not these by the impossibility of declining terms that came garbed in such generosity and goodness. Had they been hard and business-like she might have hesitated. But hesitation could not be suffered to insult an offer such as this; nor self respect to trade upon so great a kindness. The offer was gratefully accepted. Oswald's musical fate was settled. And with respect to times she ventured to propose Saturday, if that would be convenient to Mr. Rencil. She gave her little school a whole day's holiday then (she told him) and Oswald would be quite free for any hour in the course of the day that Mr. Rencil might suggest. This reference to the school, that only supreme unconsciousness could have dared to make after such signal evidences of the Organist's goodness, appeared to take Mrs. Rencil's understanding by surprise.

"A school, Mrs. Holmroyd?" she enquired. "Do you really mean...."

"Did you not know?" Oswald's mother asked in mild surprise. To her sensitive feeling it seemed as if her means of less than livelihood were patent to the world.

"But I thought ... I was led to understand," Mrs. Rencil said, obviously wrestling with a refractory intelligence, "that you ... that you made pies, Mrs. Holmroyd. Somebody told me so. Who was it, Arthur?—Of course, it is ridiculous. I might have known."

In another house, whose atmosphere of sympathy was less assured, Mrs. Holmroyd might have been consumed

with the fires of her own shame. But here her pride walked curiously independent of all deception or pretence.

“I do make pies, Mrs. Rencil,” she admitted very simply, and with curious self-possession. “It *is* ridiculous. There seems not the least connection between pies and teaching. But after my husband’s death, I scarcely knew what to do. I had my children to think of. They were dearer to me than pride.”

“Oh, forgive me, please!” the Organist’s wife exhorted her with a face and gesture of remorse. “How rude and thoughtless of me. I did not intend to hurt you, Mrs. Holmroyd. I really asked with a view to Alice, Arthur,” she said, looking at her husband. “What sort of a school is yours, Mrs. Holmroyd? A mixed school?”

Mrs. Holmroyd confessed to its mixture with misgiving.

“I do not know,” she said, “whether you would care ... to let your little daughter come to me.” But her heart plucked at the suggestion. “It is perhaps more mixed than you would care for. Not all my scholars are quite what I could wish. I dare not pick and choose, Mrs. Rencil.”

Mrs. Rencil said, “I quite understand,” with an emphasis that seemed to say the sad exigency was not confined to schools alone. But learning by enquiry that Mrs. Holmroyd’s own two children drew their manners and education from the maternal source, she appeared rather to disparage the visitor’s scruple, asking her husband: “What do you think, Arthur?”

The Organist thought that if Mrs. Holmroyd had no hesitation in sending her children to her own school, it was an example they might safely follow.

“I do not know if my wife has confessed it to you,” he said, “but she is, I can assure you, a very warm admirer of yours. She admires you in more respects than I can tell you. She admires the way you come into church, and the way you leave it, the way you dress your children and

teach them to behave. In fact, they are the models by which all behaviour is regulated in this house. What Mrs. Holmroyd's children would, or would not do, constitutes the standard by which Alice is (I will not say 'ruled' but) judged. Of course, my wife and I have frequent quarrels as to who is responsible for Alice's awful disobedience. My wife accuses me of giving her pennies and buying obedience by pennyworths at a time. I'll admit there's some truth in the accusation. Do you ever give *your* children pennies, Mrs. Holmroyd? I hope not. It's really rather fatal. Once upon a time my little daughter used to give me quite a lot of excellent behaviour for a penny. Now a penny seems to go no way, and the quality is dreadful. I think school seems to be the only solution of the difficulty."

"What *are* your terms?" his wife enquired.

Controlling a heart now riotous with hope, Mrs. Holmroyd mentioned her modest thirty shillings for the term of thirteen weeks. The idea took root and grew. Mrs. Rencil was indeed a warm admirer of the sweet face and gentle bearing of her visitor, and this school, under such unexceptional mistress-ship, seemed almost the providential answer to sundry questions touching her little daughter's education that had been table talk for some time past. Not only was it decided that the little girl with her father's soft dark eyes, who had intently followed the discussion concerning her, (nursing the brass glove box all the while) should take her place in Mrs. Holmroyd's class next week; but the Organist said that under the circumstances he could not dream of accepting more for Oswald's music than Mrs. Holmroyd asked for Alice's schooling. The two services must be reciprocal. With a heart full of thankfulness and hope renewed, Mrs. Holmroyd took leave. The Organist himself accompanied her to the door and let her out into the street whose gaslights seemed to have taken on the bright similitude of

stars, flashing forth messages of radiant gladness.

"Do come and see my wife again, some time, Mrs. Holmroyd," the Organist urged her. "I know she will be so charmed.—And I will expect Oswald at half past ten on Saturday."

She thanked him very, very much for all his kindness. "Yes. At half past ten. It will be a great event for Oswald. He shall be punctual." As she left the house, the Deputy—momentarily retarding his footsteps in the shadow until the Organist's door should be clear—made a dart forward to intercept it before it closed.

"Good evening, sir."

Mr. Rencil re-opened the door.

"What.... Is that you, Wembling?"

"Here is the emery paper, sir," said Wembling, putting a tubular package into the Organist's hand. "It is the finest they had. And there are the screws." He added a small twisted packet to the first. "Meakins have three copies of your Song in the window now, sir. Just under the gaslight. They look very well, sir. I saw some people standing outside the shop.... Shall I go straight up into the music-room?"

"If you like," said the Organist. "Why?"

"Why.... You said Thursday evening, sir, I understood," Wembling reminded him. "At half past six."

"What do you mean by taking me at my word?" Mr. Rencil asked. "Your own sense ought to have told you that I should be dining with Canon Quexley to-night. If not, it would seem that all my musical instruction is being wasted."

"If it's in the least inconvenient to you, sir," the Deputy proffered with great obligingness, "I can come again another night. Shall I go back and get some practice, sir?"

He had his Sunday hat on, and his Sunday tie, for this

was to have been his singing lesson, and he had some popular nautical songs of the period and a fat copy of the Messiah under his arm.

"No, don't go back," said the Organist, drawing him forward with a friendly hand. "A night's rest won't do your voice any harm. In fact, it will give it an added timbre. Come in and patch up those voluntaries like a good fellow. You know where they are, and the paste is in the cupboard. Light the gas and stir up the fire. Now I must go and dress."

7

Thus was a new doorway in life thrown wide for Oswald. It seemed to open direct upon heaven and yield glimpses of the brilliant celestial furniture beyond—chiefly upright pianos and gilded organs, radiating splendour and such harmonies as fill the firmament when the heavenly choristers (that are stars) open their lips and sing ecstatically together. The ideal of the dead alderman faded somewhat and lost lustre. Gold-rimmed spectacles and brown moustaches acquired a palpitating significance instead. Some day Oswald was to have both, and talk apart with Canons, and be addressed as "Sir" by Deputies, and pass mahogany-nosed vergers without a tremour. His first memorial to the best of fathers should be not a tombstone, but an anthem. It should be sung at the Mirfield Parish Church, and form one of the test pieces at the inter-church choral competitions. By the Tax Collector it should be proclaimed "Sublime Music." If the music were to bear any relation to the exalted fervour that conceived it already written and published, exalted it must surely be. Its prospective creator well nigh snivelled beneath the bed-clothes at the sheer beauty of it. He would have drunk even deeper of the draught of his own emotion but for fear of the sensitivity of the maternal hearing in the room beyond.

Nor did Oswald stand alone in the intensity of his new feelings. The consciousness of his approaching initiation to the sacred mysteries of an art extolled so rapturously by the Tax Collector, and made illustrious by such names as Handel, Rencil, and Sidney Smith, intoxicated the home in Spring Bank Gardens. They were as drunk, all of them, on the vintage of pure emotion as the verger of St. Saviour's could have made himself for eighteenpence at the Nag's Head; steadier on their feet, it is true, but not a whit more reliable in their interpretation of the phenomena of life. Because Oswald was going to take his first music lesson on

Saturday at half-past ten o'clock in the forenoon, what reason was there to suppose that the economic laws of life were being suspended? What reason was there to regard the shrinkage of Aunt Caroline's financial remains with equanimity restored, and life to come with courage? What reason was there to exercise the spirit of gigantic gratitude from the Best of Fathers' memory and say: "O, children! Think of him. Never forget your dear father." What reason was there for making a sudden hero of Oswald for a feat not even yet attempted, and paying him the exaggerated deference for an old master? What reason? Why, no reason at all; which is the only reason for half the enthusiasms in the world, or at least a reason no better than that for which (or for the lack of which) the verger shook hands six times with the last customer of the Nag's Head—as though half that number should not suffice for any reasonable being—whilst the barman slid the bolts with a brutal disregard of feeling behind the closed door; and the verger's vocabulary was suffused with an uplifting love of humanity that a few pennyworths' of kindred spirits had expanded in him. Not without good cause was Mrs. Holmroyd's dream disturbed by the apparition of Councillor Burford, bringing his polished counter, white shirt-sleeves and knotted apron-strings into her very bedroom, his lips so hard compressed as to leave visible no mouthway in his beard, with the unspoken charge:

"Sacrificing good money for music! You are making a great mistake, ma'am. A very great mistake. When did music ever teach a man business? When did music ever take a man into the Council? Point me out the name of a single musician in all the list of Mayors. Music is unpractical. It's unreliable. It's dangerous. It can't add up nor subtract. It can't judge the weight of a ham. It leads nowhere. Once your son gets music into his system you'll have no more control over him. He'll be good for nothing. But you please yourself, ma'am, of course. He's your son,

not mine. I don't want to influence you."

8

It was the cleanest of Oswalds that presented himself before the Organist's house on Saturday morning at half-past ten. The weather being warm and springlike—one of those mild January mornings, in fact, that mimics May and makes the heart of mankind impatient for Spring—he wore neither overcoat nor muffler, but his Saturday cuffs were carefully drawn down above his knitted gloves. It lacked still some minutes to the appointed time, and Oswald—furnished with a brand new empty polished leather music case that his mother's love could not deny itself the joy of buying for her son—paced up and down before the brass name-plate as impatiently he awaited the half hour chiming from St. Gyles's. The instant the quarter jack rang out, taking him by surprise when he was still some paces from the door, he ran hurriedly to the step and pulled the bell. His last moments at home had been spent before the keyboard by his mother's side, picking up eleventh-hour scraps of music-knowledge for the saving of his credit, and he attended the opening of the door with a nervous recapitulation of the lines and spaces in case he might be questioned on them. First space F; second space A; third space.... The third space was an oval space of considerable astonishment to find himself confronted all at once by the familiar face of a fellow chorister, who greeted Oswald's thunderstruck third space with an apathetic "Hello!"

This was one of the senior choristers whose voice poised on the verge of breaking, but who, nevertheless, still continued to attend rehearsals with a regard to quarter day, under warning from the Organist against any vocal over-strain. In lieu of a collar he had his throat wrapped up in some red material that might have been part of a flannel petticoat. His appearance so little suggested music or sustained the dignity of this noble Art, that Oswald was

conscious of a sudden chill of disillusionment, as though over his fire of enthusiasm wet ashes had been thrown. Could it be?... Why! the chorister had not even a music case. And yet, the community of their interests was painfully established by the neck-tied figure's asking: "What have *you* come for?"—and being told with suitable gravity that Oswald had come for his music lesson, responded laconically: "So've I."

The answer indeed, was so incontrovertible, and dealt pride such a flat-hand blow, that Oswald could only stare incredulously. And a second disillusionment followed closely on the heels of the first as the chorister stepped out into the street with the announcement that Oswald would get no lesson that morning.

"There's another pupil sat waiting of him upstairs, now. Mr. Rencil's out."

"Out!" said Oswald. "I was to come at half-past ten."

"Was you," said the chorister.

"What am I to do?" asked Oswald, whose diffidence was ever ready to appeal to any authority rather than his own.

"Do?" said the chorister. "Go back. That's what I'm doing."

Oswald's heart stopped beating at the mere suggestion of such drastic procedure.

"But Mr. Rencil said half-past ten!" he urged. "I was to be punctual."

"Then go in," said the chorister. "If you want. *I* should."

This second advice, for all its obvious conformity to Oswald's apprehension, reassured him no better than the first.

"Go in?" he said blankly. "Where?"

"Inside," answered the chorister, jerking his wrist in the direction of an appalling flight of stairs, all carpeted, that Oswald saw with growing concern, beyond his shoulder.

"You've been before, haven't you?"

Oswald shook his head.

"Is this the first time?"

Oswald said "Yes."

"Come along o' me," said the chorister with a decision that allowed no argument. "I'll soon show you. You don't need to ring if it's a lesson. Only if it's an errand. Open the door and go straight in. Like this."

He doffed his cap again, stepped into the hall, gave his boots two kicks upon the mat and made his way up the staircase, Oswald following—without courage to decline the aid of such a leader, and yet troubled with the thought of what judgment might be pronounced on his temerity. They passed up the stairs swiftly and noiselessly; so swiftly that Oswald had scarcely time to exercise his troubled sight. In a vague and disconcerting way he was aware of doors on all sides of him; of stairs leading upward in unending spirals to infinity, but he knew no more where he was or how many steps it had taken him to come there until he heard the voice of the chorister exclaim: "In here."

The long naked wrist shot out in front of him and turned a knob. A door opened. A voice said, "Go on with you." A hand pushed him peremptorily from behind, and next moment he stood, deserted and unannounced, the prey of his own emotions within the sanctum sanctorum, or music-room.

9

His entrance coincided exactly with a chord played very unevenly upon the pianoforte, which had been preceded by two other chords widely spaced from each other by intervals of stagnation as Oswald and his cicerone had mounted the stairs. All these chords, and some others unheard, had been produced by a young lady in a black frock who sat upon a music-stool before an upright piano,

with her legs dangling above the pedals, and several inches short of them; her eyes and nose tilted up to the extreme summit of what appeared to be a terrible, steep and precipitous page crowded with black and busy notes which she gazed at with great fixity of attention. Judging by the number of notes and the time required to play them, the composition on which she was at present engaged would last about eighteen months, allowing a six weeks' holiday at midsummer. Oswald's abrupt entrance seemed no less of a surprise to her than her presence was to him, for she dropped both wrists (still clutching, however, with all her out-stretched fingers to the chord last played, as though to pin it to the keyboard) and turned a startled face in the direction of the door where Oswald stood, holding his cap in one hand and his polished music case in the other, speechless and perturbed.

For the executant, he realized, was the daughter of Mrs. Bankett whom everybody knew, and granddaughter of the defunct Alderman for whom a gigantic urn and kerb were now in active preparation at the monumental mason's. And though Oswald still exchanged occasional shy glances with this young lady across the perspective of her parent's hall, albeit it was only on the night of the Mayor's party that stress of vanity had broken through the reserve between them and caused her to address the Sausage Boy, the precise degree of their acquaintanceship constituted a perpetual puzzle to them both. For Oswald, this granddaughter of the august Alderman assumed an almost symbolic significance in the wide realm of his aspirations. Ever since the night of the Mayor's party, in fact, when she did his pride the honour of speaking to it, she had come to occupy a sentimental place in his inner and most cherished life. When it is recorded that in his sacred moments of imagination he had even led her to the altar, and that she had wept tumultuous widow's tears over her deceased husband's grave in the cemetery, it may be conceived with

what embarrassment Oswald now found himself face to face with this object of his dreams, conscience-troubled lest any part of these guilty imaginings might by some mental alchemy escape control and become visible. Besides, seen out of her customary environment, Miss Bankett seemed curiously changed, and her eye was certainly more alert and penetrative than Oswald cared to encounter single handed. But, as though she found nothing in the new arrival's appearance to repay further notice, Miss Bankett transferred her gaze to the crowded summit of the sheer and almost toppling page. By the convulsive movement of her lips, wrists and shoulders, Oswald believed another chord was imminent, and regaining some of his self-confidence now that the young lady's back was turned to him, awaited its execution with interest. At the crucial moment she dropped her wrists again and flashed her face round at Oswald, who blushed at being discovered with so flagrant a look of expectation and interest in his eyes.

"Can you play?" the granddaughter of Alderman Bankett asked him with a pert enquiring mouth.

Fearful lest any reply short of negation might plunge him into a command to prove ability, Oswald answered: "Not yet."

"Have you learned three flats?"

Oswald tendered the same answer.

"This piece is in three flats. Common Time. Counting four crotchets in a bar. It is my new piece. It is by Mr. Rencil. I wish he would come. What time is it?"

All the while she imparted information or sought it, her eyes—hard, grey-green Bankettian eyes—put Oswald through a searching examination from his boots to his cap, and his cap to the music case, and the music case to his clean white collar, chin, mouth, eyes, and forehead, and without waiting for any answer to her last question,

addressed herself once more to the topmost stave of the page, and went through all the elaborate and conclusive processes as before. This time, however, with a tremendous hardening of her mouth and contracting of her brows and stiffening of her forearms and hunching of her shoulders, the chord was struck.

It was wrong. Palpably, inextricably wrong.

After gazing curiously at her outspread fingers and at the page in turn, whilst the chord still vibrated discordantly in the bowels of the instrument, and as though despairing of a reconciliation between factors so conflictingly at variance, the young lady directed her attention towards Oswald again.

"How long have you been learning music?"

Oswald answered diplomatically, "Not very long."

"A year?"

"Not yet."

"I've been learning nearly three years. I've never played this piece before. It's a lot more difficult than the last. The last had only one sharp. I don't think I like this one. Do you? I shall ask Mr. Rencil to play it for me as soon as he comes. It goes faster than this really. A lot faster." There came a pause and she added: "You won't be bringing us any more pies or sausages for a long while. I know. I heard mother tell Mary so last night. We're getting tired of them. Aren't you?"

All this time the dissonant chord made a protesting clamour in the depths of the pianoforte, as though supplicating to be resolved or otherwise put mercifully out of misery. The subject of sausages proving somewhat delicate for the son of the Manufacturer, Oswald could only respond to it by means of a flush, which Miss Bankett immediately noted and commented on, saying with the utmost self-composure: "You've gone all red. Did you know?" Oswald's reply being unintelligible, the young

lady exclaimed: “O, dear! I wish he’d come. Aren’t you tired of waiting? I am,” and displayed half a tendency to tackle the top of the page once more. But the cryptic look of the chord already attempted, and probably the still more forbidding aspect of the chord that was to follow, deterred her. Instead, submitting to an impulse of coquettish vanity, she suddenly asked him: “Do you know this piece?” and rattled audaciously through half a dozen bars of a busy rondeau, these half dozen bars constituting all that she was able to play without the book. Oswald, lacking as yet any intimacy with the works of the Organist of St. Saviour’s, was in no position to answer that this extract just performed for him came from the fourth of the second Series of Twelve Progressive Pieces for Tiny Players, called “In the Swing,” published (with a coloured title page) by Messrs. Ashpot and Claypole. Nor indeed, had he so much as the time to shake his head, for this mournful admission of ignorance was frustrated by no less a personage than the Composer himself, who opened the door at this juncture, and, rolling up his gloves, sportively flung the ball so made at the extended fingers on the keyboard, with the exclamation: “Tig!”

Then, finding the further opening of the door impeded by the person of Oswald, whose diffidence forbade him to seek escape from the handle that impended in the small of his back, he turned the mild surprise of his glasses upon the apologetic presence.

“Oswald, you scamp! What are you doing in my music-room at this time of day? Trying to steal my pupils from me, are you?”

Oswald’s lips emitted a penitential murmur, in which the words “Mother” and “half-past ten” were distinguishable. Miss Bankett, slipping adroitly off the music-stool to pick up the Organist’s gloves, cried:

“Oh! Mr. Rencil, will you play me my new piece?”

"Half-past ten!" said the Organist, drawing out his gold half-hunter and referring to the dial. "But this is not half-past ten. This is much more like a quarter to eleven."

The humour, kindly though it was, rose somewhat above the level of Oswald's immediate modesty. He hung his head, deficient of the courage requisite to tell this great musician that he had been on the doorstep when St. Gyles's church clock chimed the half hour. He wondered, too, if Mr. Rencil were really displeased to find him in the music-room, and whether it was not incumbent on him to beg the Organist's pardon. But his apprehensions were quickly allayed by the friendly pressure of the hand that fell upon his shoulder.

"One of us is evidently very late this morning," Mr. Rencil said with an air of great indulgence. "But as I happen to be in a very good temper we won't ask who it is."

"It's you," said Miss Bankett emphatically. "I've been here since a quarter past ten. And the other boy was here too—that funny looking boy with the sore throat. He said it was no use waiting—you'd only tell him to come again. He said you'd told him to come again twice, this week."

"Twice?" said the Organist of St. Saviour's. "Are you sure? I'd no idea it was twice. I thought it was three times." He laid his hat upon the writing table by the window, littered with music paper, part songs and anthems. "Did he take the letter?"

"What letter?"

"The letter I meant to give him if he had waited for me as he ought to have done." He brushed the part-songs and anthems aside and found the envelope still resting where he had laid it. "No! Here it is, the rascal! He shall have some harmonic minor scales for this.—Well? What about this new piece? I will give you sixpence if you can play it from memory."

The granddaughter of Alderman Bankett declined his challenge, but dismounted from the stool and gave the padded seat a vigorous twist with both hands. "*Please*, Mr. Rencil!"

Thus supplicated, Mr. Rencil seated himself at the instrument, and after reciting the characteristics of the composition to be performed, in most punctilious fashion: "Home for the Holidays" composed by Arthur Rencil, opus 103, No. 7. In the key of E flat, containing three flats B. E. and A (and occasionally F sharp). Common Time. Counting four crochets in a bar. Allegro ma non troppo—which means play slowly and mind your stops—ran glibly through the music that had cost Miss Bankett so much unprofitable labour. As the composition drew to a close he elaborated it by means of a protracted coda on a sustained pedal, finally modulating into the key of C major for the execution of some miraculous glissandi with both hands, to Miss Bankett's huge delight, who exclaimed nevertheless: "That isn't in the piece. I know it isn't. You're making it all up. Aren't you?" Not only so, but warming to his genial task the Organist of St. Saviour's let his enraptured auditors hear how the composition would sound on a musical box,—the preliminary winding-up of the mechanism being realistically suggested by rubbing the finger-nails lightly over the surface of the keys. That Miss Bankett was not altogether unacquainted with this high form of musical art was evinced by her begging the executant: "Now let it run down, so you have to wind it up again." At which the placid tinkling of the music-box manifested signs of unsteadiness; the notes dragged, as though the cylinder had insufficient strength to overcome the pressure of the minute metallic tongues resisting it; hiccoughed and came to a standstill. A vigorous re-winding ensued, succeeding which the music leaped into life again, more tinklingly mechanical than before.

Nor did the versatility of the performer stop here, for he

interpreted the composition after the virtuosic style of a French piano, and also in the manner of an itinerant German Band of three instruments—saxophone, cornet and clarinet. After awhile the clarinet (as Mr. Rencil explained over his shoulder) took off his cap and went collecting coppers, thus leaving the composition to the mercies of the cornet and saxophone. The cornet, after a further while, also doffed his cap and departed in quest of coppers, abandoning the morceau to the care of the saxophone alone, who held on resolutely with the basses until the clarinet's return, when he ceased playing on the saxophone in order to blow through it. Mr. Rencil also, at Miss Bankett's urgent request, played the National Anthem in two simultaneous keys, putting this familiar hymn perplexingly into the minor, at the same time dropping its tonality by semitones until at last, for lack of any further keyboard, it came into collision with the bass truss. During the course of this marvellous recital the delight which Miss Bankett experienced caused her to turn continually towards Oswald, impelled by the instinctive desire to share her own joy and partake of his, and Oswald's assurance (since no speech was demanded of it) rose to an incredible degree. Stimulated by these wonders of the sublime art—wonders of which he had not even dreamed—his bosom expanded. He visioned himself retailing all these marvels in turn; to his mother; to his sister; to Miss Bankett's own self; to imaginary legions of Canons, vergers, and admiring pupils. He felt endowed with a courage that would stick at nothing. He could even have answered questions put to him. This was an auspicious beginning, indeed. This was something like learning music. This was, in the highest sense of the word, Sublime.

As the bell of St. Gyles's boomed the hour of eleven, the music room door opened once again, and the smiling maid insinuated her head to announce that Miss Bankett's mamma had called for her, and was now seated with Mrs.

Rencil in the drawing-room.

This interruption, closely followed by the appearance of a gaunt gentleman with high cheek bones and a moustache like a respirator (though shaggier at the edges) whose roll of music wrapped in brown paper and tied with string proclaimed him a student of the divine art—probably a bass vocalist, to judge by the protuberance of his Adam's apple—put an effectual stop to further contrapuntal exercises. Miss Bankett, suddenly infected with market fever and the excitement to go a shopping, picked up her hat and mantle and ran to rejoin her waiting parent, sped by genial words of recommendation from the Organist, and the promise of a longer lesson next week. The gaunt gentleman was taken cordially by the hand and welcomed —although, as Mr. Rencil warned him, they would have to make the most of the least available time this morning, inasmuch as he had shortly to give an organ lesson at the church. Oswald, indulgently patted on the back, was commended for the lustre of his music case, which (said Mr. Rencil) showed how hard he meant to work. In addition, the Organist told him to practice his scales and to come back on Monday morning at the same time, which Oswald undertook to do, saying to himself all the while: "But I shall be at school on Monday. I can't come then. Tell him!" Had it not been for the presence of the gaunt gentleman with the natural respirator, who, having unrolled his music and straightened it upon his knee, was now beginning to cough in a summary and professional manner and to work his Adam's apple up and down in preparation for vocal exercises, and whose eye seemed to rest on Oswald in a somewhat menacing and unfriendly fashion as though resentful of his presence—Oswald felt sure he could have found sufficient courage to explain his inability to come at the time appointed. But the eye of the vocalist sealed his lips with the weight of a leaden "Begone!"

As he closed the door, still deeply pondering, he heard his name called after him in Mr. Rencil's voice. "Perhaps," thought Oswald, "he has remembered that I shall be at school on Monday morning." But the Organist had remembered no such thing. He had found on his writing table the note, addressed to one of his pupils, that the red-throated boy should have waited for this morning. The duty of delivering it was now delegated to Oswald, who accepted the charge with pride. Oswald knew Mr. Finchley; Oswald was to take the note to him at Messrs. Garrod and Wheelright's Office in Monastery Street. He would find Mr. Finchley in the public office on the left-hand side of the door, with an office coat on and a pen over his ear. If it wasn't over his ear it would be stuck through his mouth. On no account must Oswald turn by mistake into the private office on the right-hand side, for if he so much as put his head in there would be six and eightpence to pay. That Oswald should keep out of the clutches of the law was Mr. Rencil's earnest hope. The gentleman with the respirator laughed at this. That is to say, the respirator arched its back under his nose and became crescent shaped, but instantly the valves of his Adam's apple began to work again, and he tried his voice subterraneously on a "Ha!" as though actuated by the sudden fear that, in laughing, he had lost it.

"And don't forget Monday morning," Mr. Rencil reminded Oswald as he took his leave once more. Oswald, still telling himself: "But I shall be at school on Monday morning. Doesn't he know?" acquiesced again. Pondering this matter deeply, he walked with exemplary politeness down the padded stairs, keeping his eyes from wandering and praying that the doors he passed might not open to involve him in any further complications before he reached the street. A brilliant prelude on the pianoforte rang out from the music room and arrested his attention. He opened the front door with exceeding delicacy and care, to prolong

the rapture of these glorious sounds that emanated from the Organist's hallowed fingers, wondering too, whether he might not be rewarded with a taste of the quality of the gaunt-faced gentleman's voice. But that hope bore no fruit, for the moment of the singing lesson was not yet. These far more glorious strains originated from the Organist alone, who played to his flattered and enraptured pupil the latest song whose proofs sheets had reached him from the London publishers that morning. Perhaps, thought Oswald, his mother might be willing to release him from the school on Monday for such an important matter as a music lesson. His conscience troubled him the less because his vanities were so vigorous. It is true he had had no opportunity to display his clean fingers, or to show Mr. Rencil how politely he could sit at the piano. But he had been played to by the Organist's great and very self; he had been spoken to by Miss Bankett; Mr. Rencil had patted his shoulder. And lo! now he was engaged to undertake a most important mission on the Organist's behalf.

Devotion grows with service. They love best who serve the most. Oswald's loyalty towards the Organist was greater because something had been asked of it. He went on his errand irradiated with gratitude and aspirations.

O! after all this—what a musician he should some day be.

BOOK VII

THE SUITOR

1

ALTHOUGH Mrs. Holmroyd was now become a

regular attendant at his shop, the weeks waxing in light and warmth towards Easter only served to establish Councillor Burford's custom of calling at the little home in Spring Bank Gardens from time to time. Any day after the lapse of three his footfall might be listened for towards teatime, and his broad figure awaited between the two posts of the parlour door. The purpose of his visit remained perpetually undefined, and seemed in the end to repose so implicitly upon its own justification that ultimately the Councillor did not even trouble to explain that he had "just called round, ma'am ..." which served, in earlier days, as his invariable substitute for explanation. He developed a comfortable sense of liberty to fill the doorway or walk into the parlour, (standing always hat in hand with his overcoat thrown open and his broad shoulders to the mantelpiece) and watch the group at table as if they were the objects of his special interest and conciliar care. His eye would dwell on Mrs. Holmroyd's wrist as it arched delicately in pouring out the tea; or on Beryl's smaller hand as, recovering from its first constraint at the Councillor's appearance, it tucked away a spoonful of rich red home-made jam into her determined and appreciative mouth; or on Oswald prudently partaking of the politest small pieces of bread and butter in case the Councillor might surprise him with a question too direct and too peremptory for a mouth unwisely overfilled. The conversation at such times followed a routine as periodic and established as the Councillor's own visit. Enquiry was always made in regard to the behaviour of Mrs. Holmroyd's gas. Was that the full pressure, ma'am? It seemed to the visitor's municipal eye to be burning somewhat blue. Some unreasonable burgesses complained that the Daneborough gas was dirty, and made a mess of the ceiling. He begged strongly to differ with them, ma'am. Such people was unpractical and destitute of common sense. They didn't know what they was talking about. If they was in the Council, like him,

they'd understand the difficulties of the Corporation and the benefits conferred upon them. Them that grumbled ought to have a private gas company to deal with, and then they'd have something to grumble about. The Daneborough gas, ma'am, was second to no gas nowhere. It was as clean and as pure as gas could be, and as cheap. If people didn't take the trouble to clean their burners, or let water get into their pipes, or tampered with the meters, they must expect trouble. Water and landlords were also themes of his, and it was rare he could supervise the little tea-table without gratifying an impulse to identify his own groceries. The sugar (excuse him, ma'am) of which a sample would not infrequently be taken up for critical inspection at the end of the sugar-tongs, was proudly confirmed as a specimen of his best granulated lump. "A splendid sugar, ma'am. You'll find it last half as long again as the common rubbish some shops offer you at a ha'penny cheaper." The tea, too, rarely failed to attract comment, and when Mrs. Holmroyd said: "May I not tempt you with a cup of your own tea, Mr. Burford?" he never declined but that the hesitations of his hat before he clapped it finally upon his head betrayed a struggle. To a family so long unfamiliar with the presence of an adult member of the male sex at its meals, he looked in this intimate conjunction an impressive mass of masculinity. His chest and shoulders overshadowed the small table. His elbow, when he laid it on the edge of the cloth in attendance on his cup and saucer, seemed to assume possession of the board. Noise in eating, as Oswald knew, was an offence unpardonable; but the Councillor ate and drank, as he spoke and acted, with emphasis and authority, and what he did (once done) appeared as little questionable in him as unpardonable in another. The crossing of his extended legs before the fire had, for Oswald, the authority of a text of holy writ, and though the spreading of one's legs towards a comfortable blaze was a habit to be deprecated in

company, especially before ladies, it seemed in Councillor Burford's case to signify something to be accepted and bowed down to like a dogma that reason sniffs at but faith snaps up and bolts intact. The moment Councillor Burford dusted the scattered ash from his vest and trousers, and smoothed himself with a view to departure, saying: "Well, ma'am! But this isn't getting me any nearer home...." Oswald hastened behind the visitor's chair with the solicitude of a head waiter, prepared to possess himself of the Councillor's hat and coat. Into the latter garment he essayed, manfully, to help the risen guest, being nearly swept off his feet by the violence with which the burly visitor assumed it; a procedure involving almost as much danger for the assistant as the shoeing of a horse.

Contrary to Mrs. Holmroyd's fears—which, thriving on solitude's too fertile soil, had made her dread the moment when Oswald's music lessons must be confessed—the Councillor accepted the intelligence with surprising fortitude. He merely said: "Indeed, ma'am!" as he buttoned his overcoat. "Are you decided to make a musician of him?" It is true this question troubled her, that had the effect of trampling (like a rude foot in a flower bed) on dreams and aspirations too young and tender to bear the weight of such reality. But as the trespasser appeared unconscious of what he had trodden on her politeness drew no attention to the footmark, and strove to hide, even from Oswald, the least sign that she had noticed it. It was a little early yet, she answered, to say what use Oswald would ultimately make of his music. Mr. Rencil expressed himself highly pleased with Oswald's progress.

"Mr. Rencil should know, ma'am," the Councillor remarked. "If he doesn't, he ought to. Music's his business."

But the question was not pursued. The Councillor, somewhat to Mrs. Holmroyd's concern, accepted her judgment in this important matter for final. She wondered

if the facile acquiescence of her visitor proclaimed he had lost patience with her, and was resolved to waste no more advice on one so incapable of appreciating it. Her misgiving grew when two successive visits passed without enquiry as to Oswald's future. Even Oswald, for all he feared the point-blank challenge of the Councillor's eye, developed consciousness of neglect, and speculated uneasily as to the reason why their guest interrogated him no more.

One evening, after Oswald had helped the Councillor into his heavy coat and the Councillor had tried on, according to custom, his blunt crowned hat, he turned back from the doorway to Mrs. Holmroyd with the remark:

"You never call to see my daughter, ma'am."

The statement was so incontrovertible that Mrs. Holmroyd, taken by surprise, could only admit it.

"Why not?" asked the Councillor. "You ought to some time. It would be a change for you both."

Mrs. Holmroyd, to whom the suggestion had never presented itself, pleaded the difficulty of leaving her school. "Besides ..." she said, "I never thought ... Miss Burford has not asked me."

"Hasn't she ma'am?" the Councillor enquired. "I understood she had done. If she hasn't she's meant to. But you know what Annie is. Mention visitors and at once the house isn't fit for 'em. She wouldn't let nobody see into it until it's been cleaned down from top to bottom. It's always being cleaned down from top to bottom, and next day—if you believe what she tells you—it's not a ha'porth better for doing. But you don't want to take no notice of her, ma'am. *I* don't.... She'll be writing to you, I fancy, before so long. I hope you won't say No to the invitation when it comes."

With that, deciphering the movement of Mrs. Holmroyd's lips and the expression on her face as

favourable, he turned to the door again and brushed past the attendant Oswald into the open street. They heard his footsteps fading rhythmically into space. Always the abstraction of so great a presence from their midst seemed, at first, to leave the little parlour lonely, and accentuate the solitude of their tiny circle. Instinctively they drew together after his departure to compensate the void by closer demands upon each other's company.

2

The prospective invitation from Miss Burford lagged with the same leadenness that the prospective visit had done, which it replaced as a topic of enquiry on the Councillor's part when he called on Mrs. Holmroyd, asking: "Have you heard from my daughter yet, ma'am?" and assuring her, "You will do, before long, I know. She's anxious to write to you. I fancy there's some cleaning going on to-day." When at last the promised letter arrived, which it did (as Mrs. Holmroyd partly expected) by the hand of Mrs. Chandler's granddaughter, who knew (and confided to her schoolmistress) precisely what was in it, Mrs. Holmroyd behind the gratified surprise assumed to fend the keen eyes probing her, felt the resignation attendant on a fear confirmed. With liberty to act according to the dictates of her heart, much rather would she have declined the invitation tendered in Miss Burford's extra-super handwriting, on the special stationery employed for ceremonious occasions, exhaling in the hand a faintly formal odour between soft soap and dried lavender, like some spinstral scent on its dignity. But the Councillor, calling that same evening to propound his question, "Have you heard from my daughter, yet?" made refusal impossible. And for her children's sakes she must be careful to sting no susceptibilities, to throw away no friends. Nevertheless, standing once more before the door of Rockery House, a melancholy feeling possessed her,

like the trepid expectation that attends the answering of a dentist's bell. The last time (her reminiscent sentiment reminded her) that she had stood upon this step was on a soft and sunlit day in late November. Then her two children had been with her. She missed them now.

The servant-maid who answered to her ring was not the one that had admitted her on the occasion of her first visit, albeit pertaining obviously to the same species, and stamped painfully with the Burford hall-mark; irresolute and anxious-eyed. She and Mrs. Holmroyd gazed enquiringly at each other for a space—victims, alike, of the paralyzing Burford régime, though neither knew it. Acting under evident compulsion and shrinking palpably from the impertinence imposed upon her, the maid supplicated Mrs. Holmroyd's name with as much shame as if she had been begging alms. "Mrs. Holmroyd" she repeated for her own assurance, and was horrified to find that in merely closing the front door behind the guest according to the strict method laid down for her, she had forgotten it. Not daring to confess so fearful an offence, and invoking the deity's aid in vain, she improvized a substitute for the name forgotten, and announced the visitor to the drawing-room as Mrs. Scholes.

By the death-like silence brooding over the house, and in particular beyond the sealed drawing-room door, that seemed to guard nothing but seclusion, Mrs. Holmroyd had plucked up hope to believe herself the first and (preferably) the only guest. But she was quickly undeceived. Already the electro-plated kettle simmered discreetly on an occasional table over its lugubrious blue flame. The imitation Crown Derby tea-set was displayed in mathematical array. The afternoon tea-stands of wicker-work stood charged with plates of fragile bread and butter, sliced to extinction in the effort to express refinement; a primrose coloured Madeira cake, and finger biscuits of the sort with which Mrs. Holmroyd's weekly visits to the shop

in the High Gate had familiarized her. Disposed about these starved emblems of a hospitality unnatural and ill at ease were seated in varying postures of polite constraint some half dozen female figures. Save for a little colour in their millinery the assembly might have been funereal. One or two of the guests were already embarrassed with cups and saucers which penalized their movements and lent anxiety to their eyes, so that between what they held and what they sat on they would have enjoyed more liberty on a gibbet in a high wind. Still, sustained by the gratifying thought that they were partakers of the sacrament of fashion, whose rewards like those of true worship itself must be purchased by present discomfort with a view to future and not immediate enjoyment, they submitted to the ordeal with pious fortitude; holding their uncomfortable cups as if they had been hymnbooks, and uttering their "Really's" "Dear me's" and "You don't say so's" in the restrained tones for liturgical responses.

The announcement of Mrs. Scholes to this solemn assemblage furnished an agreeable distraction for the worshippers, in whose eyes a look of curiosity was kindled, and over whose lips the name "Scholes" passed in undertones of enquiry. Miss Burford, whose dark brows had touched each other in a frown of perplexity at the maid's announcement, repeating: "Mrs. Scholes!... Scholes! I don't know anybody called 'Scholes.' What does she want? Is she collecting? Surely you're not bringing her in *here*?"—stabbed a glance at the maid that would have pierced a half-inch door, on catching sight of her visitor.

"Mrs. Scholes indeed!" she exclaimed in tones of ineffable disgust. "You mean Mrs. Holmroyd. Why don't you keep your ears open!" She tried to melt the look of acrimony in a hostess-smile of welcome, but it lay undissolved beneath dilute graciousness like a crystal of washing soda.

"I couldn't think who in the world she meant, Mrs. Holmroyd! Please step forward. (Mrs. Scholes indeed!) Do take a seat. Mrs. Holmroyd—Mrs. Bingham. I don't know if you've met Miss Hanson before. Mrs. Palethorpe." She introduced her visitor to all the assembled company, which inclined from its chairs with a wary eye on its teacups like ladies on horseback, and led her to a small occasional seat by the fireplace with the assurance that she would find this chair very low and very uncomfortable, and Mrs. Holmroyd was not to hesitate to say so. Meanwhile, silent and increasingly crimson, the maid took up a position by Miss Burford's elbow, ready to receive the cups dispensed and transport them tremulously to the attendant guests. The preternatural politeness of Miss Burford's voice in its solicitude respecting the tea-tastes of her company was constantly infiltrated with undertones of rancour intended for her servant, whom she bade sharply to stand further back.

"Do you want to tilt my elbow when I am pouring out the hot water?"

This running commentary on the maid's behaviour, conducted in a suppressed and waspish whisper that posed as being inaudible to the outraged feelings of her guests, was in reality directed to the room at large, which it invited to share Miss Burford's trials—for, without these, indeed, her office as hostess would have been insupportable. Every time she raised her eyebrows or bit her underlip, or frowned, with an appealing eye to the company, she drew attention from the protested shortcomings to her own superiority, and mounted on the maid's delinquencies to a pedestal of injured pride, where she could insinuate her own high standard of domestic proficiency for admiration.

Miss Burford's tongue, in fact, turned invariably towards the kitchen. Other topics she tolerated; they seemed as alien to her nature as a new hat or stiff new mantle; but this topic boiled in her blood. At sound of the

word "Servant" she quivered to be let loose upon the subject. Her bosom was so distended with matters to impart that her ear had scarcely patience to imbibe the tepid talk of others on a topic so eminently her own. Let but the narrator pause to cough or try to recollect some unremembered name, Miss Burford's lips, unable longer to restrain the seething crowd behind them, would instantly appropriate the topic in the first person singular—as if she were continuing, and not usurping it. Would they believe this? Would they credit that? The maid could not even blacklead! Only this morning Miss Burford had had to go down on her hands and knees before that very grate and do it all over again.

Having handed round all the cups and saucers with a hand so unsteady as to make the crockery chatter like teeth, the maid had been dismissed to the kitchen (whither Miss Burford, in conversation, immediately followed her). But even this grand theme, engrossing though it was, suffered no less than any other from the morbid restlessness of Miss Burford's hospitality, that seemed never content save when it stopped her guests from drinking, with demands for their cups, or choked them over a crumb with peremptory alternatives of finger biscuits or Madeira cake. No assurance had power to allay her cares; no moment was free from the threat of interruption. She feared the tea was weak. She feared the tea was strong. She feared it was too sweet. "Mrs. Holmroyd! You are scarcely touching your tea. It must be quite cold. Do let me make you another cup. Don't eat that biscuit if you don't care for it. Let me give you a scone instead. Or some Madeira cake. You're making a very poor tea."

Dropped into the beverage of common talk Mrs. Holmroyd's first few words floated like ice in claret cup, with a serene air of detached perfection that seemed to chill the medium they swam in. If her dress were simple

and her manners unpretentious, her tones revealed the quiet confidence of a culture too surely founded in itself for affectation. When she had spoken the other voices, quick to take the standard of her tones as a challenge, remained silent for awhile out of desire to avoid immediate competition. Miss Burford re-formulated in her mind each sentence that her new guest uttered, with a minute and jealous appreciation of the difference between their contrasted speeches, and a growing distrust of her own grammar and aspirates. Not only, too, for the Councillor's daughter did Mrs. Holmroyd represent the last arbitrament of diction by which Miss Burford's blunter accents stood condemned, but a qualified referee of social amenities. Not knowing how much Mrs. Holmroyd knew of the complex usages of society, Miss Burford found herself in the dilemma of striving to propitiate standards of whose exactions she was ignorant. She watched Mrs. Holmroyd's holding of her cup and saucer; noted the application of her lips to what she drank; the fastidious curl of her fourth finger. To the hostess this new guest was the enervating unknown quantity. She had reduced the social knowledge of her other visitors to a decimal; their values were fixed and known. They, too, like herself in social matters strove after a draped ideal; uncertain as to what, beneath the formal folds, they worshipped. To them, as to her, these afternoon teas—constituting a superfluous and quite uncustomary meal—were but vague gropings after grandeur, that the fingers of aspiring fashion reached out for and were for ever left wondering whether, by any chance, they might have touched it unaware.

But Mrs. Holmroyd was not long in sounding the depth and gauging the strength of the nonconformist undercurrent that flowed through Miss Burford's drawing-room. It was uncompromisingly Wesleyan. With sabbath habitude Miss Burford and her father, it seemed, attended the grim stone chapel whose forbidding frown darkened

Monastery Street and preached perpetual commination sermons in stone. Miss Burford taught on Sunday in its schools. All Miss Burford's friends were members of the place of worship in Friar's Gate. Mrs. Palethorpe (it transpired) was the Minister's wife; Mrs. Brighouse was the wife of a Wesleyan Councillor lately elected to the Chamber. The attitude they displayed to all religions outside their own, and particularly to that from which their own immediately derived, was one of stigmatic disapproval. When Mrs. Holmroyd, directly challenged, confessed to worshipping at St. Saviour's, a momentary silence fell on the assembled company as if a situation of some delicacy had been created by her words. Miss Burford broke the silence by remarking that people must be allowed to choose their own worship—with a significant pause which seemed to say she wondered that Church could be anybody's choice. She also invited Mrs. Holmroyd to express her personal opinion of Canon Quexley. And when the visitor admitted with a slight flush that she had no speaking acquaintance with the Vicar of St. Saviour's, Miss Burford confessed she had always found his face very hard and worldly. She agreed that this might be owing to his lack of beard, which she found unpleasant in a man. "It makes men look," she said, "so bold, in my opinion. It is not natural. It was never meant to Be." Religion was touched on no deeper than this—which constituted, perhaps, the deepest point Miss Burford ever reached in it. The true comfort of a religion consisted, for her, in the license it gave to animosities and the sanctification of intolerance as pious principle. Only to mention St. Gyles's was to make her mouth harden instinctively. The glint in her eye at such a moment betrayed the secret feud that divided Daneborough; a division made all the bitterer and more obstinate because it had come to be coincident with social frontiers. The dividing stream ran through the borough like a great

cloaca, invisible, but charted; parting every social, commercial, municipal and political constituent of the town in twain.

3

Tea being disposed of and the company disencumbered of its cups and saucers, there crept into the drawing-room after awhile the thin but unmistakable odours of the cooking of animal flesh. Miss Burford's nostrils, being for some time past expectant of it, were the first to single out this subtle savour, which intimated the preparation of the Councillor's more substantial meal. Its detection was betrayed by an acute intensity of eye whose fixed stare sharpened itself to a needle-point piercing every other gaze in its quest of infinity. Reclaiming herself, with violence, from a concentration of all her faculties threatening to be cataleptic, she cloaked her feelings (half disclosed under a great restlessness, in which anxiety struggled like some captive animal in a bag); raised her voice with design to draw attention from the tell-tale odour, and turned distracted looks towards the clock. The assembled company, having its own teas to think about, and grown aware that conversation was beginning now to strain like the last obstructed driblets from a teapot, exclaimed: "Surely! That's never the right time!" and rose precipitately to its feet, despite Miss Burford's luke-warm protestations that they were to take no notice of her clock, which (she was magnanimous enough to declare) might be a minute forward. Nevertheless, as though submitting regretfully to the decision of her guests, she rose with alacrity from her chair for fear they might be tempted to change their minds, and was among the first to stand upon her feet, darting glances at the crumpled cushions and the crumbs that fell to the carpet from her visitors' laps in rising. Not being of the elect company of Miss Burford's acquaintances, whose spirits seemed volubly to mount now

that the ordeal of the tea was over, following Miss Burford in a loquacious throng to the hall, Mrs. Holmroyd tarried slightly behind the rest under feint of fastening her gloves. The voices in the hall meanwhile, dropping loquacity for confidence, and even descending into whispers as if matters of private consequence were being discussed, caused her to protract still further the preparation for departure. Whilst she stood thus, hesitating to intrude upon the circle of a conversation so obviously restricted, it was enriched all at once by the addition of a deeper voice. She heard Miss Burford's father telling the last of his daughter's visitors that he was glad to see them, ma'am, and that the days were lengthening nicely now. The front door closed amid a profusion of Good Evenings and "Don't let it be so long before you call and see me again"; the substantial, well-known tread crossed the hall to the hat-stand, where the Councillor's blunt-crowned hat seemed to be deposited with an accompanying "Ah!" of satisfaction. "Who's in the drawing-room?" the Councillor's voice enquired. "Anybody?" Miss Burford's answer was inaudible. It might have been no more than a warning contraction of the lips, or brow, or a silence-imposing hand: but that the information had been given was attested by the Councillor's unequivocating "Indeed!" with which he acknowledged it. "Is she the last?" His broad shoulders filled the drawing-room door, and his broad hand preceded him into the room with the greeting: "Now ma'am. Very happy to see you. I hope my daughter's looked after you and made you properly at home."

Behind the ample figure of her father Miss Burford, closely following, seemed reduced of a sudden to a smaller and less significant stature; as if some of the importance her presence usually expressed had been absorbed into the larger presence. Her mouth was tightly closed; she held one hand contained within the other, with an effect of

keeping curb upon herself. The eye that paid uneasy visits to her father's face seemed attracted to it by the fear of some disclosure or parental indiscretion, as if she kept a nervous watch upon his words, conscious of her utter impotence to mould or stem them. Mrs. Holmroyd, withdrawing her hand from the large grasp in which for a moment it had been embedded, thanked the Councillor for his kind enquiry, and expressed the very great pleasure this visit had given her. Miss Burford (she said) had been indeed most hospitable; most kind. Had the two women stood alone, such a tribute would have gratified the Councillor's daughter into strings of volubility, disclaiming any merit for so indifferent a meal. But the presence of her parent restrained her lips from speech. Only (though Mrs. Holmroyd did not notice it) a look of ambiguous disgust showed for a moment in her steadfast dark eyes, like a vortex spot betraying deep, swift waters, as though to protest scorn of hollow mockeries and the insincerity of human life. But the odour from the kitchen becoming almost impassioned at this juncture, brought a look of new concern into Miss Burford's face.

"Good gracious!" she exclaimed. "What *is* the girl doing! Excuse me Mrs. Holmroyd. I declare I cannot leave her for a moment." With which she retired precipitately from the room, uttering protesting "Marys" as she went.

"Sit down, ma'am" said the Councillor to Mrs. Holmroyd, ignoring the domestic tragedy as a thing beneath his notice. "Make yourself comfortable. I didn't come in to disturb you."

Mrs. Holmroyd, adjusting the fingers of her glove, affirmed that she had but that moment risen, and was on the point of departure.

"Not on my account, I hope, ma'am," the Councillor urged. "There's no need for you to hurry away because other folks has gone. Annie gets plenty of chance of seeing

Them. You don't visit us so often. In fact ... I was thinking.... Just take a seat again, ma'am, whilst I speak with my daughter for a moment."

He was already on his way to the door when Miss Burford returned, her face hot from the oven. The damage, it seemed, was not irreparable. But thank goodness she'd smelled it in time. Her panegyric was interrupted by the Councillor's enquiry:

"What's there for tea to-day, Annie?"

The question caused her eyes to contract as with contemptuous indignation for her father's stupidity. But for the presence of the guest she would have cried "There! I knew you would do it! I knew you would ask me Something!" Instead, she answered with acerbity: "It's what you always have on Thursday."

"Steak, is it?" interpreted her father. "Well, there's nothing better than steak if it's tender. Is there.... Can we offer Mrs. Holmroyd some tea, Annie?"

Reddening and darkening, his daughter said: "But Mrs. Holmroyd has been offered some tea! She's just had some. She's declined to have any more."

Mrs. Holmroyd, hastening to relieve the tension and set Miss Burford's anxieties at rest, interpolated—"Oh! thank you, *thank* you, Mr. Burford. Your daughter has given me a most excellent tea. I could not possibly stay. My children will be expecting me."

The Councillor said: "A small tea, I fear, ma'am. Not like one of your own. It won't last you long. You'll want another when you get back, I know."

Relieved of the danger, and reading Mrs. Holmroyd's refusal as definite, Miss Burford's brow recovered some degree of its composure—at least so far as the visitor was concerned. In reference to her father, judgment seemed patently reserved. It was true, she said, that they had very little to offer Mrs. Holmroyd. But of course.... If Mrs.

Holmroyd would *really* stay, and Miss Burford thought for a moment she could persuade her.... Mrs. Holmroyd extended her gloved finger instead, smiled with ineffable gratitude and took her leave. The Councillor and his daughter accompanied her to the door, that the former opened for her.

"I'd have walked back with you, ma'am," he said, "if we could have prevailed on you to stay. But you must come again some time when Annie's properly ready for you."

In the background Miss Burford stood, a witness of her parent's exasperating politeness, her mouth sealed with the irate consciousness of a hospitality compromised, and obviously resenting the false position into which her father's foolishness had forced her.

Her smile, maintained by force, forbade Mrs. Holmroyd's tact to look at it again. Mrs. Holmroyd knew that the lips, shaped to bid her formality's farewell, were hardening already for expostulation the instant she was gone. And indeed the door had no sooner closed than Miss Burford turned the full force of her dark brows and indignant mouth upon her parent to exclaim:

"A nice idea! Whatever did you want to go and ask her to stay to tea for?"

His voice fended her resentful tones with a blunt impatience that seemed to warn her his authority was in no mood to be questioned.

"Why shouldn't I? Is a man accountable to his own daughter for everything he says or does in his own house?"

"You know the Dining-room is all upset."

"All upset is it? It oughtn't to be all upset. Other people's dining-rooms aren't all upset. Where are we having our tea?"

"In the dining-room, of course."

"In the dining-room? Why couldn't Mrs. Holmroyd have had tea there and all? If the room's fit for me to sit in it

ought to be fit for anybody."

"You!" said his daughter with unmitigated scorn. "You're a man. You never see anything. You haven't eyes to tell you whether a room's clean or dirty. I can clean it a hundred times without you ever knowing the difference."

"Clean!" the Councillor retorted. "It's clean, clean, clean, and still we're never clean enough. We're cleaning every day of our lives, and yet we're no nearer being fit for decent folks to come and look at us than if we'd never started. Here it's a good couple of months since I first told you to write and ask Mrs. Holmroyd to call on you...."

"Why *I* should be asked to entertain your lady friends I really don't know," Miss Burford protested tartly. "Mrs. Holmroyd is no particular friend of mine that I'm aware of. Surely to goodness I've enough visitors without her."

"And supposing even it was a gentleman friend," her father argued. "What would you say then? What do you always say? You'd say he trod dirt all over your carpets, and made the whole place smell of stale tobacco, and that it was not a bit of good you trying to keep the house clean. I tell you," said the Councillor, without raising his voice, but speaking in tones of remonstrant sincerity, "there's not a bit of comfort in the house. It might be anybody's house but mine. I can't smoke in it. I can't have my friends in it. I'm sick of it, Annie. Sick of it."

"Thank you!" said Miss Burford in a voice of suffocated injury. "Now I know what I'm thought of. That's all the thanks I get—working to the bone to try and please you."

"Working to the bone pleases no man," her father told her. "It doesn't please me, and I've told you so scores of times. I don't want you working to the bone. I want comfort, and the more you work the less I get of it."

"And you'd be the first to complain," his daughter flung at him, "if I took you at your word, and let the place go dirty."

"You've just said," the Councillor reminded her, "that I haven't eyes to see whether it's dirty or clean. You can't have it both ways."

"There's no pleasing you," his daughter cried. "Here I've been slaving all day to get ready for Somebody I scarcely know, and when she comes and has her tea you've no more sense than to go and ask her a second time, as if I hadn't offered her enough to eat. It's ridiculous. It's making everybody a laughing stock. All the best knives and forks locked up, and only the old table-cloth out, and the silk table-centre folded away upstairs, and the cream jugs in the drawing-room...."

"Forks and nonsense! Who wants your best forks and fal de lals?" her father said contemptuously. "Not me. Not Mrs. Holmroyd. Not you, even, judging by the number of times you ever make use of 'em."

They were in the drawing-room amid the remnants of the late social gathering. As Miss Burford carried on her part of the controversy, sullen faced and heated, she passed angrily from chair to chair, putting them rudely to rights as if they had been Sunday School scholars, cuffing a chair here, and a chair there; shaking cushions with vexation; stooping to remove crumbs; scanning the carpet for traces of shoe-dirt, scooping up imaginary soil and debris with the brass shovel and committing them to the fire with an ostentatious "pfff!" of repulsion, that the Councillor might see what toil the entertaining of his guests entailed, and how interminable were the struggles and tribulations of housekeeping.

"Mrs. Holmroyd's house is no great credit to her," she threw at him. "I have never seen her tea-table. You seem to know more about that than me."

The Councillor, standing before the fireplace, dropped a curt: "That'll do. Let's leave Mrs. Holmroyd alone if we can't be civil about her."

"It's you that can't let Mrs. Holmroyd alone!" Miss Burford said. "Not me. It was you that made me ask her."

"To be sure I did," the Councillor acknowledged. "I thought she was a lady you might be glad to know. A lady whose manners you might copy with advantage."

"Thank you!" said his daughter with a dessicated mouth, like one of her father's own dried fruits. "I'm too old to be taught my manners by Mrs. Holmroyd."

"It seems so," said the Councillor tersely. "Is tea ready?"

For a moment Miss Burford flushed up at her father's peremptory closure, as if disposed to challenge this abrupt suppression of her wrongs, but one look at his face caused her to accept the issue with a voice and countenance of injury.

"It's in the oven. You're home very early."

"I'm ready as soon as tea is," the Councillor said. "I want to get back to the shop. There's a Council meeting this evening."

He quitted the drawing-room, leaving his daughter engaged on the task of scrutinizing the contents of the cups closely as she did so, to assess by the quantity of sugar undissolved and the vestiges of tea, to what extent her catering had been appreciated. Into Mrs. Holmroyd's cup she looked with a curl of the lip almost contemptuous, as if the tea-leaves visible betrayed a nature sinister and dubious.

"Pshaw!" she said to herself at last. "I don't believe it. He wouldn't be such a fool."

4

One result of Mrs. Holmroyd's ill-fated visit to the Councillor's house was that both the Councillor and his daughter avoided all further mention of her name.

Its obstinate suppression marked the continuance of their

feud. Neither would capitulate by uttering it. Nothing seemed farther from their lips than the name of Holmroyd; nothing showed less remote from their eyes. The word perpetually floated in the table-space between them, like some disquieting spectre whose very sustenance seemed their own silence. Out of this silence, heaped up with the indignations that grow to greater stature for being unspoken, their misunderstanding mounted. The Councillor in his shop and Miss Burford in her kitchen assiduously raised its walls and strengthened its obstinate buttresses. The moment she heard her father's footstep in the hall Miss Burford darkened her visage to the forbidding shade at which he had seen it last. She kept a countenance of injury in stock for his special edification, which—each time she came into his presence, or he into hers—she instantly assumed. One look at his daughter's face served to harden the Councillor's own. Each assumed the character respective, and met like masked adversaries in a duel of obstinacy.

Petty quarrels between father and daughter, issuing out of the clash of idiosyncracies too closely compacted, were not unknown, though usually they proved of short duration. But the feud between them now was of a different constitution, and each knew it. It could not be reduced to a word; a hundred words could not compose it. They had fought on one pretext, but the real object of their fighting lay undivulged. They had quarrelled and used woundful words, and crossed hard arguments, and yet the substance of their grievance remained intact. Each nurtured concealment as well as injury, and a breach upon dissimulated grounds is hard to heal.

After this fashion the chief part of a week went by. Only essential matters were discussed, and those but briefly. Meals lasted no longer than the time it took to eat them. With each last mouthful the Councillor drew forth his big gold watch, glanced at its dial, and with this mute

reference to the flight of time and calls of business, rose straightway from his place. Not to be outdone, his daughter rose as promptly and transferred the cruet to the sideboard. If their lips were on speaking terms their eyes were strangers. Such looks as passed between them were accidental, or on the daughter's part darkly clandestine. It angered her to find with what complacency her father carried on this conflict of dissimulation on her own lines. Armed with a great shield of masculine indifference that seemed to hide his daughter from his sight, he paid no more attention to her paltry moods than if they had been small-print insertions in the obituary column. What her eyes sought to hide or glittered to express, to him alike made one. He occupied a large and comfortable oblivion, in which, to her alternate wrath and resignation, she ceased to be.

Unalterably on his side, inconstantly on hers, the division deepened. What had been but a trickle of pent-up passion on the night of her historic tea-party became, after some days, a swollen stream of dark misunderstanding, swift and (as it seemed) unfordable. Flinging the weapon of anger finally aside as a thing powerless to reach or harm him, she gnawed the crust of martyrdom instead; posing—if but he would have looked at her—as the wronged and injured daughter. And to heighten the enormity of his disregard of her she cleaned his home more recklessly than ever, trying—with that perversity of her sex that drives male logic to desperation, and renders even prelates profane—to bring him to subjection by the very methods he found the most detestable. She bore her martyrdom abroad. She took it visiting with her. The grievance, condensing from its first nebula commenced at last to solidify into a shape; to find a definite expression before her friends. The mother of Oswald, by Miss Burford, was designated: "That woman," or "You know who I mean."

Meanwhile, if the Councillor talked little,—so little,

indeed, that not one word of this domestic difference ever crossed his lips—he thought no less than his daughter; prosecuting his own path of indefatigable reflection. The episode of the tea-party, disclosing his daughter's latent antagonism to Mrs. Holmroyd had brought him up abruptly on his heel. It confronted him with the untimely necessity to interrogate his own mind; to define what (for his own immediate comfort) he had been hoping to preserve indefinite. In this state of uncertainty he shunned the house in Spring Bank Gardens under pretext of a pressure of affairs that he tried (for justification's sake) to impose on his own credulity. When he drew his watch from his waistcoat pocket after meals, and quitted the table as if Time summoned him, he did so to escape more than the discomfort of his daughter's company. From her he fled not only, but from himself. He tried to temporize with his own thoughts, anxious for any basis to believe that his daughter's jealousies had played her false, and that her spitefulness had misjudged him. He had proceeded, throughout, so circumspectly that it came upon him as a shock to find how far her woman's intuition had outstripped his pedestrian commonsense, taking short cuts to forestall him on the road he trod with such immeasurable prudence. To have one's own intentions read, before they are half formulated is humiliating to the broad mind reposed in the sense of its incontestable security. He had supposed that purpose was possessed of ample space and time to work in, subject to no external pressure, and limited by nothing more urgent than his own slow-moving will. And all at once he found the issue shrunk to the dimensions of a hand, with scarce turning space for a mind indulged so long with delusive belief in its own liberty.

So, not knowing yet what his ultimate course of action was to be, he resolved meanwhile to take no step to bridge the difference. This widening antagonism (he shrewdly

thought) might serve his purpose, after all, far better than any reconciliation. If he took any extreme step, who needed to be surprised? His daughter had nobody but herself to blame.

Not that he minimized the gravity of the step contemplated. A widow with encumbrance might give pause to admirers far less practical than Councillor Burford. But his admiration for the mother of Oswald and his confidence in her womanly qualities outbalanced prudence. And despite his avowed contempt for education, and his intolerance of unprofitable culture with which he justified his educational deficiencies and scorned, in self-defence, those superior attainments that took levy of his limitations more contemptuously in return, his heart was well acquainted with the secret bitterness that comes of the knowledge of a lack of learning. If, out of a dogged determination to hide his weakness from the world and justify deficiencies by trying to show them conscious and deliberate, he lauded the wisdom of the father that had preserved him from the ills of education, he felt the need of it with each day of advancement in his business and the Council Chamber. Little did Oswald imagine that there were moments when his politeness pricked their burly visitor's pride like a fine needle, causing him an exquisite regret for opportunities irrevocably lost.

Now, by means of marriage he might possess himself of education in the person of his wife. Looking at her as she sat at table, his admiration constantly assured him: "What a Mayoress she would make! What a wife for a Councillor!" He compared her with the wives of his acquaintances; contrasted her soft and cultured speech with theirs; took pride in her complete yet uninsistent womanhood, as for a thing acquired already, whose possession exalted ownership. Such a helpmeet during his mayoral term of office would prove invaluable, reflecting lustre on official prestige. He wondered her widowhood had not been earlier

assailed, and his silent courtship entered that inevitable phase when he began to suspect each passing week of danger. Often, when he called at Mrs. Holmroyd's house, "just to look in, ma'am ..." the true purpose of his visit was the need to reassure himself that no change had compromised the situation; that she was, as he had left her, solitary and unsought. The chief deterrent was her children. Not without an interest deeper than Mrs. Holmroyd or her son divined did he concern himself with Oswald's future, seeking (for his own guidance) to appraise the mother's aspirations for her child. Her attachment to her children, he had the wit to know, must not be suffered to suspect itself in jeopardy. This quality in her, at least, was quite unfeigned. Her other qualities, for the very reason that they moved him to admire, caused him to doubt. In invoking the aid of his daughter to introduce Mrs. Holmroyd into his house, he believed that circumspection had succeeded in deceiving both. Once their intimacy was established he would (he felt) have better, closer opportunity to study Mrs. Holmroyd, supplementing his own imperfect vision with his daughter's keener eyes. Now he knew that her inexplicable delays in asking Mrs. Holmroyd to the house had formed a part of policy, and that her eyes had seen much deeper than he deemed. Circumspection, then, was a failure. Further to practise it would be futile. Only two courses now lay open to him; the first, to rebut his daughter's insinuations; the second, to ignore them. For the time being he chose the second. Above all he deemed it inexpedient to come to close quarters with his daughter on a point where his own opinion needed time for formulation. Until he knew his own mind he must avoid hers.

5

In his domestic life no less than his civic or commercial the Councillor had been—before his feet began to deviate

to the house in Spring Bank Gardens—the most regular of men. The main divisions of the day and night might by his goings and comings be measured with exactitude. Within his house this punctuality found an admirable co-adjutor in Miss Burford, whose exactitude stripped Time of none of those terrors with which poets and imaginists have endowed him. On the contrary, she devised new rules and furnished him with new decrees to reinforce his despotism. Tables were set and tables were cleared with the ruthless precision of clockwork. If the Councillor dared to return by a few minutes late or early, it was only at the risk of his daughter's stern displeasure. To be late was a crime involving the inevitable ruination of the meal. No power of earth or heaven could avail to save it. Ruined it must be. Ruined it should be. Ruined it invariably was.

To come home earlier than expected, on the Councillor's part, was a crime scarcely less abhorrent. The sound of her father's footstep, anticipating scheduled time, drew Miss Burford's visage from the oven with a look of blazing consternation: "What's that? Never the master! At *this* time?" She met him with a face like the dial of a barometer when it affirms "Stormy." That the Councillor expressed himself in no hurry extenuated his offence not at all. Miss Burford knew better than that. And, to demonstrate the consequences attendant on parental thoughtlessness, Miss Burford would set all the domestic machinery in most violent commotion. The maid would be dispatched on a dozen distracting errands to the dining-room, and be as peremptorily recalled to the kitchen for the execution of some forgotten task that her mistress had completed in the meantime, and was now become but a text for reproaches. Cooking was recklessly accelerated, and the oven-odours forced to such an intensive pitch that they fled like refugees to every quarter of the house, protesting the woes and wrongs of their oppressed race. The maid spun wildly in the midst of them, disturbing their acridity with her

petticoats as if she were a draught incarnate; shutting doors to keep the smell of cooking in, and opening windows to let it out, and dropping breathless "Yes'ms" and "no'ms" and "what'ms" on all sides of her along with loose hairpins. Being an unimaginative man, the Councillor was mercifully spared those rackings of conscience that might have tortured less complacent parents, and merely characterized these demonstrations as "Annie's way," deploring their consequences more for her sake than his own. He ate with gusto, despite his daughter's flurried face, refusing to let his own discomfort be constrained by hers, or any argument conflict with food.

On the next Saturday but one after his daughter's party, he showed the completeness of his emancipation from all domestic control by making no return for tea. The offence was unprecedented. The kettle whistled loudly on the hob; a fleshy haddock, steaming in milky juice, wasted its savours on a deepening void. Indignation withdrew from any intercourse with vulgar words, and occupied unspeakable remoteness. The maid and haddock communed in the kitchen. Miss Burford sat in awful dudgeon in the dining-room. Seven o'clock struck and brought no sign of him they waited for. The haddock, giving up all hope, sank its voice to a whisper. The maid's face, through continuous application to the kitchen clock, seemed to reflect its blankness.

"You can clear away," Miss Burford ordered her.

"Clear away?" the maid repeated, in tones of stupour.

"You heard what I said," Miss Burford told her.

"Shall I leave the cloth on'm?" the maid enquired, "against master happens to come back?"

"Leave nothing," her mistress ordered her.

She did, without further question, as commanded. She left nothing. The kettle went upon its hook. The haddock, by this time scarcely warmer than a human hand, was

transferred to the larder. Miss Burford's face discouraged looks and forbade enquiry. It was incredible the alteration wrought in a house of metronomic custom by the absence of its master.

A quarter of an hour might have elapsed when the dreadful silence of domestic speculation was broken by a sudden ring at the front door bell. It formed part of Miss Burford's principle to be inordinately startled by every unexpected ring for which her mind could furnish no immediate explanation. On such an evening as this it was certainly not to be expected that her anxiety could condescend to wait until the significance of the ring should be brought back to her at second hand, garbled by a servant's lips. She therefore followed the domestic skirts as far as the passage corner leading to the hall and heard in the stillness that succeeded the opening of the front door a voice articulate a message carefully rehearsed.

"Please!... Mr. Burford wishes to let Miss Burford know...."

She knew the voice. She knew the fashion of the message; the manner of delivery. Trembling with indignation violently suppressed, she left her point of vantage so far as to gain sight of the maid's white apron-bands and the dim figure half obliterated on the doorstep beyond, uttering the sharp word:

"Stop!"

The maid, startled into an audible expression of surprise, fell back from the door, turning a vacuous face in the direction of her mistress.

"Who is it?" Miss Burford demanded. "Who is that speaking?"

The servant said: "It's the Sausage Boy'm. With a message from Master. Master wishes to let you know...."

Her mistress suffered her to say no more. "Tell the boy to take his message to the back door," she ordered, in tones

vibrating with anger. “I will not have errand-boys ringing the front bell. Do you hear?”

The maid, whose chin had dropped to her brooch under the vehemence of this exhortation, turned to the space in front of her and re-echoed Miss Burford’s words with a feebleness that confessed itself utterly overcome with the force of them.

“You’ve got to go round to back door,” she told the messenger. “Missus says you aren’t to ring front door bell.”

A period of uncertainty seemed for a while to hover on both sides of the hall step, and was still hovering when the front door (very dubiously) closed at last without a sound.

“I will not have,” Miss Burford reiterated when the maid, returning from her mission, faced her.... “I will not have messages left by errand boys at the front door. I have repeatedly told you. You seem to take not the least notice of what I say. What is the back door for? Go and open it and tell him to deliver his message properly.”

The maid, still floundering in depths of wonder, betook herself to the appropriate door for errand boys, followed by Miss Burford, whose lips showed very hard, compressed and pale.

“Well?” she demanded after awhile, for the back door was now thrown open, and no murmur of any message, subdued by the deliverer’s consciousness of shame, as yet came to her ears. “What is it? What does the boy say for himself this time?”

“He’s not saying nothing’m,” the maid replied. “He isn’t there.”

“Isn’t there!” Miss Burford cried, incredulous. “What do you mean? Isn’t there? He must be there. Where is he?”

“I don’t see him nowheres now’m,” the maid said after a brief reconnaissance.

“Don’t see him!” repeated her mistress. “But surely to

goodness.... You heard what I ordered you. Go round to the front at once. Perhaps he's stood there yet."

The maid sped round to the front of the house by the garden path. Miss Burford, not less agitated, hastened back to the hall and flung open the front door with her own hand. The light from the hall lamp fell only on the maid's white apron, cap and baffled face, advancing at the same moment to meet it.

"Well?" Miss Burford demanded with the acuity of concern. "Where is he?"

"I don't know'm," the girl answered, breathing heavily, in part as a result of recent haste, and in part as a sacrificial offering of breath to propitiate the irate Power awaiting her; knowing it to be her recognized and bounden duty to take the blame for all sins committed in this domestic temple. "He's not in garden. I've been as far as gate. He's not outside. He must be gone."

6

Yes. He was gone. The maid had read the scroll of fate aright. The Sausage Boy was gone.

But why had he gone? With what intention had he gone? By whose authority had he gone?

Proud with the bearership of this important tidings, and knowing nothing of the tremendous significance contained in it, he had paused for a while before the Burford house and rehearsed his message to the garden gate. The garden gate having pronounced upon it favourably, he took it next to the front door, repeating it in turn to the starred and tinted glass, and his confidence now being high he prepared to recite it before the maid with no small pleasure in his own performance. To such extent as he was suffered to proceed, in fact, he had complimented himself not a little on the execution of his task, and his confusion may therefore be imagined when the voice of Miss Burford

abruptly broke him off in the middle of it and he heard himself commanded ignominiously to the back door. If the sky, with all the stars, had fallen flat upon his luckless head, he could not have been more utterly confounded. Hitherto Miss Burford's treatment of him never failed in a certain quality of indulgence. Nothing, to be sure, could overcome the native hardness of her eyes and mouth, the piercing look; the sharp-edged tone. Rarely, however, had he rung before but that (the door being opened) he heard her voice behind the maid enquiring: "Who's that? Is it the Sausages?" And she had asked after his mother, and how his sister did, and once (in a spasm of generosity) had given him an embarrassing finger biscuit that turned all to crumbs in his pocket through much handling on the way home.

At first, therefore, he could not believe his ears. Speechless he stared into the hall, striving by looks alone to assert identity. His eyes reached Miss Burford's eyes, that spurned them for all she realized whose eyes they were—with a severity he had never observed upon her face before. He heard the words she uttered mumbled over to him by the servant-maid, and all at once the only thing in front of him was the cut-glass asterisks and tinted radiations of the front door, distorting and multiplying the grotesque movements of the maid's white cap and apron behind it.

"Tell the Boy to take his message to the back door.... I will not have errand boys ringing the front door bell."

The words resounded through the awful crypt of ignominy. "Errand Boy.... Errand Boy!" She had said it. She had meant it. The words were for him, for Oswald Holmroyd; the son of the best of fathers.

And all at once, infinitely greater than the shame imposed on him, a fierce, hot, devouring pride rose out of the miry depths of his outraged self, and filled him with such an indignation as he had never known before. He was

no Errand Boy. He was a Gentleman. Gentlemen did not knock at back doors for anybody. No! Not for Anybody.

And without a moment's hesitation he turned him round, marched down the garden path and reached the road—making very sure to close the gate punctiliously behind him to show how true a Gentleman he was. An errand boy would have taken pains to leave it open. He heard sounds about the house as though some errand boy were being sought and called for, but he paid them no heed. The night was dark, yet a great and blinding brightness led him onward, like a star.

7

As the mere sound of Canon Quexley's voice, or one brief ejaculation of his canonical cough, was sufficient to bring the most unsteady Prestwich out of the influence of vocabularies and make straightway a subservient and snuffling verger of him, so this single touch of the inexorable served to chill Miss Burford's wrath like cold tap water, and bring it back with a shock into the confines of her own body whence it had so recently emerged in a supreme attempt (it seemed) to spread beyond all mortal barriers and join issue with infinity.

The boy was gone. With his message delivered no further than "Please, Mr. Burford wishes to let Miss Burford know ..."—the boy was gone. Disquiet peered out of her eyes in place of indignation. She dispatched the maid to the kitchen with a disgust too deep to seek expression.

"Get back with you," she simply said. "If I'm to have messages that are meant for me I suppose I must answer my own door and take them for myself in future." The maid, thankful to escape so lightly from the consequences of her mistress's mistake, retired to the kitchen without the need for any second bidding. Miss Burford betook her

trouble to the dining-room, where, leaving the door ajar behind her that she might command all sounds from hall and kitchen, she plunged into a sea of speculation.

Not alone for quarrel's sake during these latter days had she sought to bring to a head the feud between herself and father. Behind his stubborn silence danger dwelt for her. His independence, his aloofness, his disregard of all the gins laid out to trap his elusive anger; his unremonstrant acceptance of the discomforts of domestic life—all these things charged the atmosphere about her with explosive forces. What rash projects were being wrought to maturity behind her father's outward unconcern. What mine lay even now prepared to burst beneath her feet? Already she had begun to suspect that the Councillor's avoidance of all occasion for compromise issued from a source far deeper and deadlier than obstinacy. It showed design. Whatever plans he had, he intended they should be matured apart from her. And his choice of this messenger to-night lent substance to her worst fears.

Very early she dismissed the maid to bed, with a solicitude for the girl's repose that expressed no more than her own anxiety to have a free course and an open field when the Councillor returned. It was half-past ten when the Councillor came home. He retained in his mouth the assertive half of a cigar which he puffed with ominous complacency as he hung his hat and coat upon the hall-stand. In itself such a procedure was portentous. Not for years had he defied his daughter's feelings with more than the clinging odour of the last cigar discarded on his way home or at the gate, that—even so—gave her pretext to sniff his garments with obvious disfavour. This evening she did not even sniff.

"It's you," was all she said.

"It's me," said her father. Without amplifying his acknowledgment he walked into the dining-room and

turned up the gas.

"What!" He wheeled from the globe to the table and swept his eye across it. "There's no supper for me, then!"

"Supper?" said his daughter with a look and voice of triumphant expostulation. "At this time of night? Of course there isn't."

He repeated her words in the interrogative. "Of course there isn't?"

"Of course there isn't," Miss Burford said again more doggedly. "I didn't know what you would be wanting. How is it likely? You go your ways without the least regard for me. I don't count. I'm the last person to be told Anything."

"But you got my message," he said, breaking into her words unceremoniously. "Didn't you?"

The question, if it did nothing else, gave her at least assurance of one thing. Her father was ignorant of her treatment of the Sausage Boy. To such extent, therefore, her wrath was to the good, having no need to fear the employment of this dangerous arm against her.

"A nice idea!" she said. "Sending messages at half-past seven, with the fish cooked and wasted. No wonder decent girls won't stop. They won't put up with such goings on. I don't blame them."

The Councillor drew his chair away from the end of the table and sat down upon it with a heavy gesture of weariness.

"I'm just about tired of all this, Annie," he said. It was the announcement long waited for, that she had his permission to divulge her wrongs.

"You're not more tired than me," Miss Burford retaliated, touching a corner of the table-cloth for no reason whatever, save to emphasize her indignation. "Ever since ... for the last goodness knows how long, life hasn't been worth living."

"I'm about tired of it," her father said again. "When a man comes home after a long day's business...."

His daughter plucked that last word from his lips and tore it to nothing, with a tone.

"Business!"

"Yes, Business!" her father asseverated. "*My* business. Not *your* business. Not anybody's business but my own."

"Do you pretend to call Mrs. Holmroyd business?" she taxed him.

"Who's talking about Mrs. Holmroyd?" he demanded. "What's Mrs. Holmroyd got to do with it?" His colour had risen and deepened and his eye, exerting itself to quell his daughter's sceptic look, grew defiantly hard.

"You know best what Mrs. Holmroyd's got to do with it," she answered. "You see a deal more of her than what I do." She hazarded the stroke. "As like as not it's where you've just come from."

Her intuition, misled by anger, played her false.

"Is it?" he demanded emphatically. "That's where your cleverness is wrong, Annie," he said decisively. "I've come straight back from business. I was sat working in my office while ten minutes ago."

"But you've been to Mrs. Holmroyd's house to-night. Don't tell me you haven't."

The Councillor half rose from his chair and flicked the ash of his cigar towards the fireplace. It fell short of the fender and spilt itself in grey powder on the hearth-rug. But though this disgraceful act must be redeemed before she went to bed to-night, Miss Burford knew better now than to comment upon it.

"I'm fifty-nine years of age," the Councillor declared. "Going on for sixty. If I'm not old enough to take care of myself and manage my own affairs at my time of life it's not likely I ever shall be."

"You're certainly old enough to set folks talking about you," his daughter threw in.

"*Your* friends, I suppose!" said her father.

"No. Not my friends!" Miss Burford contended, though a darkening flush betrayed the shot struck home. "Other people. People who are no friends of mine and don't talk about things just to please *me*."

"Let 'em talk to please who they like," said her father. "I've no time to bother with such people."

"No," his daughter acquiesced. "You go off to business, and goodness only knows where, and leave me to bear the brunt. They don't say what they think to You. They say it to me. What else do you expect—carrying on the way you are."

"Carrying on!" said the Councillor, stung by the expression. "What do you mean, woman? Have you taken leave of your senses?"

"No, but I think you have," Miss Burford blazed at him. "You're not the same man. Everybody remarks it. You think because that woman lets you do as you like in her house that you can do the same at home. You used to have some respect for yourself at one time, and come back at decent hours, when people expected you. Now you've none."

"That'll do!" said the Councillor. "That'll do, I tell you! When it comes to 'that woman' as you're pleased to call her, I won't sit in this room and hear her insulted. Neither by you nor by anybody else. Do you hear that? Mrs. Holmroyd is a lady."

"O, thank you," said Miss Burford with an acid politeness. "That means to say I aren't."

"No," answered the Councillor with blunt directitude. "You aren't, Annie. You never will be. You never was."

"Whatever I am or may be," his daughter flung at him hotly, "I've got you to thank for."

"Perhaps you have," the Councillor replied.

"You should have given me a better education then," his daughter cried. "If you'd wanted me to be a lady you should have made me one."

"You can't make a lady," her father said with emphasis. "A lady makes herself. It's born with her. It grows up with her. It's part of herself. If you'd had as much edjication as Mrs. Holmroyd, you'd have used it, like you use the house, to make everybody else uncomfortable."

"Thank you," said his daughter. "If I don't know what I'm thought of now, I don't need to blame *you* for not telling me. I know I'm a bad cook, and a wretched housekeeper, and an ungrateful daughter—for you've told me so lots of times. But that's not all. There's something else, surely! What is it?"

"It's this," said her father. "I'd begun to forget what a home was intended for; what it ought to be—until I saw one for myself at Spring Bank Gardens!"

"Oh! There!" remarked Miss Burford. "I knew we should get back *there*, at last."

"Yes, there!" said the Councillor. "I believe you think there's only one house in Daneborough—and that's this, that's supposed to be mine. You never enter other houses but what you come back and speak scorn of 'em. But there's more comfort in Mrs. Holmroyd's parlour than there is here with all the rooms put together. Go any time you like and the place seems ready for you. It never changes. Mrs. Holmroyd isn't a rich lady. She's a poor lady. She's probably a good deal poorer than she's willing to admit. But what's on her table you're welcome to. It doesn't take her two months to make up her mind to ask anybody to a cup of tea and a piece of seed cake. She has her children at a word—and not a rough word either. A look's enough. When you was their age there was no controlling you. You wouldn't be said. They only talk

when they're talked to, and it's a treat to hear 'em. I've spoken against edjication. And I'm ready to speak against it now, in a general way. There's far too much of it. It gets into the wrong hands,—into the hands of them that was never meant by Nature to have it, and that only harms themselves and others with it. But when I see what edjication can do for people, it makes me think. I've never seen Mrs. Holmroyd in a temper all the time I've known her. I've never seen her put out, even. She's not for ever worrying to know what people will think because there's a hole in the carpet, or the sofa springs are broke. Why? Because of her edjication. Because she's a mind above such things. Because a lady's always a lady, and there's no mistaking her. That's why."

"And are you such a fool," said his daughter, with a contempt upon her face that seemed to despair of the Councillor's intelligence, " ... as to think yourself clever enough to judge what sort of a woman Mrs. Holmroyd really is by what she chooses to let you see? Do you think she's always just the same as what she pretends to be for *your* benefit, when you call?"

"For *my* benefit?" asked the Councillor. "What nonsense are you talking now?"

"If I don't know my own sex by this time," Miss Burford said, "I'm very sure *you* never will. Pshaw! I could slap the faces of some of them. But wait till they get you. Wait till they have you like *that*!" She twisted her thumb and forefinger tyrannically together. "And then what do they say, and do, and look like!" Her indignation, replenished from some invisible source, rose up once more, threatening to overflow its banks. "Don't think I'm to be talked over to that woman by you. Don't think I haven't seen through her already, and you too. If you fancy I'll submit tamely to remain in this house when once she sets foot in it, you're very much mistaken. Both of you. So now you know."

The Councillor, with three or four rapid puffs, sucked the last goodness out of his cigar and threw the chewed stump into the fender.

"So now I know!" he said, rising to his feet and pushing the chair back once more against the table. "Aye. That's quite right, Annie. Now I know. And are you sure," he taxed her, with a sudden access of anger in his cheek, "—that Mrs. Holmroyd's so anxious to set foot in this house and share its roof with such as me and you?"

There was something in the defiance of her father's face and question that rudely buffeted Miss Burford's confidence, but she abated nothing of her certitude or acrimony.

"I should hope you'd never be such a fool as to give her the chance," she answered.

"What!" her father said. "Is a man so much of a fool because he risks being made miserable by a wife rather than a daughter? A wife's a wife when all's said and done. If I could be as sure as you profess to be ... I'd take my chance, Annie. Fool or no fool. But I lack your confidence. Mrs. Holmroyd has no ambition to make herself a grocer's wife."

"What!" exclaimed his daughter indignantly. "Do you mean she's impudence enough to set up her nose at a Town Councillor?"

"Aye," said her father. "If it comes to a question of what you say it does—she has. Money looks for money, and breeding looks for breeding, and edjication looks for edjication. Councillor Burford and his daughter may think themselves very great people among folks with no more edjication than themselves, and no more money—or even less. But as soon as they leave their own circle and meet edjicated people—they're nobodies at once. And they know it, Annie, if they're wise."

His daughter's eyes had dilated with a curious

understanding, half-defiant, half triumphant, as her father spoke.

"What?... Do you mean?" ...

"I mean what I say," he answered quickly. "I know Mrs. Holmroyd better than what you do. We're friends. And that's all. That's all we're ever likely to be. It would take a better man than me and a better home than this to tempt her to be anything different. Now I'm going to bed."

They exchanged Good Nights with voices relapsed from the vehemence of disputation to the weariness of prosaic reality.

"I wonder!" said Miss Burford with the deepest introspection as she took the fire-shovel and hearth-brush to the spatter of cigar ash on the rug. "Has he lowered himself to ask her? Has she had the impudence to refuse him?" ...

"Pshaw!"

She was glad now, in this hour of her reprieve, that she had sent the Sausage Boy so ignominiously about his business. She despised her father, but she hated Mrs. Holmroyd.

8

The Councillor had not partaken of tea at Mrs. Holmroyd's as his daughter suspected. Such, to be sure, had been his purpose, but procrastination is the thief of confidence not less than of time. Between thoughts of Spring Bank Gardens and his daughter's darkened face awaiting him at home, the insidious moments crept over his faculties like paralysis. Irresolution lays hold of all men at its own hour and in its own place. Standing upon the doors of destiny this large figure of flesh and blood whom Oswald venerated as a being invulnerable to fear, was the victim of as many doubts as the Sausage Boy's own self when he rang or knocked at unfamiliar doors.

If Miss Burford had been startled by the belated ringing of the front bell, Mrs. Holmroyd was scarcely less surprised to hear the Councillor's well-known footstep in her passage somewhat earlier. Elizabeth had been and gone, leaving the school-room damp and chastened. Tea was long since over. Oswald had returned from delivering the last of the week's pies—sadly reduced in number. In the centre of the kitchen floor stood Beryl's bath, ready to send up its wreaths of vapour for the reception of her small body. Already she sat upon a chair before the fire. Oswald, having returned the basket to its place at the cellar-head, occupied the music stool in the parlour, practising five-finger exercises from the open pages of "Pleasant Paths to Musical Proficiency, adapted to the use of Small Hands by Arthur Rencil!" As he played, he counted conscientiously aloud, for had not Mr. Rencil told him that to count aloud was already half way toward playing with talent, and that all the Great Composers had been incorrigible Counters from their Cradle? In fact, he recommended Oswald to count to his footsteps in walking, and to go up and down stairs in every conceivable time—duple, common, three-four and six-eight in a bar. Much (he said) could be accomplished in this way, and Oswald's loyalty being somewhat quicker than his sense of humour took the Organist at his word. He counted so cheerfully when he practised that, at a distance, it sounded more like a singing lesson; and if his vocal ardour showed a tendency to flag his mother's voice was ever ready to exhort him gently:

"Oswald."

"Yes, mother?"

"Count dear!"

Whereat his voice, thus called on, straightway rose again to fill the room with fervour.

"One *And*. Two—*And*. Three—*And*."

He counted with the more enthusiasm to-night because

of his music lesson received this morning, and because—being the deliverer of a medium pork pie at the Organist's brass plate—the Organist in person had found him there and led him into the up-stairs room by an ear, with the announcement:

"Ethel! This is the rascal who rings our bell. I've just caught him in the act. What's this in his basket? It's a pie. Alice, come and take it away from him. We'll have it for breakfast to-morrow. I'll teach him to ring my bell as if he were the Water Rate."

Not only that, but the Organist's little daughter—who was bigger than Beryl and infinitely more beautiful than Miss Bankett—after whispering in her mother's ear, brought Oswald two pieces of fruit cake. (She had solicited but one alone, for Oswald's sake. It was her mother who said there must be two—remembering Oswald's sister.) The two pieces, wrapped in cream-laid writing-paper, were put by the Organist's daughter's self into Oswald's side-pocket with the carefullest regard to safety, and he left this house of dreams like a blind man, lit only by the internal brightness of his brain. For long ago, this history must confess, the granddaughter of the late Alderman Bankett had abdicated her throne within the empire of the Sausage Boy's affection, in Alice Rencil's favour. By comparison with the Organist's little daughter, indeed, Miss Bankett's voice was harsh; her eye hard; her manners cold and variable; imparting capricious confidences with the condescension for coppers, and turning on the recipient next moment the coldest eye of charity. There was something almost Burfordian in her self-content. When she subjected the Sausage Boy to scrutiny he could never quite be sure whether her look bespoke friendship, indifference or contempt. But the Organist's little daughter looked at him always with the commingled softness of her parents' eyes. No embarrassment ever mitigated the directness of her gaze, which, however, was only insufferable when

there were present other witnesses of it. She looked straight into Oswald's eyes, offering her gaze to his as she might have given him her hand to clasp and hold. Sometimes over her very slate in his mother's school their eyes met thus, and though Oswald was far too conscientious a son and student to lend encouragement to the least scholastic breach, or waste of time, the look—troubling one side of his nature—afforded wonderful incentive to the other. Regardless of all previous vows, this was now the widow who stumbled to his aldermanic grave-side in her cumberment of tears and crape, supported by the sympathies and mourning of a town. And if the young lady with the straight legs and the exceptional capacity for sulking displayed a tendency to demonstrate her best behaviour where Oswald was concerned, she expended her efforts in a lost but admirable cause.

"Ma'am!"

The sound of the Councillor's voice, confirming his footsteps, brought the music and the counting and the vivid dreams by which they were accompanied to a sudden stop, and caused Mrs. Holmroyd with celerity to draw down her sleeves. Hastily commending Beryl to the protection of her own rectitude, that must on no account touch the blazing fire—or play with matches,—she went to receive her visitor before he should advance further. He stood blocking the passage by the parlour door.

"Perhaps you're busy, ma'am," he said uneasily at sight of her. "I'm a busy man myself. Saturday's no night for calling, I'm aware. There's a shopful of customers waiting of me any time I care to go back to 'em. But I just.... Is that your son inside the room? I thought I couldn't be mistaken. I wonder.... Do you think you could spare him to do a small errand for me? No farther than my own house, ma'am," he assured Mrs. Holmroyd, sensible of the maternal solicitude expressed by the mere suspicion of a pause before she answered—

"To be sure. I think so, Mr. Burford."

"I've been that pressed at business to-day, ma'am," the Councillor explained, "that I've had no time to get back home for tea. I just want to ease my daughter's mind and let her know I shan't be home while late."

And as Oswald, furnished with his mother's sanction, and armed with cap and gloves and overcoat, took word for word the message from the Councillor's lips, committing it to the safest pocket of his memory, and turned to go, the big voice suddenly recalled him.

"Wait a moment my lad! (With your permission, ma'am.)"

Whereat the large hand sought most unexpectedly Oswald's own; opened the small fingers that made a polite movement of resistance and withdrawal, and impressed on the palm of Oswald's glove something hard and circular, over which it closed the reluctant fingers as if to seal reception with finality. "There! Now get along with you."

9

It was the first time that Councillor Burford had called at the house in Spring Bank Gardens since the night of his daughter's tea-party, and though meanwhile he had twice commented on the weather in his own shop, and transcribed Mrs. Holmroyd's needs upon his duplex tablet with an effusion so spacious that personality seemed somewhat lost in it, Oswald's mother could not resist the feeling that this unexpected visit derived its motive (and some of its embarrassment) from the evening just over a week ago when he had incurred his daughter's obvious displeasure by inviting her to high tea. For the Councillor was patently ill at ease.

"I've meant calling on you for some time, ma'am," he saw fit to explain in crossing to the fireplace. "But as a matter of fact.... Why, to tell the truth, I've been rather

busy. Busier than usual. My own daughter was only saying to me last night that she didn't seem to see nothing of me at home in these days."

The mention of his daughter, succeeded by a silence on the Councillor's part, as if his conversational reserves in this direction were at an end, prompted Mrs. Holmroyd to ask after the health of her hostess of a week ago.

"Thank you," the Councillor replied, "she's very well." The word "well" however, appeared to stick in his throat, for he said (stroking his felt hat): "When I say 'well,' I should say she's middling, ma'am. Only middling. That's all she's been for a goodish while now. But you'll know what Annie is," he told his listener, "as well as me. If she isn't worrying herself she's worrying other people. I think the house is too much for her. She can't manage it."

In these words, thrown out as it were into space whilst the Councillor rubbed his coat sleeve meditatively round his hat, Mrs. Holmroyd fancied her visitor insinuated a general apology for any shortcomings in his daughter's social qualifications that might have been divulged last week. Not wishing to participate in the least dissection of Miss Burford's character she contented herself with a face and phrase of polite regret that his daughter's health left so much to be desired, and by way of quitting the topic graciously bade the Councillor sit down. He put up his hat at once, like a barrier, against the suggestion, protesting:

"No, no, ma'am. I didn't come to sit down. Saturday night's no night for a chair. I haven't sat down in a chair of a Saturday night before the shutters were put up for five and twenty, thirty, five and thirty years and more. Sunday's my day. I don't say No to the easy chair of a Sunday afternoon."

She had hoped he would refuse, for all her mother's heart was pulled towards the kitchen where her little daughter sat. Oswald was gone away, and to the little sitter

on her lonely chair she feared the kitchen might become a very vast and formidable space.

Yet having declined the proffered seat and so allayed anxiety, the Councillor to her sudden consternation, sat down upon it. At that her mother's heart could be denied no longer. She begged him to excuse her ... but her little girl was sitting all alone ... before the fire. Might she just call her into the room. To Mrs. Holmroyd's deepening concern he jumped to his feet at once.

"Not on my account, ma'am!" he said. "I said I hadn't come to detain you, and what I have to say can be said as well standing as sitting. It won't take me a moment. It's just a small matter of business I'd like to speak to you about."

A small matter of business. But small matters of business, Mrs. Holmroyd knew, were capable of infinite extension. And her mother's heart submitted to the kitchen-tug. With a hurried apology, declaring she would be not a moment gone, she betook herself to the source of her solicitude.

"Beryl!"

The small voice answered. The small and solitary figure, seated before the fire in an attitude of adorable obedience, touched the heart it so disquieted. She put the guard before the fire, folded back the edges of the bath mat, imposed new loyalty and confidence with a kiss. For a short while Beryl must be good. She must touch nothing, fear nothing. The doors were open; her mother was close at hand and ready for the slightest call. She went back to the sitting-room to find the Councillor seated once more in the chair so recently vacated. Her advent brought him to his feet again.

"We was just talking about my daughter, ma'am," he said, reverting to their conversation's earlier phase. "And I was saying...." He crossed the room and closed the door

with a push of his flat hand as if oblivious of the least external charge on Mrs. Holmroyd's care. "And I was saying, ma'am," he repeated on his way back to the fireplace, "that the house seems more than she can manage. It isn't for want of trying. She's always trying, is Annie. She tries too hard. She thinks a house can't be kept in order unless a woman makes herself a martyr to it. She never seems happy unless she's miserable. If I carried on at business like what she does at home ... I might just as well shut the shop up. That's not what the house wants. I know what it wants better than she does. It wants a mistress.

" ... Now I flatter myself I'm a business man, and I can take a straight business answer. Yes or No, when it's given me. You've seen the house, ma'am, and you know what sort of a house it is. And you've known me now for longer than a day, and you must have formed your own conclusions as to what sort of man I am."

Up to this point Mrs. Holmroyd had contributed a look of sympathetic attention to the Councillor's words without the faintest knowledge of their import. And it came upon her with the dislocative jar that racks the semi-sleeper on his bed to find herself all at once paying serene interest to what amounted in truth to a proposal. Dreadful doors and windows of enlightenment seemed simultaneously flung open in her consciousness. Through a hundred gaping inlets the incredible truth reached her. Of all contingencies this had been the least suspected. The thought of her children, the memory of her husband—rendered more precious if possible by the approaching sanctity of Eastertide—smote her conscience as if, in some degree, it were to blame for what had happened. All her soul rose up to protect the sacred things committed to its care. The Councillor passed an uneasy sleeve around the circumference of his hat.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," he said contritely, " ... if I've spoke

too abrupt or took you in any way by surprise. I was hoping you wouldn't be altogether unprepared for what I had to say."

Mrs. Holmroyd begged him: "Pray do not mention it," and added after a pause in which he showed no disposition to speak again: "You are very kind, Mr. Burford. I ought to be deeply sensible of the confidence you place in me.... But it is quite, *quite* impossible."

"Not impossible, I hope, ma'am," the Councillor besought her. "Impossible's a hard word. Perhaps I've come upon you at an inconvenient time. Saturday's an awkward night, I know, for anything. It's no sort of a night even for my business. I'd sooner see customers any night but that, and it's only customers that can't help themselves that ever comes on it.... But I'm a plain straightforward business man, and I like to go about things in a plain straightforward way. When a thing's on my mind I want to have it settled. As soon as you came into the shop this morning I says to myself: 'Let's get it settled to-day. Get it settled before Sunday. Here's Good Friday coming on, and Easter Monday after it, and nothing more's to be gained by waiting.'

" ... I don't want to boast about myself, ma'am," he continued, "but I've got a good business of my own, and I venture to think I can offer you a comfortable home. You've seen it. You know what it is. There's not a finer view in Daneborough. The front bedrooms look right across the Town Acres to the Race Course. With your eye for scenery, ma'am, I don't doubt but what you'd enjoy the view. As for myself, I don't make no pretences. I'm just what you see me. I'm blunt and plain and straightforward. What I say I'll do, I do; and what I say I won't do, I don't do. I think I can claim the respect of all my fellow townsmen. They've honoured me with their confidence by giving me a seat on the Council, and so far as one can see it won't be long now before I'm honoured with the

mayoralty."

Troubled with his confidences, that acquired a simple and childlike quality in issuing from so large a man, Mrs. Holmroyd had lacked the heart to interrupt his pleadings, hopeless though she knew them to be.

"O, please, please, Mr. Burford!" she begged at last. "If my personal esteem is anything ... you have it. But you scarcely understand. My Husband...." Her voice dropped at the solemnity of the word like a worshipper upon a knee. "My husband has not been dead two years."

"Why, for the matter of that, ma'am," the Councillor consoled her. "I'm a widower myself, as you know, and I buried as good a wife as any man might wish to lose. We're both in the same boat. I think we ought to be able to understand each other the better for that. We can't go on living with the Dead for ever, ma'am. It's not in Nature. The Living can be bad enough at times. We're neither of us so young as we were. I don't know for certain; I've never presumed to ask you; but I suppose you've touched the thirties, ma'am. And I shall be fifty-nine come Whitsuntide. I think we're old enough to make up our minds for ourselves, without troubling a deal about what other people thinks or says. I know you suit *me* very well, ma'am, and I'd hoped I might have suited you well enough to justify you giving me a trial. You've given my goods a trial, and I'll make bold to say you don't regret it. I don't think you'd find me in any way inferior to what I sell."

There was little she could say; little she could do—beyond deepening the sadness in her face to translate a resolution sorrowing and unshaken.

"It is no defect of confidence on my part, Mr. Burford," she told him. "You are right in thinking you have that. Implicitly. But ... what you ask demands so much more than that. I can scarcely tell you all that my husband meant to me; all that we meant to one another. Even to speak of

such a matter ... with his face looking at me from the mantelpiece ... seems dreadful."

The thought, indeed, oppressed her. This disparity between the living and the dead was too abrupt. Had the burly Councillor recalled in any wise her husband's virtues or shared even some familiar imperfections made dear by death, she might have trembled at the prospect of a living memorial to one so loved, that should bring back however feebly the happiness of the past. For one brief moment, indeed, an awful thought assailed her, that came unbidden and vanished in a flush of shame. What (she wondered) would have been her treatment of this offer had it come to her through such lips as those of the Organist of St. Saviour's? The thought, swift as a winged arrow, pierced conscience in its flight and brought two slow tears of anguish to her eyes. Believing himself the instigator of them the Councillor quickly turned attention to his hat.

"I won't say your feelings doesn't do you credit," he said, rotating his hand about the crown. "Great credit. They're such as any edjicated lady might be proud to own.... But I won't detain you any longer. I didn't tell 'em where I was going to when I left the Shop, and I daresay they're wondering what's got me. With your permission ... I'll leave you." He paused and added: "To think over what I've said at leisure, ma'am. Take your own time. I know I've spoken a bit sudden. You've all Sunday before you. Give my words your best attention then, ma'am, and look at them from a common-sense, practical point of view, in the best light you can. If you'll allow me I'll perhaps call round in the course of the week. Say Tuesday or Wednesday. Or Friday, if you'd like that better. Your little boy will be at the choir practice then, I believe."

Mrs. Holmroyd tendered her deep and humid gratitude for this final testimony of the Councillor's thoughtfulness. But she begged he would take her answer now. She begged he would not compel her to reopen a subject possessed of

so many painful associations for her. He fixed on his hat a look of prolonged reflection, as though the two of them took counsel together.

"Then you feel it must be 'No,' ma'am," he put to her.

She answered: "If you please, Mr. Burford."

And unable once again to contain the disquiet welling up within her heart, she undid the door his hand had shut and breathed her little daughter's name to the silence beyond.

"Beryl!"

The small voice answered, and the small feet showed a quickness to respond, but she restrained them.

"No, no, I was not calling for you, dear. Wait awhile, Beryl. Don't go near the fire. Mother will not be long."

She did not shut the door again. The Councillor looked at it (she thought) as if for very little his obliviousness of the precious guardianship it stood for would have led him once again to complete the work with a brusque hand. She said, apologetically; "I always leave the door ajar, Mr. Burford. So that I can hear my children, in case they call."

"I've noticed you pay 'em a deal of attention, ma'am," he acknowledged.

"Perhaps you may think me foolish ..." she began.

"I don't know," he admitted with candour. "It's difficult to say one way or another while your children grows up. That's the test. If folks' children grows up to be a pleasure and a comfort to their parents, no care has been too great to give 'em. My daughter was brought up in my way, ma'am. My way wasn't your way ... at that time. I'm apt to think I don't get a great deal of comfort nor yet too much credit with her. A family's an investment, and one doesn't know whether it's a good one or a bad one till time shows. With some you can invest all your affection in it and still it won't pay you a ha'porth of interest. And with others every blessing you indulge them with comes back at a

hundred per cent. If your family returns you half the attention you've given 'em, ma'am, you ought to be a rich and happy woman some day. I hope you may be. Good-night, ma'am."

He held out his hand. Mrs. Holmroyd stirred within herself by these last words and by the remorse for a plea so rigidly refused, gave him her compassionating fingers in return. The broad hand engulfed them and held them for an appreciable space of time.

"I'm venturing to conclude, ma'am," the Councillor remarked in a lowered voice, "that what has just transpired is in strict confidence between ourselves."

The shocked look upon her face answered him without the protestation of her lips.

"To be sure!" he said, relieved. "I shan't say nothing about it. And *you* won't. There's no call to make nobody as wise as ourselves. Silence doesn't cost nothing, and it's worth a bookful of words."

... "There's another thing," he added, clearing his throat, for the unwonted subjugation of his usually uncompromising voice to a whisper had the effect of rendering it husky and unmanageable. "We're both of us common-sense practical people. I hope that what's took place won't be allowed to make no difference between us."

Mrs. Holmroyd assured him, "O, certainly not. Certainly not, Mr. Burford." She thought of Oswald and Beryl and her little school.

"I'm glad to hear you say so, ma'am," the visitor said. "I felt sure it's what you would say. I hope to merit the continuance of your custom, ma'am, and by strict attention to business combined with civility and promptitude, to retain your confidence. There's nothing you happened to overlook when you was ordering this morning? Tinned fruits? Sardines? No? Then you think that'll be all to-day. Very good, ma'am. Don't trouble yourself to come to the

door."

The effect produced on Mrs. Holmroyd by his departure was curious, and unaccountably depressing. He drew the front door behind him with manifest concern to make no noise, but even so the knocker responded to its closing with a faint and apathetic echo. Mrs. Holmroyd heard the Councillor try the knob, to be sure of its security behind him. Then his footsteps faded into silence, seeming less firm and resonant than usual. They passed out of hearing almost at once, and the desolation of a great solitude succeeded his departure. Filled with the sudden horror of life's loneliness Mrs. Holmroyd's heart turned with a despairing hunger towards her children.

As the Councillor left the house behind him, his overcoat unbuttoned; his two hands plunged into the respective pockets; his beard upon his breast; his broad feet moving leisurely; he was absorbed in the task of sweeping his mind clear of all its debris, and readjusting life once more to those realities it had, of late, lost sight of.

"It makes things easier with Annie," he reflected as he passed down the street. "Not that I'm under no obligation to consider *her*. She doesn't put herself out to consider me. She says I've got the shop, and she's a right to the house. She has it to look after. Aye! that's all very well. But I've got to live in it, and I've got it to pay for. And them that pays the piper has a right to call the tune. She can have her own tunes as much as she likes when I'm away. But when I'm at home, she'll have to listen to mine."

At the bottom of the street, before passing out of it, he looked back wistfully into the darkness that held Mrs. Holmroyd and her home.

"Aye!" he acknowledged to himself, "she's a highly estimable woman. She's one in a thousand. One in ten thousand. If she'd only consented to be what I asked her, I could have thought myself a very fortunate man. With her

at the head of it, home would have been something like home to go back to. Not an empty farce, smelling of furniture polish and dusters like it is now."

"Well!" he reflected, (walking on again) she had refused him. By her answer at least was she freed from the odium and unworthiness of his doubts. Her friendship towards him had screened no policy. Her welcome dissimulated no design.

"She's treated me very well," he consoled himself. "A man needn't want to be refused politer. She's done everything possible to respect my feelings. I couldn't have asked for more consideration if it had taken place in the Council Chamber."

"After all," he reflected as he neared the lights of High Gate, "she's said 'No.' But what's 'No'? No isn't world without end. No is No to-day and Not Quite Sure to-morrow. Both for her and me. I've perhaps been a little premature. Time soon shows up a bad bargain, but a good one has nothing to fear from it. Any bargain that's worth having is worth waiting for."

Subdued, but not despondent, he mounted the three steps between the bulging windows in the High Gate and passed into his shop at last.

"Boy! Move these boxes. Do you want Customers to fall over 'em?" "Good evening, ma'am. Are you being attended to?" "Now my lad, don't push in front of people there. You won't get served out of your turn."

10

"One—AND. Two—AND. Three—AND."

It was the voice of Oswald. He sat on the music stool once more, before the open music of "Pleasant Paths to Musical Proficiency adapted to the Use of Small Hands by Arthur Rencil," on the lower portion of whose pages the gas-light silhouetted his head. Out of the kitchen came the

babble of voices and the splash of bath water. From time to time he paused consciously, with his hands immobile upon the keys, that he might hear them. They ministered in some mystic incommunicable way to his content; they were, although he did not know it, the divine sustenance on which his aspirations fed. Without this mother and this sister life was nothing, ambition had no meaning; his dreams were worthless merchandise lacking a market. These two, whose voices comforted and inspired him as he worked, lent life whatever sweetness or significance it had; touching the future with the wonder reflected from their own faces.

And whilst he listened to them through the notes played and the beats counted, they listened in turn to him, who was (not less) a part of their very selves; an extension of their own identities; an amplification of life, of hope, of home.

"Oswald!"

"Yes, mother."

"Count, dear!"

Count? Ah, to be sure! He had momentarily lost sight of this material obligation in the sublimity of his thoughts. He sat on the music stool before his mother's ancient piano, primly garbed in its high-necked, pleated pink bodice of a bygone age, but his fingers operated a keyboard in eternity, and his music caused the very stars to stop and listen. This was Oswald Holmroyd no longer. This was surely Mr. Rencil. These, beyond doubt, were Mr. Rencil's eyes that looked at the page through large lensed spectacles. These, incontestably, were Mr. Rencil's fingers that depressed the keys. Did not Oswald's mother and his sister notice? He played the notes again, to confirm the Rencil-like quality in them.

"Mother?"

"Yes, dear."

"Are you listening?"

"Yes, dear."

"Did you hear that?"

"Yes, dear. It was beautiful. Count, dear!"

"One—AND. Two—AND. Three—AND."

Illimitable wonders dwelt in these words. Words? They were no more words than he was merely Oswald. They were planets that left his lips and floated away to take their place in the firmament of eternal glories. Across his counter the Councillor plied a busy naked arm. In the sombre dining room, lit by its subdued and solitary gas, and darkened by Miss Burford's wrathful face, Miss Burford paced like a caged leopard, awaiting the nox irae. But in the tranquillity of Mrs. Holmroyd's little home a serene content, like the soulful fragrance that issues out of the vesper throats of flowers after the heat and burden of the day, mounted up to heaven on Oswald's counting.

"One—AND. Two—AND. Three—AND."

BOOK VIII

THE DARK ANGEL

1

ONE evening in July Oswald Holmroyd and his mother came out through the western gateway of St. Saviour's. Oswald walked slowly, with his more than Sunday walk, and from time to time he stole glances at his mother's face, for it showed curiously divided. The lower half, taking its character from the set lips, seemed hard and almost stern; the upper half, subdued by the gleaming wetness of his

mother's eyes, presented a look of drenched submission, as of unresistant petals beaten down by heavy rain. They moved in silence, and for some considerable while no word had passed between them. Oswald himself was but a blurred and mute spectator of his mother's tears. At the gateway she said, speaking in a low voice: "Close it very gently, dear."

He answered "Yes, mother," and closed it very gently as she bade him, taking prodigious care. For through the iron bars he held with both his hands he could descry the little grave they had just left. Its cracked and sun-scorched sods, replaced upon the tiny mound, contrasted harshly with the greener and untrodden grass around, and the still, white lilies they had stooped to lay upon it shone out at him through the evening air with the disturbing pallour of that small, dead face looked on so recently in silence and sorrow and wonderment, and much fear. She was there, then, the little sister he had played with; who had shared this life of his so lately. Across the other graves that hemmed her in, and through the headstones that stood so silently, leaning a little towards each other as though they listened with great intentness, that one pathetic clay-soiled mound seemed to gaze after him with the supplication of his sister's face, betraying apprehensions at being left alone. It cried to him in all but words: "Oswald.... Don't leave me.... Stay with me...."

But he closed the gate and latched it, and let go of the handle quickly, saying in the low voice of custom: "Good night, Beryl," and turned away with an accusing consciousness of cowardice. For, in truth, it seemed a dreadful thing to leave his sister there in such a solemn place, amid the dead of all ages, now that the sun was sinking fast, so that only the topmost taper of St. Saviour's spire caught the last gilding of its rays, and the lengthening shadows of the gravestones stretched out like hands to touch each other, and his own shadow and the shadow of

the gate by which he stood extended far from him across the sandy drive, and the sky and the trees and the green grass and the churchyard wall and all things else foretold the creeping silence of long night. Nay! He dared not; he dared not stay with her. For her death had reawakened all his latent horror of this place; it had revived such terrors as his vanity had almost dared to deem outgrown. And he hastened to his mother's side, there to reassume his pace of deep dejection and solemnity, suitable to the grief he bore, and to the altered world he walked in. He was consumed with a steadfast sorrow, yet supported by a woeful pride appropriate to one who now can claim close kinship with Death. Every now and then he lifted up a corner of the sorrow that subdued him, as if it had been a lowered window-blind, and stole a covert peep at the outer world. Each time he saw himself regarded, he dropped the corner of the blind at once, and withdrew into his inmost solemnity, saying to himself: "She was my sister. I am the brother of the little girl who died." And for a brief, unworthy while he was suffused with consequence, and his heart beat faster through desire to sustain befittingly the importance of this new dread rôle. Until, all at once, the wickedness of such a state of mind burned conscience as if it had been some fierce, great carbuncle, throbbing hot, and he drew the curtains of his sorrow close, and vowed he would peep no more upon the outer world. From the sight of children playing in the street he turned away his eyes, lest perchance he might be tempted in a thoughtless moment to take sinful pleasure in their sport, and taste enjoyment before he was aware.

Yet God knows, in spite of all these contradictory emotions, that Oswald's grief was great and genuine enough. He missed his sister dreadfully. At times the loss of her was like a universal heart-ache that filled all space; not a room or corner of the house but suffered it. When he told himself that he would never more.... No! never more

see Beryl in this world; never more hear her voice; never more look into her eyes or clasp his two arms about her neck ... his lip trembled; his eyes burned; a pain crept up into his throat. Life without Beryl seemed unintelligible, like a sentence cut in twain. For ever he kept forgetting that his sister was dead. Always she seemed to be somewhere in the house, in some other room, in the kitchen, in the air about him; at his very elbow, causing him to turn sharply for a trepid sight of her before she should be gone. Now and again it seemed to him he heard her call his name: “Oswald!... Oswald!...” so clearly that, but for the dreadful, timely recollection of the truth, he would have cried back to her: “Yes, Beryl?...” or run to seek the reason of her call.

But now ... he dared not run. For all he loved and missed her, she had brought back secret terror into the house, into Oswald’s life. He lived in fear of her. Aye! It was a confession he would have dared to make to no one. To his mother least of all. She never suspected it. Never would she have credited that her son should entertain unworthy dread of his little, gentle, bygone sister, who had left them both to pass through Death’s dark doors into God’s eternal presence, all alone. But Oswald knew it, and the knowledge shocked him. He could not disencumber himself of those rebukeful, mortal fears that throve upon his sister’s memory and daunted courage. For now, for him, there were two Beryls. Of the little sister he had played with, who had laughed and run with him in hours of gladness, he felt no fear. No fear at all. But of that dead white sister he had last looked on in the preternatural stillness of her tiny coffin, who neither smiled nor spoke—he was terribly afraid. Not afraid by day, when the sun shone and the bright light seemed to be his guardian angel. But when the sun began to sink, and daylight dwindled, and the dusk crept tremulously into corners, and he thought disquietly of the lonely bed upstairs awaiting him.... Oh!

Then! how bitterly he missed his sister. Even the sound of her voice charged with some nocturnal fear, had been welcome to him, establishing the close companionship of kindred terror that served to partner and to reassure his own. But this unfathomable ocean of dead soundlessness in which his lonely apprehensions struggled now dismayed and daunted him. In the uncommunicative silence of his solitary bed, intensified by the yet more awful stillness in the room beyond his own,—that never stirred; that never whispered "Oswald!" or confessed a fear, or sought to be assured he was awake—he plumbed the awful depth of solitude in which all human life is lived. A part of his very self seemed dead.

2

How had it all happened?

So swiftly and so terribly that Oswald never understood. Life, like that reeling figure of his fears that issued from the doorway in the street near the Horse Green, plunged headlong all at once into the dreadful and unreal. He became the helpless witness of events so utterly remote from his experience as to appear incredible. Again and again he asked himself, bewildered, if what had seemed to happen could be true; if it was not, rather, but a dream from which in time he would with thankfulness awake. His troubled mind persistently attributed the source of all its sorrow to a thunderstorm, with which (preposterously) a bag of cherries was in some dire way associated. He had bought the cherries with a penny all his own, at a small green-grocer's shop in one of the side streets lying off the lower end of Spring Bank Gardens; a shop made suffocating with the odour of vegetables and bruised fruit, which—ever afterwards—recalled for him this awful time of sickness and sorrow. At midday he and Beryl had partaken of the cherries, and that same afternoon the storm broke. For some days they had lived beneath the threat of

it. The little school had turned so dark that needlework and penmanship were made impossible, the tense faces of the scholars—withdrawn, by prudence, from the proximity of the window—were absorbed into the gloom like inkspots dropped on blotting-paper. Over fender and fire-irons a bedroom mat was spread, that the glint of naked steel might offer no inducement to the lightning. For the same sage reason even pens were put away, and the schoolroom gas was lit to relieve the deepening gloom, and Mrs. Holmroyd sought to distract her anxious charges with stories of the Good, interrupted by ejaculations from excited lips.

"Ooh! Mrs. Holmroyd! Did you see that one!"

"It's coming nearer."

"Once when it lightened there was a chimbley pot struck in the street next but two from ours."

"Please Mrs. Holmroyd, my ma's frightened of thunder storms. They always give her sick headaches."

"My pa knows a man that was struck dead by lightning for swearing. My pa says nobody ought ever to swear in a thunderstorm."

"Please, Mrs. Holmroyd, what's thunder and lightning made of?"

With awed voices they had discussed storms and the deity whilst the thunder rolled overhead and rocked the schoolroom with deafening reverberations. Torrential rain had fallen, whose furious drops rebounded to a foot's height from the flooded flags and roadway, and flashed elongated in the lightning like electric sparks. Raging watercourses tore along the gutters, sweeping stones and papers in their flight, and soot and mortar—shaken by the thunder and dislodged by raindrops—tumbled down the schoolroom chimney and rattled alarmingly upon the hearth.

And Beryl, alone of all the quaking scholars, had

demeaned herself with tears, running to Mrs. Holmroyd's side for shelter, and hiding her head beneath her mother's bosom; and Oswald had felt unworthily ashamed of his sister and the disgrace she drew upon herself and him. For she would not confess the thunder as the cause of her alarm; she pleaded sickness and a pain instead, and into Oswald's righteousness there crept a stern repugnance of all falsehood. And when, at tea—the storm being over, and the thunder reduced to the mere rumble of a distant cart—Beryl pushed away her plate and wept afresh in lieu of eating, Oswald could not altogether rid his breast of the suspicion that she did this to cover up her earlier cowardice, and win back an alienated sympathy through tears. But thereafter events marched with terrible swift footsteps, like the resounding tramp of policemen, that brought dismay into his heart. The storm rolled altogether out of earshot; not the faintest lightning-flashes played upon the pulse of fear, and yet his little sister wept more dolorously—deaf to consolation and the persuasive voice of love. When, by custom, he should have been seated at his evening meal, a breathless Oswald was hastening to the doctor's big brass plate in Hill Street, his bosom filled with dire forebodings, with a throbbing self-importance, and reflected pain, repeating to himself the urgent message with which his mother's troubled lips had charged him. Long after, when Oswald would, of old, have been in bed, he still kept watch from the parlour window for the doctor's coming, most dreadfully divided between the apprehensions of two senses: between the apprehensions of the eye that gazed into the street, and of the ear that hearkened through the thumping of his heart to bedroom sounds above. Aye! And of the conscience that bitterly reproached him with those base, unjust suspicions of his little sister, and racked him with a hundred doubts respecting the delivery of his mother's message at the doctor's door.

But the doctor came at last, a dire figure compounded of comforts and alarms that seemed to curdle the atmosphere of dread it walked through, and the prolonged sound of lowered voices and creaking floor-boards made Oswald's heart sick. For some while after the doctor had taken leave of his mother at the front door, Oswald dared not emerge from his place of waiting in the kitchen; an inexpressible fear restrained him from making the least sign. Nor did his mother come in quest of him, or call upon his name immediately. She betook herself, instead, to the front parlour—whither the ensuing silence and the sense of his own solitude drove him timorously at last. He stole to the door, uttering the one word "Mother ..." in a voice of supplication. He fancied—though he could not quite be sure, since trouble walked with downcast eyes—that she had been seated with both hands pressed to her face when first he spoke her name, but she was risen to her feet by the time he dared to lift his eyes, and answered "Now dear ..." in a voice whose brightness seemed curiously at variance with the depth of silence from which it issued.

"How is Beryl, mother?"

"Beryl is very poorly, Oswald."

"What is the matter with her?"

"The doctor says.... He scarcely knows. He is coming to see her again in the morning, dear."

She did not tell him that the doctor had hinted darkly at inflammation of the bowels—in those days the vague term under which appendicitis hid—nor would Oswald have been much the wiser had she done so. Infinitely more significant for him was the glistening trouble on his mother's cheeks which the resolute brightness of her voice had almost succeeded in its effort to conceal from him. The sight of her wet eyes, in which a desperate courage seemed to drown, caused an unspeakable wretchedness to descend upon his soul. A mist of sickly apprehension darkened life,

blotting from his vision all at once the comfortable things contained in it, and filling it with ghastly images of silence and no shape; with featureless forebodings from which his cowardice desired to flee. When at length, with throbbing heart, he stole on tiptoe through the sickroom to his little sleeping place beyond, he scarcely dared to turn his eye towards the bed where Beryl lay, for fear of what dread spectacle his eye might meet. But his senses were poignantly aware of a small shape that writhed tormentedly beneath the coverlet, and moaned in its breathing, and never said: "Oswald ..." or raised its head. He closed the door between himself and sickness with an awful feeling of escape, as though the sight of pain were something to shut out and flee from. All that night his slumber seemed to be disturbed by dreams or dread distortions of reality. At one time it was a wail of anguish from the adjoining bedroom, real or fancied, that fetched him violently out of sleep; at another it was the dreary sound of sobbing, lulled by his mother's tranquillizing voice, that woke him. Now and again he was confusedly aware of sounds from the kitchen below, as if someone drew water from the tap, or raked the fire with care. Whether these things in fact awoke him or he awoke to them, they seemed to be without cessation: endless noises from a world of trouble. Peace never reigned in the sickroom or the world beyond, but a perpetual torment turned in tired circles. He heard St. Gyles's clock chime all sorts of unimaginable hours: twelves and thirteens and twenty-fours. From the railway goods-yard the stertorous snorts of locomotives, succeeded by the rapid ricochet of shunted waggons, churned the night with melancholy turmoil. Noise, noise, noise. He was for ever being brought to wide-eyed wakefulness by something inexpressible that roused him: the clinking of a glass; the creaking of a bedstead; the movement of a foot upon the floor; the dreadful cry of tired pain that cannot find escape from its own existence through the doors of

slumber.

3

Daybreak brought no respite; only a deepened wretchedness. Early in the morning Oswald woke to the startled realization of his mother, gazing at him in silence from the bedroom door.

“ ... I want you to go to Elizabeth’s for me,” she said, when his eyes recorded recognition of her at last. “ ... Before she has time to get away to her work, dear. And ask her if she can possibly come and help me to-day.”

Oswald’s eyes pricked and smarted through their long privation of repose, but he obeyed his mother’s order with alacrity, for any task is preferable to the suspense of tossing on a bed that offers neither sleep nor comfort; of being the stricken witness of sufferings beyond one’s power to redeem. Before St. Gyles’s clock chimed half-past six he stood outside Elizabeth’s house in the narrow, disillusioned street where this rabid worker dwelt. Yet early though he knocked, the scarred and blistered door flew open at the first impact of his knuckles as if by magic, and Elizabeth confronted him with a face that sharp suspicion and the darkest surmises rendered terrible to see. She had her shawl on, but no hat, and she waved the shining house-key in her withered hand with a tragic gesture of repudiation.

“It’s no use!” she cried, in a shrill and vibrant voice. “I wean’t tek backword now. I’ve tekkn it once this week. I wean’t tek it a second time from Nobody. She said I was to come to-day, and I said I would, and Come I Will.” At which point, recognizing all at once the form and features of the messenger through the dense emotions that had made her eyesight of small avail, she broke off with something like a sob, and propped her bosom with the door-key.

"Master Oswald!" she exclaimed incredulously. "It's you! What a fright you gied me."

Her thin lips writhed and trembled like blown straws, and the two attesting hands flung up to the level of her seared face were alive with agitation.

"I was sure it was Burfords come to bring me backword." With which she made no effort to dissimulate her tears, for though she had been spared the confirmation of her worst forebodings, she had tasted—in the brevity of that moment—all its bitterness. "Foster's gied me backword on Monday," she told Oswald. "They sent lass to say they'd let me know when they should be wanting me again. Aye! After I'd gotten my breakfast and was stood wi' my shawl on, an' door-key in my hand, and basket on table, all ready to set off."

Thus far she had spoken in her tragic voice; the voice displaying awful tones, like vocal chasms and precipices; that dropped at times to cavernous intensity, and plumbed such Stygian depths as caused cold currents to creep down Oswald's spine. All at once, however, her eye threw off its frenzy and she put the passion from her face as if it were a mask. The voice was almost honeyed that inquired of Oswald what had brought him at this early hour, though tragedy returned in force when she learned the motive of his visit. Come? Aye! Elizabeth would come at the call of his mother and of sickness, though a thousand Burfords stood between. Let Burfords give her backword if they cared, and be done with her. Not that she had any fear they would.

"Burfords will let me off to-day," she declared, with the fervour of conviction. "I know they will. They can't help, when I say who it is, and what it's for. And if they won't ... it'll be all the same. Tell your mother I shall be up at your house as soon as I've had time to let Burfords know."

And true to her promise she tore up the street within ten

minutes of Oswald's return—having been all round by Rockery House in the meanwhile—at her customary breakneck pace between stumbling and flying; the frayed extremeties of her shawl beating the air like wings.

"Oh, mum!" she cried, the instant she caught sight of Mrs. Holmroyd. "Whatever's this! Why didn't you send for me sooner! I could 'a come and sat up wi' her last night after I'd got back from Tomlinson's. I sat up a fortnight wi' Mrs. Sharples before she died, and never went to bed, and did my washing every day just same. It's nothing'm. I'm used to it. If anything was to happen in this house I couldn't bide to think that anybody else should be here at time but me. I shouldn't forgive myself."

For her the cup of sickness held intoxicating properties. She drank of it with gusto, as though it were sacramental wine. Its vintage warmed her, sent rapt and fiery currents through her blood. Dear to her heart though washings and spring-cleanings were, deathbeds and sick-chambers evoked her very soul. Such was the state of fervour they bestirred in her that her wasted body seemed a receptacle altogether too frail for the ecstatic forces rending it. No task however herculean daunted her enthusiasms; they boiled within her bosom, sustained by fires invisible and undwindling. Her insatiable appetite for work and the zeal she brought to the doing of it dispelled something of the leaden atmosphere of gloom that darkened Oswald's heart, and brought back a gleam of ancient comfort to this altered home. The vital sound of water running into tilted pails, the brisk manipulation of taps and opening of cupboard doors, the animated friction of steel fenders and fire-irons with cloths dipped in turpentine and rubbed on bathbrick tended in some mysterious fashion to remove the furrows from the gathered face of care. Oswald partook of a breakfast which Elizabeth prepared and set for him in the kitchen, in order that the parlour might be free at any moment for the doctor's coming. The sunny brightness of

the morning served to dissipate much of last night's dread. By the time that Oswald had cleared his platter there crept into his troubled being an element of timid confidence and hope. He went into the garden and found a chastened joy in it. He peeped from the parlour window and perceived a street flooded with such sunshine as made him crimp his eyes. Surely ... surely, with so much brightness and loveliness abroad; with so much in life to live for ... hope's curtains might be lifted. Things could not altogether be as dark as he had feared.

But just as the school began to reassemble, and life appeared to be on the point of resuming its cheerful, customary features once again, the sunlight was extinguished by the advent of the doctor, who drove up in his noiseless Victoria and strode gravely up the staircase, bringing gloom and the hush of apprehensions back with him as if he were nocturnal dusk incarnate. Elizabeth, red-eyed and authoritative, subdued the assembling scholars with an uplifted finger on their entry, bidding each one of them in turn to "Hush!... Be still!... Doctor's i' house." Awed by the apparition, albeit with all their curiosities bestirred and emitting a bee-like murmur, they stole up the staircase striving with the futility of childhood to keep silence, and took their places in the schoolroom where Oswald dutifully seated himself as a pattern to behaviour. The presence of a doctor in the bedroom immediately adjoining the wall on which the varnished atlas hung impressed imagination powerfully, and drew more interest than the world map had ever done. That their little schoolmate Beryl, who had wept yesterday during the thunderstorm, lay now so near to them upon a bed of sickness was a tremendous fact infecting all with irrepressible excitement. They spoke in whispers, but their whispers were stridulous and penetrating; piercing sharp with eagerness and hope, and through such sympathies as children feel they revelled in the novelty of the situation,

and welcomed each moment won from tasks and lesson-books; pointing to the progress of the clock's hands with something like jubilation. Some of them bent ears towards the wall, eager to glean sounds of the slightest portent from the unseen world of happenings beyond; others slipped on tiptoe to the window, to feed their hungry curiosities on the sight of the doctor's carriage, and Oswald watched them in a state of curious remoteness, without a word. Steeped in the subdued babel of small voices and his own more personal concerns and speculations, a strange mist of unreality seemed to be creeping over life and him. His reasoning powers attested that this was not a dream in which he took so dim a part, and yet it bore in small respect the similitude of life. The voices all about him fell upon his ears with a quality of strangeness and familiar surprise, as if they had passed through a filter and were purified of all that made them real; the window looking out upon the street showed preternaturally clear; even through the ardent hum of conversation that made the schoolroom buzz like an insectarium, he was acutely conscious of the ticking of the schoolroom clock—a sound both intimate and alien. That he should be sitting there in schooltime without his mother, without Beryl, was a circumstance so contrary to all experience as to border on the preposterous. For life itself is but a language, intelligible only when by long usage made familiar. The element of novelty can prove too much for comprehensions unprepared, like strange new words that take from speech all comfort and significance, and leave the hearer's mind depressed with the consciousness of its inability to understand. Hours passed by, it seemed to Oswald, before the schoolroom door opened and Mrs. Holmroyd appeared. There would be no school that day, she announced to them. They were all to go home very quietly. Beryl was seriously ill. "It is nothing at all infectious," she took care to impress upon her listeners. "Nothing that your parents need have the

least fear of. You must be sure to tell them that. I will write, or send word by Oswald, when you are to come again."

Saying which, to Oswald's deep dismay, she turned her face away with an abruptness of which he understood too well the cause, and retired as hastily as she had entered.

The little school broke up forthwith, simmering under the force of its own suppressed excitement. It doffed its academic slippers and put on its outdoor shoes, and reclaimed its hats and mantles from the pegs upon the landing outside the schoolroom door—Oswald mutely assisting—and took its leave, eager to disseminate the news and impart to others its own wonder, and taste the full savour of its unlooked-for liberty. Beneath its mien of sadness Oswald sensed a fine elation eager to be gone. It pulled long faces and exclaimed: "Poor Beryl!" and asked those dreadful questions that youth for ever asks until it has been taught to check its impulses, and to wrap loin-cloths about its natural and naked sentiments. "Would Beryl get better?" "What would happen if she died?" "When my cousin Amy died," the confectioner's daughter confided, "Alice didn't have to go back to school while the next term!"

Oswald participated in all these speculations with a sort of purged distress. Wistfully he watched them go. They waved their hands to him and cried: "Good-bye, Oswald," and left him cheerfully to his solitude and dumb distress. Only the little Alice Rencil ran back to him as he was about to close the door and laid compassionating fingers on his sleeve.

"Never mind, Oswald," she said to him. "I will ask mother if you may come and play with me. Often. Until Beryl gets better."

The promise dropped like a lump of sugar into his bitter cup, causing its brimming wretchedness to overflow. For

such a promise, in the present hour of pain, seemed too sweet for fulfilment. It partook of the elusive loveliness of heaven; a felicity so remote and unattainable as almost to mock the sorrow it aspires to lighten. For a while Oswald lingered on the doorstep, exchanging chastened handwaves with the receding figure of the organist's little daughter. Then, slowly and reluctantly, he shut out the pleasant prospect of the sunlit world and retired to the sadness of his soul's solitude; to the deep depression of this altered home. So changed, indeed, were all its features, so abstracted, dark and reticent the look it wore, that he seemed rather to be a stranger within strange walls than Oswald Holmroyd. A new life was sprung into being, in which he had no part. He was an outsider who haunted the outskirts of unseen happenings, as—in days agone—he had hovered about the fringe of crowds surrounding some dread Thing in front of the Infirmary gates. Sounds frightened him; of approaching footsteps he was grown afraid; almost did he live in dread of the moment when next he must encounter Elizabeth's red eyes, or undergo the searching ordeal of his mother's face. He crept into the parlour as quietly as could be, and hid there. A great desire for righteousness possessed him. From the book cupboard he drew the big Bible, that needed both his hands to lift. Its sheer avoirdupois seemed to dispense comfort to hearts like his in trouble. He spread the sacred tome upon his knee, and deeming every single portion of the Word of God contained in it to be equally acceptable to its Author and efficacious in the hour of sorrow, began dutifully with the First Chapter of Genesis: "In the Beginning ... God created Heaven, and Earth...."

4

Through all this mass of dark and doleful memory one recollection shone for Oswald Holmroyd and his mother like clear, consolatory starlight. That was the unimaginable

kindness dispensed by the Organist of St. Saviour's and his wife.

Within an hour, indeed, of the school's disbandment Mrs. Rencil knocked softly at the door of the little house in Spring Bank Gardens, drawn there by the purest feelings of friendship and concern.

"Is there anything at all ..." she enquired of Mrs. Holmroyd when the first words of sympathy had been exchanged, " ... in which we can be of the least help to you? Is there anything required for the sick-room which perhaps we might be able to lend?... Or special food, which we could prepare for you at home? Invalids always think so much more of dishes that are brought to them! And you will have so many claims upon your time. Both my husband and I would feel so happy if you would allow us to be of some real assistance to you ... however small."

The proposal was reinforced with tones and looks that left no doubt of the fullness of its sincerity, and in such a solemn hour kindness much less than this would have caused Mrs. Holmroyd's gratitude to break down. "There was nothing," she said through tears, "which at present she stood in need of—more than the wonderful sympathy which had just been shown. It was a great comfort to her to be assured of that, and to know,—in the event of real necessity—which way to turn for help." But the Organist's wife was not yet at the end of her proposal.

"Arthur suggested ..." she said, "that perhaps it might relieve you of some of your difficulty if we were to take charge of Oswald for you during this very trying time." She was thinking, as Mrs. Holmroyd knew, of Oswald's little bedplace reachable through the sick-room. "I wish you would allow us to do so. We could accommodate him so easily; he would be no trouble at all. He could sleep in our small spare bedroom, and have his meals with us ... and come to see you each day, or as often as you wished him to."

At first, though a surge of gratitude swept between Mrs. Holmroyd's heart and lips, and her thankfulness could only cry: "How can I ever thank you!"—a wave of consternation swept her also, at the thought of separation from her son in an hour when she felt such two-fold need of him. But she thought too, of his little sleeping place beyond the room where Beryl lay, and realized that it could continue to be his sleeping place no more until this shadow lifted. And the problem of her son's disposal troubled Mrs. Holmroyd even as she sought reasons to justify her keeping of him. She understood his disposition well enough to know how much, for all his resolute assertions, the dreadful isolation of removal to an upper room would cost him, destitute of all furniture save his own small bed; withdrawn from every companionship if, through need or fear, he raised his voice to solicit of the night one reassuring word. True, there was the empty schoolroom. She might have lodged him there, close by the wall. But even whilst she pondered in Mrs. Rencil's presence how best his bed might be disposed, her conscience rose up and reproached her. "It is my own selfish feelings I am seeking to consider," she said within herself. "Not his." Moreover, despite the deep trouble she was in, her mother's pride responded to such a genuine evidence of interest on his behalf, affirming—as it did—not only the great kindness of these friends, but the merit of her son. Who was to say that providence had no part in this proposal? And of a sudden, suffused with a great blind faith that was prepared to put its trust in any wisdom other than her own, she concurred with gratitude in the project of his going. "I had already been wondering," she told her visitor, " ... what was to be done with Oswald. The house is so small. And I fear it will be but a sad home for him ... during the next few days."

Thus it befell that Oswald Holmroyd set off that same afternoon in company with Mrs. Rencil and her little

daughter to the organist's house in Hill Street, carrying his nightshirt and necessaries in a canvas satchel, and the deep sadness that was in him received the unexpected setting of a golden frame. It seemed to him he was no longer Oswald Holmroyd in the flesh, but the soul of disembodied sorrow that floated in an atmosphere of love; permeated through and through with a quality of human kindliness whose ambient warmth pertained to the divine. Looks, tones, gestures—all—within this new enchanted world—were softened to besuit the soul of sorrow. Every thought and act of kindness converged in Oswald. Alice brought all her playthings to lay as an offering on the altar of his sadness, Mrs. Rencil lulled his sense of strangership with the sweetest of smiles and voices. The Organist himself laid on Oswald's shoulder a hand so warm, compassionate and kindly, as brought into Oswald's throat a lump of unswallowable affection. Think! Standing on the broad balcony of the Organist's drawing-room, immersed in a flood of glorified Hill Street sunlight—that was infinitely richer, warmer and more golden than the sunlight allocated to Spring Bank Gardens—he could survey the whole length of the High Gate as far as the Mansion House. From this impressive vantage point—surely the supreme pinnacle of human ambition—alike he could see and be seen. He could look down with pride and unimaginable condescension on upturned faces that looked (with no small envy of his elevation) at him. He could watch the music-cases come and go, that grew into visibility from every conceivable quarter of the horizon, and converged with the inevitableness of destiny upon this house of houses. Not only so, but on occasions he was even deputed to run downstairs and give admission to such recent pupils as still retained a diffidence about opening with their own hands the Organist's door. Scales and five-finger exercises and the hourly sound of stammering sonatas were the very essence of the enchanted air he breathed. He drew them all

into his lungs along with the more wondrous music that Arthur Rencil made with his own hands, and all Oswald's pulses became musicians, meting out his eager blood in bars. Nor was his part in music confined alone to what he heard. During such intervals as the Organist's teaching-room was empty Oswald was set to practice with a whimsical severity that utilized this method of distracting the boy's mind from thoughts of the shadow of home.

"Oswald, you scamp! What's this! You've only had half an hour's work. How do you expect to be able to take the Service for me next Sunday, at this rate! Quick. Get into the music-room with you, and don't you dare to give up counting or to take your fingers off the keys until my next pupil comes—whether he comes to-night or to-morrow afternoon!"

Then, too, Oswald was constituted the proud bearer of Arthur Rencil's messages, hastening to this house or to that; to the music shop in High Gate for music paper; and to the iron-monger's for fret-saws and brass hinges; and to Prestwich's for the church keys; and to Canon Quexley's in respect of hymns for Sunday. Walks, too, with Mrs. Rencil and her little daughter Oswald took; and now and then the drawing-room resounded with the most heavenly of games—in which the Organist of St. Saviour's did not disdain to take his part. And little Alice Rencil held up her face to Oswald when at night she went to bed, and put her arms about his neck, and Oswald's lips encountered soft, warm lips that might have been his sister Beryl's lips—save in respect to the effect they had upon him. For these lips, whispering his own name as they kissed him, set all his prides on fire and filled him at the same time with sadness and confusion. Oh! if only Beryl had been well! If only she and his mother might have shared with him these hours of seraphic happiness, what more could he—or they—have asked of life? After every bout of mirth and laughter Oswald dutifully dimmed the brightness in his

bosom and thought with conscientious sorrow of his little sister, and the debt incalculable he owed her sickness; these joys she could not share. For life, in such a magic setting, was not lived—but dreamed. He drew it effortlessly through his enchanted senses like breath through the lips. Time, for Oswald, ceased to be. Whole ages he abode in the Organist's house in Hill Street; whole ages, that is to say, measured by the emotions, albeit—measured by the clock—they were but moments; a night; a day; a few brief mortal hours; no more; perishable hours of imperishable memory, dying like flesh and blood and sighing out their happiness like souls at last into the eternal void. Such was the bright atmosphere of love encompassing him here that gradually he lost thought of those shadows elsewhere deepening. When it is still day with us we find it hard to realize that in other latitudes the night has fallen. Away from the little house in Spring Bank Gardens, remote from the world of anxious whispers, hushed footsteps and fear-worn faces, his youthful hopes revived. Surely, with such invariable, kindly eyes and smiling lips and reassuring voices, there was no cause to feel alarm. The worst was over; the best was soon to be. Before long, Beryl would be his laughing, gleeful sister once again. She and his mother would come to join him in this house of gladness. He began to reconsider his first terrors with magnanimity and mild contempt, as he thought, at times, of pennies foolishly expended in his days of youth on baubles that a later wisdom scorned.

... And then, of a sudden, the life about him darkened like a blue sky when from nowhere, in no time at all, the black clouds rise and swallow it. He heard the house-bell ring a peal that made assurance sicken. His startled intuitions stirred in him like leaves when the storm's first gust assails them. He sat at the pianoforte in the teaching-room, playing five-finger exercises with his whole heart, and counting in his bravest, clearest voice for Arthur

Rencil and all the world to hear; but that sharp peal silenced his counting and stopped his fingers stock-still upon the keys. It went through his bosom with a swift pain, with an indescribable emotion such as he had experienced that evening in the chancel at St. Saviour's when the passing bell rang out its apostrophic note for the dead alderman, and he and the choir had held their breath to listen, and hearts delayed their beat. It might have been anybody who rang at the Organist's door, but a sharp, dread certitude within him affirmed this was not Anybody. He heard the blend of voices down below, that might have been discussing anything; but again the sharp, dread certitude within him proclaimed this was not Anything. It was Something. Something that concerned him very closely, deeply, terribly. One of these voices, he had made sure (for all he could not hear it) was the voice of Elizabeth. Another of the voices was the voice of Mrs. Rencil, for this he heard distinctly. It cried: "Alice, dear!... Come here awhile ... I want you." And then his trembling intuitions were filled with every sort of sound inaudible to any hearing but that of a blanched and speechless terror. Sounds of movement; of doors opening and closing; of footsteps hastening in quest of him. Aye! in quest of him. In quest of Oswald Holmroyd. And such was his terror, such his certitude, that he had no courage, power or inclination to dissimulate. He could not count one beat or strike one single key to hide the fear he felt. He could only sit with impotent dropped wrists and his face turned over his shoulder in the direction of the door behind him that he knew inevitably must open.

It opened, as his fears divined, and Arthur Rencil came into the room. The accustomed smile upon his face was gone, absorbed into the solemnity of a great compassion; withdrawn to an illimitable distance (it seemed to Oswald) as if the Organist gazed down upon him with tenderness and sorrow from some infinite high place; from the sky;

from heaven.

“ ... Oswald!” he said, and that voice of dreadful, undermining softness swept away from the listener his last hope, his last fortitude. “I am afraid that you will have to give up your practice for this morning ... and go home. Your mother has just sent for you....”

The gentle voice spoke on, but Oswald heard no more. As by a lightning stroke the veil of illusory happiness was rent in twain. Beyond, where he had deemed life’s sunlight still to be, was naught but a void of pitchy darkness and despair. He dropped his face upon the compassionating arm that the Organist put around him, and poured out the wretchedness of his soul in such tears as he had never shed before.

BOOK IX

THE CHOICE

1

IF human souls in sickness could have the food they pine for, Mrs. Holmroyd would have taken Beryl to the grave in distant Clothton where the child's father lay. But the harsh voice of economy forbade. And though she tortured sorrow unavailingly to find some means by which its wishes might be met, she was loth, too, to part with the little daughter whom death had snatched so violently from her arms. More than ever now she felt the need of her. She yearned for the comfort of the child's companionship; for the knowledge that Beryl slept not too far from her mother's care. That she might open her window and draw comfort from the thought that the breeze which came to her was the same that had kissed and sweetened her little daughter's grave. She did not blind conscience entirely to the selfishness of her desires in this. Nay, conscience bitterly upbraided her at moments with grudging Beryl to the child's dead father, and she owned the dreadful justice of the accusation; but economy triumphed over irresolution at last, and lent her mother's selfishness a seemly cloak for what it did. She realized that it was the voice of stern necessity to which she hearkened, and not the voice of selfish interest alone, and Beryl was laid to rest in the green churchyard of St. Saviour's, beneath the golden iris of the clock that kept perpetual watch upon the child's sleep, on the sun-side of the western door.

Her death, and the costs of her interment, brought terror appreciably closer to the house in Spring Bank Gardens. For the little school had been broken up, and schools—once their precarious life is interrupted—sicken with almost a human facility and sink into decline. Parents seem to entertain a prejudice against letting their children reassemble too quickly beneath a roof which Death has visited. And scholars show no eagerness to recommence the studies from which providence has so mercifully freed them. And, truth to tell, for all she strove to set her school afoot once more, with a veiled desperation that tried to counteract the dreadful apathy she felt, Mrs. Holmroyd had no heart for teaching; no heart for pies; no heart for anything but undisturbed communion with her own sorrow. All else seemed vain and secular, a very sacrilege of the grief so recently sustained. And Beryl's death had, as it were, awakened her with violence to the pious mockery of this life she lived; this frail, precarious life she led so earnestly and with such monstrous confidence. A cloud of illusions died with her little daughter. A curtain had been torn aside between herself and life's realities, and the dreadful thinness of its texture was revealed. Ideals were not attainable through power of themselves, her disillusioned grief affirmed, but by the power of harder, baser things. Aspirations were but ends; not means. Steps of the heart's desire alone take no man nearer heaven; they must be built of stouter stuff; of brick; of stone; of anything that gives the stumbling foot a hold. And Oswald, through this loss so recently sustained, and through the dire uncertainty of life disclosed by it, grew doubly dear ... doubly necessary and precious to her. He must be saved. He must be saved at all cost for the fulfilment of the great ideal embodied in him. Desperately she cast eyes on every side to seek the means of safety for her son, and found—to her dismay—no place of any likelihood for them to rest on save the broad figure of Councillor Burford.

Since that fateful Saturday evening when he had called to put his fortune to the test, the Councillor had paid no further visit to the house in Spring Bank Gardens. Oswald, and the little Beryl before she died, were wont to listen for the once familiar footfall in vain; and Mrs. Holmroyd for her secret's sake had made believe to listen too, lifting up her head with theirs and simulating a conviction falsified when the step passed by. Nor was this silence broken when death cast his shadow over Mrs. Holmroyd's house. Neither the Councillor nor his daughter vouchsafed any word or sign of sympathy in that first dark hour when most she needed it. From the Rencils every imaginable kindness flowed: flowers for the room where Beryl lay; a wreath to place upon her tiny coffin and mitigate the cruelty of its shape. Kindness! Oh, kindness in sufficiency to open every portal of her soul. Before they sealed the sleeping countenance from sight for ever, Mrs. Rencil called and laid the softest kiss upon the child's cheek, turning from this to clasp Mrs. Holmroyd's hand in tearful, voiceless sympathy. If anything had helped to sustain Mrs. Holmroyd's belief in the unshakable goodness of God during this sad hour, surely it was the human goodness of these friends, whose human sympathy kindled the divine, and seemed to light for her a lamp in heaven.

But the house on the Hunmouth Road gave no acknowledgment of the loss she had sustained; breathed no word of condolence. And yet, Miss Burford at least could plead no ignorance of the dark event befallen, for Elizabeth had been constrained to sue for leave of absence from the Councillor's daughter on the morning that Oswald took his mother's message to her door. The leave of absence had been granted, it is true, though not (if Elizabeth's indiscreet recountal could be credited) too graciously. "It was very awkward" (Miss Burford had declared) "and she wished to goodness people wouldn't go and fall ill right on her washday. There were seven days in the week. Surely,

with a little contrivance, they might have picked some other day for That!"

This unkind comment on Miss Burford's part—itself providing such a commentary on the speaker—and the determined silence that succeeded it, wounded Mrs. Holmroyd's sorrow to the quick. In her heart there grew a secret grievance against the Councillor and his daughter. Lit by the contrasting kindness of the Rencils their conduct cast a shadow deep and cruel. For herself she had no heed, but this lack of feeling shown towards her dead child seemed almost too great for pardon. Many times the Councillor had sat with Beryl at her table, accepting such small hospitality as lay in Mrs. Holmroyd's power to set before him; and now, in the hour of overwhelming sorrow, he had no word or sign of sympathy to offer her. Her outraged grief touched almost a degree of scorn for the unworthiness on which her friendship had been in the past so misbestowed. And when, three days after the sad function at St. Saviour's, she heard with Oswald the familiar footstep in the street, succeeded by the customary rap upon the parlour door, and the spacious figure of Councillor Burford pushed its way apologetically into her room: "Are you there, ma'am?" ... she received the tardy visitor with sorrowful reserve. The Councillor's broad shoulders and blunt crowned hat—whose removal, as of old, constituted his last concession to politeness when he stood upon the hearthrug—and the overpowering atmosphere of worldly business which he brought in with him, unbreathable by sorrow's finer lungs, stirred Mrs. Holmroyd to a feeling almost of resentment, as for an undesired intrusion. For he took his stand as he had always stood; held his hat in front of him as he had always held it; looked round the room with an eye that seemed to betray no consciousness of the awful change wrought in it since the occasion of his last visit. And his first words when he faced Mrs. Holmroyd from the hearthrug: "Well, ma'am.

And how's things going with you?" hurt her terribly with their ineptness and inadequacy. For a while she could do no more than bow her head and murmur "Thank you ...," too deeply wounded to come to closer quarters with such a question. But in the silence that ensued she was moved after a moment to add the quiet intimation for her dead child's sake: "Ours—perhaps you have heard—has been a house of great sorrow ... since you were here last, Mr. Burford,"—for the Councillor's attitude and silence caused her for a space to wonder whether, after all, he could be acquainted with the fact of her trouble. His answer quickly set the doubt at rest.

"So I've been given to understand, ma'am," he said. "It'll have been a trying time for you." He came no closer to condolence than that; his words possessed no greater power of assimilation with fine sorrow than his own broad person, but now that Mrs. Holmroyd had opened for him this dark subject of such difficulty, he entered it with promptitude, as one who had only been awaiting an invitation given.

"In fact ..." he said, "it's that, as much as anything, that's brought me round this afternoon, ma'am." He confessed with burly frankness that the visit was perhaps belated, and in his own prosaic way expressed regret, saying it wouldn't have been amiss if he'd come a bit sooner (he knew) than what he did, and as a matter of fact it had been in his mind a day or two. But he hadn't wanted to intrude on her at a time like that, when she might be forgiven for preferring her own company to his. Had Annie wrote to her? She hadn't? No, he thought she hadn't. It wouldn't have hurt her if she had ha' done. But Mrs. Holmroyd knew how it was at *their* house. Always that amount of cleaning to be done. And besides, his daughter wasn't over and above fond of using the pen. She never had been, all her life. "She's not same as you, ma'am,—always able to find the right word at the right time, whether

it's to be wrote or spoke. Letter-writing costs her a deal of trouble, and never seems to leave her in a particular good temper when it's done." All the same (he owned) she might have called on Mrs. Holmroyd and spared him the necessity. "She's got a deal more time than me, and sympathy's more a woman's business than a man's. Not that I haven't felt sympathy with you, ma'am," he hastened to assure her. "I have. I've felt a great deal. In fact ... I venture to think there's nobody in Daneborough that's felt sorrier for what's took place than me."

Compared with the ineffable, fine kindness of the Rencils such sympathy was blundering and crude. And yet there showed a character of blunt sincerity about both man and words that touched Mrs. Holmroyd's heart despite herself, and softened her remorsefully with a consciousness of late misjudgment. For it was plain the Councillor had come this afternoon to offer her a troubled sympathy which he lacked lips or skill to utter. And sorrow must have food. The constrained crumbs he dropped so awkwardly she took with gratitude, as for her dead child's sake. All thoughts, all words, all tributes directed to that cherished memory were—to Mrs. Holmroyd's heart—like a prolongation of the life withdrawn; like bridges thrown out to span the chasm between them. Little by little, as they spoke, the feeling of estrangement ebbed away. It was no longer an obtrusive stranger who stood upon her hearthrug, bringing the materiality of a harsh and alien world into the sacred universe of sorrow. It was a familiar figure of much friendship, linked by unbreakable association with the dead. At this very table he had sat—how many times!—with Beryl in the past. How many times had Beryl lifted up her eager voice to announce his coming. "Listen!... He's there. I can hear him ... ever so far away."

Of the fact of their last eventful interview in this room but little memory survived, and that of small

embarrassment. For Mrs. Holmroyd the intervention of a great sorrow had made every recollection pale save the bitterness of recent days. She asked at length—for the cloth was laid, and the board spread, and the Councillor's eyes roved perpetually over the table as he talked—if she might offer him a cup of tea. He had not come for that (he said) and should be sorry to intrude upon her privacy ... but still.... And sat down, as of old, in the easy chair that Oswald placed for him.

"It makes a strange difference to a table," he commented, "when anybody's took from it so sudden. I can see the difference with my own eyes, and I don't need to be told what a difference *you'll* see, ma'am." He bit into his teacake with an amplitude that seemed, in some sort, to attest the measure of the spaciousness of his regret.

He stayed an hour, and by the time he took his leave the old intimacy had been re-established. Both Mrs. Holmroyd and Oswald were sorry when he rose at last, and felt their loneliness intensified when the room was void of his big, reassuring presence, and they heard their visitor's firm footsteps fading down the street.

"I shall perhaps take the liberty to call and see you again, some time soon, ma'am," were his concluding words on leaving, and Mrs. Holmroyd thanked him for the token of his friendliness with real gratitude in heart.

2

Councillor Burford kept his word. Before two days had passed he paid a second visit to the house of mourning in Spring Bank Gardens. Thereafter his visits resumed their old frequency. Within a month of Beryl's death and burial he sought occasion to repeat his fateful Saturday night's offer—choosing this time a more auspicious day—and Mrs. Holmroyd had neither heart nor courage to say No in all its nakedness. Indeed, from the first day of the

resumption of his visits—divining to what end they must inevitably lead—she had been pleading with her prejudices to think more kindly of this big, broad-shouldered man. Since marriage without some pious counterfeit of real affection was, to her, an act unthinkable, she had essayed to set her suitor's qualities in the kindest light for Oswald's sake. Could she indeed (she asked herself) reject an honourable proposal that signified so much to her son's future? Had she, even at a time like this, the right to study her own feelings before the larger considerations of his welfare? Nay, her troubled conscience seemed to cry; if she had but sacrificed those feelings sooner, who knows if Beryl might not have been with them still. Horrified by which thought, and hushed by the recent lesson of her loss, she strove to see attractiveness in the figure of her frequent guest; to endue his form with dignity and his character with worth.

The most awful thing to bear in this was the sense of her disloyalty to the dead. Not less than Oswald's goodness and ability, and the boy's ultimate advancement in the world, had her self-devotion to the memory of his dead father been part of the Ideal. She had never during all her widowhood entertained the thought of superseding his memory with a living husband. But now, for Oswald's sake must this personal ideal of hers be shattered. Henceforth the great Ideal lay with her son. Her only part in it, the only contribution she could render was sacrifice.

To make herself the wife of such a husband—with so high a standard of true husbandship in heart—was for her a bitter step to take. No woman knew less of the sordid practices of snobbery than Mrs. Holmroyd. Her heart protested kinship with all the world; sympathy with the lowliest; respect, tenderness, affection, even, for all flesh that bore the impress of its Maker and partook of the sacrament of sorrow. In consenting to be the wife of Councillor Burford it was not that she felt a personal

degradation; it was the degradation of something higher than herself that tortured her; it was the deliberate lowering of standards exalted by the spirit; standards that held her, in somewise, closer to God. She, who had known and loved the best of husbands, was accepting now—or preparing to accept—one who was unworthy to be named with him. Thought on in that way, with every emotion, every aspiration in revolt, she cried: “I cannot. I could not.... It is dreadful to think of.” But when she set against this her coming dire necessity—for soon the slender resources which had been her stronghold up to the present, must be exhausted—and asked what then was to become of Oswald ... she turned back to her self-schooling with haste and horror.

Ah! this sad task of re-teaching the affections; this melancholy school in which her feelings were constrained to mingle with thoughts unworthy of them, and to learn from the soiled pages of a mercenary primer. Prayers entered into it too. On her knees she prayed for the requisite humbleness of spirit, for such light from heaven as should blind her to the earthly fact of what she did, and lend her conduct higher sanctity. She implored her dead husband’s forgiveness for the act contemplated. It was (she told him) for their son’s sake. It was (she told him) for the rehabilitation of his good name, which she held more sacred than her own. And in this tormented state of mind she had surrendered whilst there was still a modicum of free-will left to her, and she might be able to avoid at least the last shame of financial necessity.

She gave way with many reservations. Oh, many reservations that a stricken conscience imposed on her. She strove in all things to be honest to her future husband. She professed no deceptive depth of love. She told the Councillor that she had loved once, and for ever. But she owned to being touched by his faith in her, and if he believed that she was such a wife as could make him

happy, she would loyally do her best to justify his trust. Scrupulously though she hedged her heart the answer given sufficed for Councillor Burford. It caused his businesslike exterior to soften visibly with the emotion of a desire attained, an aspiration gratified. His voice became unsteady; there crept even a moisture about his eyes. He affirmed: "I'm not a man to make promises, ma'am. I'm plain and outspoken ... but I venture to think you won't have no occasion to regret your choice." His pride, in its simplicity, was almost childlike; it tended to disclose those trumpery vanities which a stern business frontage had hitherto kept hidden. Something of self-complacency began to show in him. He "ventured to think" this and that, in regard to Mrs. Holmroyd's decision, which he characterized as "very sensible and wise, ma'am." She would be a happy woman. Why, he might go so far as to say "a proud woman"—or his name would not be Burford. She would have a comfortable home, free of care or anxiety as to the future. And one day, all being well, she might count on being Mayoress of this important Borough (which he always pronounced "Borrow"). "It's not every woman in Daneborough that can look forward to *that* ma'am." Such a culminating promise of publicity was, to be sure, the last thing Mrs. Holmroyd had foreseen or sought and the sudden prospect shocked her not a little. To pass through marriage into a stage of domestic extinction for Oswald's sake had marked the limit of what she had allowed herself to contemplate. But she strove courageously to make her face reflect, although with faint success, her future husband's pride, and for the rest resigned herself to every item of the long sacrifice imposed on her.

3

Not the least bitter was the visit that Miss Burford paid her, one afternoon, in the official character of prospective

daughter-in-law.

She called unexpectedly, breathing hard, with the chill animosity of an East Wind; her lips compressed; her eye bright and keen; a tiny flame of colour burning ominously on each cheek bone. She had come (she let it instantly be understood) at her father's instigation, and led by no desire of her own. Her father had only deigned to acquaint her with his intentions a week ago. She had heard tales, of course. Under the circumstances that was only to be expected. But she had never, no, she had never dreamed! It had come quite as a ... surprise to her. "Shock" was obviously the word she had intended to employ, but Mrs. Holmroyd's altered face averted its employment. It was plain to see that the Councillor's daughter smouldered with desire to mortify her foe, but there were limits which a studied insolence must keep—or fail completely of its mark. At her father's age, of course, (she said) it seemed ridiculous—to Her!—that he should ever dream of getting married again. But there was no reasoning with him. He was not easy to get on with. Far from it. Still ... "I'm only his daughter," she exclaimed with bitterness. "I'm nobody. No. Not more than the hearthrug." She indicated the worn hearthrug contemptuously with the ferule of her umbrella, and the hand that gripped it shook. "Well! I hope you will be satisfied. It will be a great change of life for you ... after this."

Her sentiments were curbed by a visible and powerful restraint that checked at the last moment the almost spoken words upon her lips, constantly replacing these with others less offensive in sound, though not in intention. All the while she spoke she sat bolt upright upon her chair, breathing so fiercely that her sentences were interrupted often by the compressed feelings through which they had to fight their way. As for Mrs. Holmroyd, the suddenness of her adversary's attack deprived her for awhile of the least power of speech or action. She could only sit in

silence, void of any weapon with which to defend herself against Miss Burford's rancour, even had she possessed the will to do so. For, of a dreadful truth, she knew herself to be what Miss Burford's indignation chose to paint her: an interloper, a usurper, prepared to take possession of a home on no better title than the infatuation of a parent. Yet she could not sit and suffer tacitly insinuations whose utterance made her conduct, even to herself, show viler than it was. If not in words, at least in manner, Miss Burford charged her:

"*You* have brought this about. *You* are responsible. Don't tell me my father would ever have *dreamed* of marrying again if you had not schemed to put the idea into his head."

"I little thought," the Councillor's daughter declared, "what it was going to mean to me when you called that morning with your family to bring back my father's solitaire. From the moment you put foot in the house"—she could not control the shaft—"my home has never been the same. You have altogether changed my father—and not for the better. He has become quite another man."

Driven at last by such a thrust as this to take defensive measures for her own dignity, Mrs. Holmroyd interposed:

"I am deeply distressed, Miss Burford, to think I should ever be an innocent cause of trouble to ... to anybody. But it is only due to myself to tell you that nothing was further from my thoughts in the first instance. I have been not less troubled, and surprised by the course of events—than you."

"Oh, to be sure!" Miss Burford tossed her head. "It is only natural you should say so."

"I am betraying no confidence," Mrs. Holmroyd continued, "when I tell you that at first ... indeed, for a long while, I gave your father's proposal no encouragement." Miss Burford sniffed superciliously, as much as to

emphasize the phrases “at first” and “for a long while,” with feminine contempt. Every fibre of her body was resistant, and before such an uncompromising attitude Mrs. Holmroyd felt the dismal helplessness of her position. Too loyal to her own ideal of truth to profess to this woman that she had subscribed to dictates of the heart alone in marrying Miss Burford’s father, she seemed to be left without a cause to plead. Nay, shame would have deterred her from seeking refuge in a plea which wronged so dreadfully her better self and judgment. And yet a grosser shame deterred her from confession of the truth that, in such a sacred region of the character as this, she was an opportunist, sacrificing herself to Councillor Burford for the worldly advantages which this loveless union with him secured. In two respects her tongue was tied, and without a voice to speak for her she had the bitter consciousness of being inextricably crushed between honesty and imposture: unable to gain justification from the heart or advocacy from the head. That Miss Burford divined the weakness of her adversary’s cause was evident, for she made of Mrs. Holmroyd’s halfhearted protestations her footstool. Reassured by the submissive meekness of the lips that sped no verbal darts against her own, she strengthened her attack. The mockery of her visit was unmasked. She had come, an ostensible emissary of peace, bearing words of implacable hostility and hate; her bosom rose as she spoke; the heat mounted to her cheeks, the venom to her tongue. Her message of goodwill became an indictment: every word of it a poisoned arrow. She did not know what had possessed her father. To go and do a thing like this, with everybody crying shame on him! Well! Mrs. Holmroyd had had her way. She would soon rule in a house that Miss Burford’s life had been wasted in preparing for her. All these years ... Miss Burford had toiled and moiled and worn herself to the bone—for This! Let Mrs. Holmroyd rest easy in her conscience if she could!

... Nor did the tirade end here. There were other things more dreadful that she said, and that Mrs. Holmroyd listened to—for the Councillor's daughter, casting prudence to the wind, uncorked the flask of wrath and drenched her adversary with its vitriol.

"I have had to put up with my father all these years. He is not an easy man to get on with—as you will find out to your consternation before long. You don't know him as *I* do. He is an obstinate, stubborn man who will go his own way. Yes, and rather go the wrong way of his own choosing than take the right way when anybody else points it out to him. And now ... just because of a woman he has known only a few months. Know? Why, when I say 'know' I mean, he knows nothing at all about ... I am to be turned out of my own house like a dog. Me. His own daughter. To make way for you and your son."

Mrs. Holmroyd half rose with a protesting: "Oh no! Oh no, Miss Burford...."

"I say 'Yes,'" Miss Burford threw back at her. "My father has just told me so. I am to go. And even if he had not told me, do you suppose I would ever consent to take second place to You, before my own servant, in a house where my word has been law for over twenty years? Do you imagine I would receive orders from You, or have to keep silence as if I was a child? The house has been *my* house until now. What would my friends think of me if I showed so little pride as to remain in it?"

"Stop!" cried Mrs. Holmroyd, who had mutely drunk this cup of degradation to its dregs. "I pray you to say no more, Miss Burford, for you have said enough. Oh, more than enough of what is cruel and unjust. I have listened to you because my sympathies tell me that your voice has a true claim to be heard. You are right. This is your house, not mine, and I forgive you for the hard feelings with which you resist my coming into it. But it is not yet too late. No step has been taken that cannot be retraced. I will

neither rob you of your father's affection nor of your home."

She spoke with the quiet determination that convinced Miss Burford of her adversary's sincerity, and brought her all at once out of the region of insensate anger into the cold air of common-sense. To satisfy the vengeful feelings of her injured heart it was requisite to regard Mrs. Holmroyd as a wilful foe, a base, designing woman who had plotted dominion from the first day that she had schemed admittance into the Burford house. Such dispositions as Miss Burford's do not form their judgments on conscientious reasoning. They attribute to an adversary just such motives as justify them in their hatred, and will not admit the least element of goodness that makes their own position untenable. When Mrs. Holmroyd, therefore, pointed so clearly at the resolution to withdraw from her compact with the Councillor, Miss Burford felt no prick of conscience. Nevertheless she stood sufficiently in awe of her father and of what his indignation might visit upon her for this unwarrantable interference with his plans, to be shocked at the course of action which her words had stung Mrs. Holmroyd to propose. For, in the momentous interview with her parent which had preceded this visit, the Councillor had let his will be known in no uncertain voice. He had stood with his broad back to the fire-place, and his hands locked behind his coat tails, and had told his daughter what he expected, and had the right to expect, of her. He expected her (he said) to treat his second wife with consideration and respect....

"Respect!" she had cried, as if the word—in such an application—burnt her tongue.

"Aye. Respect!" the Councillor affirmed, with greater intensity than before.

"Who else gives it her?" asked his daughter. "A woman living in a small house in a back street, with scarcely a penny to bless herself with. A stranger that nobody knows

anything about—that nobody would ever have known of but for you. *Me* give respect to *her*!" She bit her lip with the mortification of so preposterous an idea. If her father insisted on bringing this creature into the house—against every dictate of decency, and in defiance of the disgust of all right thinking people—she would (she said) go out of it. He had been prepared for this threat, and envisaged it with the tranquillity that is as gall and wormwood to the threatener.

"You're old enough to please yourself," he said.

"Do you call that pleasing myself?" she cried.

"You won't say you're doing it to please *me*," he answered dryly. But he did not ask her where she meant to go, or what she intended to do, or how she planned to earn her living. She was driven to reveal all this unprompted. Or rather, she threw down the suggestion like a gauntlet, as a challenge to his opinion. She would take a situation; she would go out into service.

"Well," said her father, "I can't stop you. If you won't respect my wishes in one thing, you won't in another. If you like going out into service better than stopping at home and behaving yourself, there's no more to be said."

"And have the world cry shame of you!" his daughter blazed at him, rendered furious with his imperturbability, and seeking words and phrases to shake his temper and bring it down to a level with her own.

"Shame of *me*!" he said. "How do you make that out? Because my daughter sets herself against my wishes, and thinks to make her father go *her* way when she refuses to go his! Shame of *you*, you mean."

"Now, see here!" he said. " ... I've borne with you too long, Annie. I'm not your son; I'm your father. All that you have and enjoy comes from me. If you'd treated me more reasonable and considerate, who's to say I should ever have thought of getting married again. But I'm tired

of living in a house that isn't my own, and being tret as if I'd no right to it. Folks that know anything will know very well I'm only taking a wife because I couldn't get what comfort I'm entitled to from my own daughter."

So the discussion had gone on. In his own way the Councillor had been just and uncompromising. It wasn't him, he said, that turned his daughter adrift. It was her that disputed his right to act according to his years and discretion. He gave her fair warning that he was going to be married. If she was prepared to be civil and reasonable and act her part as a daughter, and no more, she would be at liberty to remain in the house. That is.... He hadn't put the matter to his future wife yet, but he had no doubt she'd....

"And do you think ..." his daughter fired up; "that I would condescend to stay here with *her* permission? Has it come to this: that I've got to beg and pray of *her*? My word! No thank you."

"There's no question of you begging and praying," the Councillor argued. "And nobody knows that better than yourself. But I'm not going to allow a wife of mine to come into this house to be insulted, or made miserable by Anybody. And it amounts to this, Annie. If you're resolved to take what's happened in the wrong spirit, and persevere in your intention to make trouble in my house ... then we must try and provide for you in some other way. You'll have to go and live with your brother."

"With Him ... and Her!" cried Miss Burford furiously. "And submit to her untidy ways!" She pinched her lips to their firmest edge of determination. "Never. Never."

"Then you'll have to go and live with your Aunt Matilda," said her father dispassionately.

"What! After the things she said to me about my housekeeping ... in this very room?" his daughter expostulated.

"Then where *will* you go?" asked the Councillor. "And who *will* you live with?"

"I'll go where I'm beholden to nobody," she said hoarsely, on the verge of tears, "and live with them that value what I do for them."

"Ah!" said her father significantly.

"I'll earn my own bread. Yes. And let folks cry shame on you and her. I'll go out charing. I'll do like Elizabeth, and take no money but what I've earned."

She did not mean it, she knew. Even through the heat of her passion, she was aware she did not mean it. She threw worthless resolutions and empty words upon her fury to make it blaze spectacular, and terrify her parent with the awful conflagration actuated by his conduct. And he knew she did not mean it. It was but her womanly unreasoning passion that spoke, and he had wisdom enough to treat such rhetoric with brevity.

"I can't do no more, Annie," he said, pulling out his watch—an action that invariably stung and wounded her; inferring (as it plainly did) that he owed greater obligations to impersonal Time, than to his own daughter.

"That's it!" she said, taking scorn of the action. "Look at your watch. Say you must be going. Tell me you're too busy to stop here arguing with *me*—just because you've nothing more to say. Leave me. Go back to Her. I'm Nobody."

After that they had reverted no more to the subject. She had had the prudence to retain no such visible remembrance of the feud between them as would have imposed silence on both sides, and the Councillor was doggedly determined to ignore, in this respect, his daughter's prejudices and resentments. He spoke of the weather, of the town, of the council-chamber, of his business, with a detachment which—in a quarrel standing on some more trivial base—would have incensed her to the

most acrid retaliation, but which she made wise use of now to gain an indirect admission to her father's mood. He, on his side, did not fail to note—beneath the chill reserve of his daughter's demeanour—an alertness eager for every sign that fell from him; the evidence of an anger that strove to preserve its self-respect and yet to forfeit nothing by imprudence. Encouraged by these evidences he began to use the name of Mrs. Holmroyd with deliberation and intent, and Miss Burford restrained herself from anything more discouraging than a tightening of the lips. But one evening, before returning to his business, he said without embarrassment: "By the way, Annie. It'll have to be settled one way or another about this matter of me getting married. I don't want to do nothing for the sake of annoyance. But I've got my future wife's feelings to consider, and it's about time she should know what's going to happen here. I should like to be able to ask her up to tea one of these nights, but you may be sure I shan't do that if it's to involve her in any unpleasantness...." He paused, and Miss Burford merely hardened her mouth with an expression of determination pledged to nothing in particular, but prepared to wait frigidly upon events.

" ... She's not the sort of lady to force herself anywhere where she knows her presence isn't welcome. But if you care to call round and see her ... soon...."

"See her?" his daughter echoed. "Me? What for?"

"Why.... To do the civil thing towards her," the Councillor took up without irritation or diffidence. "And show her the politeness she has a right to expect from my daughter. There's nobody understands politeness better, nor would appreciate it more."

Not daring to take up arms against a composure which she deemed (rightly) to be crucial, Miss Burford sought refuge in a non-committal "Indeed!" and touched articles on the table with hands expressive of a resolution unaltered

and unalterable, though without verbal aggravation of her father's mood.

"It comes to this, Annie," he told her, buttoning his coat with a quiet but conclusive gesture, "both me and you's got to settle which way we intend to take. You know which way *I'm* taking. I'm hoping my way will be your way. But if it's not to be that, and you decide to go some other way ... well, it's forced to affect my plans. That's all. I may push things on a little. I don't want to do nothing rash or hasty, but it's only fair to put the matter before you very straight. I don't want to have no reproaches when it's done, and be told you hadn't fully understood, and why hadn't I made myself clearer?

" ... Eh?" He was going out as he spoke, and stopped at the door, dissatisfied with her inconclusive silence. "Do you hear, Annie?" He asked the final question with a certain sharpening of the tone calculated to impose discretion on the listener.

"Yes. I hear," Miss Burford answered in a voice purged of any quality more pronounced than aggrievement.

"That's all, then," her father acknowledged, with a resumption of his unruffled calm. "I only wanted to be sure. Time's getting on for all of us."

4

It had been an ultimatum on her father's part. He had refused to quarrel with her. He had got past the stage where altercations with an injured daughter formed part of his habitual routine. He had got past the stage where it was necessary to suffer her periodic outbursts of annoyance and displeasure, and gratify her with the loss of his temper, by which sacrifice alone her equanimity might be restored, and the house resume its normal groove. So long as his daughter had been necessary to him, and he had been constrained to count on her for such comforts as lay in her

power to give or to withhold, he had been under the obligation to quarrel with her. But now, she knew, his own cause was so sound and strong, he felt no necessity to lose his temper. He would be gravely, studiously, resolutely considerate towards her until the end. He had taken every step to salve his conscience. He had invited her to go his way; he had urged her to be respectful to the interloper; he had warned her of the consequences of her obstinacy. She had lit a bonfire of pretentious passion; burned up no end of indignant phrases and resounding resolutions. The spectacle had left him unimpressed. She watched him go down the garden path, and said to herself, with a resumption of the indignant blaze in which her perverse nature loved to live:

"Never! Never! I will starve first."

And that very afternoon she had garbed herself with her customary punctilious and unresulting care, and had set off to visit Mrs. Holmroyd. In what mood she undertook the journey heaven knew alone. It changed with her as she walked. At one moment she was a crushed and broken woman, walking forth to make the supreme sacrifice of her wasted years. At another she was an indomitable spirit, too proud to own defeat, too resolute to beg, who went in obedience to a father's arbitrary wish. But the red worm of revenge gnawed her very vitals, and the placatory phrases grew venomous as she shaped them. Indignations needed a vent. Alternately she attacked a foe, unmasked a traitor, or propitiated a rival. She was half a dozen women in as many minutes, and in such a changing atmosphere of passion policy was impossible. Yet in a dim way policy, of a sort, had shone through her conflicting moods like a lantern, through gusts of sleet and drift. She realized that this insensate opposition to her father's will was fast placing her in a false and inextricable position. She strove, it is true, to oppose him to the last pitch of defiance, and to cost him and herself and all her world the maximum of

trouble and vexation in return for the sacrifice demanded of her. But she still wished to keep some pathway of retirement behind her, however narrow, by means of which she might—albeit still fighting—with dignity retreat. Part of her anger, it vexed her to perceive, lay against her own self. Her father had the right to marry; her father had the right to study his own convenience before hers. It was ridiculous to suppose that any man of her father's age should submit to have his conduct ordered and dictated by a daughter. Why then had she contested the inevitable? Why had she taken up arms in a cause so obviously destined to defeat? Partly by reason of the solitude and retirement of her life, because this foolish gratification of her ill passion was become with her an indulgence—like cards, or tea-parties, or scandal. She treated herself to the luxury of indignation as a solatium for the emptiness of her days. She saw moreover that—like every other form of self-indulgence—the habit had grown upon her. For she retained no longer the old control upon herself; her sense of fitness and proportion was impaired; she lacked the power to direct her quarrels with a sure hand; she became their servant rather than their mistress. Already this controversy about Mrs. Holmroyd had taken her deeper than she had desired. Before her father she felt it almost impossible to assume the air and speech of ultimate surrender. Such a course seemed—after what herself had done and uttered—too limp, too cowardly, too craven. But it came to her—after her father's departure—that it would be a fine revenge on him to go and manifest a noble spirit of forbearance to her rival. Yes. She would go and demonstrate such a disposition of magnanimity as should reproach and shame them both. "My father" (she would say to Mrs. Holmroyd) "has requested me to come and welcome you into the family with my own lips. I won't deny that his action came as a blow to me ... at first. I won't deny that I have thought, and doubtless said, some

harsh things about you both. But he is my father. And if he sees his happiness in you ... it's not for me to thwart him. I wish him ... and you, every happiness."

That, or some vague equivalent, had been in her mind all the while she walked. But no resolution that she could muster was equal to the task of renouncing the congenial rôle of injury. In some presentation injury must show. And only by magnifying or creating wrongs was it possible to enjoy this orgy of martyrdom. So, as she made her way to Spring Bank Gardens, she attributed endless calumnies to the guilty couple. "He will have told her...." "She will have said...." "Oh! I know what's passed between them. I know what things they've uttered about *me*." And these blind animosities, nurtured for her own gratification and enjoyment, had swept her off her feet. She plunged from recklessness to recklessness: whilst striving to portray patience under long suffering she tried her hardest to inflict wounds. There should be no peace for any of them. Their portion, henceforth, should be rancour, hatred and remorse.

And then, Mrs. Holmroyd's pale face and firm, determined lips brought her back to consciousness of the insanity of the course her passion took.

"It is not too late," she heard Oswald's mother tell her. "I will neither rob you of your father's affection nor of your home. I too have had a home. Indeed, I have one still. This little house, with all its sad and precious memories, is very dear to me, Miss Burford."

In Miss Burford's angry bosom the tender sentiment aroused only animosity. Such expressions used towards a house affronted her practical common-sense; she felt them as a demonstration of her adversary's superiority. They were false, affected, ridiculous. Feelings so fine as this were wilfully assumed, like clothes and high looks and educated tones of voice, to try and impose on practical-minded people. But Mrs. Holmroyd had risen to her feet, and Miss Burford rose too, conscious of the utter disaster

of her plans, yet powerless to flex the perversity of her stubborn nature and make it pliable to any policy save that to which the narrow moment bound her.

"Not too late?" she said, suffering herself once more to taste before her rival the bitterness of injury. "Not too late? When you have turned my father against me? When you have twisted him round your little finger, Mrs. Holmroyd, and he has told me I am to go out and earn my own living, or starve, to make way for a perfect stranger, like you?"

How much more she said Miss Burford scarcely knew or heeded, in the abandonment of her passion; nor did Mrs. Holmroyd glean too clearly what was said to her through the disturbance in her own emotions. In a sort of haze of unreality, a fume of shame and indignation and constraint the women took their leave of one another. Mrs. Holmroyd found herself alone at last in her polluted parlour, with her two hands tightly interlocked, and the tears of outrage slowly creeping through her lashes. Miss Burford, sustained by an inward rage, found herself ultimately in the street, trembling with the efforts of her recent demonstration; shocked at the unpremeditated violence of her visit, so utterly at variance with her intentions. If she could but have bent her stubborn pride she would have gone back to the house so violently left and craved forgiveness of her outraged rival. The thought—the longing; nay, the necessity—almost moved her. She turned once upon her heel; the very words importuned her lips:

"Mrs. Holmroyd. Excuse me. I can't take my leave of you like this. I know I am hot-headed, impulsive, abrupt, ill-tempered. I know I am. There is much of my father in me. All my friends say so. They all know and dread my tongue. I say things at times that I never intend. I haven't meant half of what I've just said. I can't think what ever made me say them. But you don't realize how much I've gone through lately; how much I've had to put up with. What with my father ... and house worries, and the

servant....”

And she would have modulated into the key of self-compassion, and solicited Mrs. Holmroyd’s indulgence for an overworked, hard-used, much-to-be-pitied creature, to whom life and fate had been most cruelly unkind. But the impulse—so strong one moment as to be well-nigh peremptory—died away like an electric wind.

“To *her*!” she said, through her nipped, hard lips. “Go back and pray to *her*! So that she can tell my father all I’ve said and done!”

And because this picture of their triumph was too vivid for her pride, and because, endowing them with looks and words and accents sharpened by herself, she warred not against them but against her own nature, and fell pierced by her own arrows—because of this she turned, siding definitely with the cause lost by her perversity and folly, saying she was glad, now, that she had spoken her mind, and that Mrs. Holmroyd had been forced to swallow the bitter draught of truth, and that her father would be driven to do his worst; crying passionately within herself as she walked home:

“Let him! What does it matter to me? I’m nobody. I’ll go and starve, and everybody will cry shame on him.”

5

To Mrs. Holmroyd this scene had proved terrible. Guiltless of the least intention of offence herself, she felt Miss Burford’s shame as if it had been her own, and shrank from contact with the dreadful human passion which had seared and branded her innocence, and left it scarred (or so it seemed to her) with infamy. In some sort, conscience reproved her, this was her punishment for the worship of false idols. None could desert true gods, betray noble ideals, without some bitter toll being taken. She, who had looked upon Miss Burford hitherto from the superior

height of detachment, had laid herself open to the latter's proper scorn; she had been treated with obloquy by one to whose lower level she had descended only after a protracted struggle with her prejudices and pride. Nay, she had only come to accept the Councillor at all by a resolute detachment of him from his circle; by fixing her eyes upon himself, and blotting out the narrow life he lived and stood for. But now, with both arms Miss Burford had seemed to fling back double-doors upon the future, and cry: "See!" The prospect horrified, degraded her. She saw herself immersed for ever in a vulgar element of strife, buffeted between taunts and calumnies, charged with having wormed her way, for self-advancement, into a social world whose conditions repelled her. She foresaw nothing but wretchedness; nothing but remorse; nothing but disillusionment, and said: "What am I thinking of? It was a mistake. It can never be."

In this spirit of awakening to the truth she resolved to write to Councillor Burford. Yes, write before life's necessities could cause her better self once more to waver. She resolved to write and tell him that, after much serious thought and anxious deliberation, she found herself unable —for his sake no less than hers—to fulfil the promise given. She was engaged indeed upon this letter so difficult of execution when the Councillor called. Despite her stern resolve, his presence seemed to bring with it a sort of comfort. He greeted her with an intimacy shorn of none of his old respect; continuing to address her, despite the change in their relations, as "Ma'am." After the asp-like venom of his daughter's tongue his broad and solid accents were reassuring. And then, try howsoever she would to muffle the degrading sentiment, his presence, and the friendship it bespoke, brought security into her precarious home. He stood firm rooted like a great tree, offering shelter to lonely widowhood. Within the ample radius of his branches no want could come; no penury, no care, no

terror of the future. This, after all, had been the haven for her doubts to rest in; this big, broad man, with the solid worldly comfort he represented, had been during these latter days the true sustaining power of her mind.

Perceiving her seated at the table, pen in hand, he feigned polite retirement, albeit still standing at the door.

"Don't let me disturb you, ma'am. I see you're busy writing...."

Thus challenged so directly, the spirit of her resolution faltered, but she made no effort to avoid the issue.

"I was ... writing to you," she said.

"To me?" He came forward at once and took his stand beside her. "Indeed. Then it's well I thought to call. It'll save somebody else a journey.—Shall I read what you've wrote?" He stretched out a hand towards the letter, and with sudden shame of the words she had struggled so hard to set on paper, she warded it from his possession.

"No ... please! On second thoughts ... I think I would rather you should wait until the letter is completed." She added, timorously: "It has been a difficult letter to write."

"Indeed, ma'am." He noted then the signs of trouble on her face and said after a moment: "I'm sorry to hear that. Letters that's difficult to write isn't always very pleasant to read. May I ask what's in it?"

She turned slightly away from him, and braced herself to say:

"I was writing to ask you to relieve me from my promise."

"What! Do you mean ...?"

"Yes."

She was aware that he looked curiously at her from under his brows, with one hand plunged into the breast of his coat, and the gaze caused her heart to beat. Why? Because, in part she was afraid of a tussle with unequal

forces; in part because she trembled with the sharpened consciousness of how much, for her son, had been staked upon this reckless throw. Suppose.... Yes, suppose he told her: "Very well, ma'am." Suppose he answered: "You know your own feelings best, ma'am. It doesn't beseem me to try and force you against your will." What then? What then, ... when he had left her, and she sat alone amid the wreckage of a home beyond her power to maintain?

"May I venture to ask," the Councillor enquired, "what's prompted you to write in that strain, ma'am?"

She said: "I've been thinking. Thinking very seriously, Mr. Burford."

"Ah!" said he.

"And the more I think ... the more clearly I see the difficulties."

"Difficulties! What difficulties? Who for?"

"For everybody concerned."

"Everybody concerned, ma'am? There's only two that is concerned. That's me and you. If it suits *us*, there's no occasion why we should trouble our heads with nobody else."

She hazarded: " ... Your daughter," and he uttered a sententious "Ah! I thought I hadn't been mistook. She's been to see you."

Mrs. Holmroyd said hastily: "Please do not blame her. I had been thinking this matter over ... long before then. I had felt that it was unfair, cruel, wrong of me to displace Miss Burford from the position in your house which she has enjoyed for so many years."

"What, ma'am!" interposed the Councillor. "Do you mean to say you'd go and compromise me before the whole Borough for no better reason than that? You've as good as given me your word, and I've seen no reason to keep the matter secret. What do you suppose my friends will say? What do you suppose the town of Daneborough

will say if I've got to go and tell folks now that you've seen fit to change your mind? It'll be a serious reflection on both of us, ma'am, and I venture to think you must see it. It'll make me a laughing stock in the Council, and very likely do me harm in the Ward. It's not as if you'd engaged to marry an ordinary Burgess; you've engaged to be the wife of a Town Councillor. I'm a public man in the public eye, and one can't play fast and loose with one's obligations towards the public without a loss of repitation and character. You must realize that for yourself, ma'am. I want to have no shade cast on *your* repitation, and I want none cast on mine. We've got to live in Daneborough, both of us, and I should be very sorry to lose one ounce of the respect I've earned in business and on the Council.

... But of course, ma'am, if you tell me your opinions has undergone a change, and you don't hold me in the same estimation you did...."

"Oh, no, no, no!" Mrs. Holmroyd's better nature cried, touched by the look he cast on her.

"I'm very glad to hear you say that, ma'am," the Councillor confessed, with obvious relief. "It's very reassuring." And he turned to the subject of Miss Burford without delay. Whatever Mrs. Holmroyd decided in this matter, he wished her clearly to understand that it would make no difference to the unfortunate relations existing between himself and his daughter. "Things has got to such a pitch at home now that something's forced to be done. We can't go on any longer as we are. So if you're actuated by any mistaken notion of helping Annie, ma'am, against me ... you can dismiss it from your mind at once. You're not to blame in any way for what's happened. She's brought it on herself. She ought to have been married years ago, and if she'd been the right sort of woman to manage a husband I'm not the father to have wished to stand in her way. She could have had a home of her own and welcome. And I know *this*, ma'am. If Annie'd once got the idea of

marriage into her head no consideration of *me* would have kept her where she is. And is a man of my age to be ruled by his own daughter, and have his actions settled just in such a way as suits her temper and convenience? Are we to be governed by our children, ma'am?" Mrs. Holmroyd thought of Oswald and of all the sacrifices she was prepared to make for him, and said in a faint voice of half concurrence: "Not in all things, Mr. Burford."

"Annie's been almost past living with, these last ten years," her father said. "And any man of less patience than me would have married long ago, if only to be rid of her. I've never took that view myself. I can honestly say, ma'am, I never gave marriage a thought for its own sake until I met you. When a man that's been married once gets to my age and sees the matrimonial troubles of his friends, and them that aren't his friends, he thinks twice before he risks making the mistake again. It's come to this: the same house won't hold me and my daughter. I'm sorry to say it, and it's no fault of mine that it should be so, but it *is* so. And if even you was to say you wouldn't take the place you said you would at the head of my house, me and Annie would part company all the same. If I'm not to have a wife sitting at my table, I won't have a daughter there that's done nothing and does nothing but cross my will. I won't have her sitting opposite me and saying to herself: '*I* stopped his game.' For that's what she *would* say, ma'am. And I shouldn't think of asking you to share my house as long as there was her in it to make you miserable. For that's what she would do. She's no friend of yours. I'll own it. She's no friend of nobody's. She's never satisfied unless she has her own way, and never happy when she gets it. I shall provide for her wants, you may be sure, and treat her generous as befits a man's own daughter. But it's time I was spared the petty worries and vexations that seems the breath of life to her, and had a house of my own which I could take some pride and pleasure in."

He talked without any sign of heat, without the least visible desire to gain points in argument by vilifying the character of the absent one. His tone was that of a regretful and dispassionate regard for truth; mourning fact as it was, but seeking neither to magnify nor diminish it. And his reasoned arguments put him incontestably in the right. "It'll be very hard on me, ma'am," he said, "if you're going to throw me and all my happiness overboard, just because of a daughter that cares for neither. I don't deny you're acting up to principle, and only trying to do what's right—in fact, I've far too high an opinion of your character to think you'd ever stoop to any course of action that's unworthy of you. But if you're going to take Annie's part and tell me in all seriousness I've got to sacrifice myself and you for *her* ... Why!" he said, with a gesture of bewilderment, "I can't understand it. But I hope, after what's been said, you'll see what a mistake you would be making if you was to press your objections any further. Of course as I've said before, if your objection is personal, and it's me that's the real stumbling-block ... well, I suppose you've a right to consider yourself, ma'am. But I think, in that case, you should have spoke sooner, and spared me what—you can't fail to realize—is forced to be a great humiliation for me. There's nobody in Daneborough that doesn't know Councillor Burford, but folks has got to ask who Mrs. Holmroyd is ... and you'd be spared much that I should have to suffer. I won't deny that I've had to put up with a little harmless chaff already, and there's a lot of people who quiz me about the step I've taken—but it would be highly unpalatable if our arrangement was broken off at this stage, and I've the confidence to hope you'll think better of your intention, ma'am."

6

Councillor Burford's arguments prevailed. They

prevailed because, first of all, they were incontestable. And they prevailed because, in the second place, Mrs. Holmroyd was moved by this big man's pride and faith in her. And they prevailed because, as he spoke, quietly rearranging the situation in a new perspective of duty, she clung unconsciously to a need that satisfied every call of conscience, and yet avoided the dire alternative from which, even in making her confession, she had shrunk. Here were two sides to the controversy, each with its appeal to conscience, and though the quarrel in itself was crude and dreadful, and roused in her a deep repugnance against being mixed so closely with sentiments and acts so foreign to her nature, she contrasted Councillor Burford's voice and quiet manner with the compressed animosity of his daughter this afternoon. The wish to wound, the wish to hurt and injure, put her plainly out of the court of sympathy. Mrs. Holmroyd indulged an academic sorrow for the misguided creature—that owed itself to conscience, and not to feeling. She knew—she had known all along—that between herself and Miss Burford there existed not the least bond of interest or friendship. Their views of life were utterly at variance. All she could ever hope for, so far as she and Miss Burford were concerned, would be an occasional lull in their hostilities, when Miss Burford wearied of attack and came to closer quarters for the detection of fresh sources of aggrievement. Miss Burford had formed ever the dark background of this matrimonial life to come; had formed ever the enigma of its possibility: sphynx-like and, up to now, insoluble. It is true that the Councillor had spoken of Mrs. Holmroyd's place at the head of his house, and had, without any detailed explanation, considered his daughter as dispossessed of her domestic governance, saying: "Annie, of course, will make way for you, ma'am. You'll be entire mistress of your own affairs." But the precise nature of her disposal had never been revealed, and Mrs. Holmroyd—though this problem

perplexed her with many painful considerations—had never dared or cared to press for clearer definitions. That she could not possibly occupy a house in common with the Councillor's daughter seemed obvious. But she could not bring herself to take the steps which should precipitate Miss Burford's displacement. She left the matter in the hands of providence, assuring herself whenever the uncertainty grew too acute: "Of course.... She will understand. Her father will have prepared her." Re-marriage in itself was a procedure sufficiently repugnant to her conscience, but a re-marriage complicated by so many ugly features tended at times to make her sick at heart. She relapsed, however, on that selective and protective power of her sex which sees fervently only just so much of truth as it seeks and needs to see. By detaching Councillor Burford from all environment; by seeing him persistently in the glamour of intimacy and kindness thrown over him by her own small house; by associating him with many happy memories of her little parlour, where she and Oswald and Beryl had sat and listened for his coming footstep, and so weaving him by deft feminine processes into the very texture of that dear, departed life, already made holy by the hand of death ... by doing this, and seeing him so, cut off from contact with the grosser world, but linked as it were by many subtle strands to the spiritual, she had cajoled her affections into a sentimental liking for the big, broad man that bore no great weight of reason, but cracked like thin ice beneath the heel of reality. And now the spectre of Miss Burford was laid at last, by her father's own hand. He had taken from Mrs. Holmroyd the least pretext for self-reproach. He had told her that whether she kept her faith with him or not, his daughter's case would be unaltered in so far as it concerned her father and her father's home.

"You are not in any way to blame, ma'am," he had told Mrs. Holmroyd. "Set your mind entirely at ease on *that*

point. It was always understood that Annie should keep house for me as long as things went on as they was. But she knew very well that some day I might want a better helpmate. And when that day came she was aware she'd have to make way."

So conscience was salved, and the difficulty smoothed away. Mrs. Holmroyd, with exemplary discretion, confided little to the Councillor's enquiry about his daughter's visit: "Well ... She's been to see you then. How did she behave herself? I hope she remembered what was due to you, and treated you with proper respect."

When the Councillor took leave at length, the compact was sealed beyond all cancellation. If she would show herself to be an honourable woman, innocent of the charge of inconstancy, and loyal to a pledge twice given, there could be no retraction now. Feelings, fears, doubts, misgivings—Yes! and dislikes and repugnances—must be hid henceforth within a casket of secrecy, and sealed with silence. The larger liberties were lost to her; at one fell swoop she had bartered the freedom of existence and was become a vassal to her own promise. And because she held the promise of a woman holy, and faith between all human creatures inviolable, she felt the more in terror of her state of servitude. For we are slaves, less to one another, than to such rules of conduct as we hold unbreakable, for the preservation of our own souls.

7

Mrs. Holmroyd's friendship with the Rencils, grown much closer since the death of Beryl and their wondrous sympathy and kindness in this dark hour of her need, had brought exceeding comfort to her. This contact, on a footing of something close to intimacy, had served to sharpen her aspirations and to give her the illusion of living near to those higher things which her life had lost.

The briefest space of time passed in the charmed happiness of the Organist's home repaid her for many anxieties and days of doubt. It was only there, with her spirit lips attached to the cup of their perfect happiness, and draining every word and look and act for her soul's sustenance, that her full self expanded and she regained the full vision of life's loveliness. At such moments her husband came back to her. He was no longer lying in his grave at Clothton, but here in the midst of them, reanimated by their human sympathy and living in their smiles and glances. Her struggles were known to the Organist and his wife; they were drawn to her gentleness. Each took pleasure in the other, and Mr. Rencil and his wife experienced, after every visit that Mrs. Holmroyd paid them, that glow of human satisfaction in the knowledge of happiness conferred.

But the consciousness of her new relationship towards Councillor Burford weighed on Mrs. Holmroyd's heart like lead. An intuition, that stabbed content with the sharpness of a knife, told her that this new intrusive element would mar assuredly the perfect sympathy of their friendship. She felt its darkening influence in herself; she feared, once the secret was divulged, that she would note a corresponding change in them. Twice she called to see Mrs. Rencil for the express purpose of confession, and twice her courage failed her. "I ought to have spoken," she reproached herself in walking home. "After their great kindness to me ... this silence on my part becomes deceptive." But the thought of the confession, and the consciousness of her almost insurmountable reluctance to make it, showed her the true nature of the obligation entered into. After her decisive interview with Councillor Burford, however, she resolved that nothing should deter her from making an announcement already overdue. And she called forthwith at the house in Hill Street with this single purpose in her mind. For all her resolution it came as a positive relief to learn that Mrs. Rencil was not in, but the Organist himself

ran down to greet the visitor, and pressed her to go upstairs —saying that his wife might return home at any moment. Indeed, Mrs. Holmroyd had not been seated long in the sunlit upper room before Ethel Rencil arrived, invoking "Arthur!" as she mounted the stairs, in a voice half songful. Ah! That touched the visitor's heart like an old tune; sharpened her eyes with the brightness of half-shed tears in a moment. Such a tender revelation of companionship, of mutual dependence for happiness, the one upon the other, stung her to a sort of ecstasy that owned not anything of covetousness, but only of appreciation and of yearning. And a sudden flood of misery submerged her as she thought of herself and contrasted her lot with theirs. Not so would she have the joy of calling on her second husband's name. Nay, she had not yet familiarized herself with his embodiment sufficiently to think of him in terms of Christian names at all. For her he was still Councillor Burford; still the blunt, self-constituted caller whom she treated, even in the secret places of her heart, with the most scrupulous distance and respect. The perfect intimacy of united lives, the lovely cup of fellowship to which each contributes and from which each sips in turn—the perfect union of affinities was not for her. Only a sense of duty, a spirit of loyalty and true service superseding love, could sanctify a marriage such as this she had the hardihood to contemplate. It held no raptures, such a state. There was no joy to be expected of it. Only justification.

In the midst of these reflections, swift and poignant, Mrs. Rencil entered. Her smile—just wide enough at first to frame the looked-for figure of her husband—expanded instantly to recognition of the visitor, crying what a welcome surprise this was, and how kind of her to come and see them. Yet to Mrs. Holmroyd—preoccupied with inward comparisons, and troubled with problems respecting the disclosure which conscience was resolved to

make, and hypersensitive to all external influences and suggestions—the manner of the Organist's wife, albeit superficially cordial, betrayed something of the simulated brightness of formality which, like a meretricious picture, invokes the aid of a high varnish to compensate for its lack of depth. With a reciprocal smile upon her lips that accompanied a painful sinking of the heart, the visitor said to herself:

"She knows. She has heard. Perhaps she is offended. I ought to have told her before."

And at the first moment offering her purpose its shirked and sought-for opportunity, she stumbled into confession, saying she should be sorry for them to learn the news from any lips except her own. The opening was, perhaps, infelicitous—since it imposed on her hearers the polite duty of dissimulation. Both Mr. and Mrs. Rencil, in fact, did their utmost by facial expression to give their guest the assurance her words appeared to call for, although she fancied that Mrs. Rencil's more sophisticated eye belied the ignorance it strove so earnestly to feign. And her heart beat heavily within her. She felt the blood suffuse her face and neck as she made the hateful declaration, suffering an odious sensation of being bathed in her own guilt. For just one moment both the Organist and his wife retained their expressions of friendly interest with which they had awaited her announcement, and she had the feeling that during this brief space of time they sought within themselves—and of each other—for guidance as to the nature of their next look, and their next word. But, fractional though the hesitation was, to Mrs. Holmroyd it seemed abysmal. Something died down; dropped like a dead leaf; floated silently out of this circle of sympathy. The tone of friendship sustained by all of them, till then, sank of its own weight to the level of politeness and conventional pretence. For they knew already what she had to tell them; of that Mrs. Holmroyd entertained no doubt.

She heard Mrs. Rencil say: “Indeed!...” in a voice of unconvincing surprise. The Organist contented himself with turning the bland beam of his glasses in the direction of his wife, as though to reciprocate her interest. “How nice of you to come and tell us.... Of course, we won’t breathe a word—will we Arthur! At least ... until we have your permission.” She strewed her empty phrases over the situation as if they had been wisps of coloured wool, picked hap-hazard from a work-basket, expressive of nothing but artificial brightness.

“Is it anybody we know, Mrs. Holmroyd?”

The words “we know” rose up in accentuation above the rest like a weal on smitten flesh. Mrs. Holmroyd said with obvious constraint:

“I think ... perhaps, by name. It is Mr. Burford.”

Again there followed that slight, infinitesimal pause—that fine, sharp edge of silence which cuts so deep.

“Do you mean ... the Councillor?” Mrs. Rencil asked, and though politeness could not have designated Mrs. Holmroyd’s future husband by any nicer name, it was (as Mrs. Holmroyd’s burning cheeks attested) a euphemism for the business he pursued. She bowed her head slightly, “Yes,” divining with pain at heart that they were disappointed in her; that she had sunk below the standard of their expectations. In her trouble she seemed to hear their inward voices crying, each one to the other:

“How could she! How could she!”

And the outer voice of Mrs. Rencil, speaking for the first time, added:

“You have our sincere wishes for your happiness, Mrs. Holmroyd.”

Happiness! Oh, the mockery of it. For she was powerless to excuse or justify her action. She, who had spoken ever of her husband and the love she bore to him and he to her; who had built her friendship with the

Rencils on the corner-stone of this ... came now to tell them she was pledged to be the wife of a big, illiterate, prosperous Daneborough tradesman. That love had led her to such a step was, for them and all the world who judged her, quite unthinkable. If she sought to plead the warmth of her affections in excuse, she rebuked her sense of fitness and fine feeling. If she vindicated her heart she accused her head. She experienced a terrific longing to unbosom herself to these two friends—the only friends she had; to put her course of action before them in its true perspective. But that would have involved disloyalty to her future husband. To hint at any derogation of him was to condemn her own self and cause. And though her spiritual loneliness cried out for some companionship to which it might confide its sorrows, she knew that such a confidence would only tend to widen the breach of sympathy between them. She was conscious of that breach of sympathy in their scrupulous choice of questions. She sensed their difficulty. Her conduct in this second marriage shocked them. They despised her. She felt certain they despised her, although politeness demanded that they should simulate a superficial interest in her still. They sought only such questions as skirted the centre of the topic, striving to preserve their own detachment from a theme so alien to their hearts; to compromise themselves in no respect towards her new life, whilst endeavouring to preserve the outward semblance of unbroken friendship. Did she think of marrying soon? She would, no doubt, be leaving the house in Spring Bank Gardens? Perhaps she would be not altogether sorry to leave a district of such sad associations. But they asked her little. They skilfully ignored her obvious desire to be questioned, so that she might have the assurance of their fellowship at all points; so that, aided by interrogation, she might justify her conduct somewhat; might show a vestige of her heart to them. And in a tentative way she tried—with a desperation belied by the gentleness of her face and

speech—to communicate, as though in answer to enquiry, the things they failed to ask of her, hoping (though she lacked the inward satisfaction of it) that they might perceive something of her true heart and mind beyond. And they said: "Of course ..." and sought to show themselves as nice as could be to one who had sunk so far below the high consideration of their friendship.

And with that—or little more—the subject of her second marriage was interred, and it seemed plain to her that the spirits of the Organist and his wife left its place of sepulture with alacrity. The little Alice came in, and the Organist made fun with her in his own delightful fashion; and his wife—watching the spectacle with unconcealed rapture—turned from time to time to Mrs. Holmroyd with resumption of her old self, as though to invite her guest into the circle of their happiness. But all the while Mrs. Holmroyd participated with a pain at heart, like one who tastes of the sweetness of confraternity for the last time: too sick to eat. Sad at heart she took her leave at length, and Mr. Rencil accompanied her downstairs. For some inexplicable reason she had half hoped he would. They descended the staircase and reached the hall, and the Organist opened the door, and she saw and sensed the world of awful emptiness beyond—dark and cold and comfortless as the grave itself, without one single flame of fellowship to light and warm it. And suddenly, with a surgent impulse that her soul could not withstand, she turned upon the Organist a face of supplication.

"Mr. Rencil...." Her voice had dropped almost to a whisper, and she accompanied the exclamation with a faint gesture of the hand, weak and aimless, and yet charged with a curious expressive beauty of its own in the Organist's sight. Such a transient gesture as weds itself to looks or words once in a lifetime, and makes them memorable by means of a vague loveliness for which no meaning can be found; of an emotion that goes straight to

the heart, albeit the heart knows neither how nor why.

"Mr. Rencil.... You will not think too hardly of me. You will not blame me too greatly!..."

He said: "Blame you, Mrs. Holmroyd!" in a voice of unmistakable surprise, for her gesture and her accents of intensity had found him unprepared.

"For the step I am taking," she explained. "Oh! Believe ... I want you to believe, please ... I want you both to believe, if you will, that I have not acted in this matter lightly. It has cost me many days and weeks of anxious thinking."

She looked earnestly into his face, and he answered with gentle gravity:

"We appreciate your character too well, Mrs. Holmroyd, to suppose for a moment that you would take any step unless it fully satisfied your conscience."

She could see his face no longer for the tears that flooded him from sight. A tide of divine sorrow submerged, yet sustained her. For a moment she stood thus and tasted the insufferable sweetness of a rapture akin to death.

"Life holds nothing more precious for me ..." she went on in a voice broken by the stress of her emotion, "than the sympathy and friendship I have found in this house. They have sustained me, helped me, during many dark moments. I cannot tell you how much my heart owes to the kindness you have shown it...."

Her voice, breaking at that, she offered him—as though in attestation of a debt unpayable—her hand. He took it, and impulsively she laid her second hand for one moment over his and pressed it with a sudden effusion of friendship and of gratitude. Then, without another word or look she took her leave and bore her full heart away from this house of insupportable sweetness.

Arthur Rencil gazed out for a moment into the street,

and closed the door with the slow preoccupation of one who acts still under the influence of a deep emotion, walking gravely up the staircase to the room where his wife awaited him. Her head was turned over her shoulder to the open doorway in anticipation of his return, and her first question when he entered was:

"What did she say to you downstairs, dear?"

"She begged that we would not blame her too greatly."

"How sad. She feels it, Arthur. When you wished her all happiness ... her lip trembled. For very little she would have burst into tears. Didn't you notice?"

"I realized she was in trouble. I tried not to look at her too closely." He moved to the mantel-piece. "Just as she was going away ... she thanked us, Ethel, for our kindness to her. She said we could not realize how much her heart owed us. I think she has the fear that what she is doing may cost her our friendship."

Mrs. Rencil said: "Poor woman ... poor woman. It is a terrible position to be in. I suppose she sees no alternative. She is thinking only of her little boy.—Such a pretty woman too. Don't you think so, Arthur? At times, when she is smiling, she looks quite young. She speaks so prettily, too. I love to listen to her. Don't you? She is my conception of a thoroughly good woman."

"Are there such things," the Organist enquired thoughtfully, "as thoroughly good women?"

"You know there are!" his wife exclaimed, with a smile that did not altogether dissipate her gravity. "I can't explain how it is ... but somehow, I always feel a better woman when I am with her. But marrying a man like that!" She gave a little shudder. "Whatever can they have in common? Oh! it seems shocking for so much goodness and refinement to be thrown away. She deserves a better husband." And with glistening eyes she added: "Somebody more like you, Arthur."

The Organist turned a luminous smile upon her through his glasses.

"But I am not a City Father with a flourishing business and a fat banking account, Ethel. I am only a poor church organist who has to make up in goodness what he lacks in money."

"If it only needs money to make you different from what you are," his wife attested stoutly, "I hope we may always be poor. Oh, Arthur! When I think of Mrs. Holmroyd, I feel how truly thankful we ought both to be. We have been married nearly ten years—and during all that time we have never had anything more than just those silly quarrels that teach us how dear we are to one another.—What's that?" It was the sound of tottering and unsteady scales from the music room. "A pupil? Were you expecting anybody?"

Arthur Rencil looked up through his glasses and made a comic gesture of despair.

"Of course I wasn't. It's true that I told her to come at half-past five, but she forgets everything else I tell her—and why she has remembered this I can't imagine. Still ... it's part of the happiness we've both of us got to be so thankful for, Ethel! And when she has been thirteen times, and I have sent in the bill, and her father comes to settle it six months later—the money will go nicely towards paying for that last new hat of yours ... or the next one!" He was leaving his wife with a smile when she called him by name.

"Arthur!"

"Yes."

"Don't be long, dear!"

"You mean ... I am to give my pupil short measure, Ethel? Why?"

"No. Of course I didn't mean that. But don't give her longer than she's supposed to have. Come back and bring your writing here, and sit with me. I promise not to talk.

I'll do my fancy work. But I like to have you near me."

He went back to her, responsive to the supplication in her eyes, took her head in his two hands and kissed her. She held his neck captive for awhile, nestling her cheek against his, and said: "Oh, Arthur ... what must the world be like to those who have no love to turn to when they need it!"

BOOK X

THE CRUCIBLE

1

OF his mother's anxious inner life during these latter weeks Oswald had known nothing. Children accept the outer semblance shown them by their elders as implicitly as they take food from their hands. When his mother sat in silence he might wonder—after a while—as to the cause of it, and marvel that she should be sad. For sorrow, bitter though it may be to childhood in the first moment, is shed like tears and as easily forgotten. Oswald remembered with a diligently nurtured sadness that his little sister was dead; that he had lost his father years before. But these things, as reasons for present grief, seemed vague and difficult to comprehend. When, after some deeper silence than usual, he looked up to see the slow tears creeping down his mother's face, he experienced a feeling of embarrassment bordering on shame, and after gazing long enough to reassure himself that his first glance had not erred, he turned away his eyes as from some spectacle to which it was not meet he should be party. When his mother gazed into her purse and sighed, the act prompted him to recall

that they were very poor, and he reflected a look appropriately mournful—not that he comprehended, save at second hand, what poorness signified; for always he had food to eat, and clothes to wear, and sometimes a whole penny in his pocket to spend. Between him and the outer world his mother intervened; its shrill blasts reached him only through the thickets of her love—stirring her solicitude above him, like the raging wind subdued to soporific faintness in the topmost branches of tall forest trees.

But he was aware, since little Beryl's death, that a hush had fallen over life, as if each day were Sunday. Their voices had never quite regained their old brightness; and if ever Oswald broke into song upon the stairs, he checked himself at once with a sense of guilt. He was aware, too, that something secret and impalpable, something like a tissue of the finest gauze, wrapped him to his mother in a new relationship of love. He was aware that he had grown more precious to her since Beryl's death, and though he did his utmost to dissimulate unworthy feelings, the boy in him could not ignore the proud consequences resulting from this increase in his value. Yes. He meant more to his mother; she leaned on him. She looked to him; he found her eyes upon him set in a gaze of worship and admiration ... and he experienced the tremble of pride trying prodigiously to be humble; of an elation struggling to be duly sad. And though he was sensible of the restraint imposed upon his youth by the necessity to act this graver part, and though—from time to time—his impulses broke out and traitorously betrayed him; the weeks that passed since Beryl's death enfolded his life in a sort of sanctified and golden glamour. The supernatural softness of his mother's voice and eyes; the religious sublimity of his own behaviour which, as a detached spectator, he took occasion to admire from time to time, marvelling at the heights of righteousness his conduct reached—without effort or

conscious striving, but by a kind of natural aptitude as if he had (indeed) a genius for being good. He would say "Yes, mother," "No, mother" and "If you please, mother" in such tones as he knew she loved to hear; and walked upstairs with a tread so considerate of the hallowed home he lived in, and of his mother's feelings, as brought the blush of self-appraisement to his brow. He did—like most of us—the things that capture praise, and it was a joy to him to live in a world where goodness found such prompt appreciation and such ineffable reward. Nay, he even reached that pinnacle of exalted attainment where he was able to commiserate inferior humanity, and ask how men could ever stoop to sin at all, with such incentive to be virtuous.

Although Oswald possessed the quick eye and instantaneous observance of outward things that is the heritage of healthy youth, he had as yet acquired no skill at all in the art of translation from the open page of life and drawing inference from fact. Thus, the visits of the burly Councillor had (to him) meant nothing more than what, externally, they seemed to be. And when his mother disclosed at length the full significance of what the Councillor's comings stood for, the intelligence seemed at first too vast to be packed into the small compass of his childish mind. Nor could he comprehend how it came to be that his mother wept over him in imparting the prodigious news, and clasped him to her heart, and implored him "never ... never to forget his own dear father." But already he had arrived at the stage of understanding which accepts as fact that feminine tears mean different things at different times, and that they are not always to be taken as implying pain and grief alone, but stand sometimes for joys and prides, and feelings too remote for words, and memories which no speech can adequately represent. He was too young, as yet, to scorn his mother's tears; he held them rather in a mute respect as emblems of a wisdom higher

than his own. His youth felt vaguely conscious of its inability to read or understand them. Nor was the announcement with which they were accompanied much more comprehensible to his mind. At first the tidings spread over his intelligence and clouded his present melancholy happiness in life like a great sad cloud. But little by little, gathering reassurance from his mother's voice, and mollified by the extra love which she pressed on his acceptance, as if it had been a tempting slice of birthday cake, he began to recover confidence. Those changes that older people stand in dread of show friendly to the heart of youth. His quick eye saw a hundred possibilities in this wonderful event disclosed to him, and his tongue—seeking after enlightenment—betrayed too clearly to his mother's ears the eagerness within him. What? Did it mean that they were going to leave their present home? Did it mean that they were both of them to go and live at Rockery House, overlooking the Town Acres, upon the Hunmouth Road?

It hurt her, as she had foreknown it would, to find how greedily her son's words grasped after these new possibilities in life, and she asked him with reproachful sadness in her tones: Would he be glad to leave this house ... that had been home to them for so long? The tone and the phrasing of her question were not lost upon him, and he dropped his head. No. He would not be glad. He would be sorry ... for some things.—But were they really going to leave it, all the same? Were they, mother?

Yes. They were going to leave it.

And were they going to live in Councillor Burford's big house?

She said "Yes...." and closed her eyes.

Only one consideration shadowed his eager face with doubt.

Would Miss Burford live there too? And when his

mother reassured him: “No, dear,” he drew a deep breath. Little by little his keen imagination attached itself to the project. Just as his mother did—unknown to him—though with infinitely more success, he tuned his mind to the impending change. The first stupefaction gave place to zeal, to enthusiasm, to pride. When the big Councillor called one day, and—having first enquired of Mrs. Holmroyd: “Have you got him told yet, ma’am?” and being assured she had—took Oswald by the sleeve and asked him: “Well my lad! What do you think of me for your new father?” Oswald’s bosom swelled with a vast importance. He began to experience a pride in this great new acquisition to the family prestige. Yes. He began to be proud that this big, broad man with the grey beard and the authoritative voice, and substantial square-toed, well-blacked boots, was soon to be his second father. The thought of the shop in High Gate, with the two bowed windows and the big tea canisters and the abysmal bottles of boiled sweets, coated inside with their delectable sugary bloom, and the assistants in their white aprons and uprolled sleeves—filled him with fervour. His youthful ardours, playing about the thought of it, imbued the shop with unsuspected marvels. The magic of accessibility threw it into a terrific light. He began to conceive a passion for grocery and all pertaining to it. And then, the splendid house along the Hunmouth Road, approachable through a cast-iron gate with a corrugated handle; and the impressive Mansion House where Councillor Burford walked in and out with perfect freedom, and showed his head above the moreen curtains in the Council Chamber. All these things were, in a sense, secured to him by a sudden change in the decree of providence, as inexplicable as it was welcome. His only fear began to be that providence might change its mind and cause something—as inexplicable and unexpected as what had already taken place—to bring his hopes to naught. He would wake up in the morning with an

awful fear that destiny had changed direction in the night; that this radiant vision of stepfathers and groceries had been destroyed. And he would scan his mother's face with dread to find the confirmation of his fears—asking her at length, if its testimony seemed inconclusive: "Are we ... still going to live there?" He did not know—how could he—that his obvious eagerness for the change herself so greatly dreaded, made her martyrdom the more. For she could not disclose to her son the sheer mainspring of necessity that moved her. She could not tell him that what brought such joy and interest to his thoughtless youth, was, in some sort, the crucifixion of his mother's soul. And against his boyish pride in the acquisition of a stepfather, and his ill-concealed enthusiasm for the shop in High Gate, and all that pertained to it, she had no word to say. This act of choice was hers, not his. But it hurt her. Oh, it cut and hurt her to be the recipient of his unguarded confidences; to note the pride that got the better of his tongue; to mark his readiness to leave this home; his impatience to be associated with all that mortified her.

If only her resources had permitted it, she would have striven to keep the evil indefinitely at bay. But she perceived with something akin to desperation, that her slender store was trickling to its end—with that illusory acceleration which marks the passing of the last grains of sand through the neck of the hourglass. If she delayed the inevitable day too long, its evil would be but the more. Not as a pauper, surely, could her pride consent to be the wife of Mr. Burford. All her self-respect recoiled from the necessity to disclose her straitened circumstances to him, or undergo—perforce—the degradation of his aid. And so, when the Councillor attacked the subject of their marriage in a more practical vein, saying to Mrs. Holmroyd: "Now ma'am. Surely I've given you time enough to think things over and get your mind prepared. Don't you think we might be settling our plans and getting things in motion?

When people of our age decides upon a step like this, there's no call for long delays. At our time of life long engagements seem ridic'lous, and exposes us to folks's laughter. I propose ma'am, that we should push our plans forward without delay, and get comfortably settled."

... So when the Councillor spoke thus, standing in his overcoat on Mrs. Holmroyd's hearthrug, with his broad shoulders to the grate, and his square felt hat, brim uppermost, upon the table, she could only tremble with an inward spasm of alarm, and keep silence for fear the spoken word might injure prudence and betray her into the power of her own weakness.

"Well ma'am?" the Councillor urged her. "Don't you see the force of my argument? Don't you think, so long as we've made up our minds to get married, that it'll be wiser for us both to waste no time, but get the whole business over and done with, and settle down comfortable? Life won't last for ever, ma'am, for either of us. There's nothing in the world to wait for, that I can see. Me and you'll be older; that's all."

It was the last of her resistance. She took no further stand against his wish. After all, her pride had enjoyed the poor comfort of submitting to his persuasions; it had been spared the pressure of necessity. The only time she asked for now was just such time as might be necessary to wind off the skein of the Spring Bank Gardens life and free herself from the obligations of her present home. As for the furniture....

"Why, you won't need that now, ma'am," the Councillor decided, passing his practical, business eye over the effects displayed to view, in one comprehensive and depreciatory glance that made Mrs. Holmroyd's heart beat faster.

"Not need it?" she stammered weakly, not daring for very shame to champion what his eyes and voice had so emphatically disparaged.

"There's as much furniture as ever you'll want, and as good (I venture to say) up yonder, ma'am. You won't want to encumber yourself with a lot of old rubbish—even if there was room for it at the other end. But there isn't."

She looked and listened with a face of white dismay, but the Councillor was too preoccupied with his task of bland dispraisement to note the havoc wrought within his listener's feelings. "I should pack it all off to the sale-room, ma'am, and be done with it. Not that it will fetch a deal—is that there table mahogany?—but it will be out of the road. You've not much upstairs in the bedroom way, ma'am, I believe? I've never been myself; I'm only going by what I understood Annie to say after she'd paid you a call one afternoon."

Against such masculine authority she dared not pit herself. She said after a pause, in a voice directed obviously to his better feelings,—a voice of veiled imploration:

"These things are of old association. For me ... they have a sentimental value."

"Aye, ma'am, sentiment!" the Councillor concurred, in an indulgent tone which made her a present of the quality for what it was worth, whilst showing his practical contempt of it. "But we can't live on sentiment, ma'am. That's what I find in my business, at all events. Customers doesn't come to me for sentiment. They come to me for Value—and unless they get it they'll go elsewhere. What's sentiment when you look at things sensible? It's only a hindrance ma'am, if you let it interfere with practical affairs. There's individuals in the Council Chamber, and as many more outside it, that talks sentiment to hide their lack of common sense. 'Don't remove such and such a pump,' they say. 'It's stood there since I was a lad.' 'Aye,' says I, 'and what use is it now that every house has water laid on to its kitchen? I'll wager not a bucketful's been drawn by anybody this past two years. Folks has grown a deal too

proud to be seen fetching *their* water from a pump in public. They'll only condescend, nowadays, to go out to fetch beer.' Take my advice ma'am, and don't give way to sentiment. It doesn't pay."

She protested: "Oh, Mr. Burford.... You do not surely mean all you say. This pianoforte ... I used to practise on it as a girl. My mother...." She could say no more, for many memories choked the source of speech, and she turned away her head to hide the tears.

"Why ma'am," said the Councillor, embarrassed by this unexpected sequel to a harangue whose delivery had impressed him not a little, as serving to give his future wife a hint of the eloquent common-sense her husband-elect was able to disseminate upon occasion. "I wasn't referring to the piano, particular. I was speaking general, you understand. So far as the piano goes".... He bent on it an eye of judicial condescension," ... I won't say but what we can't find room for that."

She plucked up courage to thank him. "Indeed, I hope so. I should be most grateful ..." and linked the table quickly to the favour granted, and some of the pictures, and the mirror....

"To be sure ... to be sure," the Councillor accorded. "We can find a place for a few old odds and ends, on which you set particular store. But ..." he crimped his brow and turned it about the four walls of the room as if to suggest the difficulty of the task she set him. "I hope you'll be reasonable, ma'am, and bring no more than what there's room for. Such things as carpets and window curtains and slates and schoolbooks would be best got rid of. They'd only be lumber where they're going to." This she did not contest. Its material truth was too patent to be argued. And yet, for her, even the humblest objects that had once formed part of her home; nay, had formed the outer portion of her very self (as to Mrs. Holmroyd it seemed), had a value almost individual. They were,—so she had

sometimes phrased it to her inner ear, “the soul’s anchorage”; something by which in hours of grief and moments of adversity she could stabilize the violent fluctuations of self and feel unchanged by reason of the companionship of things long known. To enter this strange man’s house with no reminders of the old life left, was to break association with the past. He forfeited nothing. His home, his shop, his daily round—all the familiar extensions of himself remained unchanged. He gained a wife; he gave up nothing of environment. She, on the contrary, must needs lose all, or most, and find what comfort she could amid surroundings strange and storyless. Little by little (so she felt) her life was being outstripped. That part of it in which her dearest thoughts resided was being put off like a skin. Soon she would acquire a fresh integument showing nothing of the old pattern.

Slowly she would begin to take on the character of her new surroundings; assume the hue; absorb into her inmost self the tincture of the strange life entered. Nay! “God forbid!” her conscience cried out loud within her. Through all, in spite of all, must she cling with passionate allegiance to that earlier self with all its sacred memories and obligations. That was the nature of the reverie into which her thoughts dipped swiftly, with the swiftness of a swallow on the wing, as she stood in the little Spring Bank Gardens parlour confronting her future husband. Some of his words in her abstraction she failed to hear, but she returned to consciousness of his voice. He was asking her to “call round to-morrow, ma’am, and take a look at the house. It’s time you did. I venture to think there’s not much you’ll find—or seek—to alter. But you’re going to be mistress, and it’s only right you should have a voice in things. I’ll tell you quite straightforward that I’m a man that doesn’t care for a bit more change than there’s any reason for. The house has suited me well enough for twenty years—and I believe I know you well enough by

this time, ma'am, to think it will suit *you*. With all her faults Annie was a good housekeeper. She overdid it, we all know. She's been spring-cleaning ever since I let her know that things was settled betwixt us. She says she's not going to have you come into the place and cry shame on her, and you shan't be able to throw the dust of the house after her when she's gone. She won't be there to-morrow, ma'am. That's why I should like you to call then, if quite convenient. She'll be going to stay with her Aunt Matilda after awhile."

" ... Yes. I'll tell you quite straightforward that I'm a man that doesn't care for a bit more change than there's any reason for." The phrase sank deep into her consciousness. She, the woman, was being asked to change her name, her home, her habits, everything. He, the man of business, who had no use for sentiment, was yet bound tight enough to institutions by a something not more rational than sentiment, albeit of a tempered hardness and dignified with a sterner name. Through his marked desire to gratify and please her, his deference to her feelings, his obvious care to misrepresent himself to her in nothing, but to take his stand on the uncompromising pedestal of common-sense—she yet divined more clearly, the closer she approached to it, the narrow nature of the life awaiting her.

2

To nobody in Daneborough did Mrs. Holmroyd shrink from making the disclosure of her impending marriage more than to Elizabeth. She shirked it so effectually in fact, that Elizabeth spared her all initiative by bringing the news to her own door, where—on entering—she flung dramatic hands to heaven, and cried with the emotional fervour that agitated her withered frame on the slightest occasion:

"Oh missus! And you never told me!"

For Elizabeth it was a fresh evidence of the world's conspiracy against her. Mrs. Holmroyd had withheld the news on purpose. This deliberate secrecy was but part of a design.

"You've finished with me'm!" the old woman declared. "Now you've gotten Joe Burford, and will be Mayoress one of these fine days, you don't intend to have nothing more to do with me. You'll be same as Miss Burford. You'll be overproud to have me about the place, for fear I might tell the servants I'd a chance of being Joe Burford's mother if I'd liked."

Elizabeth's shaft—wildly though she sped it—struck the target if it did not pierce its centre. Her awareness of this painful convergence of their two destinies in the Burford circle had troubled Mrs. Holmroyd deeper than she dared admit. What Elizabeth's undaunted independence had declined, her own extremity had accepted. She was oppressed with the humiliating sense of stooping to fallen crusts, rendered unsavoury by association. And she felt no easier in spirit when Elizabeth, harping on a theme dear to her heart, exclaimed:

"Aye'm! I ought to ha' took him when I'd chance. Lots o' folks has told me so. If I had 'a' done I should be living in yon fine house now, with other women charring for me." She praised Mrs. Holmroyd's wisdom, that would have been a lesson to her (she said) 'nobbut it had come fifty year before.' "I thought then'm, that I should be able to work for ever. Who wanted old Joe Burford i' them days, wi' his mucky aud appron and muffin basket? I was a deal keener to be free to earn my own meat wi' my own hands. But if I could 'a' seen then what I see now. Hands doesn't last for ever, nor eyes'm. Nor friends!" she added with a terrible gesture of despair. "Nay'm! Friends is the first things a body loses. No matter how hard you work, nor what you do for them'm, they've finished with you moment you begin to fail."

But her first energies of despair, dying down beneath Mrs. Holmroyd's gentle assurance of faith, welled into the customary tears, contrite and supplicative. She hadn't meant it. She'd spoke too hasty. "Don't *you* be angry with me'm," she begged, "and turn again me for what I've just said. It's true of anybody but you. You'd never act like other people, I know." And her tremulous ambition besought but one boon of Mrs. Holmroyd's clemency. "Let me come and work for you when you get yonder!" she supplicated. "Aye, do'm! You'll only keep one servant. You'll want someone to come on Mondays to wash. I'd rather come and wash for you," she cried, "than anybody in Daneborough." And her triumph was terrible to see when Mrs. Holmroyd—touched by the dread spectacle of old age warring, single handed, against the world—gave the necessary sanction. "Aye! I knew it! I knew it!" Elizabeth declaimed, in a voice of such passionate conviction as made the globe ring on the little chandelier; for she stood in the passage just beyond the parlour door. "I knew *you'd* stand by me. I knew you wouldn't throw me aside like Her! Oh'm! I'd give all I've got to see her face when I tell her what you've promised, and let her know I shall be charring up yonder long after she's gone."

" ... Make mischief'm?" she protested, in response to Mrs. Holmroyd's shocked admonition. "*Me*'m?" she emphasized reproachfully. "I'd scorn to do such a thing. It's not my way'm. But I shall be forced to tell her when she asks me. For she'll ask me'm. I know she will. It wouldn't be her if she didn't."

And on the next occasion of her working for Mrs. Holmroyd she brought the tidings of a terrible encounter with the Councillor's daughter. The big black shawl in which Elizabeth stood enveloped tossed like a thing alive, diabolically agitated by the emotions underneath it. She had told Miss Burford.... Ah! she had told Miss Burford things to make the heart of any widow turn cold. "Mrs.

Holmroyd is a lady ...” she had told her. “Which you never were and never will be.” “Mrs. Holmroyd knows my value a hundred times better than what you do. She’s begged me to work for her. Yes. I’m to get the place fit for her to come to. Mrs. Holmroyd says (this). Mrs. Holmroyd says (that).” All the indignation long pent up within Elizabeth’s bosom had been given (so it seemed) additional authority by being passed through Mrs. Holmroyd’s lips. Mrs. Holmroyd constituted the mouthpiece of all that Elizabeth’s triumphant anger had to say.

“Oh! if you could ’a’ seen her face then’m!” she cried, her triumph blind to the altered countenance confronting her. “If you could ’a’ seen colour she turned. Red and green—and at last as white as yon tablecloth. Oh, it would ’a’ done you good’m.”

Remonstrance with such uplifted passion was vain. Mrs. Holmroyd could only bow her head to the storm let loose upon her outraged feelings. All this, her impotent distress divined, was part of the harvest of her reaping; part of her judgment.

Now what in these days of encounter with such compromising realities had become of the Great Ideal?

Little indeed, it has to be confessed. Like some frail lantern striving in a gale, so many gusts and blasts had blown upon it that at times its flame looked to be perilously overset, if not extinguished quite. For no man cares to recall his better motives when he acts deliberately according to his worst, and a feeling akin to shame had deterred Mrs. Holmroyd from dwelling on the Great Ideal —being all too conscious of the doubtful nature of the road on which she travelled now to reach it. But the details of Elizabeth’s encounter; the judicial sentence passed by Mr. Burford upon her scanty furniture, and Oswald’s over-eager acceptance of all the terms and conditions of the new life, awakened her to a sense of danger imminent and real. The Great Ideal must be revived; the smouldering lamp

relit. She had been thinking (so her reproaches ran) too much about herself during these recent days to pay true heed to the welfare of her son. She had dwelt too utterly on the sacrifice which her motherhood must make; too little on the glorious object of it. That she must forfeit many of her own most deeply held ideals meant nothing, if she could succeed in keeping true to the one ideal of Duty. Surely all other ideals were—or ought to be—subordinate to this. They were all comprised within this one strict law. Duty was the more than half of love; the more than half of faith; the more than half of charity; the more than half of everything that made life livable and justified it to itself. For everything that love might do, duty might do. Less brightly, to be sure, but not less thoroughly. Nay, was it not the very frame and skeleton of love; the hard, strong staff that love itself must use to lean on, and that—in love's hands—put forth its blossoms and flowered like a living shrub? Let her sacrifice be complete and noble, not grudged and mean. Of what avail was prayer, so long as her poor material self resisted all that prayer besought?

... So the lantern was relit, and Oswald—not without some wonder and perplexity and vague disquiet—felt once more upon his shoulder the burden of the Great Ideal. For already, in his boyish mind, he had been disposed to give up his earlier pact, and every obligation contained in it, as readily as he renounced his present home—in joyous exchange for the brighter future beckoning him, and shining before his sight like a brand new penny. Already, indeed, he had completed his preparation to exchange the old Best of Fathers for the new. And his aspirations, tired of running errands in quest of a vague and indefinable Ideal had relapsed comfortably upon ambitions nearer home. The double-fronted shop in the High Gate to his readjusted vision offered all that the most ambitious spirit could desire. And to have a broad town councillor for Father, and to live in a house standing behind railings and

a rockery on the Hunmouth Road, seemed in themselves attainments so lofty that it damped his ardour to be told these things spelled not finality of greatness; that they affected him personally not at all, and that still his spirit must press forward to its unknown destination, leaving these splendours far behind. But with the quick duplicity of youth he hid from his mother's searching look all the more incriminating evidences of his culpability. Through his momentarily flagging underlip, and the tremour of his eyelids beneath a gaze more searching than his guilty eye could bear, Mrs. Holmroyd divined something of the boy's trouble, flinching under the burden reimposed. But he possessed the fickleness of mind that is one of the most touching attributes of youth; the prompt reaction to fresh needs and appetites aroused; so putting aside obediently the bright new playthings of his fancy which were his hourly solace now, he took up—at his mother's wish—the thumbed and tattered and neglected primer of ideals, and studied diligently at her knee the book he had believed and hoped for ever laid aside. And to earn the praise which is so precious to the young, he acted the part which he knew by experience that his mother most desired to see him play.

" ... And shall I go to the Grammar School, now, mother?" he asked, and she answered—after just a moment's hesitation—"Yes, dear."

It was perhaps less dazzling, this Grammar School, to an imagination that had once fed on the immoderate delights of flour bins and humbug bottles and candied fruits and sugar scoops. But he tried his loyal hardest to make the best of the Ideal; stimulated his pride once more with thoughts of grammar-schools and mortarboards, and sought to puff up his stature to the dimensions of the great things expected of him, keeping nevertheless the closest watch upon occasion, like some obedient dog that knows itself forbidden to solicit food at table, and yet builds terrific hopes on the beseechful moisture of its muzzle and

the supplicative brightness of its eyes. Who knows!... Who knows.... So thought this little boy within himself. Even hopes come true at times.

3

And now they were arrived at the last weeks of uncertainty and expectation. They were come, indeed, so close to the inevitable that Mrs. Holmroyd's misery outgrew all wish or effort to prolong itself against the evil hour, and was possessed only of that last desire of the truly wretched—to drain their cup and drown anticipation in reality. Yet despite this fact, so many tasks and duties called upon her time that—in her rare moments of leisure, when the true self could escape from the network of necessities—she even reproached her conduct with indifference, saying: "I do not feel things as I should. Surely, there are a hundred claims upon my sadness, and yet I never heed them. Can it be that I am become hardened; that my feelings have lost their finer edge?" Curiously enough, her apprehensions that had, at one time, filled all the future with dismay, were resolved now into a single dread of the marriage ceremony. She dreaded the ordeal of strange eyes; the moment of publicity that should expose her to the scrutiny of a carnal world,—repeating to herself, as though the invocation were a prayer: "Oh, if it were only over!" The years that were to follow seemed as naught by comparison with those few brief moments of publicity; that narrow, bitter portal of experience through which she would be constrained to pass.

Almost every day the Councillor's broad and well-blacked boots traversed the Spring Bank pavement, and after a prefatory knock his large hand pushed open Mrs. Holmroyd's door. The subject of the marriage ceremony offered a theme of close deliberation between them.

"We don't want no unnecessary fuss, ma'am," the Councillor had told his future wife. "Neither of us. In our

case it's not called for. We're not going into marriage with any silly, nonsensical ideas, and our heads stuck up in the clouds, as if we was young people. We're walking into it in a reasonable manner, and it would be a mistake in my humble opinion to make more of that business than what it is. Something plain and simple, ma'am, would suit me—and I venture to think you're of the same way of thinking."

The Councillor's "venture to think" had all the force of a behest. He used it, as Mrs. Holmroyd had by this time come to be aware, as an imperative expression of his will, and she had already assumed that secret attitude of mind which sought its refuge in submission. And though she more than shared the Councillor's desire for simplicity, the need of it hurt her none the less. All the dignities and decencies of what by right should go to constitute the act of marriage seemed lacking. They could no longer stand before the sight of God and man with that uplifting pride in the rightness of their mutual choice, and faith in one another. Not—as on that first, ineffable occasion—could she move towards the altar steps, sustained by love undoubting and undimmed. That love, she knew despairingly, had been given once for all. Such bridal veil as now alone she might rightly wear was the thick veil wrapped about her feelings, to keep the inner eyes from seeing the truth too clearly. For her and him—she realized with pain—the solemnities of marriage were a mockery. And yet, something in her nature cried out for, and seemed as if it could not dispense with, these very solemnities which reproached and mocked her spirit with the blessed food of which it lacked the power to partake. To his suggestion of being married at the Register Office, "very quiet, ma'am," Mrs. Holmroyd did indeed offer an emphatic opposition. Where questions of common-sense were in debate she yielded to his wish nine times out of ten without a word,—just as she might have laid her submissive hand upon his offered arm. But the higher

spiritual altitudes had come to be acknowledged tacitly as hers. Here, in a region of the judgment compromising no pounds, shillings and pence, the Councillor gave way to her with a great air of condescension and magnanimity. The mere sight of Mrs. Holmroyd's shocked face had been sufficient to make him instantly withdraw his suggestion.

"I see it doesn't exactly meet with your approval, ma'am," he said. "And I've no desire to force you, nor nobody, against their feelings. The Register Office would be nice and quiet, and I'm well known to the Registrar, who'd do anything to make things comfortable for us both. There'd be no sightseers let in to stare out of idle curiosity at business that doesn't concern them. But I see you don't like the idea ma'am, and so we'll drop it. I'm willing to meet your wishes in the matter. If you don't care for the register office, how would *my* place of Worship suit you?"

He referred now to the stark, stone chapel in Friar's Gate, built after the pattern of a child's house with freestone blocks in place of wooden bricks, and the alternative (it transpired) suited Mrs. Holmroyd no better. Already she had made it clear to Mr. Burford that their marriage must be understood to cost her no part of those religious observances to which, from childhood, she had been used, and to which both by conviction and deep association she was indissolubly bound, and the Councillor had said at once: "To be sure, ma'am. To be sure. I've nothing to say against that. It's sound and reasonable, and stands to common-sense. I should be sorry to interfere with anybody's religious views.... I suppose, ma'am," he added; "you don't mean to imply that you'd entertain any objection to accompany me now and again to *my* place of worship? I venture to think you won't consider that an unreasonable thing for a man to ask of his wife. I give you credit for not being bigoted, ma'am."

And she had said—though not without misgiving, knowing too well the dangers of compromise in spiritual

affairs: “Certainly, Mr. Burford. I should have no objection ... to going with you occasionally to Friar’s Gate.”

“People would look for it, ma’am,” he told her with a voice that had manifestly gained in courage from her assurance. “They’d expect to see us worship together after we was married. I don’t necessarily mean as a reg’lar thing. But as frequent as can be arranged agreeable to us both. As far as I’m concerned,” he said with great toleration, “I flatter myself I’m a broad-minded man in most things, or I shouldn’t have the confidence of the burgesses of the West Ward to represent them at the Council table. And I shouldn’t object to sit beside you at your place of worship, ma’am, on special occasions and so forth.”

He did not tell her, to be sure, that in the course of his private cogitations he had come to see in the approaching marriage a favourable opportunity to cultivate a closer contact with the Established Church. Up to the present he had been held fixed to his place of nonconformity by the force of circumstances. Nothing in his life of inflexible routine between the house, the business and the Council Chamber, had offered the least excuse for any loosening of the rivets that bound him (to all outward seeming) to the Wesleyan belief. And yet, apart from the strength of its external hold upon him, the rigid compactness of its observances into which from boyhood he had been wedged and mortared like one of the stones of the chapel’s self, the Councillor’s religious opinions were less dogmatic than the uncompromising attitude with which, in public, he subscribed to them might have led outsiders to believe. He had, at least, mixed with too many men and too many opinions in the Council Chamber and Mayor’s Parlour to be indifferent to the material advantages attaching to church membership. Theologically considered, the Councillor’s opinions on any aspect of religion were negligible; and it is not unreasonable to suppose that he

had kept faithful to his first fold for the same reason that many husbands remain constant to their wives—that is to say, for lack of the requisite encouragement to infidelity. But neither he nor Miss Burford was unaware of the stigma of inferiority under which their own particular religious body laboured in the eyes of social Daneborough. The knowledge rankled deep in both their bosoms, though the Councillor had wit to case his resentments in a breast of masonry, and show to the world a four-square front that seemed impervious to slights or envy. Miss Burford's resentment of the superior pretentions of church-going Daneborough was, on the contrary, alert and acrid. To collide by accident with the fashionable stream of worshippers from St. Gyles's was to bring instant defiance to her head, and sharpness to her nose and scorn to her eye. She affected to despise church-going as a mere outlet for pretentiousness and display. People only went to church, according to Miss Burford, to show themselves off and try and make the world believe them of more social importance than they were. "I suppose she thinks herself Somebody!" had been one of her contemptuous pronouncements on Mrs. Holmroyd, "because she goes to Church! I declare I haven't patience with such people. They haven't any religion at all; their worship is nothing but show."

Despite her breach with her father, she took care to keep in constant touch with him, for—though she had a daughter's injury to vindicate, she had also a woman's curiosity to satisfy; and there were many points about this monstrous marriage which her indignation burned to know. Despite her vehement protestation to the contrary she had deigned to accept temporary shelter with her brother and his wife in their narrow-chested raw brick villa forming one of a terrace off the Hunmouth Road, so recently come into existence that its nether end was still a sandpit and depository of builder's debris, the whole area being

impregnated with the odour of mortar and unseasoned wood. Here a bedroom was being slowly prepared for her under her personal supervision, and to all acquaintances she spoke of herself as being already driven from her home. She still slept, however, under her father's roof, and whilst professing to take no further part in the direction of the house, but saying in regard to all matters referred for her judgment: "Don't ask *me*. I don't count for anything any longer. I'm Nobody!" claiming to be, in point of authority, the inferior of her father's servant, whom (saying she never troubled, interfered with, or corrected now) she nevertheless found ample opportunity to interfere with and reprehend a great deal.

She had prophesied to more than one of her acquaintances—all of whom were quite willing to insinuate sympathy with Miss Burford's cause for the confidential rewards that such ephemeral allegiance brought them—she had prophesied: "Mark my words! I would never be a bit surprised if the marriage was actually to take place in Church. She's capable of Anything. And as for my father...." To him, putting the aspersion adroitly into the mouth of the world, she said, choosing her opportunity:

"A nice idea! Causing people to talk about you as they do, and saying the wedding is going to take place in Church!"

"Well," said the Councillor after awhile, in a tone between repudiation and contempt. "And what if it is?"

"What if it is!" Miss Burford expostulated, roused by the triumph of conviction. "Do you mean to say you're actually going to let that woman drag you where she pleases, just to gratify her pride and vanity?" She drew in the breath of indignation through her tightened nose. "You that's worshipped Wesleyan all your life."

"Is that to say," her father asked deliberately, "that

there's no other places of worship but what's Wesleyan?"

"Ah!" she cried, with a light of terrible comprehension breaking out upon her face. "So that's it, is it! That's what she's brought you to. If I didn't think so! You'll be going to church with her on Sundays before long, like the rest of them. That's what you'll be doing."

Her prediction, made in that acrimonious key, was not unwelcome to the Councillor. She had flung the gauntlet down to him in anger, and by a little diplomatic show of resentment he might with better credit pick it up and charge the consequences to her.

"Well? And suppose I do?" he said. "You'll only have yourself to blame, Annie. It'll be you that's driven me, not her. I don't know what sort of Christianity you call yours, but if it's the sort of Christianity one gets by attending chapel ... I venture to think I shan't get a deal more harm by going to church.... There's one thing, though," he added. "Whether a man goes to church or chapel, he doesn't need to ask permission of his daughter, nor of nobody. Wherever I go to I shall go to please myself."

"Do you call That religion?" his daughter challenged him severely, at a blind end for an answer. "Is religion pleasing oneself I'd like to know?"

"Why, so far as you're concerned," her father answered imperturbably, "it's neither pleasing oneself nor nobody, Annie. It's being as ill-tempered as you can, and trying to make everybody else the same. There's not more real religion in your nature than would cover a threepenny bit, and it doesn't become you to talk about other folks' religion, whatever sort it is, so I'm telling you, Annie, and I'm your Father."

All things considered he was by no means dissatisfied with this encounter.

"Well, she knows now," he complimented himself. "She can't say I haven't told her."

And the more he thought over the episode the better pleased he was with the turn his policy had given to it.

"As a member of the Corporation I've got to be broad-minded and reasonable. There's more places of worship in this town than one, and more feelings to consider than mine or hers. It's only natural for a man to pay his wife the compliment of attending her place of worship, so long as she's willing to do the same by him. I venture to think there's nobody of common sense can quarrel with it."

And in pondering the idea he found increasing satisfaction with this propitious opportunity to plant one foot in the established faith, and come to handshakes with the Clergy.

"The worst of nonconformist bodies," he told himself for his instruction, "is their bigotry. They're that narrow. Folks that's too closely connected with their own sects and sees no good outside them, gets warped. Annie's warped. Her friends is warped. I can see it now. I've been inclined to get a bit warped myself, and to look on churchgoers as if they wasn't hardly Christians. Well, I'm glad to say I've seen the error I was making before it's got too late. I don't want to meet a better Christian than my future wife. She'd be a credit to any Body or place of Worship. And if the clergy calls upon Us there's nobody will know better how to receive them. That I *do* know. And I venture to think they'll get no better treatment in any parishioner's house than what they will in mine." In such wise he held forth to his inward ear, formulating the phrases with self-importance, and listening to them with appreciative pride. And the more he delved into the subject the more sanction he was gratified to find for his contemplated movement to the Church. "I live in St. Saviour's parish," he reminded himself. "The church isn't more than a stone's throw from my own front door. It is common-sense to leave one's wife at the porch on a wet morning and then trudge another half mile under a dripping umbrella to Friar's Gate, as though

my wife's worship wasn't good enough for me?"

"And beside ..." he continued to himself, and to the other listeners in his imagination, " ... after a man's been married in a place of worship, it has associations that he's got to consider." Unconsciously he adapted Mrs. Holmroyd's terminology and point of view to his own more practical necessity.

"If I can go to church for *my* convenience, it's only right and fair to go again for *theirs*. I gave Friar's Gate its turn when I was married the first time, because my wife worshipped there the same as me. But it's not to be supposed that a man's bound for ever by what he does once. It isn't business. Customers doesn't tie themselves to me; they go where it suits them, and religion stands to be the same. I've customers from all the leading bodies, and it's no bad thing to show oneself well disposed. Church can do a lot for a man when it wants. A church-warden in a place of worship like St. Gyles's or St. Saviour's has a lot of influence, and is very much looked up to. By all classes."

And thus arguing the whole theological position, and balancing its pros and contras, he felt more than satisfied that Mrs. Holmroyd was a churchwoman, and that he had so handsomely acceded to her wishes. For the Mayor of this important Borough, close parochial relationship with the established faith would not fail to be a valuable asset; it would tend to magnify the importance of his office; give him a status not vouchsafed to mere dissenters, and commend him by his toleration and notable broad-mindedness to those more influential circles whence—despite the robe and chair and chain of office—true mayoral glory cometh. As he said to himself:

"I think I can venture to congratulate myself that things has turned out just as they have done. I've no anxieties about the step I'm going to take. Unless I'm very much mistaken, she'll be a great comfort and a great help to a

public man like me. She'll be just the sort of wife a man in my position ought to have!"

And each time passing the church that was to exercise such fatal influence upon his future, he cast a new and almost proprietorial look upon its grey stones, parapet and tapering spire, as if the sacred edifice had been a prospective branch of his High Gate business, shortly to be opened to the public.

"If only Annie had been sensible and took what's happened in the right way," he ruminated more than once, regretfully, in gazing at St. Saviour's as he walked to business, "we might perhaps have done the thing a bit more public. It isn't *every* day a Town Councillor gets married."

He indulged himself, however, to this luxurious regret without entertaining the least misconception as to the possibility of obviating the thing deplored. Annie being what she was (he told himself) any attempt at a wedding on the grand scale—even if Mrs. Holmroyd had been willing—might only end in unpleasantness and failure. And Councillor Burford was certainly too good a man of business to risk unnecessary expenditure for a benefit so problematical. No, no, (said he with resolution) let them take up their married life very simple and quiet first of all, and go cautious in all things until they found their feet and saw exactly where they stood. If this wedding was proclaimed too loud and open, there'd be many folks expect to be invited to it whose acquaintance (said the Councillor to himself) he wasn't so particular anxious to encourage. Such a function would have a tendency to emphasize his social circle and fix him in it; and he saw no reason to be fixed in *any* circle, or bind himself to friends that wasn't (strictly speaking) such particular friends of his after all. This was an age of progress, and with such a wife as he'd had the foresight and good fortune to provide for himself, he wouldn't venture to say *what* his social circle

in the ancient "Borrow" might ultimately be.

"If any woman can help a man to get what his public and private capacity entitles him to," said he; "it's Her. So long as she'll row in the same boat—and I have confidence she will—there's no telling where we shall end before we've finished. Other men's done it, and I venture to think I've got as much practical common-sense as them."

4

It was a significant morning for Councillor Burford when he passed St. Saviour's on his way to worship at the Friar's Gate Chapel, and told himself with satisfaction as he scrutinized the weathered fabric:

"Well! They'll have something to talk about this morning. I'd give a good deal to be sat in there, so as no one could see me, and study their faces. I daresay there's one or two won't be unprepared for it—but there's others will be took by surprise."

He was referring to the banns of course, which were to be published that morning for the first time of asking; a fact responsible for Mrs. Holmroyd's absence from church.

She shared in nowise her future husband's curiosity to hear the proclamation read, or to note its effect upon the assembled congregation. The mere thought of such publicity was so painful that she felt she would not dare to worship in the church again until the marriage was accomplished, and she had come to working terms with fact. She stayed at home instead, striving to evade the publicity of her own thoughts, and keeping far removed from the window lest any passer-by should catch a sight of her. She knew that the Councillor would be sure to ask her on the morrow with complacence:

"Well, ma'am! And how did things go off with you in church on Sunday?" and she would be at trouble how to answer him, for fear—in the effort to save two sets of

feelings—she might wound both.

... But if she hid herself at home, and Councillor Burford curbed a wandering curiosity in chapel, asking himself from time to time: "Well! Is it over by now? Has it been made public yet?"—Oswald, in his place in the dim chancel beneath the conglomeration of stained glass, heard the portentous announcement and turned his ear to drink in every word, suffused with pride to know himself the very son of the Widow of This Parish (as the violent elbow of his neighbour in the choirstalls notified) and to be the future stepson of the Joseph Henry Burford who owned the big villa on the Hunmouth Road, and part of the Mansion House, and would some day be Mayor of Daneborough and go to church and public functions with a gold chain round his neck. And he—through whose consciousness these glorious reflections ran like the sands through the waist of an egg-timer, imparting delicious shivers of consequence and urgency—he, the thinker, was Oswald Holmroyd, who had had the best of fathers, and was foredestined to the best of futures. Ah! it was a supreme, immense, prodigious moment, in which the very roof of imagination shook and lifted like the church itself when the sixty-four feet pedals stirred its pulses, and the Rate Collector lifted his nose to heaven and said: "Sublime!"

The newly married couple were agreed to have no honeymoon in the accepted sense of the word. To Mrs. Holmroyd the thought of such an expedition for the purpose of enjoying the dead fruits of this second marriage, filled her with inexplicable wretchedness. She would have suffered anything rather than protracted leisure in which to taste, beneath the artificial flavourings of joy and happiness, the bitterness of truth. For her part, she said, she would prefer to enter upon their new and actual life with the least loss of time, and the Councillor—who was never a very happy man away from business and the engrossments of the Council Chamber; and who had

himself opened the subject to Mrs. Holmroyd by hinting a fear that he would not be able to offer her much in the way of a honeymoon (ma'am) at this season of the year—applauded sentiments so agreeable to his own, with the heartiness that recognized a difficulty removed. Still, since convention almost demanded that a newly married couple—even of their maturity—should retire from public observation to practice the first intimacies of the wedded state, it was decided that they should spend a few days at Spathorpe, for the sake of propriety. "I shall have to be back at business on the Friday, ma'am," the Councillor decided. "That and Saturday's my busy days, and there's a lot of new proposals that needs my attention in the Council Chamber. I can't very well be spared just now."

The disposal of Oswald during this brief period offered some difficulty, and Mrs. Holmroyd had indeed cited her son as one of the considerations disinclining her to leave home. The suggestion, to be sure, was very gently made, and she laid no insuperable stress upon it, but the Councillor showed more decision in ruling out this feature of her argument than she relished.

"What, ma'am!" he said. "Why ... that boy of yours is big enough to look after himself by this time, I should hope, without no need for his mother to do it for him. He can't always expect to have hold of your apron strings. When I was not much more than his age, I'd begun to earn my living in earnest. Livings *had* to be earned in them days. You've got to think about yourself *some* time, ma'am; you've got every bit as much right to be considered as him."

He spoke with the comfortable candour that seemed to have only her interest at heart, and sought to let her understand that his wife-to-be constituted, now and hereafter, the speaker's charge and care. But the homily blew like a chill wind across her heart, and caused presentiments to shiver faintly as if they had been wet

leaves. It was just such a speech as, uttered earlier, might have weighed heavily against the speaker on her oscillating beam of sentiment, but until this moment the Councillor's interest in Oswald had seemed the perfect reflection of her own, and her hopes—looking everywhere for comfort—had presumed too much upon the semblance. He had taken Oswald by the sleeve; pinched the lobe of the boy's ear between a solid thumb and forefinger; greeted him with a face and voice indicative of satisfaction, and had passed judgment upon the boy's intelligence and natural abilities in terse but favourable phrases that caused his mother's heart to swell.

"He's a smart enough lad, ma'am. He ought to do something ... *some* day."

Until now the Councillor had appeared to hold Mrs. Holmroyd and her son in an equable regard, as if she and he were one and indivisible. But this hint of separation, as though their interests no longer were in common, but stood within sight of the parting of the roads—this hint disturbed her and made her voice and courage fail.

"We can surely find somebody to look after him," the Councillor said. He was referring still to Oswald and the question of the boy's disposal during their absence. "Why ... I daresay my son would have been agreeable to take charge of him for the few days we're likely to be gone—if it hadn't been for Annie stopping with them. One couldn't reasonably expect him to have 'em both. Is there no neighbour of yours, ma'am, who'd be disposed to take him in? It'll be ... let's see; it'll only be four days at the outside, and it'll learn him to be independent and look after himself."

Once upon a time she would have been courageous enough to tell him that her son's happiness was dearer to her than her own, and that she would consent to leave him nowhere, and in no hands, where that happiness was not likely to be secured. But already the influence of this

stronger sex began to fall prophetically across her mind like an encroaching shadow, effacing more and more of her woman's power to will and strive. The hope in her mind; the hope she had half determined to reveal, yet dared not, was that Oswald might be privileged to occupy the little bedroom awaiting him in their new home. It hurt and disappointed her that no proposal to this effect fell from the Councillor's lips, but no idea seemed farther from his thoughts, and she could not broach the topic to a mind so blankly unprepared for it. Had their positions been reversed, and this son were his—not hers—her lips would have teemed with considerations for his sake, but the Councillor's lips lent her no help. She said, with the meekness that confessed a hope renounced:

"I will see what can be arranged."

And before the evening fell she had made arrangements to board Oswald with the next-door neighbour. Now that her trusted staff of hope had failed her, she clung almost prayerfully to the alternative hope that the Rencils might divine her difficulty once again, and come at the eleventh hour to her aid with an offer to take charge of Oswald as on that previous, scarcely less melancholy occasion. And Oswald indulged the hope too, filled with rekindled ambition to taste afresh the wonders, splendours and soul-stirring kindnesses of the Organist's house; to look out of the lofty big bowed window upon the world below; right down the Hill Gate to the Mansion House, and to know himself admitted into the very sanctuary of the Organist's home life; a sharer in all its merriments, delights and glories. But no such second proffer came. Only—one evening—there arrived at the house in Spring Bank Gardens a fellow-chorister of Oswald's who had been given this journey by Mr. Rencil as an agreeable alternative to scale practice—two pupils (it seemed) having collided at the same hour, each being dismissed on a separate errand in order to make way for the other. He

knocked, after hesitation, at the door, and said “Hello!” to Oswald who opened it, asking, with a parcel in one hand and a letter in the other: “Is this where you live?” Oswald answered in the affirmative, and was revolving in his own mind how, with dignity, he might impart the information that he lived here only for the present, and would be moving shortly to more commodious premises on the Hunmouth Road, when the fellow-chorister pushed the letter and the parcel into his keeping with the remark: “Here! Take hold of these, then, and give ’em to her. Mr. Rencil sent ’em. With his compliments, I was to say. I wish I hadn’t gone for my lesson to-night. I very nearly didn’t. I should ’a been playing Reliev-O now.” With which he took his leave at a run, leaping each alternate step and thumping each alternate door with his doubled fist as he sped noisily down Spring Bank Gardens. Oswald, divining something of consequence in this unusual combination of letter and package, bore them excitedly to his mother, crying as he ran: “Mother! Mother.... From Mr. Rencil.” His exclamations and the sight of what he held brought the blood to her face in a swift tide that was half of joy and half of pain. Tears rose instinctively to her eyes for an emotion already apprehended, and her fingers trembled as they tore open the envelope addressed to her in Mrs. Rencil’s writing.

"Dear Mrs. Holmroyd," (the brief note ran, diffusing round about her as she read the faint, sweet perfume associated in her recollection with the Organist's wife). " ... My husband and I ask your acceptance of the accompanying small present as a token of our very kind regard, and of our joint good wishes for your happiness in the new life, upon which—we understand—you will so soon be entering. We thought that the little book-slide might be useful. I remember your saying how pleased you were with mine. My husband did all the woodwork, and I am responsible for the lining and the tiny silk bookmarker. We hope they will serve to remind you of us both, and bear testimony to our very kind remembrance of you.

"Once again, dear Mrs. Holmroyd, wishing you every happiness in the new life, which—we are both agreed—nobody better deserves.

"Ever sincerely yours,

"Ethel Rencil."

That was the letter, though she could scarcely read the wording for the tears that stood in her eyes; and Oswald eagerly awaiting exclamations of astonishment and rapture, constrained by this unexpected change in her, dropped his gaze and turned embarrassed to the window. The letter, caressing her with its tender perfume, as if it had been a soft hand, or a hushed, kind voice, touched her to the heart. For awhile she could only stand silent, wrapped in this atmosphere of human sympathy and

kindness; suffering a gratitude so deep, so tremulous, so poignant, as to be almost a pain. And yet, a pain of such sweet sorrow as to satisfy the deepmost necessity of her soul. Pain like this, sadness like this, aching gratitude like this.... Oh! they were nearer to heaven than mere happiness. In those brief moments life itself seemed little; love was all. A wondrous sense of the infinite possessed her; a sense of the eternal curtain of compassion drawn between kindred souls and darkness.

"How can I ever thank them!" she said at last. "Dear friends.... Dear friends!" She pressed the letter for a moment to her lips and replaced it in its envelope with fingers that expressed reverence. She had never looked for such a gift from them. It roused who knows what hopes in her. She clung to their unlooked-for act of friendship as the drowning cling to a hand, seeking the comfort and assurance of it long after it has saved them. If she had but hearkened to the impulses that surged within her she would have gone without delay to bear her gratitude in person, whilst yet an intoxication of thankfulness warmed her heart and lent words to her lips. But reason prevailed with her. She read afresh the letter whose first perusal had so flushed and gratified her. And again she read it, and as she read the earlier glamour seemed to fall away from the written page like the glow from an evening sky when the sun sinks west-ward apace; and where the splendour and promise and loveliness of friendship had once been, now was only the drear, chill light of disillusionment. Clearly could she read the words at length, with eyes undimmed. Their loveliness had lain in her own tears; her own emotions, long pent up, had only used this page of scented friendliness as a vent for their outflowing. Word by word she pulled the periods to pieces as if they had been petals, trying to wrest from them the secret of their creation. "A token of our kind regard" (she read). " ... We hope that they will serve to remind you of us both...." "Our very kind

remembrances....” “Every happiness in the new life—which nobody better deserves....” Yes. These sentences exhaled a delicate and fragile friendliness, but of the future ... not one word. They were phrases of sweet finality, laid like precious flowers upon a grave; tributes to the past, and to the happiness gone with it. This letter, this book-slide were dedicated to their dead, or dying, friendship. With the Mrs. Councillor Burford of the new life to which, so tenderly, their wishes wafted her, they had naught to do. Slowly, from that first great exaltation, she sank despondently upon her loneliness, as the sick do who rise ecstatic from their pillows to clasp an empty and dissolving vision.

She was wrong (of course); emotions, overstrained, misled her. The balance of her judgment was not fine enough to register exact distinctions. And yet, she was not so wrong; she had come very near to truth, in missing it. Mrs. Rencil’s note concealed much labour in its folds. Three imperfect drafts had gone to the making of it, and its final form owed not a little to her husband’s aid.

“Help me, Arthur,” she had begged him. “It is an occasion on which I feel that I would like to say so much.... And yet....” Her eyes sought those of her husband, to solicit his understanding without the use of words.

“I know,” he acquiesced.

“It is so difficult,” she confided, “when one’s sympathies are so deeply involved. I don’t want to say anything injudicious. But I don’t want to say too little. How will this do, Arthur? Listen,” She read it to him, and bit by bit between them the note that Mrs. Holmroyd finally received was written.

“Do you think it sounds quite ... genuine?” the writer asked. “As if it had been written in a spirit of real friendship? Or does it read a little bit stilted and constrained? Poor thing! I do wish she had been marrying

somebody worthy of her; somebody one could really like, and take an interest in. The whole thing is too sad. I feel as if I were losing a dear friend—just at the moment when I had come to know how deeply fond I am of her. I fear we shall see very little of her now. What, Arthur?" Mr. Rencil had not spoken. He had only gazed out of the window through the strong lenses liquifying his brown eyes, as though—through his wife's voice—he listened to heaven's annunciation of the first notes of a new anthem.

"I'm afraid not," he said.

"And I felt," his wife continued, studying the sheet of writing paper in her hand, "that Mrs. Holmroyd was just the sort of friend I had been wanting. A real, close friend, Arthur, that I could have placed all my confidence in."

"Have you no husband, Ethel?" he asked of her, with his sudden winsome smile.

"You know I have," she said. "But I mean someone of my own sex, whose friendship I might have enjoyed without jealousy. With so many women, Arthur, friendship seems only a pretext for spitefulness; it is like the cream on sour milk. The only way some women can enjoy friendship between themselves is by being unfriendly towards others. Mrs. Holmroyd was a curious exception. I never heard her utter one single unkind word. More than once ... her sweetness has been so irresistible that I have almost had it on my tongue to propose that we should call each other by our Christian names." She sighed. "Perhaps it is well that I never did. It might only have made things more difficult. What a nuisance all these silly social distinctions are!" she said, as though to disclaim a personal responsibility. "One feels so powerless. Why mayn't we be friends with *any*body, just for friendship's sake? However ... I suppose we can't. It isn't possible. So long as Mrs. Holmroyd remained just her own dear self—with no relations or acquaintances to consider—it was one thing. But as Mrs. Burford ... it *does* become so awkward. One has one's

other friends to think of. And the Burfords are all strong Wesleyans," she added. "Such narrow, unsociable, joyless people. They don't understand music, Arthur, and they look with disapproval on anything but money. You get no pupils from *them*."

"Still ..." the Organist remarked at last. "I suppose that Councillor Burford will be Mayor, some day."

"Yes. I suppose he will," Mrs. Rencil said, and she picked up the letter from the writing table. "Let me read it to you once more, Arthur, and hear how it sounds."

But Mrs. Holmroyd had no husband to appeal to; only her own, uncertain self. And doubtful now of all emotion likely to mislead her, she waited till her heart was cold enough to write with prudence. Even the mere transcribing of her gratefulness brought back a glow of mild unreason that she found hard to restrain, but at last the letter was completed.

"Dear Mrs. Rencil," (she wrote)

"How can I possibly find words to thank you and your husband for your good wishes, and for the lovely present which you have sent me? Such an unlooked-for token of your kind remembrance has touched me deeply, and I can scarcely say how much I value the gift, for its own sake and yours, and for the sake of the many happy memories which it will serve constantly to recall.

"Be assured I am not likely to forget all the kindness and sympathy which I have received so abundantly at your hands, and I shall never cease to look back upon this chapter of my life with a gratitude deeper than I know how to express.

"Most faithfully yours,

"Margaret Hester Holmroyd."

Studiously she had avoided the least allusion to the future; the least appeal to a friendship from which, in heart, she felt herself cut off—albeit, kindled by the gratitude that she tried so discreetly to reveal, she yearned to throw herself upon its mercy and crave such crumbs as, in her altered state, it might still be disposed to give to her. And Mrs. Rencil, touched though she was with the writer's gratitude, did not fail to note the air of sad finality; the tone of mourning for friendship and kindness of the past. She showed the note to her husband, underlining its significance for him with a finger as he read, and thus—on each side—motives were sought and countered, and doubts multiplied, and a thin, fine web of mutual uncertainty spun its divisive veil between them.

5

These last days were days of unutterable wretchedness for Mrs. Holmroyd. She had not conceived how terrible, to her, would be the liquidation of their little home. When the hour arrived at last for its dismemberment, and Elizabeth appeared in her black shawl as the embodiment of destruction—it seemed to her as if they slew some living thing. These tables, chairs, carpets, curtains—even the meagre fragments of linoleum—possessed for Mrs. Holmroyd a life and sanctity of their own. They were not pieces of dissociated furniture, but vital elements of corporate existence; each dependent on the other; each necessary to the other; essential to the home they stood for. And now, to separate them all by violence, was like the tearing out of tongues. This home, that once had been, and now so shortly would be no more,—it cried to her with a penetrating voice; she could not bear it. Worst of all was the ruthless fervour that Elizabeth brought to her task.

Nay! It was not fervour; it was ferocity. The old woman's very youth came back to her, regalvanized by this golden opportunity to indulge the long frustrated passions of her life. The hand that seized and tugged, the arms that lifted, were remorseless. Lost in the rapture of her work she heard no voices crying to her heart for mercy from this ravished home, as Mrs. Holmroyd did. Like a hawk, too, she hovered over the doomed house, scenting prey and plunder. Her predatory instincts were aroused; there was nothing so out-worn and perished but that it protested still some value in her eyes. She begrudged the meanest victory to the dustcart. To strips of ragged oilcloth—confessing their full wretchedness now that they were torn from their surroundings—old curtains, broken blind-cords ... she attached her hopes with terrible solicitude, demanding of Mrs. Holmroyd: "What's to be done with this'm?" with an anxious voice, and an eye unable to conceal the sharpened intensity of its longings. Nor did she once suspect, nor did Mrs. Holmroyd divulge to her, the sickness of the latter's heart at being spectator of this dread and violent defunction.

Not till now, when all the happiness and sorrow embalmed in the tranquil atmosphere of her little home were being dispersed for ever, did she quite realize how much it had meant to her; how great a portion of her life was wrapt in it. One strip of evening sunlight no broader than her hand, when it lay golden on the bedroom wall, smote her like a smile on the features of the dying. This bedroom, so often the repository of her earnest prayers, in its hour of despoliation assumed a serenity, a peace, a loveliness greater than her soul could bear. Thus, and thus, had the setting sun laid his finger on the wall when Beryl was alive, and Beryl's voice and smile, something of Beryl's very self were wrought into the tissue of this house. Oh! How could she leave it!

But the fury of Elizabeth abated not. With her brimming

pails and scrubbing brushes, her bars of mottled soap, and sopping floor-cloths, she moved voraciously about her work, diffusing a relentless enthusiasm that offered sentiment no quarter, whilst her pile of household spoils accumulated in its special corner in the kitchen. Hard to suffer though Elizabeth's distinctive fury might be, she was—at least—a merciful alternative to the horrors of the salesroom and the brutality of the auctioneer's hammer. As each doomed piece of furniture made its last, mute supplication to Mrs. Holmroyd's heart, she said: "I cannot! No, I cannot! Sold, it shall never be." And its sentence was commuted into charity; let it be slain by gift, but not by barter. "Would you like to have this, Elizabeth?"

"Oh, mum!..."

"I know that *you* would take care of it."

Aye! That she would. Be very sure she would'm. It should be stood here'm, or it should be stood there'm, in her little house—where Mrs. Holmroyd might be free to call and see it, any time she chose. "For don't think I shall part with it'm. Don't think I shall ever take it ... *you* know where. Nay. Not me'm! I think too much about it, and You."

Tears of thankfulness, like holy water, Elizabeth shed upon each gift in turn, and through the blessedness of giving, Mrs. Holmroyd's heart escaped the direr penalties of sacrifice. Her home was being not altogether broken into fragments; not altogether scattered to the four winds. Somewhere, in unstrange hands, some part of it would still preserve its ancient atmosphere of love. For of Elizabeth's fidelity to her new charge Mrs. Holmroyd never entertained a doubt.

"I shall look after them," she cried, "until I die'm. I shall be as careful of them as if they was yours. Oh'm! Nobbut I'd had these last year, I could have let splendid for the Race Week."

BOOK XI

THE SACRIFICE

1

AT half-past eight on the fateful morning, Mrs. Holmroyd left her home with Oswald for the last time. She dared not trust herself to take a farewell look at it, lest the action might deliver her to her weakness, or betray the nature of this leave-taking to unseen eyes; for though Elizabeth was sworn to secrecy, and had pledged her sacred word to keep the kitchen until Mrs. Holmroyd and her son should be far remote from curious sight, the discretion of old age is frail, and Mrs. Holmroyd hastened to put herself beyond its reach. A pale sun began to part the curtains of a mild October sky, and the morning air partook of both the freshness and languor of autumn, impregnated with the faint melancholy of dead leaves. Here and there a milkcart drawled its course, and the flash and rattle of its cans, and the milkman's whistle, accosted Mrs. Holmroyd's senses with a curious distinctness and novelty—as if they were familiar things noted for the first time after sickness or bereavement, recharged with that significance of which health and daily habit tend to rob them. At the corner of the street she turned to give one hasty glance behind. Already a group of figures gathered round about her door, recruited by the forsworn Elizabeth, who raised dramatic hands to heaven from a circle of rapt faces. But their curiosity fell without harm upon her at this distance, like feeble rays of sunlight, and in a moment she had turned the corner into the broad Horse Green. Her thoughts were busy and her heart was full, and she and her

son walked in a silence unbroken on either side. From time to time Oswald raised curious eyes to his mother's face, as if to seek the necessary guidance from it for his own demeanour. He would have welcomed sanction to display his self-importance to the world at large, and to reveal—through suitable deportment—the full consequence of this early morning expedition on which they were engaged. But his mother's face encouraged no expansion of the pride, and so he did his best to pitch his feelings in her key and find his satisfaction in a prodigious solemnity. To which end he tried to walk, and look, as much like Councillor Burford as was possible, absorbed in matters of municipal concern, carrying in his right hand the spray of white chrysanthemums for Beryl's grave with the gravity of a mace-bearer. As they traversed the Horse Green and came within sight of High Gate, Mrs. Holmroyd suddenly addressed her son, albeit without turning her head or gaze towards him.

"Oswald."

"Yes, mother."

"Just look round, dear. Do you see anybody?"

"Yes, mother."

"Who?"

"Elizabeth."

"Whereabouts is she?"

"Just at the end of Spring Bank Gardens. She has seen me, mother. Now she has stopped."

"That will do, dear. Don't look round again.

The spirit of Elizabeth, indeed, roused to a terrible pitch of excitement, had been able to bear no longer the cruel inhibition laid upon it. That she should keep house whilst Mrs. Holmroyd married at St. Saviour's the son of him whose widow—but for providence and her own folly—she might this day have been, transcended human power. This was no time to hold by oaths or honour pledges. And so

well had she bestirred the feelings of her auditors outside Mrs. Holmroyd's doorstep that forthwith, intoxicated with her own excitement, she hastened in the wake of Oswald and his mother, consumed by one desire—to reach the church before the ceremony should have started. And so did her anxieties play tricks with time and delude her tortured senses, that every second seemed an hour, and the wedding ceremony had taken place a dozen times before her stumbling feet reached the Horse Green. The sight of Oswald and his mother threw all her fears into disorder. "They're there!" she cried, staggering in her black shawl. "He's looked round. He's seed me! He's told her. And I promised faithful.... She'll never forgive me now! I've lost my charring."

Aghast, with one hand pressing the tight-clasped housekey beneath her palpitating heart, and the other nipping the two edges of the prolific shawl about her stricken person, she retreated into Spring Bank Gardens, where, out of sight behind the corner, she leaned against the wall and wept foreboding tears into her shawl. But tears were impotent to quench the raging fire in her bosom. She had seen Joe Burford's father buried. Should she fail to be witness of his son's marriage to her old mistress? Nay, not her. Let them do what they liked at her after, she should not falter at this moment, when so much depended. And like a bird of dark omen she hovered the trail of Mrs. Holmroyd and her son, trying to conceal herself from sight with the ludicrous deception of old age that deceives only the deceiver.

2

The spectre of Elizabeth, casting its fitful shadow over an event that should have been serene and open, and not (as now) furtive and perplexed, served to deepen for Mrs. Holmroyd the atmosphere of subterfuge and shame in which she moved. Her heart contained no anger against the

frail delinquent who thus broke faith and followed. In a world of Mrs. Holmroyd's choosing none would have been more welcome at her marriage than this old creature in the black shawl. And even now she said: "Poor thing!" and grudged Elizabeth nothing of her pilfered satisfaction. But such a wedding as this ... before such a witness as that that followed.... Oh! it seemed a shabby, sordid, loveless, hopeless thing. All these weeks she had been trying hard to learn a liking for this man who was so soon to be her husband; to learn it off by rote, as if it had been a lesson, and say it over to herself until by repetition it became a part of her, and conscience could forget how painfully the task had been acquired. And she believed she had succeeded ... till now. At the narrow junction of the Horse Green with High Gate she trembled under a sudden fear that from their big bowed window the Rencils might catch sight of her upon her ignominious journey, and she walked more quickly, with averted head. The thought of Joseph Burford awaiting her arrival at St. Saviour's Church, in a posture of complacent confidence, sure of himself and her; undoubting, imperturbable, filled her conscience with dismay. It came to this: in her own small house, in the seclusion of her own small world, before no witnesses, her acceptance of him had seemed natural and possible. But here ... beneath the open sky, before the eyes of the world, she was ashamed of her choice of him; of her husband to be. That was the sordid truth of all her shrinking. If this husband had been some other than he was ... some other such as she might love and honour; some other, say, like Arthur Rencil, smiling at her with his eyes of winsome sadness through their liquefying glasses....

Nay! At that, shocked into sudden horror and detestation of herself, she turned upon these thoughts and trod their sinful smoulder underfoot. Had she no higher sense of reverence and gratitude towards one whose timely worship saved her, and hers, from dire extremity? Had she no finer

sense of duty, faith, and honour, than to accept so much from him to whom her love could give so little in exchange? Within the churchyard, stooping to adjust the spray of white chrysanthemums on the green mound that marked where Beryl lay, she offered up a heart-felt prayer to heaven that she might be assisted in her loyal effort to make herself a true wife to him whom, so shortly at God's altar, she would take for better or for worse. Perhaps her prayer, though it could have gained no added fervour, might have been lengthened; but the ominous shadow of Elizabeth, perceptible beyond the railings, drove her inside the dreaded church.

3

Of all that marked the features of this marriage she was acutely, poignantly aware. Her senses sank on a sudden to a state of penitential calm, like some boisterous wind that drops at sundown and leaves a world that listens only to its own silence. The spacious dimness of the church, though offering refuge to her more external self, lent no comfort to the inner; it only served to emphasize her littleness. Here and there, in the central gloom that brooded between walls pierced with the violence of stained glass, she saw sparse heads above the woodwork of the pews; hats of women—though whether there for worship or from curiosity she knew not. They moved as she entered, and the rustle of the baize door multiplied itself throughout the empty church in whispers. A certain mild expectancy mingled with the torpid atmosphere of unpreparedness. The sabbath sanctity seemed gone; put off like a vestment. Only the outward features of solemnity remained, animated by no conscious spirit of reverence or worship. Pulpit and lectern dozed in their coverlets of calico, with the figures of last Sunday's hymns staring apathetically from their oaken board. It was a house of worship in undress.

From somewhere out of the obscurity of the aisle the

person of the verger detached itself, approaching Mrs. Holmroyd with the swiftness and directness of purpose. He shed something impalpable from his finger-ends in coming, with an airy, almost graceful gesture, as though he scattered benedictions, and his floating robes diffused odours of rappee and alcohol. Impeccable though his manner was, Mrs. Holmroyd's sharpened consciousness detected accents of a certain secularity. He bade her "good morning" in the voice of almost conversational brightness, and imparted the information that "Councillor Burford's sat waiting of you in the chancel. I've put him in Mrs. Bankett's pew. I'm not sure whether Mr. Todd's come yet, but I'll let you know. He won't be late, I feel confident, for him and me has to take an interment at the Cimitery this morning." With these words and a tribute to the favourable character of the weather, he led Mrs. Holmroyd up the church at a pace smarter than the one reserved for Services and Sundays. If she had been some client paying a visit to her lawyer's office (it seemed to her) she could not have been more sensible of the purely business air investing the procedure. The curious calm and clarity of her state of mind magnified, no doubt, the slightest impressions made upon it, and showed trifles more momentous than they were. For it is sure that the verger only sought to set her at her ease, and to impress his personality upon the bridal consciousness in its brightest and most helpful light, but Mrs. Holmroyd felt aware of a subtle absence of solemnity in her surroundings, as if a semi-surreptitious function such as this could not in reason hope for the full sanctification and blessing of the church.

In one of the chancel pews the Councillor awaited her, seated beside a large, inverted silk hat. He half rose to make way for Mrs. Holmroyd, shook her hand briefly as she passed him, saying: "Good morning, ma'am," in a voice depressed to the tone of the edifice they sat in. But neither he nor she had any word to say to one another; The

strangeness of their conjunction in these surroundings made them seem strange to one another. To Oswald the Councillor gave no sign of recognition, but re-seating himself broadly at the pew-mouth after Mrs. Holmroyd's admission, blocked all further entry, and Oswald—after a moment of irresolution—took refuge in the pew behind. In this atmosphere of speculation and constraint he found himself all at once bereft of the self-importance that had filled his bosom up to the present, and he became once more but a little boy, waiting curiously and anxiously upon events, with no very clear perception of the duties incumbent on or expected of him, nor of what would be his fate. It seemed evident to him that a ceremony which imposed such deadly silence upon all participants, and transformed so utterly his mother and the Councillor, must possess elements of gravity for which he had not sufficiently allowed. His ignorance had always associated weddings with bells and cakes and great rejoicings, and he found it hard to reconcile what he had previously believed about such things with this dread silence of reality. Not less than her son was Mrs. Holmroyd sensible of the oppressive silence of the church, as though it had no comfort to impart nor consolation to breathe over them. And though she knew that one note of music would have dissolved all the resolute compression of her courage into tears, she could not help longing for the voice of the organ to awake the sanctity that was asleep, and lift her heart from its bed of clay to some place nearer heaven.

An unimaginable time they seemed to sit there, oppressed beneath the weight of silence, during which she strove in vain to pray coherently, and the Councillor drew out his watch, and made the circumference of his silk hat with a coat-sleeve. The frigid aloofness of this uncongenial place of worship, so different from the half secular and reassuring air of nonconformity, made him ill at ease. And the business man's respect of punctuality chafed against

the least liberties with time. And then again, this feeling of impotent attendance on the convenience of a curate rubbed dignity on the raw. He was disposed to reproach himself with having consented to come here at all; he owned no sympathy with church ways; he would have done better to insist on the Register Office. From this point of view his reproach shifted to lay the blame upon a false desire for privacy.

"If Annie'd been what a man's daughter should have been by rights," he reflected irately, "there'd have been no occasion for me to come to church in a hole and corner way like this. This is no sort of wedding for a Town Councillor. It's neither one thing nor another. We ought to have done the whole affair on proper, business lines whilst we was about it. We might have had the Mayor and half the Corporation present, and who's to say under them conditions we couldn't have arranged for Canon Quexley to conduct the proceedings respectable." For a few moments out of humour with himself, the world, and his surroundings, he was even conscious of a certain resentment towards the woman by his side; but this he promptly quelled. "It's no use blaming her," he told himself emphatically. "It's not her fault. She's not to blame any more than me. But it's unfortunate for us both, as things has turned out. Very unfortunate. Are we to be kept sat here all day? If this is how the church conducts its services, such unbusiness-like ways doesn't deserve to get no custom at all. There'll be our cab waiting of us outside by this time."

In point of fact they were kept waiting little beyond their due time. Almost simultaneously with the snapping of the vestry latch and the sound of commingled voices, the Curate appeared before the altar, completing the adjustment of his hood, and the verger, inflated with a new importance, beckoned to them from the end of the choir-stalls. Even Canon Quexley's fleshy forefinger could not

have conveyed the intimation with more episcopal dignity. Oswald, sitting solitary in his pew, beheld his mother and the Councillor advance and take their places together at the altar steps, beneath the crude blues and cardinals of the east window. Now they seemed to be in earnest conversation with the Curate; now they shook hands with one another; anon they knelt, whilst the verger, standing in the shadow of the organ, watched the proceedings with a critical eye. At length the Curate ceased to mumble. Councillor Burford offered an arm to his mother, and Prestwich stepped alertly forward, and he and they and the Curate retired to the vestry. Everybody seemed to have forgotten Oswald, and Oswald remained rivetted to his seat in the chancel pew, asking himself perplexedly: "Am I supposed to sit here?... Will they come back to me? What if they've forgotten, and gone out by the vestry door!"

But just as his anxieties were becoming acute, the Councillor and his mother returned. They moved down the chancel side by side, the Councillor with chest squared, and right arm protruding awkwardly at an angle, and the fingers of Oswald's mother reposing lightly on his coat sleeve. The Councillor's air of caged discomfort had given way to a look of visible relief, almost triumphant, as if the now surmounted worst had proved less formidable than his fears. Indeed, within the vestry a great part of this ecclesiastical constraint had been put aside. The Curate had doffed his ceremonial voice and air, and resumed his suspended humanity once more, congratulating the newly-wedded couple and offering his heartfelt wishes for the length and happiness of their married life. And the Councillor, taking his proffered hand in a broad grip of friendliness that forgot already the fretful thoughts engendered by delay, thanked him "on behalf of me and my wife."

"You've conducted the proceedings most satisfactory, sir. I'm not a churchman myself, as perhaps you're aware,

but I venture to think we couldn't have been married more comfortable in any place of worship, and me and my wife's extremely obliged to you. I hope it won't be the last time I shall attend this church, and I'm sure both me and Mrs. Burford will be happy to have the pleasure of seeing you at our own house after we've got nicely settled down." To which the Curate had murmured with a flush of gratitude, as though the condescension were undeserved:

"How very kind of you!"

"Well! It's a beginning!" the Councillor said to himself as he left the vestry. "Since we've took the first step, let's go on with it.... After all, it will be more gratifying when one looks back, to think we was married in a church. The church has a dignity and standing—whatever some folks say. It hasn't held its head up against all competitors for nothing."

At first, so straight did his mother's gaze stream out before her, as if she followed the pathway cleared by it, that Oswald feared she would have passed him by; but as she and her new husband came abreast with the pew in which he sat, she detached her hand gently from the Councillor's coat-sleeve and moved to Oswald with a look that awed him. Her eyes were gleaming wet; he perceived she had been weeping, but there was a sort of radiance about them too, as if they were of stained glass like the windows all around, and an inward light shone through, flowing from some deep source of splendour. Before that flood of liberated feeling, of love, of tenderness and strangely stirred compassion, Oswald's gaze flinched and fell. His youth lacked the self-possession to meet and to sustain a look of such intensity. But he felt, as his mother's arms encompassed him, and he was sensible of the moisture of her eyes upon his face, that in some new way she had tremendous need of him; that her embrace served the purpose of an appeal ... a cry to all that was best and noblest in her son. And his lips quivered at this testimony

of her faith in him, and at his own uplifting faith in the goodness and nobility of his nature. There, in the chancel of St. Saviour's, whelmed by an emotion that stirred his very bowels, as the deep notes of Mr. Rencil's organ sometimes did, he vowed that his mother should never be deceived in him; that her faith and hope should never be betrayed.

Her embrace was of the briefest. She clasped him but a moment and let him go, and took her husband's arm again —with a slight gesture to Oswald that he must follow. Outside the church, not before the main gates but by the little iron wicket that Oswald and the choristers made use of, a one-horse cab was standing. "I'm sorry now it hadn't been a pair," the Councillor reflected to himself, at sight of it. "It would have been more in keeping. This desire for privacy can be carried too far. But me and her agreed to keep the whole thing very quiet for both our sakes, and I can't be blamed. We said 'a cab' and a cab's what we've got. It's too late to make any changes now."

By this time the bridal party was close up to the little gate. The driver clambered on to the box; the verger, bare-headed, held the door open with an ingratiatory smile. A small knot of onlookers watched the proceedings with the intent interest always kindled by the spectacle of other folks' affairs, and some rice was thrown half-heartedly by luke-warm fingers, that rattled with the chilliness of hailstones against the cab-windows and the Councillor's top hat. The Councillor handed his new-made wife into the cab; his stooping shoulders and broad back followed her, and Prestwich was about to close the door when Mrs. Burford's hand beyond the window made a faint movement of deterrence. It was for Oswald. Through the re-opened door he stepped into the cab with a growing sense of undesiredness and intrusion that caused him to diminish his small body into its smallest compass on the small front seat. The Councillor bestowed no glance upon

him. From his mother he obtained the reassurance of a strained smile. Through the window, as the cab rolled away, he caught sight of the figure of Elizabeth, distracted between desire to see and horror of being seen, who, wrapping and re-wrapping her tormented person in the black shawl, followed every phase of the proceedings with a face of convulsive mobility. Oswald's mother remarked the pathetic figure too, and a sudden impulse of compassion urged her to give one parting sign of recognition—that should serve Elizabeth both for acknowledgment and pardon. But the opportunity was lost —she knew not how—and the cab moved lugubriously on its journey. Its journey was, in the first instance, to the Councillor's own house, where a light refection of wine and sandwiches was laid out upon the table in the dining-room, as a fortification against the impending journey by rail; the cab-horse meanwhile jingling its bit before the garden gate, and the driver drawing solace from a cold pipe. Time, being limited, favoured neither conversation nor eating, and to Oswald it seemed as if the repast had no sooner begun than the Councillor rose to his feet, watch in hand, and uttered a warning: "Well?" He had been cherishing the hope of accompanying his mother to the station in the cab, and of bidding her a last good-bye at the railway-carriage window, but the Councillor rudely broke the hope by saying—"You'll have to be making your way back now, my lad. Me and your mother's driving straight to the station." The words fell percussively on Oswald's hearing, and he lifted a face of instinctive appeal, towards his mother, but her gaze failed him; his look fell upon lowered eyes. For Mrs. Burford had cherished, too, the same hope as her son, but she heard the tone of resolution in the Councillor's voice ... and this was no moment to dispute a husband's will.

"The station is a very busy place, Oswald," she said, as though subscribing to her husband's greater wisdom. But

when she kissed him, he knew that her kiss sought to speak to him, to tell him that his mother's heart, at least, took no side with this greater wisdom to which both he and she must henceforth yield. And all at once, still carrying the warmth of her caress, and with her final recommendations ringing in his ears, he was "making his way back, my lad" as the Councillor had bidden him. He walked with his eyes fixed desperately on the shrinking outline of the cab from which, at intervals, emerged a microscopic hand, until both cab and hand were gone from sight, and then his spirit sank into a sea of utter loneliness, lead-weighted with the feeling of irreparable loss. Yes. A voice deep within him seemed to whisper that this morning's marriage had cost him something very dear. An element of sweetness had been abstracted from life; elements of darkness and bitterness infused into it; its composition was changed already; it could never be the same again. His secret heart began to confess a fear of the future. This new father, to whose acquisition he had looked forward with such pride —he was afraid of him. Never once this morning had the Councillor's eyes deigned to dwell openly on Oswald's inconsiderable person; that the boy noted. They had appeared, rather, to avoid him, as if he were some displeasing and unwanted object whose too obvious existence they sought to shirk. It was borne in on Oswald with dismay that his new father did not care for him; that he had never cared for him; that this big, broad, burly figure would slowly shoulder him out of the place he held in his mother's heart; dispossess him of all that his sonship had enjoyed under the reign of undivided love. And in this hour of utter loneliness his heart sickened for the old home, for the old life, for his old self, for the old familiar mother, attached by her slender fingers to no man's arm.

But the old home was on its deathbed, expiring fast. Only just so much life had been preserved in it as to serve their necessities over this momentous morning. By

nightfall Elizabeth's fury would have robbed it of its last breath. Now his comprehension, sharpened by distress, began to grasp the meaning of his mother's tears, and he perceived what it was that she had wept for. Oh, why had she wished to leave this house at all! Why had she not explained to him what marriage really meant, that he might have besought her earnestly to dwell with him forever in the life so dear to both? Immersed in a state of sorrow which to Oswald's childish eyes seemed eternal, his feet had brought him to St. Saviour's before he was aware. The church divulged no consciousness of all that had taken place so recently within its walls. Its tall spire, spun into the pale October sky, seemed to hold intercourse with heaven; the gilt numerals on the clock dial, gravely indicated by the creeping hands of gold, caught the sun and gleamed with a steadfast, holy light that made Oswald's grief the more discernible. The churchyard was empty, and actuated by a sort of need to raise again the cup of sorrow to his lips, and taste such bitter dregs as might be left in it, Oswald entered. Here was the path they came by, he and his mother. Here was Beryl's tiny grave; a mound of green surmounted by the spray of white chrysanthemums which they had laid upon the turf this morning, and over which his mother had bowed her head and stood for awhile with closed eyes. Oswald stood too, staring at the grassy shape through the single pane of loneliness with which his life seemed lit. Beryl was down there, he meditated, in the narrow place where they had laid her; deep beneath his feet, his little sister, whom he had once companioned and kissed, and played with. And stirred by a sudden impulse to test the silence of her tomb, and learn if—peradventure—his sister's spirit of a truth resided there and hearkened, he said, in a low and urgent voice:

"Beryl!!"

... The sound of her name, uttered thus audibly by his own lips, shocked and startled him, and he looked sharply

and shamefully on all sides to make sure no ear had overheard. After all, it was but his loneliness that cried upon her; she seemed nearer to him now, for all the feet of soil that lay between them, than his own mother. Oh, if his sister had but been alive to-day, that he might have charge of her and find in her sorrow assuagement and companionship for his own. From time to time, from the distant railway station, the sound of whistles reached him in the churchyard silence, and he said of this, or that, or the other: "Will that be it?"

Wearing always his new garment of wretchedness, he wandered slowly back to what—for want of any better name—he still called "home." Elizabeth (he reflected) would be there by now; he might obtain some moments of melancholy satisfaction in her company, helping to destroy the last remnants of the old life; any food was more welcome to an empty heart than none. In the High Gate he passed the Organist's door, and long and steadfastly he fixed his eyes upon its upper window, and very slowly did he walk—praying secretly that the Organist might emerge, or that some responsive face might show itself behind the window, or welcome hand make signal to his hungering hopes.

But no sign of life caused Oswald's heart to leap. All that seemed left to him now out of the wreckage of his once bright world ... was the Great Ideal. Aye! The Ideal. That was the thing to cling to. Let him build dreams bright enough to fill his solitude and make him independent of the illusive pleasures of this outer world. Let him make himself forthwith resplendent with high resolve and noble aspiration, so that his mother should marvel at the change in him when next she pressed him to her bosom. Let the Great Ideal shine from his brow like a light set in some upper window: a beacon and a pledge.

THE END

Typographical errors corrected by the etext transcriber:

blinked increduously=> blinked incredulously {pg 37}

vermilion poloneys=> vermilion boloneys {pg 38}

twenty years before rose up=> twenty years before she rose up {pg 35}

and and at the plate-glass=> and at the plate-glass {pg 85}

for the imformation=> for the information {pg 230}

conglomoration of cushions=> conglomeration of cushions {pg 236}

whose whimiscality seemed=> whose whimsicality seemed {pg 242}

no hurry extentuated his offence=> no hurry extenuated his offence {pg 295}

is social circle=> his social circle {pg 424}

One couldn’t reasonable expect=> One couldn’t reasonably expect {pg 428}

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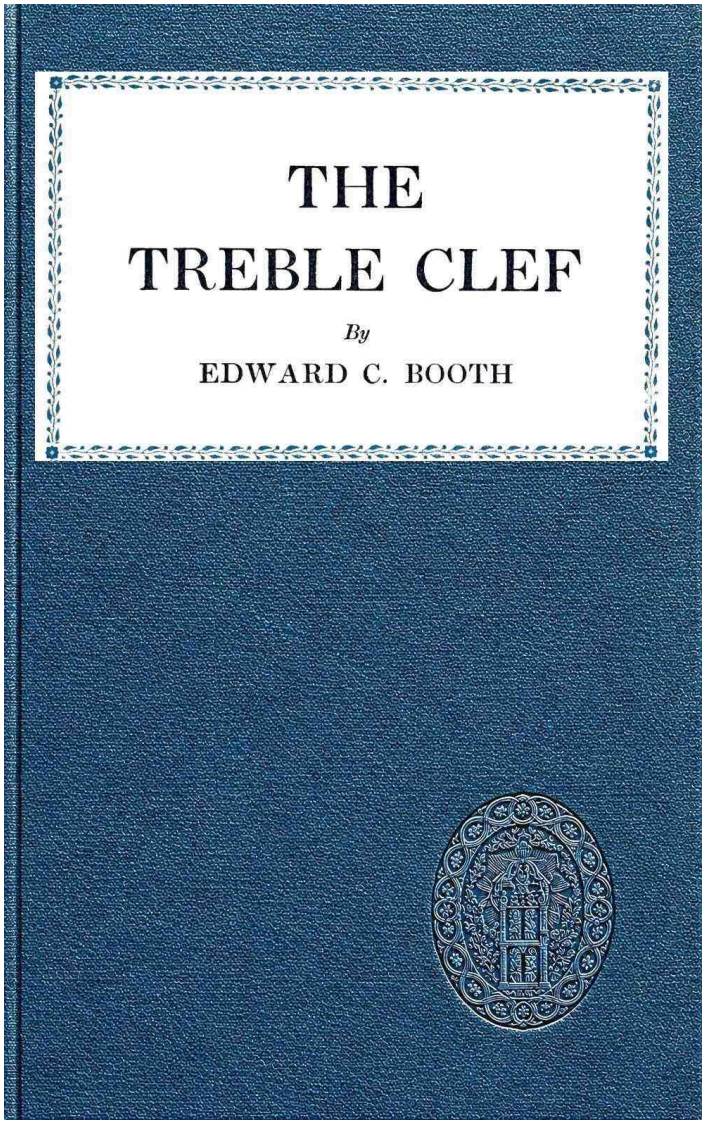
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