



RING IN
THE NEW

RICHARD
WHITEING

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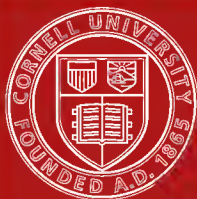
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RING IN THE NEW

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BY

RICHARD WHITEING

Author of "The Island," "No. 5 John Street,"
"The Yellow Van"



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CHAPTER I

PRUDENCE MERYON—Prue, for short—stood a beggar in the world at twenty years of age, with little more than as many pounds sterling between her and the deeps.

The news of it came to her, as it were, between sleeping and waking, or, at any rate, between sitting down to breakfast and opening a letter.

The letter was from her uncle, a solicitor, who had the liquidation of her dead mother's affairs in hand; and it came to tell her that, as a result of a long investigation, in the leisurely way peculiar to the law, she had but this sum left to her credit. To be exact, it was £30 17s. 4d., saved from the wreck of the estate, and shortly to be handed to her in due form. When that was spent, she would be without a penny.

Her father, one of a prosperous family, whose members had quietly cast him off as unlucky, had died in her infancy. Her mother, who had but lately followed him to the grave, had brought her up on slender means. This brave woman had, however, achieved the High School for her only child amid many discouragement.

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ments. But just when she was about to meditate an appeal to her husband's people with a view to Girton, she had been taken off. A small store of miscellaneous literature, a few articles of furniture saved from a sale, were the scant additions to the inheritance on which the girl had to begin life.

She was staying at the house of a cousin, when the letter came to hand. The reading of it aloud produced no particular commotion at the breakfast-table. The cousin—twice removed—had too many daughters of her own to have much sorrow to spare for the woes of the clan at large.

Prue, for her part, failed to realise all that it meant. The Bohemian father had been reputed a man of means; the mother had kept her own counsel for fear of breaking the spirit of the child.

In her sojourn with the cousin since the mother's sudden death, Prue had lived in the substantial comfort and honour of the paying guest. Having started fairly with these things, she had taken them as matters of course. It was the nonchalance of the kitten, who, save in the way of kindness, has never yet felt the weight of a human hand.

So they were all like a famous character, in being unaware that they had a story to tell. They had one, for all that. Their men had failed them—more than once in that family; and as the sufferers were the weakest link in the long chain of dependence, they had the most to bear. In this way, women are the characteristic figures of the unrest of the time; and any one of them placed in its most trying circumstances—say

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a little work-girl trying to earn her bread—might typify the whole struggle for life in our age. On the other hand, they will probably be the first to find a remedy, in the jumpy synthetic fashion of their sex. They may be expected to start illogically, yet to get there, while the men are only thinking about it. Without them, our perhaps too ponderous democracy will find it impossible to ring in the new for the regeneration of mankind.

Prue's equanimity was now shown in her manner. She had the cock-suredness of the high school girl, a peculiar product of our time, the curtness of the young woman of parts who wants to make short work of all the twaddle of the world. She was afraid of nothing, not even of her professor; and she had caricatured him on her blotting-book not only as a fogey, but as a man whose reign of intellectual supremacy was over. It was the form of foolishness natural to her age.

She had even a little discreet slang, not at all because she liked it, or even quite understood it, but because the high school for girls thought itself just as good as the high school for boys. It would have been pure drivel if you had heard it from behind a curtain; but when you saw the fresh, healthy-minded face, and the wistful eyes, still busy as with the memories of another planet, it had the charm of the tall talk of babes.

"How am I to get my togs for Girton, with a sum like that?"

"How are you to get to Girton at all?" asked her cousin.

"It looks as if you would have to take your coat off,

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and get a job at a pound a week," said one of the daughters.

"Stumped at the start," said Prue; and the tears came. As the true proprieties of the situation, they gave the face its natural beauty in putting away from it all non-childish things.

"Why don't you go and see Aunt Edom?" said the wife, dashing a drop or two from her own lids.

"I have not come down to that," said Prue petulantly. And, as might have been expected, she went to see her aunt next day.

Aunt Edom was the head of the family. She was of that higher middle-class from which it had declined, or to which it was aspiring, as you like. She lived in a great house in a leafy suburb, but drove in Hyde Park every day. Her back premises were fortified with the announcement: "Beware of the Dog"—"No Bottles." Rightly understood, this signified that the servants, like their mistress, sought the peace of the sheltered life. She was that peace personified. She was of the old school when the issues were simple—ladylike and young ladylike bringing-up, a fortune in prospect, a suitable mate in due course. Dignified widowhood might follow in season, and with it there would be sure to come, as it came in her case, the right mourning, the right respect for the memory of a life-long partner, the right respect for herself in a cheerfulness which was submission to the providential decree. A kindly patronage of less fortunate relations was included in her list of duties, and the sole condition attached to it was acquiescence when she laid down the

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law. Her ideal was a sort of Nirvana on this side of the grave, in the intimate sense of her union as a private person with the principle of pure being, as represented by a Conservative Government in power not averse to reforms. Nothing could have saved her from being the mother of the Gracchi if she had lived at the proper time. She had not the faintest suspicion that this agreeable state of things would require ringing out before the Judgment Day.

“And what are you going to do now, child?” she said, as Prue sat before her in the big drawing-room.

“I ’d like to go to Girton, Aunt Edom, please.”

“Girton!” said the old lady gently. “Don’t you think it is rather an American sort of place?”

“Don’t know much about that,” said the girl hastily; “but it is a ripping good shop, if you want to get on.”

It was most unfortunate, and the worst of it was it would have been so easy not to say it, if she had only given it a thought.

The pause was dreadful, and it seemed only to be prolonged when the old lady repeated, syllable by syllable: “rip—ping—good—shop.”

The pendulum of the clock did not spare either of them a single pang.

“That is just why I never liked the high school, though of course your poor mother would have her way. Just why I don’t like Girton, if you must know.”

“Aunt Edom, I am so sorry.”

“Oh, never mind me, it is yourself I am thinking of. Did you never hear of a book called ‘The Etymological Dictionary’?”

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“Yes, Aunt Edom.”

“I have a great mind to give you a copy to show you where you stand, on the brink of—so to speak. You want to say, I suppose, that residence at Girton is conducive to proficiency in studies. Why don't you say so? What is 'ripping,' if you please? 'To tear violently with a sharp instrument,' though I have not the definition at hand. Rather vulgar at the best of times, I should say; very coarse in this instance. 'Ripping!' Prue dear, as if you were a Whitechapel murderer. And 'shop'; why can't you say academy or establishment?” She shook a front of curls that, but for her respect for antiquity, might never have been in commotion since the time of Queen Adelaide.

“I forgot, Aunt Edom. I was thinking of our playground, you know.”

“Oh, leave that to the playground for the ragged school. Do you know what my gardener's child, a mere mite of ten, said the other day, and to me, if you please—I asked him why he was wearing a bandage over his forehead. He said someone—a school-fellow, I presume—had given him 'a shove in the eye.' Can you guess what he meant?”

“I think I can, Aunt Edom.”

“I 'm sorry you can't. Shocking! shocking! What are we coming to? A nice boy otherwise. All that money spent on the rates, and this little innocent sent out to face life with—with—a 'shove in the eye.' Never mind about being an M.A., Prue; let us see if we can make you a young lady first.”

It was the first skirmish between the old and the new

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—it must be admitted, with honours for the old. The result of it all was that Girton lost its chance, through no fault of its own, and that Prue went to live with Aunt Edom as reader and companion. So she made her start in life.

CHAPTER II

LADY companionship is one of the vanishing industries. Yet it was that, or nursery tuition, or painting in water-colours, or destitution, for women who had to earn their own living when Aunt Edom was young.

They all meant pretty much the same thing—absolute dependence, absolute limitation of opportunity.

It was Prue's business and her duty to study the moods of her patron, to be strong and firm and gentle when the other was sometimes rather the reverse, to have superhuman self-command, to know of no sinking of the heart on rainy days, to fill in with fancy needlework the blanks of cheerful assent, or of discreet negation, tempered with a deprecatory cough.

Aunt Edom liked to have the needlework done on a frame, so as to ease the process of transition from the tapestry of her youth.

She was so good, and so deadly quiet, and so lapped to the chin in all the proprieties of opinion and of utterance. It was the moderate and the becoming pushed to the verge of exasperation. In the land of her choice it was always afternoon—afternoon of tea-cake or muffin, of soft carpets, of the pet dog, and the British poets—none of them later than Southey—all in a row.

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Prue had sometimes to read from these merry men, or from the divines of their epochs. The last were for Sunday—usually Mr. Robertson of Brighton, turn by turn with Mr. Blair.

Mr. Blair was commended to the girl's notice as a model of style. Oh, the blank, unutterable dullness of his turns when they happened to coincide with a rainy day!

“The sun that rolls over our heads, the food that we receive, and the rest that we enjoy daily admonish us of a superior and a beneficent Being.”

Or this, which might goad the mildest of Hindoo converts to the excesses of a Malay.

“An elevated genius employed in little things appears like the sun in his evening declination. He remits his splendour, but retains his magnitude, and pleases more, though he dazzles less.”

Aunt Edom knew it by heart. She had wrought it in Berlin wool in her youth. She had heard it a hundred times since, without ever getting a surfeit. It was fixed in her brain by a process of iteration that was hardly to be called pressure: It was seared into Prue's.

Bath, Bournemouth or Harrogate were her variants of London. The same sort of apartments and subservient landladies were in each; the same southern aspects and cosy corners; the same doctors who never mentioned over-feeding to ears polite; the same apothecaries; the same warming-pans at the close of the exemplary day.

It was even the same round of walks or drives, for carriages, horses, and coachman travelled with them

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from place to place. With what longing the girl looked on the motor cars, and echoed anathema with her lips, but not with her heart!

The horses pulled up without a touch of the rein at the same shops, while the grey-haired coachman dozed. The same dreary show of life was seen from the same elevation of the well-upholstered seats. It was one of dignified use and wont, of prosperity, of the exclusion of all that was disagreeable from the field of vision.

There was but one flaw in her defences—the dear old lady dearly loved a lord after the manner of her race. Not many came her way, but one postulant member of the order managed to engineer an introduction during her stay at Harrogate.

He was a ridiculous creature who haunted the spas on the lookout for widows. He had seen that there might be pickings in Aunt Edom—to do him justice, not for marriage. He had begun by thinking that Prue might be her daughter. When he found that she was only the companion, he slackened in his approaches. Then, learning that she was still a relative, he advanced again. The girl loathed him from beginning to end.

She was wrong. He was not a bad fellow, only a sheer adventurer, and some of that tribe are the most amusing creatures in the world. He lived on the reputation of having a claim to an ancient title which had lapsed through the supposed default of an heir. On this, which might ennoble him and his any day, in the twinkling of an eye, he had married money, and hoped to marry it again.

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As a thing of real life, he had the simple tastes of his obscure Cockney origin, and the acquired ones of a really decent education. His good old mother, who had kept a lodging-house in May Fair, and had died before he invented his fantastic claim to the peerage, had done her best for him in every way. With what she left him he set up as a fine gentleman on his travels—always on the lookout for an opportunity. He was shapely—thanks to nature and his tailor. He could whisper soft nothings in three European tongues, for he never missed a chance of taking a lesson from the waiters. His first venture in marriage had given him an endowment for life. His motto—apart from the more formal one of the blazon on his note-paper—was “live and let live.” He had treated his first wife kindly, and she loved him and believed in him to the last—thanking him on her death-bed for never having once reminded her of her want of blue blood.

He now began to look for higher things. When he descended on a watering-place his first care was to get himself advertised in a local paper. In the smaller resorts this operation cost but a five-pound note, but on occasion he had been known to go as far as seven pound ten. The article on his career was all ready, and indeed in print in his valise, and it displayed him as an equally good hand at a sonnet or at a duel to the death. So too was a review of his book of poems each dedicated to a different beauty in a different capital—to Inez, to Coeline, to Chloe, to Elmire. The suggestion was that angry dons, or what not, according to the local colouring, enraged by his audacity, had challenged him

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to mortal combat, always with the same distressing result to themselves. These preliminary arrangements settled, he appeared in full fig in the public promenades, took a turn at the gaming-tables, or at whatever else was most in vogue at the place. He rode and drove in Hyde Park, lost or won a trifle at Baden or at Monte Carlo, prosecuted inquiries about suitable catches all the mornings, made love all the afternoons, showed himself at play or opera at night.

Then, wearied out with the labours of a well-spent day, he reverted to the primitive tastes of his youth, and, if it was anywhere to be had, sought the companionship of some fellow-Bohemian who loved his pipe and glass, and could talk boxing, ratting, or the odds till the small hours.

This relief was imperative to enable him to rise like a giant refreshed for business in the morning. Of all human pursuits, courtship as a vocation is probably the most fatiguing. We talk of the toils of the working class; but what are these to the exertions, of a nobleman who has to sigh, ogle, squeeze hands, turn compliments, work off impromptus in albums, look daggers at rivals, train a lovelook, and keep that and his padding in place, even in the crises of passion, for five mortal hours a day? What wonder that, when this was over, he would sink into a chair in the smoking-room of his hotel, and yield to the repose of state by calling the waiter "Bill!"

Prue had snubbed him so remorselessly that he had finally ceased his visits to her aunt's house. She might

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have been less severe, if he had been less than twice her age.

He took the check as Napoleon took Trafalgar, breaking up his camp at once, and swinging his entire force to a foreign strand, where an easier conquest seemed to await his arms.

The old lady was not pleased. She had lost an agreeable acquaintance, of whose real character she had not the faintest suspicion.

It was the first decisive chill in the relations between aunt and niece, and each felt that a touch might serve to part them now.

The touch soon came when they fell back to the old life in town without break or change. The girl had been left in the carriage one day while her aunt got down to give an order. She was found laughing on the dowager's return, and was sharply rebuked for unladylike behaviour. This time she answered back, though temperately, and was forbidden, with needless asperity, to say another word.

She could bear it no longer; and after a burst of tears, an untasted dinner, and a sleepless night, she announced her determination to take her fate in her own hands.

Her balance at the bank was small, but so was her experience of its limitations; and her confidence in her own powers made up for every deficiency. She was tired of the stagnation of dependence, and she longed for the freedom of adventurous toil.

The old lady, who had expected an apology, could

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go no further in concession than to say that she would wait for it till the close of the next day. It did not come, in spite of the good offices of the cousin of the opening scene.

“It ’s no use,” said Prue, to the many-daughtered matron of that family. “It ’s a new time for women, and I ’m going to do ‘something on my own.’” The momentary reversion to slang was significant as a cry of her spirit in revolt.

“The ‘monstrous regiment of women’!” cried one of the daughters, who was also of the high school.

“It ’ll come to that one day,” said her mother, who had not had her advantages. “Why not go into the Army at once?”

The daughter laughed, and nestled up to her.

“Oh, mummy, you ’re a bit off this time! Don’t you remember John Knox snacking Mary Stuart, and finding afterwards he had to reckon with Queen Bess?”

“I don’t care,” said her parent, mollified, but not enlightened. “‘Regiment of women’! women on the war-path for a job; that ’s what I call you all, with your new ideas. Prue ’s a silly little fool!”

So in less than a week Prudence—perhaps not quite happily named—had left the sheltering house with many expressions of gratitude and affection, coldly received by her aunt, and with a determination never to trouble her, or indeed the family, again.

CHAPTER III

SHE went into lodgings, with her own furniture, and made her arrangements for living with what she thought was the simplicity of a stoic. It was rather alarming to find herself quite alone, but there was still the sustaining sense of adventure and of her confidence in herself.

Her first care was to call at the "Genteel Employment Bureau," an excellent institution which had enjoyed an occasional donation from her aunt.

She walked upstairs; and, as she entered the office, the eyes of the women and girls in waiting seemed to say, "One more!" Some said it scoffingly in this inarticulate way, others only with an air of honest doubt. None had the requisite detachment of mind for pity. The sceptics were mostly of the shabby-genteel order, and were not above the suspicion of borrowed plumes. A few suggested heights of fashion, being accompanied by ladies whose carriages were outside.

They have a way in foreign parts, when you enter a public office, of taking particulars of your present and past states of being, in needless detail, before proceeding to business. "Your name? Your age? Your domicile? Your nationality? Married or single? The names of your parents?"—and so on. And when at length they suffer you to unfold the purpose of your

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visit, it is generally to inform you, with the utmost suavity, that you have come to the wrong pigeon-hole.

It was not quite so bad here. Still, there were formalities which the girl thought tedious. At length, however, she found herself in presence of the secretary, a shrewd-looking woman, with keen eyes, tempered in their effect by a kindly smile.

“What can you do?”

Terrible question for any human being, when you come to think of it. What, indeed, that some other cannot do ever so much better?

The catechist seemed to feel that. “Let me put it in another way. What do you want to do?”

“Clerical work,” murmured the girl.

“Ah, don’t say that. It means anything, and therefore nothing. Half the business of the world is clerical work, from writing a despatch to copying an invoice. Particularise.”

“Assisting literary men—”

“Can you write shorthand?”

“No.”

“Or use the typewriter?”

“I ’m afraid not.”

“You are too young to know your way through the library of the British Museum.”

“I could find it. I ’ve never been there.”

“Anything else in any other line?”

“I used to be very fond of embroidery.”

“Fond of buying it, or fond of doing it?”

“I did that,” said Prue, with a blush of pride, and producing a neatly folded pocket-handkerchief.

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“Yes, yes,” said the other soothingly, as she glanced at the little floreated initial, much as if it had been something from the trousseau of a doll.

“What ’s the matter with it?” said Prue; but only with her eyes.

“Well, you see, the paying work is more important—robes of office, curtains of state, military uniforms, backs of prayerbooks—there is a beauty worked from the pattern of the one the Martyr King carried to the scaffold with him. Could you do anything of that kind?”

The poor little amateur shook her head, and in the very nick of time. The gesture was contrived a double debt to pay, for it checked a tear that was on the edge of the precipice. What a hard, not to say a devilish, sort of world it seemed, where the people would n’t play when you wanted to be nice.

The secretary worked on the theory that, in difficult conjunctures, her sex wants “bracing.” Many women doctors notoriously act on the same principle, and try to snub their patients into health. There will never be an end to petitions for reprieve for female malefactors, until the judges on the Bench wear real petticoats. No man can expect a woman to believe him when he says there is no hope.

For the moment, the secretary seemed as odious as any spectacled intelligence in Mars, with no anatomy to speak of, and especially without a heart.

She was aware of it.

“I ’m not saying this to discourage you. All I want you to understand is that, before you come here to find work to do, you must have been somewhere else to learn

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how to do it. There 's not the slightest reason why you should not learn, if you have the time, and I 'm afraid I must add, the money, for the lessons."

Poor Prue was going to proffer—"My music!" but the words died on her lips.

"Think of something you want to do, and I 'll advise you how to learn it," said the other, with a kindly shake of the hand. "Come to me when you have learned it, and I 'll do my best to find you work. Meantime, don't hate me more than you can help."

The tears welled over as the girl went out: the two had met, after a fashion, at last.

She at once joined the great shorthand school, and took her first lessons there in script and typewriting, before she slept that night.

CHAPTER IV

SHARP on the stroke of eight came a knock at her door next morning. It was the servant. She ought to have dispensed with that luxury, but she did not know it, and she clung to the proprieties of her class.

And after all, Sarah Ruskill was not the full and complete offence, being but a domestic in fractions. She let herself out by the day to a number of persons who could afford to pay a little to escape the worst drudgery, and were content to do the rest themselves.

Prue was dozing when the first knock came, and she had not responded to it with alacrity. On a second and a sharper summons, she slipped on a dressing-gown, drew the bolt, and Sarah came in.

She was tall, and not yet in middle life. The lines of her face were hard as a bust of Nelson carved by a bo'sun of the *Victory* from the timbers of the ship. But that name is misleading, after all: it was rather the mask of a female Wellington. The same high build of Roman determination, Roman pride, the same firm mouth to close with a snap on a resolve; with only something soft and kindly in the eye to bring it back to womanhood.

“Sorry,” said Prue, as she followed her into the sitting-room.

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Sarah usually tidied up that room while her employer dressed, and then took the bedroom. She was silent, though apparently not from ill-feeling. It was but an effort of concentration on the business of getting from place to place in different parts of London to earn something less than a pound a week. All her energies seemed to go into her work, and she had become the most taciturn of mortals. She usually spoke in a kind of shorthand, in which leading words did duty for the whole sentence. In another point of view, she was sometimes as puzzling to the commentator as a hieroglyph or a fragment of the Sapphic muse.

She moved briskly about the sitting-room, and piled the lighter articles of furniture on the table ready for the sweeping. Then, while raking out the fire, with a handkerchief over her head, she muttered, in a momentary interval of quiet:

“Got to fit you all in.”

It was not enough to put the hearer in possession of her train of thought without assistance. Such assistance the reader, at any rate, has a right to claim.

It signified that Sarah, on finishing her two hours of covenanted service with Prue, was due at a small flat in the Gray's Inn Road. And characteristically, it took no account of the fact that she had first walked all the way from her own lodgings in Kentish Town, to mark her habit of thrift and her sense of the futility of the early trams.

“Three-quarters for two shillin's, five times a week.”

This fragment should present but little difficulty to the scholiast in its manifest reference to the terms of another engagement.

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"It is not much," said Prue.

"Every little 'elps," said Sarah.

Her employer lingered, as though in hope of further confidences.

She had to wait, Sarah was on her knees, dust-pan in hand, before she said anything more. It was not much when it came.

"Temperance hotel odd times—flat near Fitzroy Square—vegetables."

Research might have filled in these blanks as follows: An hour or two's work on certain other days, at the places named, or at the premises of a Vegetarian Society. Prue smiled to herself. She was trying to imagine a fellow-creature with such a vocabulary, in love. It begged the question. Sarah had never been in that state, and would have regarded a man, trying to persuade her to enter it, as hardly less objectionable than an inebriate.

"Eight if you 're lucky, an' more like twelve; wuss on Saturdays."

But a murmur at best, this was apparently addressed in confidence to a hole in the carpet.

It might have thrashed out on interpretation in this way, though the reading is offered conjecturally, and with diffidence: Sarah never reached home before eight at night, and she was sometimes later, particularly at the end of the week. It completely baffled Prue however; and her feeble remark: "Then you 've your meals to think of," was not much more than a confession of failure.

"On tramp," said Sarah.

We must once more come to the assistance of the

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student. This probably signified that Sarah took her meals just as she could get them, and mostly as she walked from one scene of toil to the other, on her almost ceaseless round.

Accepting so much, for purposes of argument, it must be owned that Sarah had the benefit of her exertions in more ways than one. She stood up now, and Prue thought she had never seen a finer creature in mere physical form. Her movements had the elasticity of a perfectly healthy animal. Her breadth was in due proportion to her height. She was straight as a dart.

She had never been so communicative before; and her employer had to be thankful for small mercies. There was still a good deal more to learn. Sarah was the passion for independence almost running into disease. Ordinary domestic service was intolerable to her. She wanted to know when her day's work was done; and she went out to service in this ingenious way, as other girls go out to work in factories. It gave her the precious sense of self-ownership, when she sat, if only on the stroke of midnight, in the solitude of her own 'ome. She had toiled like a slave in this great venture of starting on her own account. She held herself even better off than a work-girl. She had customers like a shopkeeper; and, like a shopkeeper, no one master whose fiat might mean "the sack," and destitution.

Her time was kept to the minute; and, with a gruff "Good morning," she vanished, leaving everything ready for breakfast, and the rooms in perfect order.

CHAPTER V

THREE months later: a clear autumn night and a girl scudding along Holborn like a smack before the wind. It is a girl out of temper, to judge by her angry call to her dog.

“Spag! Spag! Spag! *Will* you come here, or will you not?”

It was the third time of asking, and he seemed to think he had better get it over. He came, took the expected cuff, and then went on loitering worse than ever.

Prue was taking a walk, and had just left her lodgings in Featherstone Buildings, Holborn. The dead and gone generations that lodged there before her may sometimes look down on the Jacobean interiors, and think it might have been worse.

The girl thought differently just now. She was still out of work, friendless, solitary, and poorer than ever. The solitude was the most trying. Not a word in sympathy or in kindness all the week: only the yea and nay of business intercourse with supercilious clerks of offices at which she applied for something to do. It was usually “nay” in less than a syllable, “nay” in a shake of the head, “nay” in a titter, “nay” in a sniff. The sexes are at war in the labour market now; and well they know how to make each other feel it in business hours. The want of chatter, what a want it is! Overmuch

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mere "yea and nay" is as dry in the mouth as a meal of phosphates, and perhaps no better for the health.

Yet there was the dog, after all; and the everlasting compensations which are to be found in every situation, if one knows how to look for them, came in there. He might not say much, but she could talk for both at need, and prompt his share of the dialogue without troubling the wings. He was so used to her prattle of sweet foolishness, that he was wont to glance inquiry when he missed her voice for a quarter of an hour.

She had bought him at the beginning of her troubles from an old jobber named Spagley, to whom he was indebted for his name. By this person he was regarded as a failure, owing to an unfortunate course in his blood, which made him too lazy for distinction in the rat-pit.

In his personal appearance, as he now returned to his own devices, there was nothing to distinguish this quadruped as a being apart. He was a mere fox-terrier with faults. He had long ears, suggestive of the gentle life, and large, soulful eyes—a mistake, no doubt, in his breed.

"A good head," the girl had remarked, when she was negotiating the purchase.

"Yes," said the odd jobber; "and a good body: only they 've no business to be together. Wuth pounds instead o' shillings, lidy, if they was a match."

"Will he bite?"

"Would n't 'urt a biby—wish 'e would."

In other respects, Spagley seemed to have every possible fault of man or beast. In their totality these

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almost made up the full catalogue of the shortcomings which were attributed to the working classes in the days before reform. It might have been possible to denounce him as ignorant, drunken, venal, and violent. If not drunken, he certainly haunted public-houses, a tendency which his mistress could never wholly check. Venal he was, for he would do anything for a mouthful; violent in his mortal hatred of strangers, tempered only by fear of reprisals. In infancy he had once been disturbed at a meal: ever after that he circled round his plate while eating, and growled into vacancy though none was nigh to threaten his morsel. He had a hatred of company, of children, of unwonted noises, of innocent laughter—in short, though still but in middle life, he was a perfect fogey. In this way he lived upon the reputation of being capable of whole holocausts of slaughter. When spoken to with kindness he snarled—with severity, he turned over on his back. To put it offensively, he was the hoarse, sanguine coward and bed-presser of his time.

Yet she loved him with something of that perversity of regard that her sex so often shows for the monsters which the world shuns or abhors. And after all, he was still good company. She bore his part as well as her own in question and answer, observation and rejoinder, at times when, but for the exercise of her fancy, both would have seemed the denizens of a dumb world. They had talks to which he contributed even less than a growl.

“Who ’s afraid, Spag?” she said, looking down at him. “But you might say something to mis’ess, all the same.”

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He made no reply, but simply took the bone that lay nearest to him and trudged on.

But she was determined to make him talk.

“Mis’ess can’t see the way ahead to her little dawg’s Christmas dinner.”

Their dialogues were always couched as nearly as possible in the vernacular of his place of origin, Seven Dials.

“Keep your pecker up,” said the dog, very much as he might have done at a spiritualistic *séance*, with herself as medium.

Their way lay through Lincoln’s Inn Fields and by the Temple to the Embankment. It is a strip of that garden of the three Inns of Court, running like a wedge of verdure from Gray’s Inn to the river which is not to be surpassed in any capital in the world. The beginning of a garden city for London, it may one day be.

At the lower end of it came the Thames in the perfect beauty of an autumn evening. On one side—the side of the palaces—the casuals were already taking their seats on the benches for the night’s sleep in the open air. On the other, there were the wharves, the chimneys, and the river shipping softened into perfect harmony by the atmospheric haze. Over both, the richly-painted sky at dusk was seen from a suitable standpoint as the girl passed over Blackfriars Bridge.

The Bridge was alive with wayfarers, most of them hurrying one way to the Surrey side. The huge, two-decker trams, glowing with light like steamers in the darkness, were waiting for a freight at the far end. They filled fast as hulks under a corn-shoot, as passen-

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gers poured in to get their chance of rapid transit to suburbs, which to some of them represented the ends of the earth. The files stood patiently in long sheds, the exact width of the car, until it came to their turn.

The girl did not join in the press. As one who knew her way about London, she turned towards the borough, and presently reached Chaucer's country, and Gower's before him, as the spire of St. Saviour's came in view. The old, old church is always a cheering sight. It seems to promise that you have only to wait long enough to make sure of the essential comforts of home at last. How snugly tucked up in his last bed, in one of its aisles, lies old Gower now!

Then, again crossing the river by London Bridge, she looked down on the pool, and on the ocean shipping with its lights, and on the two castellated masses in the distance, the Tower and its Bridge, to bound the view.

She turned from the parapet, found herself in a rushing crowd—hardly noticed till now in the gathering gloom, and drew aside under a gas-lamp to keep herself out of harm's way.

It was mighty London in one of its heartbeats.

The people were nearly all pouring from the City side, where they had earned their bread, to their homes in the remotest suburbs. "Tic, toc! tic, toc!" the patter of the high heels was only less insistent than the click of the grim clog-dance that marks the movement of the Lancashire folk to their work at dawn. The low heels made so much less noise that the men, though in the composition, quite lost the benefit of the advertisement.

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The women were of all varieties—trim clerks or shop-girls, slim-waisted as some insects, and often slimmer in the chest. Others, of much the same build, but less smart, might have come from the tailoring shops. A few of quite another make evidently did men's work in the great packing-houses. Their shabby jackets, wanting many a stitch, seemed bursting under the pressure of muscle. Dainty creatures, with books under their arms, and with the *pince-nez* that was only half use, and the other pose, were perhaps from the public departments. Their management of their skirts showed Brahminical scorn of contact with inferiors, quite as much as anxiety to escape the mud. The average of personal beauty was high, it being an English crowd.

The one thing common to all—women and men—was hurry. Even the footsore, who could afford to confess their infirmity out of business hours, were still making the best of their way towards the haven of home.

The lamp threw its circle of light in the darkness, and the figures seemed to rush into this, at one side, and out of it at the other, like a broken army worried by cavalry.

The girl laughed at first, and settled herself under the gleam to enjoy it all. Then she began to feel a vague misgiving, without in the least knowing its cause. And gradually her mood changed, and the brightness went out of her eyes, all of it, at least, that came from within.

When it was there she had an infinite charm of expression. When it was not—well the hunted hare at close quarters is not a pretty sight. The brows were puckered; the mouth lost all suavity of line.

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There was something quite wrong, and it was this, though still she could not have given it a name. The scene was like some effect of the kinematograph in which moving figures dart off of the nothingness, across a disc of light, to dash themselves into nothingness again at the far edge. It is the more appalling because so many are smiling and talking at the moment of the catastrophe. And only the kinematograph, being as it usually is in a hurry to get through the programme, could give such a sense of pace.

Swift and unsought came to her in the subconsciousness, a fancy in which she could herself have joined in the scamper, in sheer terror of the sight. It seemed to suggest the folly of all endeavour. This was not only the way of London Bridge at eventide, it was the way of the world from birth to death. Midge-like millions, one instant idly busy in a ray, the next, back to the void from which they came as from the womb of night.

“Mis’ess wants to cry,” she said to the dog.

He wanted to yell, and did it, as a stray foot threatened his peace.

It was the foot of a young man who had caught her exclamation to the dog, and her scared look.

He walked on discreetly, and then turned back to look at her again without attracting attention.

Then he waited at a distance, as though to follow her when she moved—still with discretion, and evidently not by any means as an intruder, but only as one who wanted to know.

She, on her side, was quite unaware of him. Another ghastly fancy had come to deepen the impression of

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the scene before her. Mites scampering across a fragment of cheese under the microscope idly busy—with the maw of Gargantua for their futile end and aim!

And then again a sense of hopelessness more immediate. It was the age of the work-girl, and she was one. These countless thousands driven from their homes to earn their bread were her competitors, and they stood between her and her crust. The thought was so dispiriting that it had at once to be laughed away. She roused herself, caught the dog in her arms, and stemmed the torrent to the City side on her way home.

“London Bridge does n’t seem to take much stock in us two, Spag.”

He trotted on still downcast. “Spag, you ’re a coward!”

“And how about you, mis’ess? Who was worryin’ about Christmas dinners just now?”

“Mis’ess has something to worry about. She ’s no business to have a little dog if she can’t keep him.”

“Stow your naggin’, or I ’ll stay out all night.”

And so home by the Bank and the Mansion-house, both just about as disdainful of the pair as London Bridge. Then finally through the more peopled streets again, to where other girls turned out for the industries of the night, or a drunken cab-tout, on his way to the lock-up, sang his war-song of bestial jubilation until the policeman choked him into better behaviour, some eyes looking pity, while many figures drew aside to avoid the stain of his touch.

The fire was still burning in her little garret suite, the lamp was soon lit, and the supper laid. The old

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house, all its offices hermetically closed, lay in perfect peace. Then came the old book.

What a really interesting invention! A score or so of letters in an alphabet, and, with the permutations and combinations thereof, Socrates still hailing you across the gulfs of Time, and Montaigne at your elbow ready for a chat.

“Might be wuss, mis’ess, if you ask me,” the dog was understood to say, as he curled himself up at her feet.

She bent down and kissed the white line of his brow.

CHAPTER VI

SHE was eager to earn now, and ready to try. She had stuck to her work at the shorthand school, and she felt perfectly convinced of her ability to take down winged words with a pinion as swift as themselves, whenever she had a mind. In fact, she had already announced this fact with becoming reserve to the universe, and was now awaiting an answer to an advertisement in the paper which Sarah brought to her bedside a few days later.

It is always hard to be among the unemployed, no doubt, but, until you are penniless, you are only in the ornamental stage.

For the other, take a grey-headed failure, who has never been a success, setting out to persuade five millions of competitive fellow-citizens to want the one insignificant thing that he brings to the market of the world. What wonder that it so often ends in oxalic acid on Hampstead Heath!

Unspeakable blackness of despair, while the sunlight shines on the morning pageant of the Mall, and the drags start for the races with their dainty loads. Unspeakable mystery!

She set out for the school, taking the dog with her, prattling cheerfully to him as they trudged along. She

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had been less confident at the close of yesterday's walk; but that was only the difference in the time of day. Most of our moods are purely atmospheric. With the sun in the right quarter, and a pound in your pocket—who 's afraid? In the morning she was still the high school girl, cheery, confident, and with the easy belief that the world 's an oyster to be opened with a paper-knife.

The dog was not altogether in the same frame of mind. At any rate, he steered sideways, and with his head down, probably because he was only a dog. At any other time, this proceeding might have struck her as an omen, but just now she was as breezily indifferent to it as the free-thinking general of antiquity to the chicken that was off its feed. When they reached the door of the school, she ordered him to wait for her, and he seated himself on the threshold without a word.

She resented his silence.

"You need n't look so proud of yourself," she said, "anybody could squat outside a door."

He still sulked.

"I know what you are thinking: 'Well, I get my livin' by it, mis'ess, anyhow!' You don't. You get your livin', as you call it, just because I choose to keep you; please remember that. I happen to like your little ways."

"Well, ain't I an expert in that kind o' thing, mis'ess?"

"Don't argue. I happen to like you. Will that do?"

He seemed to think it would do very well, as he settled himself on the door-step to await her return.

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She entered the huge hive. It was the scene of yesterday once more. The bread-hunters were still pouring in from all parts, for the go-as-you-please plan of teaching gave all the certainty of finding a lesson at their need. They were of both sexes, and of any age, up to the fatal forty, though the young formed the vast majority. They trooped off by their sex division, right and left, on passing the door.

They were of all classes. One of Prue's flock was known, and honoured accordingly, as the youngest daughter of the youngest daughter of a peer. Many were the daughters of servants of servants, fired with new ambitions at the Board school, and trying to break their caste in the hope of higher destinies. There were all the accents in their hurried speech, as they came clattering in—from the drawl of smartness to the Cockney twang; all the varieties of finery in the same range, down to the dreariest make-believes that deceived none but their wearers, and hardly them.

She greeted a few select souls who had qualified themselves for her intimacy by the right management of their h's, and then passed on to the speed rooms. In these, the professorial chairs were tenanted by melancholy men, who seemed somehow to have missed brighter vocations in life, and who had trained themselves in the art of reading at so many words to the minute in varying degrees of celerity. The one of Prue's choice, in his monotone, and the even beat of his utterance, might have passed for the Scripture-reader in a mosque. A crowd of girls, most of them feverishly intent on their work, followed him with pen and pencil, on the principle

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of catch as catch can. To be able to take down the quickest reader, and render him afterwards in long hand, was to be fit for the reporters' gallery in the House of Commons—the blue riband of the profession. In regard to that height of attainment, of course, the girl-students could only regard and adore. They were as effectually shut out from the joys of possession, as if they had been victors of an honours list.

* * * * *

A letter was handed to her as she left the school. It was an answer to her advertisement.

It was in a neat, restrained, scholarly hand, and it informed her that the writer, a man of letters, would be glad to see her that very evening, with a view to an experiment in dictation, which, he was careful to say, might not turn out well. She sent the dog home to wait for her on his own door-step, and hurried off to the rendezvous.

He was a studious-looking person, grey and bent, and with a manner which betokened much wear and tear in the toil of his trade. His nerves were shattered by life-long labours of composition, and by the hunt for the phrase. He could never let himself go, but he still hoped that one might learn to stop on the mount of prophecy to tie a shoe-string, and yet finish the ascent in ecstasy.

His brain was weary; his hand was on strike with writers' cramp. He had resolved to dispense with the one, and flog the other into activity by engaging a

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shorthand writer. His old age was in a hurry, and he yearned to get the pot of literature quicker on the boil.

She took her pen, a new one in a new holder, opened her note-book, and then sat quietly waiting for him, in a way that he secretly resented at the start, as the manner of a cat after a mouse. He knew it was going to put him out—to judge by his deep and long-drawn sigh.

The subject was a leader for a weekly paper.

After a glance at his amanuensis, and a faint “Are you ready?” which was rank cowardice, though he hoped it would pass for something else, he began:

“The situation of parties at the end of the session is one that must inspire all well-wishers of—” and here he came to a most distressing pause.

“Have you got that down?” he groaned.

“Yes, sir.”

“Strike it out, if you please.”

Then he tried again on a new tack: “‘When Grey seemed on the brink of failure with his great historic measure, he’—er! Repeat that, if you please.’”

She did so.

“Strike it out”—fiercely this time—“and read, ‘In the second administration of Lord Derby—’ Have you got that down?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Thank you. What was it I said? I am extremely sorry to trouble you.”

“‘In the second administration of Lord Derby,’ sir.”

“I am obliged to you. Would you mind stopping for a moment?”

And he wrenched his vast, bony bulk out of the chair,

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and reached to the topmost shelf of a well-furnished library for a book.

On this he concentrated his attention for full five minutes, while no sound was heard but the turning of the leaves and an occasional dry cough. The girl looked round the room, took stock of the furniture, still more attentive stock of her strange employer, thought her thoughts, and then sat in the attitude of attention biting the end of her pen.

“You are sure I said ‘second’ administration?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Would you be kind enough to say ‘first’?”

He tried again, but no sound came save a repetition of the cough.

It was not lung trouble, nor even tonsils, but just sheer panic in the premonitory stage.

Then in a desperate rush for fluency, he went off like a thirty-pound salmon with the hook in his gills.

The girl’s note-book at once became a farrago of dots and dashes, which had no definite relation to any known script, and were but heartrending appeals for a rescue.

Slowing down from sheer exhaustion, he mopped the telltale drops from his brow, and surrendered again to the long-drawn agonies of his muse.

He was beaten, and he knew it; but he watched her savagely out of the corner of his eye, to see if she knew it too. Being so much in the same plight, she passed with triumph through the ordeal, her gaze fixed on the vacancy of her own scrawl, her thoughts on the awful moment of reckoning when she would have to render it into intelligible copy.

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Then he came to an end with a sort of snap, which he fondly hoped might pass for a peroration, but which was not much better than the stroke of a cleaver cutting a sentence in half.

“That will do, thank you. Will you be so good as to write it out?”

She began with the opening sentences, which were fairly intelligible by reason of her having taken them down in longhand while he hunted up the reference. Beyond them lay a wreckage of the Pitman system, dancing, as in the mad tumult of a whirlpool, to her distracted gaze.

But there was an unexpected rescue. His exertions had made him fretful as a child on a hot night; and she had hardly written a dozen words before he pulled her up.

“Do not make that noise, if you please!”

“What noise, sir?”

“The pen: it scratches the paper so. Would you mind writing it out at home and sending it to me by to-morrow’s post?”

She hurried home, and sat till far in the night over her task, only to feel that the shame of confessed failure awaited her in the morning. But the first post brought her an envelope in his handwriting, with a cheque for a guinea, and this note:

“DEAR MADAM,—I am afraid I have to apologise to you for some expressions of impatience, due entirely to my own fault. You will kindly excuse them, and set them down, not to any want of skill on your part, to

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which, upon occasion, I shall be happy to testify, but simply to the nature of the beast. I am unable to dictate, and I must not therefore trouble you again."

Saved! Yes from the worst; but not from the knowledge that she must find some other way of earning her living, and that her shorthand was, at present, no better than a child's toy.

There was this to be said on the other side. She had begun to earn, though only by a fluke. That first guinea for one's first job: it is a turning-point in life. She at once laid her plans for investing it in a new hat—just to treat her luck.

How very deplorable! I know, I know; perhaps she 'll catch it by-and-by.

CHAPTER VII

SARAH had handed her the letter with a certain air of mystery. She carried the day's paper, as usual, under her arm; and drawing another from her pocket:

"You can 'ave this for nothink," she said.

"What is it—a circular?"

"No; a paper—only for nothink. I 'm a-tellin' you, miss."

"Telling me what?"

"Got out by a customer o' mine. Givin' it away at the start."

Prue hardly noticed it at the time, but when Sarah was gone it caught her eye.

"THE BRANDING IRON"

"A Journal of the Back Streets

"(Edited by George Leonard.)

"Price: Love—or a ha'penny. Only once a week."

"What stuff," she said—and then she took it up.

It was the oddest-looking little thing, the very protoplasm of the press. Put two sheets of foolscap, one within the other, and you have its size and its number of pages.

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Fill these pages with handwriting duplicated by one of the copying processes, and you have the method of production.

The headings were in round hand; the first was an "Address to our Readers."

"Our Idea: *The Branding Iron* is a new journal of society—in the back streets. Our contemporaries, who work mainly by the backstairs, in the other interest, are not to be surpassed. They retail its small talk, 'biograph' its celebrities, tell its queer stories, report its amusements, and generally fix it up in a way that defies competition in their own line, and leaves us no resource but the choice of fresh fields and pastures new.

"We propose, therefore, to do for the back streets exactly what our rivals do for the other parts of the planet.

"We give our journal away, at the start, as the sprat to catch the herring of the ha'penny subscription, which we are fully determined to get later on.

"We shall give it away without distinction of persons, according to the limit of our means. It will be sent, not only to the humblest, but to both Houses of Parliament, especially the Bench of Bishops, and to the King on his Throne.

"When they are tired of receiving it for nothing—or ashamed, which will do just as well—they may forward the ha'penny for the issues to come; and, as a superfluity of niceness, for those already received.

"Our idea is to take one mean neighbourhood in this, or, for that matter, any other great town, a neighbourhood you might cover with your hat, and give a faithful

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record of its proceedings from week to week. Subscribers have only to multiply this by all the mean neighbourhoods of our native land to learn how huge masses of our brother-Romans live, love, eat, drink, fight, and generally go to the devil, or the other place, in their own way, with nothing less than the skies of England for their canopy.

“It is the age of cheap journalism and of the personal note. Almost everybody has his paper now, and why not the man in the back street?”

“OUR MACHINERY

“We are produced at present on a fifteen-shilling duplicator worked by hand. We are never going to stop till countless printing-presses reel off our innumerable editions to the uttermost ends of the earth. Our early copies will one day sell for more than their weight in bank-notes. Oh, be in time!

“OUR IMPUDENCE

“We promise to tell the truth—but not the whole of it—to be decent, honest, cheeky, as cheerful as possible; and even quite simple, rational, and unaffected, as often as our readers will give us a chance. But enough as to all that—‘leave thy damnable faces, and begin.’”

She frowned and pouted; tried to busy herself with other things; tossed them aside; come back to it. It was impossible to resist the appeal of a string of paragraphs

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headed "Unfashionable Intelligence"—and some of them signed "G. L."

"Mr. and Mrs. Foodle have been out of town for the hop-picking. The children were left in the care of a big brother of eleven, and one fell in the fire and is now in the hospital.

"The usual weekly receptions at Mrs. Maloney's on Saturday night, resulted in the maiming of two policemen, and in three hospital cases among the members of the family and their friends. The proceedings were finally toned down by boiling water poured from an upper floor.

"There was no music at the last 'At Home' at the Foake's, two well-behaved youths who usually attend with jew's-harp and concertina having been put away for a purse-snatching case.

"Mr. Jelks, whose name is a household word in the quarter in which we publish, has just returned from Holloway. He has not yet succeeded in carrying out his threat of vengeance against his wife for sending him there, but he has made two attempts on the door. She is safely locked in, and does all her marketing by lowering a string from an upper window. The police say they are loath to interfere between man and wife.

"The body in the back kitchen at Paradise Row has been unburied for eight days, owing to some hitch in the raffle to defray the expenses of the funeral."

She shuddered, threw the paper down, kicked it away from her.

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She was in a new world. All that it meant she could not understand, but much that it might mean as a horrible survival of primitive barbarism came to her, by a sort of intuition of the past of the race in its passage through the slime. It smote her with a sense of age, of retrogression, of the night of things. It even brought back her childish horror of propinquity and of contact with the monstrosities of insect life. So these disgusting items were also in the inventory of human attribute, as well as fair speech, gentle manners, the dignity of use and wont, to which her experience had hitherto been confined. And now, perhaps, in the state to which she was drifting, they were soon to live quite intimately to her sight and touch.

Then she picked the paper up again and read on :

“COACHING

“The Jolly Dogs’ Club met on Sunday morning for the usual trip to Epping Forest in a van. They were treated with scant courtesy by the proprietor of a well-known hostelry on the road who thought fit to decline to entertain them as travellers. They were not, however, unprovided with the needful, having taken the precaution to lay in a stock of it from their own bar. They reached home much ‘refreshed’ by the trip, some half-a-dozen of them at the bottom of the vehicle. The revels were kept up to an early hour of Monday morning. The police notoriously bear no good-will to the institution, but in view of its strictly private character, they were of course powerless to interfere.

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“FICTION

“We call attention this week to the opening chapter of our thrilling romance—‘The Decoy Duck.’ Our readers may accept our assurance that the leading characters are drawn from the life, and that the incident of the drugged sailor, with which the instalment closes, is founded on fact. The locality of the cellar scene will be recognized by everyone who knows the neighbourhood.

“THE PULPIT

“Atheism at Mile End Waste. Barney Benson, the well-known practitioner in this line, still holds his own against all comers, in opposition to the authenticity of the Gospels and the obligations of the (so-called) moral law. He will bring his present season to a close next Sunday week at the Marble Arch, after a tour which has furnished lively debates at the St. Pancras Arches, and other stations of the mission in the metropolis. It is fortunate that he knows all his Scripture references pretty well by heart. His sight suffers from the results of a recent difference of opinion with an ill-conditioned defender of the Pentateuch, at the Fountain in the Regent’s Park.

“A BIT OF ALLRIGHT

“What *do* you think? Fighting Nancy of the Rope Walk has joined the Girls’ Club of the district, and when last seen was on her way to a singing competition in the

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Guild Hall. She was clothed in white muslin with pink favours, and quite in her right mind, softly cooing to herself for dress rehearsal something about 'Distant Bells.' It recalled with a difference those other beautiful lines:

“ ‘ O I've seen a girl or two in my time,
Yet I never saw such a vixen;
She's light-blue eyes and bonny brown 'air,
And they call her the Slasher of Brixton.' ”

“MONEY ARTICLE

“The tally-man in the second floor back at Moscrop Place is doing a thriving business at about ninety per cent. by taking in urgency pledges after the closing of the pawn-shops. He now picks and chooses, refusing straw mattresses, chairs, tables, and all similar articles in bulk. On the other hand, he makes no inquiries, and owing to the strictly confidential character of his transactions, he escapes service of the usual notices by the police. Threatened competition on the part of a Yiddish rival, who does business at the cutting prices prevalent in the continental trade, has lately induced him to lower his rate of accommodation from a penny to a farthing, upon all articles of personal apparel brought clean from the wash; his customers, of course, have benefited greatly by the change.”

The girl was throwing it down, after passing unread a section, “Parliament—The House: by the Mouse under the Speaker's Chair,” when her eye fell on a paragraph

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headed "The Labour Market," the engrossing subject of her thoughts.

"Has anybody in search of a sensation ever thought of spotting the look of some of the out-o'-works on London Bridge at closing time? I once saw a cyclist who had lost control, flying full-speed downhill, with a flint wall at the bottom. There was death in the face—and he found it. There 's death, I swear, in some of these faces. O, my God!

"(Signed) GEORGE LEONARD.

"Too many 'nobody wants me's' still about, in spite of the slight improvement in trade. The other night I overheard a little one of the order, on the Bridge—rather too smart to be convincing at first sight; but she 'll soon get over that. She was apologising to her dog for a bad time coming when she might not be able to keep even him. Note the female unemployed never get a show in the processions, and theirs is the worse case. The poor little dot wound up with a 'mis'ess wants to cry,' as she looked down at the tyke.

"G. L."

She grew crimson with shame and wrath. Had she been watched in her walk? Her miniature in such a portrait gallery—the insolence of it! "George Leonard"—oh, for a cowhide and a strong arm.

She was going to thrust the rag into the fire and make an end of it, when something made her hold her hand. Perhaps the writer was not all a mocking fool. Had the

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poor mummer but torn off the mask for a moment to wipe a troubled face? She remembered the barber in the play who makes haste to laugh only for fear he should be obliged to weep.

So she folded *The Branding Iron* and put it by, meaning to give Sarah sixpence for a month's subscription next day.

This operation led her to her account-book. She was horribly startled: there was less than nine pounds in the bank!

CHAPTER VIII

IT was a cruel shock. Over twenty pounds spent in three months! How the money had run through her fingers! The French label one variety of hopeless person as the triple fool. If Prue had known of it, that is what she would have called herself. The discovery put an end to work for the day, and left her in a state of aimless despondency, of futile scheming in the void. She audited every item of her petty account, trying to condemn half of it as wanton waste, yet still not without a sense of exculpation.

She rose from the task comforted, but as she did so, her eyes fell on the new hat which she had bought with the proceeds of her first earnings. Then she took in a cargo of repentance, heavy enough to sink a ship, let alone a single swimmer. What could set her right with herself? Only some decisive act of penance and of sacrifice. She took the offending thing, dropped it into the paper-bag in which she had brought it into the house, and rushed into the street.

The old woman who swept the crossing and to whom she occasionally gave a penny was at her post. Prue thrust the hat into her hand with a recommendation to sell it and buy herself a pair of shoes, and hurried back to her room. She was happier now. She could not help

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feeling that she had done something rather heroic, and cleared off part of her load of guilt.

She spent the afternoon in making good resolutions, and after tea, much refreshed in mind and body, thought of setting out for a walk.

She stretched forth her hand mechanically for her hat. Alas! it was not there. The pang was intolerable; and she hurried out again with five shillings in her hand to buy back her gift. Too late: the wretched recipient was wearing it, with a smirk of coquetry that was positively maddening in its suggestion of the vanity of human wishes.

Prue went to bed.

* * * * *

SHE got but little further next morning. It was still how to find work.

Sarah's knock came as a happy thought, and she ran to open. Why not ask her? She knew so many people. If only she could be induced to talk about them.

There were no letters—only a solitary post-card, with a picture on it, which Sarah eyed for a moment before she laid it down.

By sheer good luck, Sarah gave her a sort of opening with a "'Ow did you like the piper?'" pointing to *The Branding Iron* still lying where it had been left the night before.

"I hated it," said Prue, with energy. It was not a very happy response. Sarah made no remark.

"You said you knew the writer, I think? He must be a—strange sort of man."

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She was going to say "detestable"; but the second thought prevailed.

"Customer o' mine."

She saw her mistake: it was not for Sarah to belittle her employers.

Sarah seemed to think that she had hardly said enough.

"That piper 's only 'is blarney. When he likes, he kin talk jest 's good 's you or me. He 's up to somethin'. Lives in a model, but he ain't there more 'n half the time. He 's up to somethin': don't tell me!"

Prue tried again: "What a lot of strange people—different characters you must meet."

Sarah seemed to scent danger. Had she gone too far? She shut her lips tight, and began dusting a chair with even more concentrated fury than usual.

Prue had the good sense to let her go on.

"Characters!" said Sarah; and then she checked herself again.

"They ain't all odds and ends for all that," she said, after a pause. "Some on 'em quite nice sort o' people, jest 's good 's you are."

The girl laughed.

"Manner o' speakin', I mean!"

Prue seemed quite absorbed in trying to thread a needle.

"Save money; keep theirselves to theirselves; no hangin' about after chaps. What do *you* think?"

"Of course."

"There 's one 's a doctor's daughter—if he 'ad n't cut finger at an inquest and died o' mortification."

"How sad!"

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“Well, she got into the Post Office; and now she ’s the champion there.”

“Champion of what?”

It was indiscreet: Sarah thought she was being drawn.

“You ’ll soon want some more curtain stuff, I fancy,” she said, by way of returning to business. “Them ’s wore out.”

She shook the curtains, pulled them straight, and bustled about with one eye on her task and the other on her employer, as though trying to assure herself she was not being followed.

“Beat the record—you know what I mean: take the cake,” she resumed. “Five-an’-twenty years never missed once. Up at six, breakfast at seven, bus at eight, and in the ’buildin’ at nine. Never a day’s illness. Take her pension soon.”

It was her ever-recurring note—independence: the woman sufficient to herself.

And this came as a sort of soliloquy:

“They don’t want no fellers to keep ’em—them sort. Why, there ’s another one o’ my lot, she ’s good for three pound a week any day, sometimes four.”

“What a fortune!”

“Well, I ’m tellin’ yer. Miss Belton ’s her name—Laura Belton—what they call a jim engraver.”

“Gem perhaps.”

“What did I sye?”

Prue restrained her curiosity.

“She ’s half American—jest as fly as they make ’em.”

Prue still kept busy with the needle.

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“There ’s others. P’raps you ’ll see some on ’em some day,” said Sarah oracularly.

Prue had not made much headway as yet, and she was beginning to grow disheartened. She put down the needle; took up the post-card; glanced at it abstractedly; laid that down too.

Then the luck turned. Sarah eyed the card curiously, not to say covetously.

“You might let me ’ave that, miss, when you done with it, if it ain’t got no privit in it.”

“Certainly! But what for, if there ’s no ‘private’ in that?”

Sarah was in a difficulty. She had to explain herself; an explanation could only be given in words; and words were as embarrassing as ever. It was a sort of three-cornered trap, with a sharp edge at every corner.

She had to speak.

“Ten-pound prize for collectin’ the greatest number of post-cards sent out by one firm. Beg ’m from my customers. Don’t you fancy I—”

The girl looked puzzled.

“It ’s for the advertisement.” Prue, who was beginning to know her Sarah, made no answer.

“They want to make people start buyin’ of ’em.”

“I suppose so.”

It was so vague and ill-informed that it compelled further speech.

“There ’s money in post-cards, miss, you take my tip. Wish I was an artist like you.”

“Like me!”

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Sarah glanced at a water-colour on the wall. "You did that, did n't yer?"

"Yes."

"Well, you might make yer fortune."

She pricked up her ears, in spite of herself.

"You would n't see much more of me, if I took fust prize," said Sarah, as she piled the chairs on the table, and took up her dust-pan—a sure sign that she wished to be alone.

"But where do I come in?"

Sarah's hand was forced. She had to go on talking from sheer good feeling. She had awakened hopes.

"In the colourin', that 's where you come in. Art-workers, they call 'em. I 've got a customer, she can earn her thirty shillin's a week at it, if she gives her Sundays in. She heard of it quite by chance," resumed Sarah, giving way to a perfect flood of loquacity that suggested the bursting of a dam. "She wanted a job, I can tell yer. Owed me a fortnight, an' been on short rations."

"Short rations?" She was listening now with all her might.

"'Ope you 'll never know what it is. Her week's food worked out at fourpence a dye. I know what I 'm talking about. I 've 'ad some in my time too. Lunch biscuits, two pound, fippence; coffee, no milk or sugar, sixpence. Four 'errin's thrippence; reduction on takin' a quantity. Four eggs—yah! sometimes, I do assure you—fourpence more. Seven penn'orth o' bread; thrippence more for vegetables and a mossel o' fruit; an' there y' are—Sundays and week dyes, fourpence a dye.

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Ah, an' you could see the dyelight through her, at week-ends, make no mistake."

"Stop," said the girl fiercely. "I 'd rather do it than hear about it."

She had a horror of pain so intensely morbid that her first impulse was always one of repulsion for the sufferer. It outraged her sense of the logic of life.

"I 'm only tellin' yer!"

"—And die than do it."

"You see she was—"

"I hate people that talk about it—there!"

"Well, as I was sayin', she got the job. An' then I lent 'er five shillin's to set up with, and pay 'er fines."

"What fines?"

"You oughter see her now."

"But what fines?"

"It 's the beginnin' that 's a bit 'ard. What you spoil you pay for; that 's only fair."

* * * * *

THE beginning was hard, for Prue tried it rather than leave any stone unturned. The pay was something infinitesimal per hundred, hardly exceeding the retail price per card. They were charming little hunting scenes and the like, and the artists had to paint the red coats of the huntsmen, the brown spots on the dogs, and the green on the trees. Of course the girl provided her own paint and brushes, and equally, of course, at the outset, her failures strewed the floor. These she had to make good. The cards were delivered to her in packets at the factory, and she

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had to account for all of them, spoiled or perfect, when she took them back.

Alas! the lean kine of the failures ate up all the fat of the successes, and still left a deficit chargeable to capital. She was a couple of shillings to the bad at the week's end.

The next week she began to "earn," and she went down to take her money. The balance of accounts on pay day showed an actual wage, clear of all deductions, of a net farthing an hour, or one shilling and three ha'pence for fifty-four hours' work.

The dog ran towards her when she came in, but she brushed him aside. "Mis'ess has had a fright," she said, and she lifted him into a chair from which he commonly observed the humours of the street, and herself sank into another and buried her face in her hands. It was all very well to say that the essay was only experimental, and that she had still a shot in the locker of her Savings' Bank. This was what was going to happen when she closed the account.

And, above all, this was work. This was henceforth to be her lot in life. As the sense of it came upon her with a rush, she pitched cards and paints into the fire and threw herself on the floor in an agony of fright too intense for tears.

Never before had she known what it was to have to earn. She had taken money pretty much as a matter of course. It was always there, if not in abundance, still with enough to serve. It was a sort of elemental first condition, like the air and the light. These might be better or worse in quality, but still there they were every day. But think of having to win by toil every breath and every beam,

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with darkness or death as the penalty of failure. The idea was a new revelation of the sense of pain, and it gave her a pang as of nausea.

Especially she sickened at the thought of the drudgery that work involved. These smudged fingers, these splitting headaches over a hopeless task! Her glass had given her glimpses of odious havoc where the daubed hand had gone upwards to sweep the hair from her brow. Yes; this was work—work which in the school days was only a mere dignified indulgence of high spirits, with nothing more serious at stake than a certificate. It came upon her as another revelation of the infinite possibilities of suffering, and showed the world as one great torture chamber, with endless perspectives of misery.

The dog, seeing that something had come to pass, left his perch to make inquiries. She was too wretched to talk for him, but she drew him to her heart in a passion of tears.

CHAPTER IX

A WRETCHED night and a girl very badly scared. The glorious sunshine of the September morning. With this, and with the tea and toast that fortifies the very malefactor for the scaffold, the courage to set out and look for a job, and to resolve that it must be found to-day.

Which way to turn? Well, to the old scene of enchantment and terror—the City. The people there will be all going to work at this hour. By following them, rubbing shoulders with them, looking at them, something may turn up.

She made straight for St. Paul's as a sort of central point, and flattening her slender figure against the base of the Peel Statue, stood agape at the scene.

The City was busy, though it had yet to take off its coat. This time it was the centripetal rush from the suburbs. The still countless hordes of bread-winners were going out for the bread. They were of both sexes, though naturally she had no eye for any but the women and girls; and of every age short of infancy and senility. Extremes of either sort were rare: youth had the *pas*. Here and there the morning light betrayed the now futile attempts of hair-dye to conceal the ravages of time—futile because so often exposed. Some fringes were almost pathetic in their suggestion of coming discomfiture.

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She had the pity all to herself. None seemed to take notice of his fellow-man—for one reason, perhaps, because all were trotting the same way. To have turned a head, even for a glance at his fellow-woman, would have been to lose a minute; and time was money there.

But some girls stopped short at the cathedral; and bustling into the old graveyard garden, as though they had important business among the tombs, plunged into seats. Then, drawing from their pockets the serial of their choice, they began to read in the devil-driven and purposeful way in which people do most things in this part of the world. And, as the great clock struck the quarters, they hurried out of the garden in contingents, and took to their heels.

Why? It was all so new to this observer.

There is notoriously but one resource in difficulties of this sort—the policeman. She chose him with care. There were two at hand, but one seemed ineligible by excess of waist. The belt of his overcoat recalled the memory of the girdle that went round about the earth. An artist's feelings are his feelings; and every woman is an artist in things of this sort.

His brother-officer was young, and shapely in a manly sort of way. Prue applied to him.

“Poorer sort, miss, come up by the early trains, sake o' the cheap fare” (‘‘Wo there!’’ to a wayward bus trying to break the line). “Got to wait about till the workshops open. That 's all it means.”

“Thank you.”

He veered round for a moment to get a better look at her. But his peremptory “steady” showed that the

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driver of a van had taken a mean advantage of him. His eye wandered no more; but his voice reached down to her again.

“Some of ’em wait in a church—Allhallows in the Wall, if you ’d like to see it. It ’s been done in the papers. Rather a curious sight.”

For an idea of the human tide at its highest, the spot was certainly well chosen, though that was sheer luck. She was at the point of juncture of the main channels. One mighty outflow of petticoated humanity—she had still no eyes for the other—in solid flood almost without a ripple, strikes from Battersea, Clapham, Lewisham, Greenwich, and far beyond. Another pours southwards from Islington, Hackney, Hornsey, Tottenham, Walthamstow. The eastward rush is by Beckton, Canning Town, Whitechapel. The waters leave huge deposits on their way at the Cannon Street warehouses, the factories of Golden Lane, and even as far as at the retail shops of the West End. One immense wave carries hundreds into the telegraph building at St. Martin’s le Grand.

Then came a recurrence of the old ghastly terror of the bridge—the dire and dreadful sense of not knowing how to begin to face life, the feeling sure that it will be too much for you. These girls were all her competitors; and, in their close ranks, moving at the double, there were certainly many who could have beaten her in the finest points of the game.

This makes the awesomeness of crowds, and is at the root of the mystery of stage fright. Whoever you be, somewhere, in this multitude before you, you expect to find your equal or master in strength or wit.

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She bought a paper, on the chance of finding something in the advertisements. It was trying in its technicalities of the export trade: "Wanted at once, Best Legging Machinists for Block-work. Ostrich Feathers, good Boa and Stole-finisher; also Layers. Girls for Brace Boxing. Girl accustomed to cutting up."

The chilling sense of personal insignificance grew more intense. It was still too early to ask for work. The bosses who had it to give were yet in train or brougham puffing the early cigarette. So she made for Allhallows, partly from curiosity, partly to wait with the rest.

The old church stood almost buttressed against a fragment of that older city wall which has been manned in its time by Roman and Dane, with many another strenuous person of history now in fine dust. It was nearly full of work-girls. A happy thought of the vicar had proved that, where there is a sincere desire to be useful, even City churches need not despair. Another once empty temple in the same quarter has been filled again by revivalist services, as hot in their gospelling as any tabernacle of the slums, and as coarse in their appeal as any picture puff of the hoardings. This one may, or may not, "meet a want," but there can be no question of the success of Allhallows in the Wall in that direction.

The girls drew out their sewing; stitched to sacred music; and, if they liked, joined in a short service that followed. The strange congregation of wayfarers prayed and sang, rose or sat tight, just as it pleased them; and, when it was over, read books of general interest which they found in the pews. A hall adjoining the church offered much the same accommodation to the men.

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She followed one of the congregation mechanically—a girl of about her own age. Work might lie that way; at any rate, there was the vague sense of adventure. The girl hurried off with the panic haste of an insect trying to escape from a sheet of paper, until a chance meeting with a friend brought her to a momentary pause. It was a dapper little boy-man of the clerky species, with down on his upper-lip, which was evidently the object of repeated and most assiduous cultures.

The pair gesticulated surprise and delight, and then went on in company, laughing, chattering, both at once. Prue followed their bliss as a forlorn player follows a neighbour's luck at roulette. It was hard to keep pace with them, for though the route march was but by the hard pavement, they seemed to have the benefit of springing turf dotted with flowers beneath their tread.

At Fore Street they parted with a cloud on their faces, she leftward, he the other way.

Sometimes a river comes up with a sudden rush that carries all things in its wake. How fatuous seems the expectation that any two pebbles, torn from their bed into momentary contact, will come together once more for the ebb. It is all the chance of the tide. With no better chance, these two insignificant creatures seemed to have found and lost each other again. For really, if you think what tides are, or if you think what life is, who can tell?

The girl finally disappeared in a warehouse in Jewin Crescent. It was as though Prue had suddenly been dumped down into Ethiopia, for the strangeness of the scene. Jewin Crescent seemed to glare business from

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every plate-glass window, from every subterranean choking with goods. It looked ready to meet the world in arms in this line. It was greedy for "hands." The cards in the windows asked for them, now and then in terms that might have belonged to an African tongue. It was as baffling as the advertisements, and gave poor Prue the same disheartening sense of being out in the cold.

But it is difficult to be dull in the City. You have only to wander about to find for yourself snacks of spiritual refreshment—here a garden, there a monument—unequaled in the world. It is wisely done. The terrible stress of it would otherwise be too murderous.

Right in the midst of one tumult of vans and trampling feet, she found old St. Giles's, Cripplegate, with another fragment of the wall as staunch as when it was put up. Amid a hurly-burly of the same description, bounding a small churchyard, she came on a monument to Heminge and Condell, printers of the first folio, without whom there would have been no Shakespeare for posterity. It rested under a spreading tree, whose leaves still darkened the ledgers. She thanked God for both trees and monument, in her heart.

CHAPTER X

SHE was hungry now and so were others. The poorer girls were beginning to turn out for their midday meal. Many of them showed the way at full speed to a shop where the menu, with a promise of "Three Courses for Threepence," lifted its head and lied, as shamelessly as the Monument hard by.

And great, growing girls many of them: what wonder that the Cockney breed begins to fail us in our battle-line!

Yet still were they dainty feeders, according to their sex law. However much they stinted themselves in meat, most of them could spare a halfpenny for a dessert of "sweet-stuff." This they enjoyed—regardless of the omen—in one of the old graveyards ever at hand in this part of town.

And while they ate, they gossiped and giggled over silly things—invincible idealists as they all are, ever preferring to the rude substance of utility, its shadow of romance. Their dinner-hour was not for mere rest and provender; but for the holiday of the nimble spirit in the chaff of the passer-by.

The smarter specimens, the girls of porcelain, as distinct from the common clay, were not without resource. Prue tracked one of them in the hope of luckier chances, and saw her dive into a basement which promised better

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things. Alas! it was a club. She was turning away with a sense of disappointment, when a hansom drove up to the door, and out of it stepped an old acquaintance—Gertrude Holl.

Prue remembered her at the high school, a great gawk of a girl, with still a promise of beauty and shape, now fully realised, and of academic distinction, realised too. in a high bracket in the Tripos list—a nine days' wonder of the newspapers. A rich man's daughter, so shy, so quiet, so easily beating them all when she put forth her strength, except in small-talk.

In her deficiency in that art she might have met Sarah Ruskil as a mate, from the starting-point of the other pole of being. Sarah was taciturn because she knew nothing beyond her work and her narrow purpose of independence. Gertrude was so because she knew too much, and was bewildered with the sense of opportunity. Unlike Sarah—but this was her secret—she yearned to be a girl with girls.

She was shyer than ever now that she noticed Prue's well-meant effort to avoid her, and mistook its cause. All that Prue had in her mind was becoming veneration for a being beyond her intellectual sphere.

But Gertrude was not to be put off. She ran up to her and took her hand—"You here?"—yet timidly let it fall again without the expected pressure. What if "little Meryon" might not care to have it squeezed?

"And where have you been, I wonder, and what have you been doing all this time? Won't you come in to luncheon?"

"I can't, I 'm not a member."

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“But I am, I fancy,” laughed Gertrude, and in truth her name stood on the list of a managing committee importing interest and solicitude in the highest quarters.

“What ’s it all about?” asked Prue, in some alarm, as they went downstairs.

“Oh, just a place to give some of our work-girls a chance of getting decent food amid decent surroundings, at a price within their means.”

It was restful, after the hurly-burly without. Prue found an ample subterranean, neatly furnished; and quite a crowd of clerkly and secretarial workers at a substantial meal served at an exceedingly low price.

“Who ’d have thought you knew anything about things of this sort?” she said.

“Why not?”

It was the old Gertrude, even to the sudden flush of confusion. Her whole personality seemed to come back to memory as her schoolmate looked at her and heard her voice—her shyness of being shy, her yearning for comradeship, instead of the respect which they were all so ready to offer in acknowledgment of her remarkable powers. They used to stand so very much in awe of her, Prue with the rest.

“Oh, of course. Everything is very nice, I ’m sure.”

“It ’s the best we can do at present,” returned the other deprecatingly; “and I hope it ’s better than nothing. I may do something better bye and bye, but what ’s the good of talking about it now? Only think of our meeting after all these years. Now let us have a good talk.”

It was easier said than done. Gertrude had toiled for

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fluency in airy nothings, but her proficiency in the exact sciences was against her. Most conversational problems seemed settled by the mere statement of the case. It was so self-evident that there was really nothing to say. Her silence among her mates was sometimes appalling, even to herself. Prue remembered with shame that the smaller fry, with "little Meryon" at their head, used to call her the deaf mute for her scant notice of their impudence.

"And what are you doing, Meryon?"

"Oh, I 'm—looking round."

"I see: going to write about us perhaps. I always thought that would be your line."

It was a new idea. Why not live up to Gertrude's assumption, and try to do something in that way?

And there was this besides—the wish to save her face before her old schoolmate, and not to seem "done." It is a constant preoccupation of the hard-up. The pride, which is their only asset, is in their way. Millionaires and lords are about the only persons who can afford to be without it. The poor wretch with only three ha'pence in his pocket has constantly to keep himself in heart, and others in awe with "'t ain't good enough for me."

There was a pause, and Prue took the opportunity of stealing a glance at the ring finger. Gertrude was not married. Clearly the other sex were still not much in her line. She had been reared in the dogma of man's superiority, and was most anxious to believe in it, as in all things she held to be true. Yet sometimes she found this no easy matter, in regard to a creature so cheery in getting itself floored, in the struggle of mind with mind on the way down to dinner.

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“Well, if I can be of any use, you know,” added Gertrude timidly.

“There seems to be a good deal doing for girls now,” said her friend—“girls that have to earn their own living.”

“It ’s about time, I think.”

Before they left the table, they had the place nearly all to themselves. Members had no time to loiter at this hour of the day.

“Come round and take a look at it,” said Gertrude, with a smile that seemed really to say, “Come and like me a little bit.”

“Musical afternoons,” read Prue, from the notice-board: “Whist drives,” “Shakespeare readings,” “Cycle runs.” It was hard to check the impulse to punctuate with notes of admiration. Certain references to select boarding-houses and apartments made her glad she had not given herself away. This might mean supervision; and she was still a Bohemian at heart—the passion strong within her for the freedom of the wild.

Yet it was appetising, say what you liked—“holiday parties” too; and the chance of brushing up her French, for some of them, in conversation classes.

And this was being “in the City”!

“What sort of girls do you have here?”

“Clerks, secretaries, Post Office girls, you know.”

The afternoon had slipped away, and they had to separate.

“I ’m going to have a few women journalists to luncheon at another club, the ‘Ineffable’ West End this time,” said Gertrude, returning to the idea of Prue’s literary

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ambitions. "Won't you come too, Meryon?" and she left it there with a stammer and a blush.

"Meryon" accepted.

She walked away elate. Something had come of it after all.

* * * * *

It was a perfect evening, and she went on, hardly caring which way she turned. The City was at its best. This jurisdiction will have to go, no doubt, with all its incidental glimpses of the old urbane life of commerce that soothed the fever of the struggle. It ought to go, exploited as it is by a greedy minority who have no sense of its meaning. Yet what a thing to lose, with all its faults! It is the garden city in being, in its scrapes of greensward, and immemorial trees shading the old graves; in its ancient churches with a careworn man dropping in, now and then, for a moment's silent prayer between two bouts of brokerage, or two corners in quinine.

Here, surely, is the faith that moves mountains—to be able to pray in such a place, and to know what 's going on outside.

By the mere accident of a turning, the girl was now in Charterhouse Square—going, going, indeed like all else in that region, but far from quite gone. A warehouse here and there, but still also many a house with the quiet of old burgher ideals brooding over it, and a suggestion of the giving and taking of kindly services, as part of the exchange transactions of the day.

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An old-time garden was in the middle of the square, and beyond it lay the walls of the older foundation, with its gables and its patches of verdure visible through the gates. All glowed in the soft light of the sunset. The garden was bright with bordering flowers, and with patches of colour in the costumes of lawn tennis parties; and musical with laughter and the cries of the game.

The players were in the employ of a great City firm; and they had their boarding-houses here—one for the young women, another for the men. The firm had done the thing handsomely, reserving the garden for recreation, and keeping the old buildings unspoiled. Here and there a girl who had finished her game, or who did not care to begin it, sat at an open window reading, writing, or looking on.

In two other idlers peering through the railings Prue recognised the callow pair she had seen on leaving All-hallows.

They seemed still more foolishly happy than they had been in the morning, perhaps in the thought that, though not without assistance, the outgoing tide had brought two of its pebbles together again.

CHAPTER XI

THE hope of work was about the only thing that gave Prue her courage for the luncheon at the Ineffable. She was half-afraid of all writers (perhaps because she had never seen one in the flesh), and half-scornful of one variety. The two moods are generally found in company: it is notorious that cowards whistle loudest in churchyards.

She had an idea that the members of all clubs were distinctly stand-offish. Clubs were associated with fashionable quarters, in her mind, and this one was no exception. She forgot that every newsboy, every crossing-sweeper, every work-girl—as she saw the other day—has a club now. But the girls in jam or pickles or flowers have just the same misgivings when they first join. They generally bonnet the caretaker on the evening of their first essay in rational enjoyment, and pour their tea from the windows on the head of the passer-by. It is their struggle for self possession—nothing more.

It was of course quite different from what she had expected. The Ineffable was almost pure being. It was composite and quintessential. It aimed at combining every good thing going in every club. It admitted both sexes. It was ethical; there were improving mottoes on the walls. The ripe wisdom of the ages and of the

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sages is all very well, but rather obstructive to the exchange of confidences at afternoon tea. It was Bohemian: there was a smoking room, wherein, while some ladies puffed for pleasure, others only puffed with a purpose. Good women, high up in all sorts of movements for the benefit of their sex, lit the cigarette of emancipation. Now it is one thing to indulge in this habit because you like it; quite another to do so only in defiance of your husband's mother's prejudice against it as a pollution of his home. This is but social obloquy sought on the house-tops in a sacred cause. These martyrs to duty were generally to be recognised by their practice of sitting in solitude, and punctuating the enjoyment with occasional paroxysms of suffocation. Their distress was often the more touching because of the extreme tenuity of its cause.

The hall porter, a man in livery, was rather unnecessarily disquieting as he took Prue's name. He was so placid, so self-contained, so remote, so transcendental, so "bother him!" in a word. She meekly took a seat at his bidding and prepared to watch him in his hutch. He had the grand manner of all West End servants. They catch it from their masters who hold their own only by the imperturbable calm which keeps an ill-bred world in awe. It is the more perfectly developed in the lacqueys, since in their case a single lapse into temper would leave them unfrocked.

Soon, however, she began to feel sorry for the man. He flew about swiftly, silently, unhastily, all in one, from speaking-tube to telephone that kept him in touch with all parts of the building. In the intervals of their

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alarums, he received and pigeon-holed letters, or weighed them, answered questions of members, signed the books of the messenger boys, and piled their parcels with an instinctive mastery of the science of strain that always contrived to leave the more fragile articles on the superstructure of the edifice.

She thought the members were fussy and self-important, as they bounced in or out. They were not; it was only an effect of the everlasting banging of the door. She muttered: "Give your orders, gents!" as they paused to communicate with the porter. It was uncalled for, it was almost unkind.

Gertrude came down, welcomed her effusively—for Gertrude—and took her into the morning room.

There were men about, as well as women. Prue was determined to see that all these male creatures had an air of being led with a leash, though in any other setting some of them might have passed for lions.

Perhaps her second thoughts on the subject led her to stick close to Gertrude, as the latter presented her to two or three ladies of the luncheon party already assembled. She heard vaguely Miss A., Mrs. B., Miss C., as the sounds of earth are heard by one who dives from the shore.

There was the editor of a great ladies' paper, quiet, composed, and with all sorts of possibilities of mischief in the steel-grey eye behind the *pince-nez*. There was her Paris correspondent over for a holiday—a woman of middle age, with a coquetry of silver hair that suggested a Pompadour in masquerade. Her dark eyebrows equally natural, and sparkling eyes beneath were quite in keep-

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ing. The figure alone, in its rotundity, told of the ravages of time, and of good dinners. As the lady editor was presumptively clever, this one was unquestionably so. She was a walking encyclopædia of all the queer stories of all the aristocracies of Europe. Sometimes these were pointed with a laugh that shook her whole frame, and made her very shoulders look wicked, not to speak of the massive head that rested on them without any visible intervention of a neck. Her repertory was her living. She could sit down at a moment's notice, and reel off the most side-splitting things about the social celebrities of the day. Who can hope to be a hero to the compiler of a column of social chat? She was capable of more solid and more reasoned judgments, but they did not pay; and she was not without the excuse for half the enormities of the world—a young family to push on in life, and a dependent mate.

He was present, an aged man, mild, colourless, effaced, whom she called "Bitty."

"Bitty dear, just go and make sure that I did n't leave the dog biscuits in the cab."

Bitty went.

"The new type," whispered Gertrude to Prue; "the husband of the woman of letters."

"I see—lady's-maid to the pythonesse."

"Well, you know, he 's just kind, fills her pen, lays out the fancy ink and fancy paper, brings her oysters and chablis at twelve with his own hand."

"Is it a man?"

"Don't be so—so—you know. Wait till you begin to scribble yourself. She is the bread-winner, anyhow."

The bread-winner! How that phrase seemed ever to

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ring in the girl's ear, or to rise in her thoughts. They were all bread-winners, for others or only for themselves. It was the woman at work, even here.

"The lady fashion-editor of the—"

She too, it seemed, had made a post for herself under the imperious law which now drives her sex into the market-place. She wrote her daily column of point-lace and furbelow, and, when it was done, mounted to garret regions of her stately house in South Kensington to superintend a whole workshop full of girls who cut out paper patterns of latest Paris fashions for "the trade" of two continents.

"And the quiet-looking woman over in the corner?"

"The one pouring over 'The Times'?"

"Yes."

"Speculator on the money market."

"What 's that, I wonder?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, I can't exactly say—making money, you know."

Oh, if only she could know!

"I believe it 's something like this," added Gertrude—"buys things that are steadily going up, and as soon as they 've gone high enough to give her the tiniest margin of profit, sells and begins again. It 's a succession of operations in small change—our woman's way. We all make up to her for tips. See! she 's just slipping out into the hall to look at the tape."

"The tape?" queried the girl faintly. The whirl of new experiences was bewildering.

"Don't be afraid; you won't have to work up the subject. She and 'Fashions' are not in our party to-day."

Another of Gertrude's guests was the great lecturer à

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la mode, a foreigner, who had become the rage in London by bringing German culture to the University Extension Lecture-rooms, and Plato to Claridge's. Prue had read about him in the papers.

There had been nothing like it, they said, since the fair crowd of "Carolines" flocked to the Sorbonne to hear M. Caro, the eminent professor, after whom they were named. They, too, took down words of gold in note-books edged with that precious metal, and with pencils of the same. It was a passing craze, but it left an enduring record. M. Pailleron, the dramatist, was jealous of M. Caro; he wrote "*Le Monde ou l'on s'ennuie*," for the Français; and all Paris went to laugh. The philosopher was equal to the occasion. He sat in a stage-box, well forward, laughed with the rest, and applauded with the self-same hands with which he had gesticulated truths divine from his university chair.

These foreign fashions reach us late. We are in our Carolinian period; but we are going one more on our model. M. Caro lectured but in one place; the distinguished Hungarian professor—for he was of that nationality—lectured in half-a-dozen. To-day you heard him at the Ineffable; to-morrow at South Kensington, where the young men of the University of London were as eager about him as the young women. Politian at Florence could hardly have had better houses.

His highest score for the record was some three lectures a day. He had lectured at Oxford; and opened there with an apology to the dons for his fluency. They were not to think worse of him than they could help, because he happened to be able to say what was in him without a stammer, or the punctuating "er"! It was the incurable

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habit of his temperament. They smiled, if only as men in torture; and he gave them an hour's talk without a break.

And such a talk it was!—good racy idiomatic English, with hardly a trace of accent. And on such subjects!—the encyclopædic range. Plato here; the schoolmen there; music; history. He would hardly have turned tail on the pragmatic sanction itself.

And with all this, articles in the great reviews, and volume after volume of solid German scholarship—not flawless, according to carping criticism, yet still of such quality that most of his detractors would have been glad to have the half of his complaint. A wonderful man!

A professor of the old school, a don, who rather despised culture for ladies, had been asked to meet him, and had come. Prue was obliged to admit that he was not exactly promising for a festival of this description. He was lop-sided with much learning, owing to his habit of carrying his daily purchases at the second-hand bookshops in a pocket of his overcoat. They were always thrust into one pocket; and their weight had, in the course of years, dragged down the shoulder on that side in a way that excited commiseration.

“We 're all here now, I think,” said Gertrude—“all but Mary Lane. She 'll come in by the quarter-past—punctual as usual, because always consistently behind time. I 'm going to put you next to her.”

“I think I shall like her,” said Prue. It was only another way of saying “poor me.” She was cowed by all this suggestion of faculty. Oh, for a “dear old stupid,” and a mate!

“You will like her, I think, though I 'm afraid she 's

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rather too bright and good for this world. She 's trying to make a living out of dreamland. She sets Mr. Yeat's songs to music, and sings them in a way that makes your flesh creep. She used to play the music at a 'higher thought centre' for twelve shillings a week, and live on that and a few shillings more in most blessed contentment, in a parlour under the sky. She 's now, I believe, on tour in the country with an old-fashioned interlude play, which is to redeem the villagers from the dullness of their lives.'

"I do like her," cried Prue emphatically; "and there she is at the door."

"Not a bad shot," said Gertrude, as she rose to meet a girl very little older than Prue, who looked like a figure out of a canvas of Francia.

It was a beautiful face, not so much by its lines, as by its air of sweet unreasonableness that was exceedingly winning, by its suggestion of perfect peace, and absolute indifference to consequences in the pursuit of ideals.

"She looks as though she had never felt afraid," said Prue.

"I think you 've hit it."

They were moving into the dining-room when Bitty was missed; and it must be confessed that he had been an inordinately long time looking for the dog biscuits.

The page-boy who was sent to recover him found him in the hall, watching the porter with a sort of fascination, and evidently longing to approach him as a friend. The porter was in one of those crises of a professional problem in which a man is seen at his best, or worst, accord-

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ing to the issue. He was at the telephone; and the instrument was advising him from a place in Hertfordshire to the following effect:

A. To ascertain the number of a Bond Street jeweller, and ask him why a brooch left for repair had not arrived, as promised, by that morning's post.

B. To book-stalls for two for that evening— if possible in the middle of the middle row.

C. To look out for a lady who might be expected at the luncheon hour, and say that her hostess had unfortunately missed the train; to try to transfer that lady for purposes of hospitality to a common friend who might, or might not, be at the club.

The porter was pondering these things with the blank stare of mental concentration, when a piercing cry of urgency from the speaking-tube compelled him to pass to that instrument.

It was but a trifle, a request to find the domestic who had been ordered to mend the fire in one of the upper rooms, and to ascertain why he had neglected his task.

The porter was not beaten; he was not even confused. Had he been of those who are daunted by the difficulty of serving two masters, he would never have been in that club. But unfortunately, while he was thus engaged, with an instrument in either hand, the telephone began to ask, in manifestly indignant protest: "Are you there?"

The porter paled, and his lips opened as in the act of articulation, but no sound came forth. He thought of where his rude hut by the Board school lay, of his young

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barbarians all at play in the gutter outside; and, so thinking, he swallowed the oath, which he meant to send by another route.

Still it was not in human nature to hide every sign of agitation. A cold bead slowly gathered on his brow. It was only one, but it was a bead of agony. He was evidently engaged in mental prayer for a third hand to enable him to fumble for his handkerchief.

These situations confound all distinctions of class. Bitty was about to say, "Warm work!" when the page-boy advanced with his message: "Please, sir, they 're goin' in to lunch."

The porter was left to his fate.

Their covers were laid in a recess that gave them almost a room to themselves. The owner of Bitty was of course the life of the gathering, keeping her end of the table in a titter with stories that gave high politics the interest of small-talk, and made even Reuter readable. It was a cheerful meal. The foreign professor capped paradoxes with her, and laughed heartily at her stories. The don threw their gaiety into relief with a persistent scowl.

When they moved into another room for coffee, Gertrude offered Prue an introduction to the lady editor, but the girl shrank back.

It was impossible, though that was the very thing for which she had come. The rattling cleverness of it all quite o'ercrowed her spirit. So this was a writer for the press! How enter the lists against such a champion as the Paris correspondent, or even in her train? Prue thought of her poor little school-girl essays, with the

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laboured bits from the books of reference about the Greeks and Romans, as against the careless ease of this outflow from the very fount of life, as it is lived by the men and women of to-day.

It was one more glimpse of the real condition of the struggle; and it gave her the same sickening sensation of her own inadequacy as she had felt in the City. "Some other time," was all she had the courage to say.

Gertrude understood her but too well. It was her own complaint.

"As you please; but mind I sha' n't let you off. You are not going to be let off now. The great man lectures here to-day. Would n't you like to hear him? I can't go, because I 've these good people to see off the premises, and a committee meeting upstairs after that. Wait for me till I get that over. Mary Lane is going to the lecture, and she 'll take care of you till I come down. Make haste with your coffee; there 's no time to lose."

CHAPTER XII

THE whole audience was at attention; the note-books were out; the pencils sharpened to a pin's point. The lecture was for half-past two. It was now five-and-twenty minutes to three—four-and-twenty! "He cometh not," she said. She was premature: he had entered the room.

No ladies' man to look at. Middle aged, solidly built, solidly browed, square headed, clean shaven but for the wisp of dark moustache. A conceivable Teutonic *bursch* who had taken his *turn verein* prizes, fought his duel, and clinked his cannakin with the best, in the intervals of labours by the midnight oil that might burn the eyesight out of a man at twenty-five. He had evidently survived that danger by a score of years.

Not a moment was wasted in preliminaries; or only one, what time he laid his watch on the desk. It was suggestive. Other audiences no doubt awaited him in other parts. The way we live now!

The Carolines settled down to attention; the light dying out of their faces, lest so much as a smile should break the thread of his high argument. And then a solid hour of it—for he gave good measure—with Plato for a text, and, for illustrations, anything apposite that happened to-day, yesterday, two thousand years ago.

On a passage of the Republic treating of government

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by sages (the fewer the better), he quoted a Disraelian novel to show that, with all our conceit of popular institutions, England has ever been at the heel of a few great families when she thought she was walking at her own sweet will. Chatham built up her empire; Pitt held tight to what was left, while the Parliament with its bauble and babble, was but his rattle for the crowd. The magic of it, for these particular hearers, was that of a fantasia on to-day, yesterday, and to-morrow into which anything might come, even his antipathies—or especially. These were strong: Huxley, Spencer, Wagner, were but a few of them.

The Americans were but one more: their whole corporate life, as it stood in the estimate, but a colossal game of bluff! An overrated people, only waiting to be found out in a cataclysm! The hunt was up, whenever a Gibson girl or a Gibson man crossed his path of thought. Some ladies of this nationality were among the audience. They took it all in good part. They had been known to whisper that he must have been badly treated by their mothers in his salad days. People should be more careful; think of the fearful power of reprisal when the victim happens to rise to a professorial chair!

And, after all, who cares whether it was exactly so or not? It was first-class sport. He professed no great regard for lecturing as a teaching process. It was but a stimulant, an appetiser—it might have annoyed him to say a cocktail—for the solids of the feast.

He knew the sex, and ruled them on the Byronic method—"first pique, then soothe by turns." If they

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expected mere dry erudition, or flowery compliment, they had come to the wrong shop.

Yet latent rebellion put forth a flash at question-time. When the lecture was over, his hearers were at liberty to ask for further particulars on knotty points. Some were not above the temptation to floor their revered teacher by the Socratic method. It may be enough to say that, with all their suppleness, he was not usually the one floored. A few had evidently hoped to put up a fight, by urging the don to the lists, but he declined with a growl.

The lecturer had no time for the insolence of triumph, the cab—why not a motor—awaited him at the door for another lecture, another article for the reviews, another chapter of another book. It was the professor *à la mode*, chatty, discursive, emotional, paradoxical—everything but dull. So, while men are shaping women, women shape men.

Prue was dazed and dispirited. There was nothing here for her. What place in any sort of life of letters could she hope to find, among all these craftsmen of the pen and of the spoken word? She was a strange compound of the terror of facing life, and a certain readiness to take a beating which, without her knowing it, might yet save her in the last resort. Hitherto she had done little but come up for punishment—and that worst of all—the punishment of her own fears. But there was always the hope that the luck might change.

Even her talk with Mary Lane at luncheon had not come to much. Mary had picked her own way through

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the meal, with an air of extreme detachment of mind from the viands when they came to her elbow. She feasted, like the heroes of the Iliad, only to put away from her a desire of meat and drink, which, to her, at least, was something of an impertinence.

She had listened with great intentness to every word of the lecture—not, however, without an occasional shrug of the shoulders. But when it was over, and they went into the drawing-room to wait for their hostess, she seemed to warm into her real self.

In this light she took Prue's fancy as a sort of holy woman of Scripture, lost in our century, and in our world. She was evidently one of that rare but real band who are wholly devoted to the things of the spirit, and who regard them as the only realities—delightfully unpractical persons, most refreshing in a society which is so perfectly well aware of what it is about.

With all this—and that was the charm of it—she evidently regarded herself as the most business-like person in the world. It came out that she had once kept a kind of shop in a poor neighbourhood, for the commerce of fine thoughts and fine emotions, in the firm persuasion that nothing would be easier than to live by it, in the measure of her simple wants. She had taught the children how to romp with the sense of art and taste, and transform to their imagination the dismal asphalt of the models into playing fields. She had held them spellbound with stories in class, told to music where the music happened to be better than words. She was quite proud of having made them or their mothers pay for her services—a halfpenny

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a week; a farthing on taking a quantity; and only for nothing when she was quite sure there was nothing to spare.

“I want you to understand I was doing it for a living, not for charity. I had enough of that when I used to unpack the old second-hand coats that came to my dear old father, the curate, from a public fund. I went forth to try to help him; what else could I do? But I was lucky in being able to try only by doing beautiful things. Life is not all chandler’s shop.”

“But how *did* it pay, after all?”

“Splendidly till I caught the fever. I ’m going to begin again this winter; but I ’ve been so busy with my interlude play.”

“Tell me about that.”

“Well, you know, I ’m taking it through the villages, and in a van for cheapness. It is so much sweeter than the railways; and we can always get lodgings in the cottages. I love my villagers—what country parson’s daughter does not? I ’ve three girls to help me. Emma Marsh—‘the Pearl,’ the name of the title part; May Holroyd—the ‘Peasant Father’ (not a heavy one, I hope); Mary Francis—‘Chorus Angel.’ Your humble servant is stage-manager, orchestra, and maid-of-all-work. That ’s our stock company. May has had to go home to look after her mother, and I ’ve come up to find someone to take her place.”

“Au-thor!” laughed Prue, as though joining in a call.

“I ’m author,” said Mary, with modest pride. “No, no, I ’m not, though; I ’m only adapter. I found what I wanted in an odd volume of the Early English Text

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Society, a story poem, written nigh five hundred years ago by a great unknown who died without leaving so much as a card for posterity with his name. It was so lovely that I just rigged it up into scenes."

There was something quite hypnotising in her quiet self-confidence.

"It 's going to be a great success," cried Prue enthusiastically. "I know it is, I feel it."

"It *is* a success. Sometimes I make thirty shillings a week, and can send something home. That leaves plenty to keep body and soul together."

"What 's the charge at the doors?"

She laughed outright.

"Half the time there are no doors. On clear summer nights we stage it in the open. No, no; the play 's the thing. I want the village people to see it, and how are they ever to see anything of that sort, if they wait for the touring companies? The leavings of the agent in advance are good enough for me."

"Playing in the open," murmured Prue, "like a rehearsal of the 'Midsummer Night's Dream.' A dream of a dream. Oh, how perfect! Don't say anything more just yet."

"Not even about the charge at the doors?"

"Be quiet, please!"

"Yes; but pray don't imagine I forget things of that sort. I 'm the last in the world, I assure you. We always send the hat round;" and she pointed to a pouch at her girdle. "They give what they like. I 've cut down expenses as low as I can, so they don't have to give much. Sometimes it is an offering in kind; as often as not, a

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dish of apples, a basket of eggs. Then, when we 've paid all outgoing, we share and share alike, I and my three girls. That 's 'treasury.' Hurrah for the road!"

"Yes; but when you *must* take a hall?"

It was so captivating that Prue thought she had better put off the hour of full surrender by still looking for a flaw.

"A barn you mean, or a schoolroom. We can always get that on loan. You can't think what a lot of lending goes on when you start in the right sort of way. The villagers do all the supers' parts for nothing, and are happy to do them—here and there a speaking part too, when we 've time to coach them a bit."

"You 've forgotten the dresses."

"I don't think so. You should see our wardrobe. We work at it when we 're on the road."

"Thespis and his cart?"

"No; only old Ober Ammergau in its age of innocence."

"The scenery? You said yourself it was n't all outdoors."

"A screen to hide the actors who are off duty from the actors who are on."

"I 'm thinking of the audience—the illusion."

"So am I. The less in that line they have done for them, the more they do for themselves. 'Thus with imagined wing our swift scene flies'—why this abject reliance on the stage carpenters? Look at the child with its doll. A bundle of rags and a stick will beat all the waxen and flaxen felicities of the toy-shops. As a matter of fact, Macbeth was never so flourishing as when he appeared in

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knee-breeches. To this day the Comédie Française finds an arm-chair and a couple of pillows enough for one of the greatest scenes in Molière."

Prue was silent; so was Mary for a while. It was "a penny for your thoughts" with either of them. Both had the precious gift of reverie. Mary sat as one looking at some far-off things. Then she murmured:

"If you must have realism, why not try nature? At Sherwood we gave the whole scene of the Nativity in a glade of the forest, with the Magi of the village choir picking their way by the light of the moon in a cloudless heaven, and of a bright, particular star that happened to be on service for the night. Oh, the beauty of it—the beauty! The words came like whispers of the purest poetry from the very heart of things."

Prue's pulse beat fast. Could this be the thing she was looking for—a way of living that was also a path of art, with all the delicious excitements of life on the road? At any rate, there was room for a great hope. Amid all these people so coldly clever, so repellently sure of themselves, had she not found a friend?

* * * * *

Gertrude came in and broke the spell.

"You poor things, you must be famished. Come and have a cup of tea."

She led the way to a large room which was not as other rooms of other clubs. The waiters—all men here—had the air of courtiers; the muffin and tea-cakes were rites in their pomp of service. There was an orchestra—most

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of its members mighty pretty fellows, and well aware of it. Soft airs floated on a breeze perfumed by the pocket-handkerchiefs, no footfall on the heavy carpet contending with them for the mastery. So, according to the best authorities, things are done in Paradise. It was many stages nearer the stars than the fogeydom of Pall Mall. If there was anything left to desire (yet who could want it, in such a place and with such a programme?), it was but a corner for a nap.

Prue was ready for any desperate venture, under the sense of isolation and nothingness in which she had been left by the earlier experiences of the day. She kissed Mary Lane at parting, and whispered: "May I fill Miss Holroyd's place?"

She hurried home to tell the dog about it. He did not take it in good part.

"I 'm disgusted with you. I shall have to find a billet in a Punch and Judy show, before you 've done."

She was prepared for the objection, and appeased him with rock cakes bought on the way.

CHAPTER XIII

THE village schoolroom was crowded with men, women, and children, except where at three-parts of its length a red cord drawn from side to side marked the mystery-land of the stage. Beyond this was the school piano. The curtain hung from one of the rafters, and stretched three-parts of the way across. A couple of screens—one borrowed from the schoolmaster, the other from the parsonage—sealed the gaps to public curiosity.

The arrangement of the audience was not so much by wealth and social importance as by inches of altitude. The children sat in front, on the lowest forms; the mothers who looked after them, in the next rows; the bigger boys, and the men capable of cuffing them at need, in the rear. The paraffin lamps shed a cheerful glow until Mary Lane came in as an old man, and obscured, without extinguishing them, by means of a kind of tin cosy made for the purpose. Then the talk sank to a murmur, and the murmur to a hush, when Mary, re-entering as orchestra, took her place at the piano for the overture.

It was the divine score of Glück in the *Orfeo*, the finest expression of the emotions of love and yearning, meeting and parting, in the whole range of musical literature, the sublimation of the purest passion of sorrow and of joy. It is impossible to go beyond this. To listen to it is to

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feel that music is the only one of our arts that condescends to earth, instead of merely aspiring to the skies.

The strain ceased; a bell tinkled in the perfect stillness; the curtain rose.

“Oh!” from various parts of the house, particularly from the stalls. The rest was silence, in obedience to a second summons of the bell.

The house was dark, but the stage was illuminated by three lamps for footlights, and as many others hanging from the roof. Other wings, in the shape of other screens, came in view. At the back all was closed in by the large map of the world, and by the lithographs of birds, beasts and fishes, with their faces turned to the wall.

Scene: a mound of turf in the foreground, with a rustic in mediæval garb stretched thereon as in sleep—Prue, her first appearance on any stage, masquerading as a man of the period of doublet and hose. Only the shape was to be seen, the face being shrouded by the hood of a long cloak. For the rest of the scenery, no more than a broad band of cloth of silver drawn obliquely across the stage.

Enter a winged Angel, as Chorus, Mary Francis, a youthful figure that might have walked straight out of Botticelli's “Assumption,” by kind permission of the Director of the National Gallery—a harmony as to costume and hair, in pale blue and gold, with a star on the breast, and a mere suggestion of plumes of black and crimson at the shoulders, as she stands facing the audience.

She takes her place at a spot near the footlights, with her feet drawn close together, and displays a scrap of embroidery inscribed “The Pearl.”

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The Angel speaks—in recitative—

“Good people, our play is the play of a father’s grief at the loss of his little daughter. It was first written as a piece of poetry, in the West Midland speech of our fathers, about five hundred years ago. The writer did his work, and went his way, leaving his very name unknown. The poem was on the same road to oblivion, till a scholar, one Richard Morris, saved it for all the millions of English-speaking people for all time. Mary Lane has now made a kind of play of it, in the hope of giving pleasure to our English village-folk.

“In the high season of August the father visits the grave of his ‘precious pearl without price,’ wrings his hands for sorrow, and falls asleep upon its bed of flowers. Now to see how it fared with him in his dreams.”

The curtain falls.

It rises again on the same scene, but with the stage in half light, and with the mourner, or, at any rate, the cloak that does duty for him, still lying by the grave. Then there enters a sort of other self of him (Prue apparelled in misty grey), which represents his action in the dream.

The Angel speaks—

“His body lies upon the grave, his ghost is gone in God-es grace to a strange land.

“Where the rocks and cliffs gleam glorious.

The hill-sides are of crystal.

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The leaves of the trees are as burnished silver.
The gravel is of orient pearl.
The birds are of all hues of beauty.
He hears their sweet melody.
What tongue shall tell the beauty of their forest
home?
All shines like gold.
He is at the bank of a river.
It gives forth sweet sounds.
Its stones glitter like stars on a winter night.
He follows the stream.
Sure Paradise lies beyond.”

The figure advances slowly, as in blissful trance. Then it pauses at the streak of cloth of silver—a thing of earthy texture no longer, for any of us, but a glittering stream in the open, as the end of the schoolroom is a landscape of Paradise. The poet is his own scene-painter: and it serves.

But he may not pass the river. He tries it with his staff in all directions. There is no ford.

The curtain falls.

It rises on a darkened stage, with a “crystal cliff” at the far end (a cloth draped over a couple of chairs), at the foot of which sits a maiden—Emma Marsh, a harmony of white and rose, white and pearl—the last as to the costume. This is our nearest approach to the “Royal array” of the poem—a robe of muslin all glistening under the beam of a strong light from the wing, which is the modest secret of the management.

The music sounds again. This time it is the Ballotti of

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the same celestial score, where Eurydice appears, a vision of glory in Elysium. Who shall render, in any terms but its own, its soaring raptures, the intensity of significance in its message of the higher destinies of the soul?

It is enough for all of us, it is almost too much; hearken only to the sighs of wonder and measureless content.

The Angel speaks—

“He knows that he has seen her before.
He would call her, but is afraid.
She lifts up her face, ‘white as ivory.’
He stands still, ‘like a well-trained hawk.’
He fears lest she escape ere he speak with her.
She moves along the stream towards him.
Her kirtle is decked with precious stones.
She wears a crown of the same.
Her hair hangs down about her: it shines as gold.
A wonderful pearl is set in her breast.
She salutes him.
‘No man from here to Greece is so glad.’ ”

*The Father speaks—*turning to the vision, all trembling
lest he lose it by breaking the silence—

“Oh, Pearl adorned with pearls, art thou my Pearl that I have plained? What fate hath brought my jewel hither, and wrought my woe, for since we two were parted, joyless have I been.”

The Maiden—

“Thy Pearl is not lost. It is in that gracious garden where no sin cometh.”

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The Father—

“I thank the Lord that hath brought me near my blisse.
Now will I pass the river.”

The Maiden—

“Thou errest in thinking I can be with thee. Death
alone can bring thee over this water.”

The Father—

“Dost thou doom me to sorrow again? If I lose thee,
I care not what befall.”

The Maiden—

“Suffer patiently. Cease to strive. Abide God-es
doom. All lieth in his hand.”

The Father—

“Rebuke me never with fell words. Lend me thy com-
fort.”

A sob from one of the women. A whisper among the
audience: “Et ’s Mrs. Truby now; see if it ain’t!” A
nudge from a man with downcast head, sitting by the
woman. Silence again.

The Maiden—

“‘A blissful life thou says I lead,
Thou wouldest know thereof the stage
My Lord, the Lamb, through his Godhede
He took myself to his mariáge.’”

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The Father—

“Thou wert so young. What couldest thou have done to please God?”

The Maiden—

“It is God-es goodness; no merit of mine. The lord of the vineyard hired workmen for a penny a day. At noon he hired other men in the market-place. At one hour before the sun went down, he saw more men standing idle. When the sun went down, the reeve was told to pay the workmen. To give each a penny. One began to complain as having travailed more. The lord said he had according to his due and his need. What more would he have?”

The Father—

“Methink thy tale unreasonable.”

The Maiden—

“In heaven each is paid alike. God is no niggard. None can have less bliss than another.”

The Father—

“I am but dust and ashes. Bring me to that blissful bower, thy dwelling-place.”

The curtain falls.

There was an interval; and the audience began to prattle. The women came to console Mrs. Truby, and she accepted consolation. Her mate sat quite grim and silent,

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his head bowed a little lower than before, under the sense of his nothingness. He had the sickening air of sufferance, of some animal cornered, and bearing blows.

The doctrine of the parable was evidently a trouble to most of them—the penny paid to all the labourers, the new-comers as well as to those who had borne the burden of the day. The village cobbler was for making it a demonstration in political economy, but he was afraid to raise his voice. It is a hard saying, no doubt, “from each according to his powers; to each according to his needs”; but one day it will appear in fire in the skies, and then our old society will dissolve to a new birth of faith and love. Meanwhile it is but the *pons asinorum* of the higher truth, a modest function indeed compared with its glories to come.

The curtain rises—the Angel speaks—

The father enters again. He presses forward eagerly till he is stopped by the silver thread of the stream.

“Yet may he see what lies beyond,
As St. John saw it, so seeth he,
The city is of burnished gold,
Pitched upon gems—jasper, sapphire, chalcedony,
emerald, sardonix, ruby, chrysolite,
beryl, topaz, chrysophrase, jacinth, amethyst.”

There was a great stir in the audience. Their Sunday reading had taught them to revel in the effects of this Hatton Garden heaven. It was, no doubt, but the anthropomorphist there is in all of us doing his best in the terms of his experience. His limitations were none the less

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regrettable. As the catalogue rolled off the angel's tongue, a few began to try to realize its glories by thinking of the great ball-room at the hall, with company assembled to meet the Lord-Lieutenant of the county.

Luckily, the music came to the rescue. A procession of girls (three marking the extreme limit of the resources of the management, and of these one borrowed from the village), passed across the stage, "singing a holy song." And as that song rose, high and clear, the mere ball-room heaven dissolved into the New Jerusalem, with the whole white-robed choir innumerable entering its gates, and raising their canticles of rapture to its throne.

The Angel speaks—

"The beholder of this fair city stands 'still as a dazed quail,' in the moonlight.

"Alder men (older men) fall prostrate." (Alas! we have none in the cast.)

The father, seeing his little queen, stretches forth his arms in longing, and once more essays the stream. He may not cross; and he sinks upon the grave.

Then Mary, with her head thrown back, and her eyes closed, for she knew the whole composition without book, played one of the sublime choruses of shepherds and nymphs, in which the anguish of parting is transmuted into the joy of all generous and exalted emotion by the magical insight of art.

The Angel speaks—

"The dreamer has learnt his lesson.

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Men desire more than they have any right to expect.
God give us grace to be his servants."

The curtain falls.

And so home, much as their fathers may have gone before them, five hundred years ago, with talk and to spare for present needs, and store of it for the winter fire.

The point is that this handful of girls, with the simplest of "dresses and appointments," with only such music as may be brought to every village in the land, have held an audience of English rustics spell-bound by means of mere nature working in a medium of the perfect simplicity of great art. Beside their mechanical resources, the lowest music hall, the commonest gaff in the land, is as great a wonder of scenic contrivance as it is of the brutalisation of English taste.

CHAPTER XIV

“**M**ESTER” Truby came in next morning bearing gifts, as from his wife—a small basket of flowers packed under a cool leaf. He laid it in Prue’s hands as those of the father in the cast, smiling as he looked at her, and complimenting her on having grown in the night. It was his way of saying that she seemed bigger as a woman than as a man. He took his leave with the few simple words that were necessary, and without any allusion to his deeper interest in the performance. He had lately lost an only child, a girl, of about the same age as the one in the play.

The little caravan was soon on the road again for town. In October Mary Lane’s season would come to an end. She was to put up for a time at a Tolstoi settlement in the south of England, where a handful of ladies, one or two of them the spoiled children of fashion, were, in desperation, trying to realize the simple life by doing their own house work and taking care of waifs from the slums. The route march was for that point. The players gave performances on the way to crowded houses—sometimes with Spagley as shepherd’s dog in the interlude. He had been sent for, by special request, in the middle of the tour, and had generally conducted himself to the satisfaction of his owner and employer. On one occasion, however, he made an unauthorized appearance on the stage, with a stray stocking in his mouth, in the midst of a moving scene.

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So it was broad England generally from north to south as they sped along, with some new aspect of nature every day. It was beauty of dreamland everywhere for the town-bred girl—beauty of old highways, old villages, here and there of old towns, and with it peace. The country was lovely still in the orderly succession of its sights and sounds. The wrens sang and the birds began to make friends with man betimes by friendly visits to the garden patches. The swallows vanished, but the woodlark, the blackbird and thrush were in full cry, and the young birds generally in full practice, still under tuition, though one might hardly guess it from their self-sufficient air. The mid-spaces of earth and sky were flecked with the flocking lark, the roads with the tramp—one just as much a piece of the natural history of the country as the other. The larks were all that they professed to be; so was one of the tramps in being a real “unemployed.” He was a carpenter from one of the great towns, on his way to the capital to look for a job. He wore his apron round his waist for warmth; carried his tools at his back; and stepped out bravely, in his desperation, to join the fourteen thousand men of his trade out of work in London, by reason of the substitution of iron for wood in his branch of the building trade.

And on their way Mary called at the last lavender farm left in England, to renew her stock of the dried flower and the distilled water for winter use. It was all home-made by a gentlewoman in whose family the industry had been for generations, and who was the last of her line.

It was October in Prue’s heart, when she entered the solitary home in London in the waning light, with Spag at her heels. The place was as neat as when she left it,

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for Sarah had looked in from time to time, and, duly notified in advance, had been there in the early morning. But perhaps all that only made matters worse. The sense of desolation was accentuated by the gloom and the autumn chill, by the little pile of rubbish in handbills and circulars which had not been worth forwarding, and, above all, by reaction from the state of exalted feeling in which she had lately lived. It was a sordid world again, common and low, with never a seraph in sight.

She was going to seek a sort of outdoor relief of the spirit in cuffing her companion, kissing him for pardon, and then having a good cry, when her eye fell on a letter suspended from the mantel-piece by a thread, evidently to attract immediate attention. Its fancy notepaper bore a stamped address that Prue had never heard of before, and it ran in this way:

“Miss Ruskill will be glad to have the pleasure of Miss Meryon’s company at tea at above this evenin’ at ‘arf after five. No answer requered, but please come. Fare tuppence by the yellow tram from Grazin’ Road, stopping at the Bull and Gate, and then two minet’s walk. Company.

“*P. S.*—Also the dawg, if in town.”

It explained many a dark hint of Sarah as to a coming event of importance; and Prue, with her running footman in attendance at the tail of the car, was soon on her way.

SARAH’S tea party was not so much an entertainment as an act of dedication. During all her years of hard work,

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she had been secretly building a temple. It was finished at last, and now she wanted her little world to come and see.

Sarah lived in one room in a slum, but she devoted all her spare money, and all her spare time, to the decoration of a supplementary lodging in a better quarter. This was reserved for future use as the 'ome of her dreams, and was the scene of the present rite. Every penny she could save was given to the furnishing of it. The carpets were of the brightest known to the hire and purchase-system; antimacassars were not wanting; the pictures were framed in inevitable plush. It was an expensive luxury. One room had gradually grown to two under the temptation of a cottage piano and of a new and irresistible suite in saddle-bags. And now there it was at last, perfect, a palace and a shrine, a place of rest to be happy in, at every moment that could be spared for the inward contemplation of the joy of being.

Sarah had no sense of sex grievance, absolutely none of political grievance: all she wanted was personal independence, and this 'ome was the expression of it. She had never broken bread in it, or closed an eye. When she had realized the sense of possession to the full, in long, dreamy hours, she locked the door, and went away—to fly back again on the first opportunity, as a lover to his mistress, a mother to her babe—"Mine!"

For this, she had toiled for six solid years, saving as the coral insect builds, and paying off, amid many discouragements, and some narrow escapes of ruin. The more or less fanciful campaigns in the literature of self-help are really nothing beside the realities of heroic self-denial in some unrecorded lives.

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She welcomed her guest warmly, though with constraint. The part of hostess was evidently one that gave her considerable difficulty, and it could hardly be said to have received an exhaustive interpretation by her persistent refusal to sit down. The gathering was a sort of review of her customers present or past. Prue recognised most of them from well-remembered verbal sketches. A little old lady seated on the sofa was—the girl thought, perhaps the most perfect achievement of neatness ever seen. This was indubitably the “champion” employee from the Post Office who had never missed a day’s attendance for a quarter of a century. She seemed to have been saving up her ailments and to be looking forward to a long and comfortable illness, to begin on the very day of her retirement from the service.

Sarah clearly felt that there was something incomplete in her own mere refusal to take a chair, but she was still at a loss. Her sense of the duties of hospitality fitfully dictated other courses. As each guest entered the room, she pointed to a plate of oranges, and said simply: “’Ave one!” When this was declined, she turned to the open piano, glistening with cleanliness, and urged each to “play a tune.” She had a quantity of music at hand which had really been taken over from a customer in lieu of wages, one stray sheet of it bearing the title, “Rosy Cheeks Mazurka,” a fair sample of the rest.

Nobody, of course, would display musical gifts at such exceedingly short range of invitation, as nobody would eat fruit. Poor Sarah looked disconcerted, and Prue, seeing it, sat down, and began one of Chopin’s nocturnes. When it was over, Sarah murmured with difficulty: “Ancore. Give us another, miss,” and laid on the instru-

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ment a piece from her own collection called, "My Bright-eyed Sweet Elaine."

She was happier now. The piano was in use, the music was in use, with the carpet and the saddle-bag suite, while one of her guests looked at an engraving representing the signing of Magna Charta, and another toyed with a work of fiction entitled "Elizabeth, or the Exiles of Siberia," bound in red-and-gold. It was the sanctification of usage: the 'ome was real at last.

Prue turned from the piano to find the company assembled. She took a chair beside the young person who had been looking at the book; only to feel sorry, a moment after, that for once she had taken the course that lay nearest to her. The young person was not exactly reassuring. Her entire costume was a gaud rather than a thing for use. It seemed to have been composed from a close study of the gospels of fashion in the popular press, with a liberal exercise of the right of private judgment, in regard to bargains at the suburban sales. Her hat was rather an awning than a covering for the head. You could have sheltered chickens under it from the rain. Its shade was luminous, and robbed the vermilion of her cheek of barely half a tint. Her eyebrows were things of purpose. She was not ill-looking, but she seemed to want perspective for her proper effect.

Sarah introduced her—with needless emphasis on a vowel—as "Miss Eva St. Galmier, a purfessional."

Prue recognised her from previous descriptions. She was a singer at one of those minor music halls of the workingmen's clubs utterly unknown to the general

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public, and a world within the world of stupendous London.

Her foreign name was quite delusive in its suggestion of ignorance of our tongue. She spoke this with a rattling metallic fluency, as of coins pouring from a banker's shovel; and every utterance seemed an exercise in the "patter" of her craft. In this medium, she contrived, in the course of the first five minutes to inform her new acquaintance that "pa was such a gentleman," and that her brother (neither of them present) was a young man about town—presumptively the Kentish quarter of that extensive region.

"Glad to meet you, miss, and your dear old dog. Seems like meeting old friends."

Prue winced, and glanced rather angrily at her hostess. Evidently the system of the fractional maid-of-all-work was no unmixed blessing. There might be leakage even in Sarah's taciturnity.

She muttered her acknowledgments, and took up another book—this time in blue-and-gold.

But Miss St. Galmier was not to be put off so. She was distinctly clinging. Young persons with that build of headgear, and that shade of vermilion, are apt to be so when they find one of their own sex who may give them countenance in difficult conjunctures. The most frivolous woman is rarely without a dean's wife in reserve. These things are to scale; and Miss St. Galmier, who was a tactician in her way, was ruled by the law of the case.

"You should see my brother Reginald's dog," resumed Miss St. Galmier. "My pa used to say—"

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But here Prue managed to give her the slip, as Sarah advanced with another young woman immediately recognisable as Sarah's customer from America.

It was not wholly by the dress. Laura Belton had lived long enough in England to make occasional default of the national note. The heels of her shoes—or, to put it more genteelly, of her footwear—were fast losing the sense of aspiration. Yet, here and there, Prue's quick eye caught points that were not of this hemisphere. The faultless gloves, the lawn about her shoulders thrown, or its equivalent in feather'stole, the few bits of ornament—merely parts of a composition without any pretence to an independent life of their own—were all of this order. So was the manner—at once alert and reposeful, and with a self-assurance that was but good sense taking itself for better or for worse. The charm of mere line and contour was well enough, but the real appeal lay in the expression of a mind at ease, and quite seriously bracing in its effect on the beholder.

Only another work-girl, no doubt—but lucky the people with the patent rights of that type if also alas! of the other of "The Long Day."

"It 's the jim engraver what I told yer about," said Sarah; and she left it there, and the pair alone.

"She won't part with her 'jim,' " said Laura, with a laugh.

"No; I 'm afraid it 's a hopeless case."

"She 's a pearl, for all that. What I owe her in peace of mind! But there: it would only spoil her; she must never know."

"A pearl with a good many owners," said Prue.

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“The other way on, I fancy; a tyrant with a good many slaves.”

“Yes; she ’ll do anything, if you ’ll only mind what she tells you.”

“Beg pardon, but ought n’t it to be what she ’s ’a-tellin’ of yer’?” said Laura, with a twinkle of her eye.

“The better reading, certainly.”

“I never resist; and live in clover. Her virtues of omission are just as conspicuous as the others. She even allows me to clean my own tools.”

“What beautiful, delicate little things they must be,” said Prue, in the hope of getting her to talk about herself and her art.

She might have succeeded; but just then Sarah ushered in a new guest—a man.

“Who ’s he, I wonder?” said Prue. “I thought it was to be a—a—”

“Caucus of women?” suggested the other.

“Well, yes?”

“Can’t you guess? The editor of *The Branding Iron*.”

CHAPTER XV

“IMPOSSIBLE,” said Prue.
“Why?”

“He looks such a—’nother sort of person.”

“Is n’t that constantly happening? Now to me, he seems exactly like that sort of person.”

“I don’t quite understand.”

“Well the sort that wants something in life, and won’t take no for an answer.”

He was not a day older than five-and-twenty, and had the average good looks of his age. The French call them the beauty of the devil, meaning that most of us have a chance of perdition once in our lives.

They were the looks of health and faculty, Prue had to own as much to herself, in spite of her prepossession against him on account of his journalistic style. He was of middle height, had dark hair that curled with its own wiry strength, was clean shaven, and very neatly dressed. But this was nothing out of the way, except as a corrective of her first impression. The main point was the air of purpose that brought the whole personality together in one dominant note.

“I ’ve never met him before,” she said, more in soliloquy than in answer to Laura.

“Nor I; but I ’ve read *The Branding Iron*.”

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“Too much slum and slang to my taste. Who wants to know about—?”

“I think he ’ll get there,” said Laura briefly, and she moved away as Sarah brought the new-comer up to Prue.

“This ’ere ’s the young lidy that sent yer the six-pence,” were the introductory words.

“My first subscriber,” he said, with a smile and bow.

Prue thought of his catch-penny, “Oh, be in time!” and wished him, or herself, at Jericho. But it was impossible to rally back to the mood of aversion. His accent and manner confirmed the impression formed on his entering the room. It was Oxford certainly; but there was nothing of the drawl due to the passage of speech through tubes insufficiently protected by a clerical tie.

She had to say something civil. “Your paper is very—original.”

“Wait,” he returned quietly, and more to himself than to her.

Was he going to be disagreeable, after all—just when she was ready to give him another chance?

“Well,” he continued, “one must cry from the housetops sometimes, to get a hearing. But, you know, I ’m under a solemn promise to be occasionally simple, rational, and unaffected between whiles.”

“A paper all written by one man: it must be hard work.”

“That ’s easy enough; but think of the trials of Sarah my business manager. How should I get my subscriptions without her?”

“By the way, who attends to the bridges?” she asked, with a touch of severity.

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“I do” was the bland reply.

The shaft had missed. He had evidently forgotten the incident and failed to recognise her. She was mortified, and tried a barb with a finer point.

“It is very good of you to give us so much of your time.”

“Unfortunate for me that I can only give so little. But I have other things to attend to in other quarters, worse luck.”

What were the other things? It was annoying that she did not know him well enough to ask a simple question.

The talk fell for a few minutes, while she mused, and he observed the company. He was a disappointment and a consolation at the same time. Everything she had expected in the editor of *The Branding Iron* was wanting—a pert manner, even a loud and self-assertive voice. The tones were low and without emphasis. He was as simple and unconsciously himself as a sage of genius, or an animal—say, as Whitman, a horse, or a dog. With a change of clothing, he might have taken his place in a camp of miners, or in a navvies’ gang. None need have suspected his disguise: he would have been a clean navy, a clean miner, that is all.

“A newspaper is a very costly venture, I believe.”

“Yes. I’ve known what it is to drop five-pound-ten a week.”

It was not pleasant to be laughed at; and she made some slight change in her manner to show it.

The rebuke escaped him, perhaps because he did n’t deserve it.

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“But that ’s only my ignorance. What I hope to prove is that you can start a paper just as cheaply as you start a chandler’s shop.”

“Is not the other way shorter?”

“What other way, please?”

“Well—to find someone with capital.”

“I think not. We must look out, or the capitalist will dominate literature, as well as journalism by-and-by. The very poems will be settled at a board meeting, and written in factories, with one department for the elegies, and another for the odes, each under a responsible manager.”

“But the machinery, the—what do you call it—‘plant,’ the writers even—I mean the clever ones—how are you going to get all that?”

It was another shaft, but he still refused to wince.

“Suppose the clever writers, as you call them, had a little more sense of their opportunity. A quill, a bottle of ink, a sheet of paper, and a mere human being, for the driving power—and what more do you want? All oratory in its essentials means the stump of a tree, all drama the tail of a cart.”

“Yes, yes,” she said impudently. “Oh, I wish you knew Mary Lane.”

“I know of her, if that will do. Nothing in the world can really stand between the one who wants to say something, and the other who wants to have it said. Get that right, and the capital will make itself as you go on.”

“Remember you have n’t got into print yet with *The Branding Iron*.”

“Please don’t forget that I have n’t tried. I ’ve writ-

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ten my paper with my own hand; that will do away with the printing presses, until I can afford to buy them. And I am circulating it through the ha'penny post, and our incomparable Sarah; and that will do away with the publisher till he comes to us hat in hand. My editorial office, publishing office, and all the rest of it, is a back parlour, with a deal table in one corner, and a few reams of paper, in another, piled on the floor. I began with one subscriber" (and he bowed again); "I 've three hundred and fifty-seven now. I lost over a hundred shillings the first week: I lose scarcely as many threepenny-bits now; and I can afford to go on till it all comes right. Why not a one-man paper, and a poor man at that? A thought can get itself uttered just as easily now as ever it could in the age of the broadsheet and the age of the pamphleteer."

Sarah served tea.

She was distracted between the wish to be silent, and the sense of her duty as hostess. Her working compromise was to urge her guests to produce themselves for the benefit of one another.

"Tell 'em that funny story about your old dawg and the parrot, miss," she said to Prue.

It would have been far easier to die; and Prue gave her to understand as much by signs.

Sarah was more successful with another of the party, to whom she appealed for "that bit about the old bachelor."

The bachelor, it seemed, had applied to a ladies' employment agency for someone to call on him and decorate his rooms. Elderly as he was, his eyes gleamed in a way that was not altogether reassuring to the manage-

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ment. Yet they could hardly refuse to entertain his proposition, for one of their advertised services was the embellishment of the home. They accordingly selected the most matronly person on the staff, and sent her to his chambers, in spectacles and a cap, to take his orders. He gave them faintly. The matron asked him for ten pounds to go on with, and promised to render a faithful account of her disbursements in due course. He drew a cheque for the amount, still as one in low spirits. She then took information as to his hours of absence, and, during these hours, called to show her skill in the decorative arts. It was a plush drapery for the bookcase, on one day; on another, a window-sill blossoming in flowers. The elderly bachelor still pined, and, at the end of the week, the matron—cap, spectacles, and all, sought him out and asked for a further installment. The elderly bachelor shook his head, muttered something about a swindle and showed her out. ‘Fine—ten pounds and costs.’

Spag was now implored by Sarah to “bang the door,” an accomplishment which he had originally acquired by his attempts to bring down an appetising morsel artfully placed on the top. But he now refused to show off, and retired, with a low growl, beneath his owner’s chair.

The party broke up, the remorseless Sarah pressing her oranges on them to the last. When they were all gone, she sat in her ’ome in an ecstasy of contemplation, and, as the twilight deepened, felt that she had not lived and laboured in vain. Then, rousing herself, she “tidied” the place in a rapture of energy, locked it up, and returned to her garret abode.

CHAPTER XVI

LAURA and Prue found their way out together—perhaps not without contrivance on one side. Prue's return to town in the October gloom had given her an oppressive sense of loneliness. She wanted a mate.

She wanted guidance most of all. She was ready to pay her court to this queen of work-girls, who, according to Sarah, might earn as much as four pounds a week. She longed to know how it was done.

The Fates were kind.

“Won't you come and see my den?” were about Laura's first words, as they turned into the street. “I can't come up to Sarah in hospitality; but perhaps a tiny cup of black coffee might tempt you, at the end of our walk.”

The den was in a street in middle-aged Bloomsbury, and by a church which had sheltered generations of worshippers. Laura let herself in with her latchkey, and seemed to have the place all to herself. Landing after landing echoed to their tread, as they mounted the staircase, and read by the dim gaslight the names of the solicitors, land agents, and company promoters, who had long since locked up and gone away for the night. A small brass plate on the garret floor bore the inscription, “Belton, Gem Engraver.”

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The subdued roar of a neighbouring thoroughfare kept up a sort of orchestral base that never stopped, and that now served only as a sort of background for the silence. It was the monster city in one of its peculiar notes—a retreat of perfect peace and seclusion, but still within sound of the sea of human life.

Laura lit her lamp, and, inviting her guest to follow, did the honours of the flat. On one side of the passage was a tiny bedroom, and next to this a tinier kitchen. On the other there was a room still on the Lilliputian scale, furnished simply, but with taste.

“Sitting-room and work-room in one,” said the hostess, and she pointed to a seat.

“I wonder where you put the work-room.”

“Look again”; and she pointed to a recess under the window where something stood shrouded in black calico.

She stripped off the muffler, and a sort of gawky sewing-machine stood revealed, with treadle and wheels.

Prue touched it as respectfully as a savage fingering some wonder of civilisation. Then Laura lit another lamp that threw an intense ray through a bull’s-eye, removed another coverlet and displayed rows of tiny tools standing upright in their cases.

“It looks like the dentist’s,” said Prue.

“No it ’s only the machinery of one of the oldest crafts in the world.”

“Please tell me all about; and, to begin with, what do you exactly mean by a gem?”

“Oh, I can’t talk shop to that extent. You ’ve seen a signet ring set with a precious stone; well I ’m an engraver of the signet.”

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“Show me how it ’s done just for one fraction of a second—please!”

Laura took up a cornelian that lay on the table embedded in pitch, and fixed one of the small tools of metal in the instrument. Then, after laying some liquid mixture on the point, with the end of a match, she applied a tube-like glass to her eye, and, as the tool began to revolve with the motion of the treadle, held the gem against it with the utmost delicacy and firmness of touch.

“There! that ’s the whole art and mystery,” and she wiped the stone with a soft rag, and handed it to Prue.

“I don’t see much.”

“Take the glass.”

“All I can make out is something like the film of a spider’s web.”

“It is n’t quite so obvious as a chip in a paving-stone, I must admit. But if I held it there half a minute longer, you ’d have an incision that you could just flick with the edge of your nail. Now you want the receipt for the mixture. Well, it ’s diamond dust and oil. You know the saying, ‘diamond cut diamond’: nothing else will cut any precious stone. The tools are tiny discs of different sizes; and, as they revolve with their coating of diamond dust, they grind out the design of the intaglio, and there you are. Here endeth the first lesson”; and she covered up the machine again, and led the awe-struck Prue back to her seat.

“One of the oldest arts in the world,” murmured Prue.

“Yes, though I believe the wheel ’s an innovation that has n’t yet reached its thousandth year. Before that, they worried it out somehow by hand, giving, I should say

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a respectable fraction of a lifetime to each gem. We 're in such a hurry nowadays. But the fun of it is that the finest things ever done were done in the old way. Here are a few impressions of them; but, if you want the full glory of it, spend an hour some day in the British Museum."

She opened one of a small cabinet of tray-like drawers, and there, in their order, were ranged casts from the gems of antiquity great in their art as any masterpiece of Phidias on the colossal scale, but in actual measurement, few beyond the size of a shilling, and many smaller than a sixpence. And there, in that narrow round, nymphs and fauns and satyrs danced, heroes led the way to battle, Alexander showed the face of a god beneath his helmet, and Hera the charm of her perfect profile while Olympian Zeus himself seemed to shake ambrosial locks at her before giving in. It was fascinating—story, fable, religion, myth, all embodied in the divinest forms. The world seemed to open out before the beholder both in space and time. For, behind the gems, were the women who had worn them as pledges of love, the men as gages of treaty between state and state. And, behind these again, the artists who had carved them with such reverence and such patient care that each impression was a nameless monument of some forgotten genius of the greatest ages of man.

"Does it take long to learn?" asked Prue wistfully.

"Five years, with art school and *atelier*; and then you 're only at the beginning of it, in its higher reaches, as I stand now. To do the great work I should have to put in twenty years of incessant study. I could never

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come up to that. It 's too 'slow and steady'—too 'forever and forever' for me. I 'm an American in up-bringing, though I was born in the old country; and there 's something in me now that makes me want to do it by steam machinery. My dear old master, a Frenchman, in New York, could fix his very soul for days and weeks on a grain of onyx. The years glided peacefully by with him, with nothing but a cabinet and two or three trays of impressions to show for the toil of a lifetime. The cloister is nothing to it. He had a daughter who lured me into it, poor soul; and the two worked together, grew old together, till I broke away from them to come here for the sake of better chances. These endless perspectives of before and after sometimes get on my nerves, and I feel rather lonesome sometimes when I turn my head and look down a vista of five thousand years.'

On her way home Prue met a ghostly procession winding through the streets in the dusk—the "unemployed" returning to their lairs after the daily round. The scene was dismally suggestive of a gang going down to "Plutonian shores"—figures dimmed by the fast falling night, by a want of definite outline, in their shabbiness, and even, in some curious way, by their shuffling gait. The long line was under guard of mounted and cloaked police, front, flank and rear. No word was spoken: there was only a dismal sound, now and then, as the coins, shaken in the collecting boxes, gave step for the march in their even beat, not exactly as with drum taps, but as with a rattle of bones. It was the more terrible because it was all so decorous, so entirely free from the very show of disorder. For this imparted to it a certain inevitable-

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ness, as of a situation without hope. The great glaring opulent streets, now lighting up, flashed untold wealth and luxury from shop windows gorged with the tribute of the world. Ah, what a picture of a civilization:—the draggletailed banners, still sodden from an untimely shower, so futile in the ineptitude of their mottoes of defiance; the doomed men, and here and there a straggling woman on the outskirts of the crowd, one and all of the colour of the mud-stained earth into which they were so soon to fade.

On entering her lodging, sick at heart with a vague fear, she had touched something in the passage—“*The Branding Iron*” which had been thrust under the door. She lit a candle, sat down and began to read.

“Riches, Comfort and Poverty—How we stand now.

“Incomes of £700 per annum, and over—only one and a quarter millions of persons, holders and families all told.

“Incomes between £160 and £700—only three and three quarter millions of persons, holders and families all told.

“Incomes of less than £160 down to the vanishing point—thirty-eight millions of persons, earners and families all told. Diffuse or perish. Ring in the New!

“Society—our own in particular—might be classified according to the extent to which its members can see ahead in the first necessities of life. A minority can see but one meal and one night’s lodging. Those who dare extend their gaze to the week-end are in easy circumstances. A view that embraces the whole year marks the fortunate few. To have no dread of a life’s end

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remote enough to involve the misadventure of Methusaleh brings the extremes into a kind of brotherhood of the defiance of Fate. In these fiercely competitive days, the "multi-millionaire" and the casual are the only two that don't care a damn; and, as classes, they are both extremely select. We are nearing a time when a man of sixty, who is able to show by certificate that he has managed to provide himself with three meals a day and shelter, since his coming of age, will be rewarded with a medal. It should be done solemnly and publicly, and not without the accompaniment of garlands, and a professional fanfare. The principle—with the reservation of a tall roof and good meals—seems already to govern the distribution of the Birthday Honours. With an ever-increasing rarity of civic virtue in a medium of mere oatmeal and potatoes, successful candidates will soon be deserving of the Order of Merit itself."

She was dropping the paper when something else claimed her attention—the rent book, lying on her table in the modest unassuming yet exasperating way of an unpaid account.

Then she felt in a flash that she would have to sit down to a long deferred audit of ways and means which would be an audit of despair.

All the time she had been in the country she had put it off, for fear she should be compelled to take some resolution that would mar the beautiful life of the road. She had earned something as a member of the company, but earnings and expenditure not too well regulated, had hardly balanced one another. The difference was on the wrong

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side; and, in the weeks of absence, she had paid but one installment of her rent.

She sat down with a sigh, looked through her bank-book, turned out her pockets, scrawled a few calculations on a sheet of paper, then glared down at them, like the mountain-climber who turns a corner, and meets the abyss.

The last time she had come to a reckoning of this sort there was less than nine pounds in the bank. Now, with all claims satisfied, it would be less than as many shillings. And no trade as yet at her finger-ends, and no other hope anywhere.

She threw herself on the sofa and remained there motionless—how long she hardly knew. Then she slowly rose, bathed her face in cold water, scribbled a line to Sarah telling her to call no more till further orders, took it to the post, hurried home to the sofa once more—to face the music.

The night that followed was awful. Long spells of wakeful terror of what was to come, unavailing sorrow for what was past—surely the essence of the torments of hell. All this in darkness, differing for the worse from the darkness of death in being darkness with consciousness, darkness with pangs. One hour of it worse than a whole lifetime of soft deans preaching the vanity of life amid the solaces of Mayfair.

Drugs no remedy. The all-controlling mind no remedy. The torment in full dance in the distracted brain.

Sleep at intervals; and the sleep worse. Huge pere-

Ring in the New

grinations of nightmare through scenes of woe, and the senses and the will all powerless to control them to issues of hope. Dire struggle with shapes, forces, not always of this world. These, ever in the last resort, getting the best of it, till a loud cry, audible to herself as a crack of doom, brought her to wakefulness again, sweating on the brow, the music tuning up once more.

CHAPTER XVII

THERE was but one thing to do—stick to the short-hand, until she had mastered it, and could go to market with something to sell. All she wanted was time, and not much of that. Her fitful apprenticeship had counted for something: a spell of good, steady work would soon do the rest.

But meanwhile she had to live. It was the everlasting problem—how to boil the pot, while waiting for the beatitudes of aspiration.

A little time!

She sought out the landlord next morning, or rather the landlord's agent, a womanly abstraction in felt slippers, who lived somewhere below stairs. It was not a comforting interview. Prue picked her way up to the light again, with the words: "I want my 'a'pence," ringing in her ears.

A hat of power, and an exceedingly smart skirt were on her landing. Certain human attributes usually associated with these things were not wanting in their due subordination of interest—a voice trained to music-hall patter, an eye trained to twinkle 'at command—Miss Eva St. Galmier, in a word. The young lady was apparently

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in the process of a sort of third time of asking at the door-bell.

“Good morning, my dear!” Prue thought the endearment might have been spared, until further acquaintance. But Miss St. Galmier was breezy or nothing. “Perhaps you might like to take a ticket for my benefit. So proud. To-night at eight; the Fandango Club, in the Whitechapel Road. I know I ought to offer it complimentary to a sister professional; but you ’ll excuse me, I ’m sure.”

“Sister professional”—it stung like the stroke of a whip.

“I ’m afraid I ’ve no right to any privilege of that sort,” said Prue, drawing out her purse.

Nine little shillings between a little work-girl and destitution; and then there were eight!

“Why, surely, I thought we were all in the same boat. Have n’t you just been on tour in the provinces?”

And so the line was drawn between Mary Lane and her villages, and this young woman and Whitechapel. Prue had never thought of that before.

“Oh, well; at any rate, I ’m out of an engagement now,” she said, with a gruesome smile.

“Don’t cry it from the house-tops, my dear. It gives you away. It ’s not your business to let people know you are in want of a job. Give ’em something saucy, you know. Look here!”

And she drew from a recess of her purse a frayed newspaper cutting, and read:

“ ‘ ’Eavenly Evie St. Galmier, the only funny woman in the world. Dances—Skirt, Sand, Eccentric: Songs

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—Serio, Sentimental, Patriotic, Patter, Coon. Not out of work, but resting. “O mother, put me in my little bed.” Imitation the sincerest form of flattery, with compliments to the lady at Liverpool. ‘E. St. G.’”

Poor Prue made no answer, but she had her thoughts. Was she coming down to this?

“There ’s lots of work going just now in our line,” continued the ‘Eavenly one. “It ’s late for the pantomimes, but there ’s always a chance for a smart girl. Somebody ’s dropping out at rehearsal, or getting the sack. Do you do anything on the light fantastic? I could teach you ‘sand.’”

Prue wanted to fell her with a glance; but with her growing sense of helplessness, and with the cry of “my ‘a’pence” ringing in her ears, it seemed easier to let her talk on.

“You ’re not tall enough,” resumed her patron thoughtfully, “for one of the long sixes—you know: the great big gals in the ballet that take the front rows. But they would n’t say no to you, if there was an opening for a light weight; mark my words.”

“I should hate it, thank you.”

“So should I now, but, you see, I ’m a star.”

“I mean the stage.”

“Oh, I see. Well, many do; but there ’s worse jobs than that. I ’ve known what it is to be a window-pane before now. It ’s a very genteel line, I assure you, but it does n’t lead to much. Once a window-pane, always a window-pane till you are turned thirty, and then you ’re done.”

“A window-pane?” It was inevitable.

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“Yes; I ’ve gone through that—figuratively, of course,” she added, with a certain meditative stress on the polysyllables that hardly bespoke a mind at ease. “You might n’t think it, but I ’ve been in the window with the other goods eight hours a day, at the fancy shop nearly opposite your street.”

The other still looked puzzled.

“You sit there—see! and work some new invention—Palace of Truth or the Lady in the Glass House; that ’s the idea. But there ’s no hiding anything, from top to toe—fine points and patent leather, and do your hair three times a day.”

Prue gave a little shudder; recovered herself, reflected; seemed to hear as from some pit of doom the cry for the “’a’pence”; shuddered again.

“The young person that took my berth is leaving Saturday to get married. Saw him the first time through the plate glass, and felt it was her fate.”

It was Miss St. Galmier still. But the game languished for want of a second player, and soon after she took her leave.

Then Prue stole out stealthily to the fancy shop, got the place, and, with a lighter heart, hurried to the shorthand school, and did her tale of work for the day.

Miss St. Galmier’s setting in theatrical life was something of a contrast to Mary Lane’s. She belonged to a world with the world of the music halls, a lower deep of taste still opening out of the lowest known to the general public. Some of the popular clubs in our far east scorn the yoke of the university settlement, and experiment

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boldly in the joy of living. They have their own concert-rooms as they have their bars, dining-rooms, and sing-songs; and the "professionals" who minister at these shrines of the Muse form a class apart. They are *lions comiques* in embryo, mimes, mountebanks, and what not in a state of aspiration towards the West End and the "regular 'alls."

Prue went to the benefit, and found herself in a perfect hive of festive pleasure. It was swarming activity. The son of toil means business when he starts his own club, with his own money, and under his own rules. His revelry shakes his building; and but for the roof, his "chihiking" of members, popular or unpopular, might smite the sky. The hall was a scene of rude plenty in drinking and even in eating; the fumes of tobacco rose in a haze between the audience and the stage.

It was quite brutish, but alive, alive—Caliban in his hours of ease. The songs, as Prue heard them, or read them from a broad-sheet miscellany bought for a penny at the door, sounded an alarm of national peril, since nations may perish of mere grossness as well as of vice. What are we to do about them? Will the Archbishop try a form of prayer?

This was one of the collection:

" In Zanzibar's great cocoa-nut castle,
Hail to the Czar each monkey vassal,
Great King Gazoo, my great ancestor,
Sang to his bride, as he caress'd her,
With chin-bone chattering, his Pansie flattering.

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Chorus:

“My little Chimpanzee, you ’re all the world to me;
A branch I ’ll find for thee in my own family tree.
No monkey shine for me, a wedding fine there ’ll be,
In high society in Zanzibar.
My little bar.”

In others it was the poetry of the swill tub, the poetry of getting drunk, the poetry of blacking people’s eyes. The titles exhaled vulgarity. “The Sage and the Onion”; “Pom Tiddly Om Pom”; “The New Perjama Hat.”

Merciful Author of our being! if one may be excused, in view of the urgency of the occasion, for putting it in that way. It is as big a danger as the German fleet off Dover. The German fleet hailing from the tops a sure conquest of neglected nations. “Yahoo ahoy!”

Miss St. Galmier came on to a round of applause, chiefly composed of the beating of pots on tables. This last was an example of the process known as killing two birds with one stone. It served to signify both artistic approbation and empty measures.

She sang something about “The Man of my Choice,” designed to give the impression that a guardsman without a penny, and an aged millionaire were contending for the honour of her hand, and that she hardly knew what to do. She asked the audience for advice, and they gave it as freely as the friends of the old man with the ass, in the fable. One who suggested “chuck the pair, and go and do a day’s washing” was considered to have

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gone too far. There was a movement for his ejection among some of her adorers, but it died out at the sight of him. He earned his bread in the hell-hole of a liner, and his eyes now glowed with a fiercer heat than that of the tropic seas.

The laugh was against her, but she was equal to the occasion. *She* danced herself back into popularity with an energy which showed that the beauties of her attire were not merely skin-deep.

There were other futilities, among them the pelting of the *bénéficiaire* with bouquets, which in size and make-up looked like French legs of mutton. The largest was thrown by a young man who had appropriated one of the buds for his button-hole. His own appearance suggested a sheep in man's clothing—second-hand.

Miss St. Galmier had seen Prue, and wafted a kiss to her, and when her turn was over she ran around to the girl's side.

The poor child sat in her corner, palpitant, and crimsoned with burning shame. She had never seen anything of the kind before. It struck her as a transaction, however petty, in the greatest sin known to the code of her sex, the sale of the body.

“How did it go?” said Miss St. Galmier.

The whole profession, high and low, gentle and simple, have a way of putting you on the rack of this searching question, when you happen to meet them in the neighbourhood of the footlights. “How did it go, dear?”

And Prue told the harmful, necessary, inevitable lie, though it almost choked her in the utterance.

“So sweet of you,” said Miss St. Galmier, kissing her

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again; and at the same time, classing her in her heart as an envious little cat. If such lies were of any use, there might be some excuse for them.

She was accompanied by the young man who had thrown the largest leg of mutton—"my brother—Mr. Reginald St. Galmier, author and composer, and the writer of the song."

The young man showed great delicacy. His first impulse was to ask Prue if she would take a glass of—"any-think," but, in the very moment of utterance, he substituted for the last word—lemonade.

Prue could only shake her head.

After a few common-places, chiefly in celebration of her brother's talents, Miss St. Galmier left them to themselves not without intent. This, however, escaped Prue's notice, as a lump of sugar might escape the notice of a bird in a room on fire.

She was soon relieved. The young man was at least tolerable in being respectful, and she began to think that he was simply unfortunate in his sister. If she had known more, she would have extended her commiseration to the entire breed.

Both were unfortunate in their papa, as he, too, was unfortunate in his progenitors. He had never had a chance until the kindly earth took him, in a last endeavour to make him useful in his grave. It is asserted and plausibly, that even these by-products have a certain value as manure.

Many generations of failure who had aped their betters in everything they had of worse had gone into the

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making of "Pa." The imitation was always flattering in its intent, though it was sometimes touching in its remoteness. When the second Charles reigned, and kept his bevy, the Flipp of the period (the name St. Galmier was an afterthought borrowed from an advertisement) flaunted his trull. When the Mohock dandies scoured the town, the contemporary Flipp would beat an old woman in a back-yard. In our day of smaller things, "Pa" could only be a gent. His interpretation of the part was that he should never pay a milk-score, and never do a day's work. His only industry was living on his wits, and in this he was, as it were, congenitally handicapped by the want of capital.

Yet his children were grateful to him in a way; and the words, "Pa was a gentleman," were ever on their lips. They meant that he always talked aristocratic reaction, and left them, as sole heritage, an education hardly reaching the limit of the three R's, and a hearty contempt for the "wukkin' class." The men of that stock had ever failed their womankind, and Miss Eva was the result. Differently circumstanced, she might have mended the stockings of the family, and risen to higher things. And still she was the mainstay of the poor creature that was left.

Reginald meant so well, but what was he to do? His mind had been limited to the literature of sport and of puzzle prizes. His vernacular was newspaperese.

"Excuse me, miss, but you 're in rather close proximity to the draught of that door. You 're not afraid of—of?"

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She waited for him. A man might have seen through him at once; the sexes are always disposed to give each other the benefit of the doubt.

He was going to say "catching cold," but he changed it to "contracting an indisposition."

He was distinctly cheering now that she had taken his measure. "No, I 'm all right."

"You are still obdurit about my offer of refreshmint."

"I don't want anything, thank you."

"Perhaps you 'll partake of a sandwidge?"

"Partake" was one of Reggy's big guns. He sometimes talked of eating his dinner, especially when he was hungry, but the present was not a common occasion. He had picked up "partake" from the reports of executions, wherein persons going to be hanged always take their last breakfast with the help of this verb.

"No, thank you!"

"You 're like me, I dessay, in—"

"I really don't think so."

"—In that respeck: I mean, in a manner of speakin'. Sometimes I can never touch a mossel, 'specially if I 'm writin' anythink."

"I think I 'll go now, if you please."

"May I have the pleasure of escorting—"

"So much obliged; I know my 'bus."

It was impossible to let her go like that. His author's heart hungered for a word of admiration. With all his faults, he was of the tribe of writers of verse. Between the publishers and the public they often forego their meals without a pang. But their word of praise!

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“I knocked off ‘The Man of my Choice’ at a sittin’,” he said, by way of starting the hare. “Not a line of it was written before twelve o’clock last night. Midnight oil, and no mistake.”

“Midnight beer,” was on the tip of the young woman’s tongue. She was beginning to feel quite bold, now that she knew he could not possibly bite. But she restrained herself. “Please excuse me to your sister,” was all she said; and before he could recover himself she was gone.

He walked thoughtfully to the bar, joined an acquaintance who had been watching him, tossed a coin in the air with indescribable dexterity, and covered it with two fingers almost before it fell.

“Suddin death.”

“ ’Ead.”

The fingers were lifted, and the friend had to pay. Reginald rarely took stimulant without going through this ceremony. It was his idea of being “classy,” and he was firmly persuaded that it was borrowed from the practice of West End clubs.

“Nice little bit o’ muslin,” said the friend, looking after Prue.

“No, thanks, I ’ve ’ad some,” said Reginald. It was the smart expression of his weariness of female charms.

This change to another dialect was inevitable, for the friend spoke nothing but slang. He thought in it: it was so much a part of himself. Mr. St. Galmier could, of course, meet him on that ground, though he would have preferred newspaperese. Neither of them would have

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been capable of mere English in the very hour of death.

“Your sister looked toppin’ to-night.”

“Well, she had got ’em on, I must say,” returned her brother, in grateful acknowledgment of the compliment to her attire.

CHAPTER XVIII

HER work began next day. She had to sit in a shop front, cleared so as to exhibit herself, and nothing but herself. In that crystal cell, she manipulated in endless repetition—a Sisyphus of the era of advertisement—a minor invention before the passing crowd. This contrivance, as she learned from a copy of testimonials hanging in the window, was the very one with which Leonard produced *The Branding Iron*.

The operator, as she was called, lived in a glare of publicity beside which that of an actor, or the occupant of a throne, was monastic seclusion. The loitering onlookers could, and certainly would, have touched her, but for the window-pane. They were quite close enough to look straight into her eyes, whenever she gave a moment's rest to the drooping lids. It was a crowd that changed every moment, yet was still the same, in being vacuously agape in varying degrees of intensity. Every motion was watched, as she rose, sat down again, or raised a hand. Sometimes the heads were in pairs; and by the movement of the lips, or the laugh, she knew that her whole personality was under discussion. Now and then some bold, merciless glance looked derision, or

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an insolent sense of the absolute ownership of a chattel of public curiosity, which was still harder to bear.

At first this ever-present espionage, without intermission and without remorse, induced a self-consciousness that was maddening. She was always in misery about her hair or her dress, and she showed it by innumerable touches, that, she hoped, were furtive, but that often found retribution in a guffaw or a sneer. This went on, without a moment's break, for all the hours of her working day.

It was "the crowd" in its most forbidding aspect, in the dirty faces, in the still dirtier hands, that pawed the barrier of plate glass. Majestic persons who have to earn their living by driving in procession through populations afoot for business of public welcome, find this the hardest trial of their trade. They have been known to say that nothing is more terrible than the vast acreage of open mouth displayed in culminating moments of the delirium of loyalty—a blackness, ominous with its portcullis of fangs, and with a redness, as of moist blood, stirring in its depths. That must be bad enough; but how much worse the still closer view of certain distortions of laughter, or of certain leers. The stinging blushes could not always be kept down, though the penalty of that revelation came swift and sure in modes of notice still more odiously personal. And, when these in their turn left the cheek for a tell-tale white, there was more to bear.

This was the first day. The girl thought she could never go through another like it, and she missed her

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evening lesson at the shorthand school through sheer terror of her kind. She hurried home with the same feeling of shame that she had first known at the sight of Miss St. Galmier on the stage—the feeling that she, too, was showing her body for a crust.

The second day found her steeled in a sort of compromise, and in a determination never to raise her eyes. Other days brought a greater mastery of the trick of indifference, and at last something like a full recovery of the courage of her glance. With this came assuagements—once, a sight of Mr. St. Galmier in a fine theatrical start of surprise, followed by a ridiculous struggle with the yielding brim of his hat; then, of the faithful Spagley. The dog signalled the success of his search for her by a delirious bark, and by an attempt to enter the shop as a customer. Being given to understand by motions that this would never do, he afterwards came round, at almost regular intervals, merely to wait and gaze. He insisted on taking her to her work every morning; reappeared about midday to squat demurely on the kerbstone, and to look comfort, yearning, and love; and finally called at night to conduct her to the school.

Gradually she learned to regard the moving spectacle as a sort of panorama of human fatuity—principally male. She felt herself in the full tide of the modern movement, which, in one of its aspects, is a movement for the abolition of privacy. What with fashionable flats, overlooked in their most secret chambers from the slimy well of the courtyard, personal paragraphs, family dinners in public hotels, and all the rest of it, the peasants

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of the painter Israel's art, with nothing in the way of supervision between them and the sky, may soon become a memory of the past.

The evening school hours began at six, and there was no time for more than a cup of tea and a biscuit on the way. They went on for three hours without a break; and the girl sometimes reeled with headache as she left her desk. The dog never failed to be in attendance at nine, with stiffened tail, and head and ears pointing down the basement staircase, all on the strain for the first sound of her step in the scramble of alien feet. Then they went home to supper; and, after the meal, set forth again for the ramble that helped to keep her alive. Their walks and talks, often lasting till midnight, brought them very close together. He received many a hug by the way in quiet places, and responded, or at least submitted, with a patience which showed his sense of a situation out of the common. "Cuddling ain't much in my line, mis'ess; but go on, if it does you good," he was once understood to say. But for him, she might never have found strength for the trial.

Poverty made strange companionships at the school, as in other places. Prue insensibly began to mingle with the others of her "station." Her new chums were the girls who spent but twopence or fourpence on meals, and whose successful struggles to keep up appearances were largely due to donations of cast-off finery. Few took the omnibus or tram all the way to and from their distant suburbs. They simply reserved themselves for a lift in the good penn'orths, tabulated in their gossip to the minutest fraction of distance and of cost. A sickly student who was guilty of the extravagance of "a ride both

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ways" found it necessary to set herself right with public opinion. She was too tired; but she had found out how to make it up on the meals. One of her strokes of good fortune was the discovery of a couple of empty stout bottles, which, being returned in exchange for the sum left in deposit, yielded a fare. Another student was the fourteenth child of a clergyman nor yet the last in his quiver. He was a person of delicate feeling; and, whenever he came to tea with his daughter, he brought the materials for the repast in his pocket. She—perhaps for want of other nutriment—devoured the Pitman system as an express train devours space; and was generally understood to be in the running for the gold medal.

Their talk ran on such things as how many times a dress could be turned, and otherwise worried out of its life before it subsided into pulp. One of them earned the money for her fees by serving her own sisters as a housemaid. The sisters exacted full measure—"Dolly, my boots!" "Dolly, where 's my hot water?" was the morning cry to the Cinderella below. A little grey-haired lady of sixty lived in one of those homes for young women that are advertised in the waiting-rooms of railway stations at ten shillings a week all told. They slept in cubicles shut off from one another by curtains. Each strip belonged jointly to the occupants of the two beds between which it ran, and there were ructions as to the right moment at which it should be drawn. This one greatly enjoyed the school life and companionship: it made her feel a girl with the rest. They sometimes amused themselves by offering precious suggestions to an imaginary committee of the County Council "catering" for the hard up.

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The grim, stoic heroism of it all would have been its redeeming point for the cultured onlooker. But that opportunity of distinction was quite thrown away upon them. They held out in mere dourness, without knowing that it was beautiful to endure; and they were quite remote from the conception of the higher life as a sort of transcendental process of outgrowing the top of your own head. The pinch of poverty was their lot, as it is the lot of more of us than are known to the philosophy of Mr. Charles Booth. Few of those that make the varied pageant of the street are easy in their circumstances. They are on the verge of a kind of bankruptcy, just as, in the theological sense, they are on the brink of the grave. Anything may happen to them at any moment. A strip of orange peel on the pavement, a too close shave of the wheel of the god in his motor car, may throw their lives, or what is of far more importance, their modest budgets, quite out of gear.

In the midst of it all came another stroke of ill-luck for Prue. The new invention, which it was her business to exhibit, had failed to please an exacting public. Customers were few and far between. Even candid inquirers, in spite of the bribe of abundant "literature" which might afterwards serve for pipe-lights, gradually fell off. The anxious proprietor in the background frequently had to pass his hand over a heated brow. He was honest enough to own that his assistant was not to blame. And he knew, for he often watched her at her work, sometimes openly from the near kerbstone, sometimes in hiding behind a lamp-post over the way. If now and then he wished that she had a trifle more dash, and blamed himself for not having engaged an ex-bar-

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maid, he generously dismissed the thought. There came a time when he had to tell her that her next Saturday night would be her last in his cage.

There were moments of weakness, moments when she thought of writing to Gertrude Holl, and then inconsistently dismissed the idea just because she knew that it would bring what she most wanted. Gertrude was the old schoolfellow, and Prue had all the pride of the playground—the pride that made them eager to show one another that they came of decent people, and were going to do well in the world.

Mary Lane, who kept constantly in touch with her through the post, wrote in total ignorance of her plight. Mary's visit of a few days to the distant Tolstoi settlement had ended in her becoming a member. She was all enthusiasm about the place and the life.

“An old farmhouse—what a place to hibernate in! Chimney-corners all real, not a single ‘property’ anywhere, low ceilings, white-washed walls, quaint little staircases at every turn, little white beds for the children, a copy of the simple rules and observances in every room.

“ ‘Members must wear a short-simple dress, the sleeves of which can be turned up at the elbow.

“ ‘Members are asked not to grumble to one another, but to take all complaints to the Sister-in-Charge or else to bring them forward at chapter.

“ ‘One hour each day must be spent in silence, either in meditation or in the study of certain selected books.

“ ‘We will labour for our daily bread according to our strength and opportunity.

“ ‘We promise deliberate resistance to the tidal waves

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of fashion, to the panics of the public mind, and to all forms of weakness and of fear.

“ ‘We will not cause to be killed or hurt, nor will we kill or hurt, any living creature needlessly. We will strive to preserve all gentle and beautiful things.

“ ‘We desire to oppose all luxury and extravagance and the anti-social multiplication of our daily wants. We feel called by the bond of brotherhood to share the life of the people.’

“Prue, won't you come? Why, it is worth the journey just to see the room of the Sister-in-Charge. On the walls quotations in her beautiful writing from the big books—the Bhagavad, St. Francis, the New Testament. A large photograph of the picture of the marriage of St. Francis with the Lady Poverty, over her writing-desk. And the children! One is at hand now from the dreariest slum in London, as merry as a lark, her little white apron trimmed with embroidery, a red ribbon in her hair. And the meals, if you please! the clearing of the table (all done by those who have sat there, not a servant in the place)! the washing of the dishes! the garden afterwards!—Eden even in this wintry time. One of the children is going blind, and I 'm to take her next week to see the sea, so that she may have that image in her soul before they close for ever.”

Alack! Alack!

The faithful Sarah found her out, saw exactly how matters stood, and pressed something into her hand.

It was a sovereign.

“Oh, it 's very good of you, Sarah,” said Prue, looking down at it, in her outstretched palm.

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“What ’s the matter with it?” said Sarah fiercely.

“I ’m afraid, I might not—”

“I see you don’t tumble miss. It ain’t nothin’ o’ that sort.”

“What is it then?”

“I want you to borrow it of me, if you can do with it—see, six per cent. per annum. I don’t get enough interest on my money in this ’ere Savings Bank.”

She took it in her need; and, determined not to pretend ignorance of Sarah’s generous intent in the transaction, gave her a kiss. But it was not destined to fructify in her hands. Writhing in remorse at the thought that she might never be able to repay it, she returned it integrally an hour after, in the napkin of a postal order, with a note to say that her prospects had suddenly improved.

Perhaps the man in the parable, who had the talent, was simply one of the great misunderstood.

CHAPTER XIX

IT was not all a white lie: in her desperation she had fallen back on the wild-cat schemes advertised in the newspapers. There is a sort of agony column quite otherwise tragic than the mock heroics of the one so called. Rogues make quite a decent income from last shillings offered in exchange for sure and certain guides to affluence. These used to consist mainly of the recommendation to buy a potato-baking apparatus, and, if possible, sell out several times a day. We have improved on that.

Prue now began to sit up at night over the puzzle prizes of the catchpenny papers. And, one dire and dreadful day, she read of a whole thousand pounds to be earned without any mental exertion whatever. It was simply going begging in New York to anyone who would part with a live ear to replace an organ of that description lost by an American millionaire! There was nothing to do but submit to the operation of grafting. It drove her wild with longing—not for the operation, but for the fee. For a moment, forgetful of all but her want of a thousandth part of the bribe, she began to experiment before the looking-glass with a new kind of coiffure that might hide a meditative disfigurement. But she was

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stopped by the bitter reflection of the bar of sex, and by her dread that the ears could hardly make a match of it, as the one in search of a mate would probably be as long and hairy as that of the jackass breed.

Then shame fell on her to think that it was the traffic in the body once more, and that she should have lent even half an ear to the sordid appeal. Still she turned eagerly to the precious sheet, every day. The editor knew his business. Whole populations of the needy, in two hemispheres, were kept agog by the accounts of offers to sell that poured in from all parts of the country on both sides of the ocean. They were evidently genuine, for there was no need of lies. A bankrupt was ready to come to terms in the hope of getting a new start. A widow, doubtless of the Spartan breed, offered an ear, "male or female," to help her sons in the struggle for life. One candidate sought to make reservations as to the drum of the sacrificial organ, for which he had "a personal use." Old Newgate could hardly have matched it in the days when wretches, under sentence of death, sold their carcasses in advance to the surgeons for the price of a night's carouse.

The Branding Iron fell upon it tooth and nail:

"It is a new form of one of the oldest infamies in the record—the infamy of selling chatter about good things to those who have none. Talk of wealth to the indigent, and you will get it, whatever happens to them. Would you wheedle poor devils out of their last coin, learn how to make them see sights—the scullion, in plates of the fashions; the gutter folk, in pictures of pomp; the starving, in accounts of banquets of state. It gives them mirages. Watch four hundred casuals waiting for their chance to

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fight for two hundred places in a doss-house—they are all reading some ha’porth of modern revelations of riches and power, as fast as it can be handed round. It is the art of making the empty lick their chops. And who can doubt that, when it has exhausted all possible circulations on the planet, it will find a new one by talking about water to people in hell?’’

The sordidness of it all was the worst trial, the worst temptation. It tore her this way and that. She envied the prosperous; she almost hated them. She repented of these feelings and made new resolutions of endurance and of self-control. She forgot the resolutions in bitter outbursts of anger and despair. She fell back on the memory of the teachings at her mother’s knee, trying to live by the beatitudes, only to find them break in her hands. The sense of the sex grievance tinctured her feelings with a deeper despair. She was so miserably helpless in face of life. There were moments when she was in the mood of Job’s wife. She could have asked her Maker what he meant by striking a woman, and then bowed her head to his final blow.

She had a strong sense of the joy of life, a still stronger sense of the pain and torment of it. She turned to the joy as a flower to the light: it touched all her being into beauty, gave a glow to the eyes that was almost voluptuous, lenity to the lines of feature. Under the pain, or far more the terror of the pain, the change was as the change in landscape under rain and wintry skies. It ran through all her being to the inmost recesses of the soul. The world was a wretched world of accident and mischance, with blind forces hurtling in a chaos where

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anything might happen, except a law to live by, good or bad. At best it was but a scrap fight between angels and devils, with the odds on the black. It was the religion of her wretchedness; and, like most of us nowadays, she simply made her religion from her luck, as she went on.

As the luck grew more debasing, it became a deeper night. The pawn-shop was the next stage, the pawnshop, where every customer enjoyed a delusive privacy, in a sort of hutch that fitted him as close as a pair of monstrous blinkers greasy with animal contact. A judge stood beyond a counter as high as an Old Bailey dock, weighing every precious trinket as though it were a sin, and seeming to rate its value in degrees of cold contempt. It was impossible to chaffer with him, for to speak was to run the risk of betraying your identity to some unknown creature stirring stealthily, like ground game in a hole, in the hutch next door.

On her first venture, she nearly fainted under the ordeal of a gruff demand for her name for the ticket. She stood speechless, until a second and a gruffer summons prompted the expedient of writing the name on a slip of paper picked up from the floor. And all this with the door ever on the creak, or on the bang, behind her, as the rusty spring yielded to the shoulder of another customer, or swung when he fled in disgust to try his luck elsewhere. At the first alarm of this sort, she tried instinctively to look at the intruder, and saw a face that made her turn again at a bound. Thereafter, no matter what happened, she tried to keep her back to the enemy. But on one awful holiday morning, when busi-

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ness was brisk, she knew by the sickly warmth of breath behind her that she was not alone, and rushed in terror from the place.

The trinkets disappeared one by one, like things thrown from a sledge to the wolves. And now there seemed no resource and no hope. She was mistaken: there were still the unexpected possibilities of the lowest deep; and stirring in that were other mocking devils of editors working up largest circulations for their respective sheets. This time the dodge was a hunt for buried treasure. The papers announced that, week by week, their confidence men would bury counters giving the right to certain sums of money (usually fifty pounds) hidden in the public thoroughfares in such a way that those who knew how to seek might surely find. They would bury them secretly, like the booty of any other crime; and then put readers on the track of the discovery by cryptic yet significant hints.

The levy on greed and destitution was successful beyond expectation. The whole country, wherever there was a town large enough to repay the cost of the appeal, joined in the "Hunt for Hidden Treasure." Thousands besieged the publishing offices from the earliest dawn for first copies of successful issues, each artfully peppered with hints. The circulation went up by thousands, under the disgusting temptation of the hope of a prize. The whole of that restless proletariat which lives on its dreams of Providential "coin" went forth to the hunt, each trying to keep his secret from his neighbour. The craftsmen took their tools; crawling age and infancy joined in with anything that came to hand—knives, scissors, forks broken like the teeth of their

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owners—a hairpin, a hatpin, a rusty corkscrew, rather than nothing at all. Syndicates of poor devils, mistrusting their individual powers, brought their best into a common stock of inference and deduction for the interpretation of the obscurities of the oracle. It was the prayer to lighten our darkness with a practical import at last, the craving to see, to handle, fifty pounds in bulk before they died.

They searched by day and by night under the irresistible stimulus of the records of success published in every edition. The police had to be reinforced in quarters that were hot with the quest. On Woolwich Common the hunters were dispersed by soldiers in line. They were found creeping in the sewers. They scaled the railings of the parks, after hours. They did damage to property, ever digging, scraping, burrowing, peering with bulging eyes. It brought together the desperadoes of all parts. Tramp met tramp on the public roads and “passed the time of day” with the latest news of the chase. As a rule, all refrained from breaking the peace. They were stilled into good behaviour by a greater issue, a greater interest, like wild beasts suspending their natural rancours in a time of flood.

It was too maddening: Prue had to join them at last. One lurid night she stole forth to try her luck. The piteous crowd! the piteous, piteous crowd! Pasty-faced fathers of families, with rickety-looking children carrying bags and tools. Stragglers from the warehouses who had suspended their march home by the bridges to try their luck. Women, old and young, usually in pairs, and sometimes in whole gangs for comfort and support. Engaged couples, who saw a short cut to marriage and

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housekeeping—the piteous crowd! Even Prue was not quite alone: there was the dog for emergencies, the only one, perhaps, with a free soul in all the throng.

To-night's unhappy hunting ground was Pentonville—in the disused graveyard on the hill where Joey Grimaldi is believed to lie in his last sleep, not uncheered, now and forever surely, with a practical joke for his dreams. The graveyard was closed, but its borders were accessible from the street. The railings, rotting in the low wall, were touched, for the occasion, with the mystery of certain portals in the "Arabian Nights." Between any two of them might be the cavern that was the hiding-place of the hoard.

It was the graveyard or nothing, so much was clear. All made straight for it, and prowled round and round, casting furtive glances at one another, and each wishing his neighbour in the bottomless pit. Some knelt and began digging, ghoulish in the uncertain light, with clawed fingers for picks. Others used jemmies, for the very thieves were in the hunt.

Prue prowled with the rest, but at first did nothing more, partly for want of an implement—she had nothing but her umbrella—partly because she was smitten with fear. At length she paused in her round, and finding herself at a quiet corner of the enclosure, made a feeble thrust through the railings into the yielding soil, loosened by a recent shower. Her point went in easily some six inches or so, until the silk was fouled with the mire, and then it stopped dead. She was terrified by both results. Was the yielding softness flesh? Was the hardness a

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fragment of its grisly kinship in human bone? Her heart seemed suddenly to stop, and then went on again with great, audible beats.

To dig was impossible, seeing what might turn up, but presently she found courage to probe again.

She had to find it—the treasure seemed the only issue to all her afflictions, including a harridan's cry for her 'a'pence, the sharpest of all. Without it her world would be reduced to the state of a planet without an atmosphere. Nothing to breathe, in all the finest things we live by: decency, dignity, self-respect, all withering in the void.

The point rang true once more as to an obstacle, tic! tic! tic!

Again, tic! tic! tic!

“Halves, young 'un, and I 'll get it out for yer!”

She turned and met a terrible face, drawn with hunger or worry (perhaps with both: they generally hunt in pairs), eyes blazing as with the delirium of fever.

“You kin never git it by yerself. You ain't got the purchase with a tool like that. Is it halves, I say?”

Her glance lit up with much the same fire as his own. It was the fever of the chase, of first blood in a first battle. All the acquired and all the inherited restraints melt in the blaze of it. Man is the primitive brute again, with nothing before him but the clear issue of a lust and its object.

Fifty pound! Fifty pound!

“Yes,” said Prue.

He stretched himself at full length on the pavement,

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made a long arm, like a swimmer in the action of the side-stroke, and clawed down to it, with outstretched hand.

The earth flew in a cascade to right and left, till he touched something, gripped it at last, snorting, for the final pull.

A big, round stone: only that and nothing more—a big, round stone!

“Cuss you!” he said. “I ’ve a damn good mind—Out o’ work for nine weeks an’ this is your idee of a job. Cuss you agin!”

He held the stone at arm’s-length, as though threatening her with it. She was very much afraid.

A shadowy figure darted across the road to where they stood, and, without word or gesture, placed itself between them.

It was George Leonard, but he had no eyes for her: he was looking steadfastly at the man. She pulled down her veil with a convulsive gesture, as the poor wretch made off, with a final oath.

“Go home and go to bed. What is a child like you doing here?”

It gave her a great start. Leonard had recognised her, then, and her silly venture would soon be the common talk.

The shame of it! Sarah judging her; Laura—perhaps Leonard himself. Why this should be a greater shame than the rest she hardly knew, and she was much too troubled to inquire.

He looked at her curiously, though the veil was still there. But the scrutiny seemed to satisfy him.

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"I don't ask who you are, or where you live. But won't you let me take you so far on your way home as to get you out of this?"

She breathed freely again. He did not know her after all. "I shall be very much obliged."

They trudged on together, Spagley sniffing curiously at his heels. It was a second risk of betrayal, but she had to take her chance.

"You are not without protection after all," he said, smiling down at the dog. "Still I hope you won't think I 'm one too many in this ruck. I assure you some of these poor people are dangerous when they have to go away empty-handed."

"More dangerous still, I think, when their hands are full of stones."

"Who can wonder?"

"Wretches?"

"Yes; poor wretches, with all my heart."

"Stone-throwers?"

"—If only they threw them at the right people."

"Why throw them at anybody?"

"Well, then, at the right windows."

"Whose, I wonder?"

"The windows of the other wretches who sent them here, on what, for all but one in a hundred thousand, was meant to be a fool's errand."

"Why should n't we have our chance?"

"Why, indeed?—your chance of being treated as something better than a pawn in a huckster's game."

The talk flagged. She was almost prostrate with weakness of body and soul—the dreadful adventure of the

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night, the more dreadful prospect of the morrow, with its sharper pinch of poverty and attendant degradation. Was that degradation to be intensified by exposure? She had dismissed the fear of recognition from her mind, but now, in her dejection, it came back in full force. Did he know her, after all? And, if he did not, how might he mistake her real character, meeting her at this hour and in these surroundings? The alternatives were equally hateful.

She was ready to be angry with him in either case, if only for the accident of his share in the situation.

“ ‘Hucksters’! Well, at least they fling the coins for the scramble. How few of our fine friends will do so much as that!’ ”

It was her new mood of envy and despair succeeding the earlier one of the belief in her sacred right to a good time. She was made for happiness and sunshine. Why were they withheld? It was a devil’s world, a world of misery for the weak. Why was n’t she made wicked enough to be strong? She wanted to wound one of the dominant faction—that was all she knew.

“ ‘There ’s something in that, perhaps,’ ” he said.

It was not what she had expected; his equanimity had turned the point of the dart. But this only gave a new offence—who was he, to be so odiously reasonable?

“ ‘You are overwrought. Who can wonder at it? I ’m afraid you must have found life an awful struggle, young as you are.’ ”

There was no answer this time. She might have broken down in a sob.

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She stopped at the corner of a street, which was but one turning from her own.

“Good-night, and thank you a thousand times, and—if you think of me again—please don’t mind.”

In another minute she had groped her way upstairs in a darkness that seemed the image of her lot.

Had he recognised her?—had he not? It was the swing of a pendulum of uncertainties whose ticking sent her into a troubled sleep.

CHAPTER XX

THE wintry dawn came at last, and breakfastless she hurried round to see Laura Belton, why she hardly knew. It was the want of something to cling to.

Laura was in her morning mood—one rather too much braced perhaps with tubbing and good resolutions, happily subject to decline with the sun.

Prue's looks still threatened to betray the secret of the night's adventure. She knew it, and felt that she had to account for appearances without going into detail.

"I 'm miserable," she said, as she dropped into a chair.

"Guess you ain't well."

Prue's eyes flashed resentment; and she was for making off again. But Laura barred the way, with the cold comfort of "'Fallen cherub, to be weak is to be miserable.'"

"Oh, don't pelt me with poets, please."

Laura knew what she was about. The experienced second in the prize ring never coddles a fainting champion: he simply bites his ear.

"Don't let 's talk about anything but getting well. Meanwhile have something to eat and drink—coffee, if

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you like: it won't take a minute; but here 's the tea hot and hot."

"I don't want to eat," said the other, still in high dudgeon, but holding out a hand for the tea.

"I wonder if Sarah has opened the tin of kippers. They 're very nice."

"I told you I—"

Laura looked at her with a more searching attention, but still with the provoking bedside manner of a doctor treating a case of incipient hysteria.

"My poor, little Prue—let me call you Prue, if you don't mind; it will help us both."

"Thank you, Laura."

"I think I 've got it. I guess that you guess you are sick." It was a second bite of the ear, well intended, no doubt, but painful all the same.

"I don't guess anything—," snapped Prue, with a stress on the word, in sharp rebuke of the Americanisms.

"You 're getting better every moment. You 'll eat me out of house and home, at this rate. But you *are* sick all the same."

"What 's the matter with me?" said Prue indignantly.

"Sick, I tell you. Don't tell me what it 's all about, unless you want to. I 'll tell you, if you like, while you 're eating your breakfast. You 're just sick of fear. You 've had a scare."

Prue began to eat her breakfast.

"You 'll get it all the same, if you mean to have it," said the hostess, after a short silence.

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“Get what?” said the guest, at first taking it as an inhospitable allusion to her first failure with a morsel of rusk.

“All you want.”

“I want so much, you see, so much more than anybody ought to dare to want nowadays.”

“Well, never mind, own up.”

“I want to earn my living. Did you ever hear of such cheek?” There were tears in the voice.

“Take care, or I shall have to comfort you. Make up your mind about what you want, and it will come to you, sure enough.”

“Have n't I asked everybody—God and man?”

“Have you asked them like that, I wonder?”

“I 've asked one on my knees, and the other—” “with deeper abasement,” was the thought on her mind.

“That 's just it. Don't worry your Maker, or, for that matter, your fellow-creatures either. Ask quietly, and you 'll get there in time.”

“Never. I know what it 's going to be, it 's going to be just my luck.”

“If you think so, so it is going to be.”

“That 's cheering, I must say.”

“It 's true though. You 've been thinking ill luck for weeks. I know it: I can see it in your face. How can you expect to get anything else?”

“Oh, how *can* I think anything else—how can I think anything else?” cried Prue, fairly breaking down.

The other walked over to her; and soothed her as if she had been a petulant child.

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“Have you ever tried thinking good luck, dear?”

“What ’s the use of thinking a lie? ‘Oh, who can hold a fire in his hand?’ I can pelt with the poets, too, if it comes to that.”

“‘Nothing is, but thinking makes it so.’ I can go on pelting back, you see.”

“There ’s hundreds of thousands of us in stony London—the helpless ones, who can’t do the trick of earning their bread in this poor make-believe of a way of life. Some only because they are ‘poor stupids’—Who made them stupids: have n’t they the right to live?—just as many because they ’re too proud or too honest to stoop to the dodges. Who gave the clever fellows the right to trample ’em under foot? Go and see the processions, any day in the streets, and then you ’ll know. It is n’t so much the unemployment—that ’s bad enough—it ’s the horrid indifference of the others, who ’ve got on top, to their want of faculty, their want of a lift. As if it were a sin not to know how to get your victuals, when it ’s just as piteous as cancer, and ought to bring all the luckier devils in humble ministration to your feet! Hundreds of thousands of us I tell you here and in every other centre of civilisation, ‘on the planet!’ ”

“Never mind the others. You won’t do them any good, nor they you. Just mind your own business, and think good luck, first and last and all the time. There ’s the prescription: do try to swallow it. You make take it on a full meal: have another slice of toast.”

Prue shook her head.

“Do try it: here it is in two words. Go home, sit in

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the cosiest corner of your room, the one that catches the sun. If he 's shy about looking in, go and hunt him up from the top of a 'bus. I daresay you 'll find him in Kensington Gardens anyhow. Sit under the trees, just empty your mind of all your trouble—you *can* do it if you try—and when you 've done it, read something, a novel if you like, and then come and see the doctor again."

"Novels!—all about the aristocracy by one who never was there."

"Oh, pitch into them: it always brings down the house."

"What do they care about human nature, till it has ten thousand a year? I 'm sick of them; will that do?"

"Who 's talking American now?"

"I 've quite enough foolishness in stock," murmured Prue.

"Well, then, try a little wisdom, if you can get it down." And Laura ran into her bedroom and came back with a book.

It was a strange-looking volume, its cover embossed with a cross of gold on a pyramid of sealing-wax red. Both were incongruous. The cross was but one of the civilities of dedication—there was neither sacrifice nor atonement in the creed within. The pyramid, in the crudity of its colour scheme, was all too suggestive of an advertisement of bottled beer.

"Now be off, unless you like to stay and see Sarah. She 'll be here soon. I wish I could go with you, but I 've a crest and a coat-of-arms to finish by midday for a signet ring."

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The mention of Sarah would have been enough, without another word.

* * * * *

PRUE turned and fled, with the volume tucked under her arm, and never stopping till she reached home. Kensington Gardens was out of the question: it would have broken into her last shilling.

And never stopping again for hours, when once she had begun to read. It was one of the new religions, slowly winning whole provinces of thought from the old, and—almost as a matter of course—American. That astonishing people has gone into this line with all its inventive energy, and it makes most of the fashionable patterns now. Some have their active principle in the negation of matter (When is a door not a door?—Always). Most of them in the negation of all unpleasantness, including sin, sickness, poverty, and death, as but the foolish fancies of the race.

It was the whole American spirit in its deification of the human will, to the end of having a good time in all the worlds. Everything was derived from that—the outlook of a race which had never known defeat, and which had adopted “’tis my pleasure” as its law of life. Its supreme power was no imperial Jehovah thundering wrath and judgments, but only a president of a bustling democracy of the spirit shaping its own destinies, and perfectly confident that all was going to turn out for the best. In the light of this new declaration of independence, the whole company of the suppliants, with their sanctities of poverty, meekness, and obedience, seemed

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but a spadeful of writhing worms. Your relations with your Maker were perfectly sociable. He was the chief executive officer for the distribution of all good things, wisdom and happiness, money, lands, and luxuries. He helped you in your "business," as well as in the most delicate intuitions of the mystery of the universe. He was money as well as love. This newest version of His gospel was sold at the very highest prices obtainable, and every chapter bore a significant intimation of the penalties attending, not so much the mutilations of the text, as the infringement of copyright. The great unpaid of the priesthood—say Molinos as contrasted with Dr. Parker—were no more. The new hierarchy expected to make money, and were ready to impart the secret to their devotees. They remembered that, quite early, the successors of the apostles were taking large fees for the casting out of devils.

The very devil, in this instance, was fear. It was to give place to "a mental condition always serene, calm, decided, self-composed, and bent on some purpose of lasting good, first to yourself, next to others." Fear was the worst of all follies. There was nothing to be afraid of anywhere in the heaven above, in the earth below, or in the waters under the earth. Whatever you thought with sufficient intensity and determination, that thing you made! Everything desirable came to you by calm repetition of the demand for it. Everything undesirable might be put away by an equally calm denial of its existence.

It repelled her at first, yet still she had to read on. It

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was irresistible, if only as a study of race types. Here was the American still working in the medium of his own characteristic inventions, the man who first thought of firing at the skies for rain, instead of praying at them, and who was now ready to bluff them for all the blessings of life.

CHAPTER XXI

IT was fascinating, as a sort of essay in the sovereignty of mind—the omnipotent will of man creating a world of its own, bending all things to its own needs. You were wretched: it was but one of your fancies. There was nothing the matter with you, or with your circumstances, with Fate, or with God.

Here was the saddest little woman in all London—so she thought—for her experience knew of none in a worse plight—and she was offered the chance of making herself insensible to all woe, in one stage of the cure, and positively and beamingly joyful in the next. And this without priest or promises, without offers or invocations, but just by constant repetition of the shibboleths so dear to all of us, “I will” and “I won’t.”

There was a perfect discipline for it. You had trances of meditation in which you brought yourself into oneness with a sort of cheery soul of things that had never known a pang. The thinking made it so, whatever the mere illusions of suffering that seemed to give it the lie.

It was a colossal trial, but her strength rose to the occasion. She began to glory in her difficulties as merely the raw material of her triumphs. Her sordid troubles were now touched into beauty by the noblest uses. The last

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shilling served for food as long as it could possibly be made to last; and she sat down to her meagre ration with no sense of privation. What was the barren pride of self-denial to this new ecstasy of delight? With but a crust of bread and cheese on the table, she ate as neatly in the matter of service, and with as much relish, as at a feast of state. She prattled courage and hope between the mouthfuls, affected to serve herself with dainty pieces, sipped her sugarless tea with a relish, as of choice wine, putting away from her all sense of hardship and of the possibilities of mischance.

“I am not half-starving. I am not going to be turned out of house and home at the end of the week.” It was the formula of denial. And this was the formula of affirmation: “I am faring as kings would fare, if they knew what was good for them. I am going to stay on here—here in my dear, old lodging, the only place that was ever *mine*. I am going to have work and plenty of it. Amen!”

When the last penny of the last shilling in hand had yielded the last loaf, she was still equal to the occasion. It was but an attempt to frighten her; and she was not going to be afraid any more. The luck lingered on the way—that was all. Meantime there might still be a remaining trinket to pawn. The instinctive dread of that operation made her pull a wry face, which she instantly took to the glass with her, and ruled down with a smile.

Hysteria, if you like, but a hysteria of happiness, positive, radiant, the delight of battle. Life with all its contrarieties of circumstance was now but a play played

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before the angels, a pageant of great opportunity. The greater the trial, the greater the rapture of victory. The burden of the day was but the raw material of its shining garment of triumph and glory. The more of it the merrier, for a certain stately merriment is the note of the heroic mood. Poor Aunt Edom, crouching behind her rampart of the three per cents.! Prue could have condoled with her on her securities—odious misnomer—and have offered her a worry as a gift of life.

Everywhere she roamed the field for champions to vanquish, for chances of safety to avoid. She kept away from Laura, in spite of frequent letters asking her to call, and of a card that betokened a fruitless visit, left under the door. She feared that a meeting just now might tarnish her glory of winning on the merits of the case. Instead of creeping by the stairhead lest her footfall should disturb the applicant for "'a'pence," she sought that person in her den, on frivolous pretexts, until she actually cowed her into the suppression of her plaint. She looked her pawnbroker straight in the eyes—they had been green, it seemed, all the while—and with such effect that, for the first time in her troubles, she found herself addressed as "Miss." From these encounters she returned to trances of meditation on the insignificance of the insignificant. She enjoyed them in a quiet corner of her room fitted up for introspection with the trappings of a domestic oratory, every object in it suggestive of the exclusion of all that was not satisfaction and peace.

This was the new discipline, as she had picked and chosen it from the tangle of systems for her own use. The other parts of these, with most of their authors, were all

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but leather and prunella in her eyes. She could not afford to buy much of the literature, at the monstrous prices fixed by prophets in a hurry to make their fortune. But she caught glimpses of it at the free libraries and book-shops of the movement; and here, through long, delicious days, she browsed at will.

It was another new world called into being to redress the balance of the old, and still characteristically American in its indebtedness to the past. Its ideas were almost without exception borrowed from the ancient systems, some of them but a wreck of heresies of the ancient churches long since catalogued and condemned. To change the figure, it was a sort of new American pick-me-up, with the American sense of the boom as the base of the compound. Every good thing was in it from everywhere, mostly without acknowledgment, to make a mixture that would go down,—the dogged endurance of the stoic, the mystic's contemplative trance, the proud humility of À Kempis, the raptures of Theresa, with here and there a little flower of St. Francis floating on the surface, less for flavor than for the delight of the eye.

With the limitations of her reading, Prue knew nothing of its sources, and it came to her as a brand-new thing. It was especially alluring to her as an achievement of her own sex. Sibyls ministered at its altars, and in its caves, while man was content with the menial function of guarding the approaches. They took conclusions at the running jump, and consistently sought the law of the theory in the fluke of the facts. If you died after all, in spite of the promises, you still died cured of the fear of death. The charm was in the offer of absolutes in happiness, cor-

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responding to the insatiate craving for them in the human soul. The daughter of Eve was still as ready as her far-off mother to believe that one day we might walk as gods. It was optimism at its extremest point of tension. Evil was abolished, here as well as hereafter, in all its forms: with sin and sorrow and suffering, it simply "was not." The promise was formal; and Prue was too inexperienced in the subtleties of dialectic to see where the fallacy lay. Fear, the thing that had most oppressed her woman's soul, went the same way. You merely drew your sword and mocked its terrors, like Eneas in the nether world—a sibyl still at hand, even there, to tell him they were all shadows of a shade.

Strong meat of faith—whatever else it was not! The religion in which the girl had been brought up, religion as Aunt Edom understood it, was at best not much more than a ceremonial remembrance of an age of heroism that had long since passed away. It was fast sinking to a mere ethic of good taste. Things were done, or not done, not because of Moses or his Maker, but because of Mrs. Grundy as usurper of the Mount. Prue craved for something more sustaining in the tremendous strain of her trial. In that crisis even the sweet trustfulness of Mary Lane seemed to want "bite."

Often the girl laughed, in spite of herself, at certain appeals pushed by the methods of a puff for corn-cure to the same ends of making a fortune for a quack. Yet still she read on, quieting, for the moment, her own misgivings by a disposition to make allowance for the spirit of the time. After all, what she most wanted—the courage

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to stand up to life, was there in full measure. It was a literature of power, worthy of the people that had put Niagara to work. Its art of willing was sometimes strangely associated with a placid trust in the issue. It was not an active, a contentious, or a combative force, but rather a certain continuity of desire which realised its objects by the mere equality of the pressure. It did not preclude, it rather enjoined, the cessation of all effort of the combative kind. She settled down, at last, into an absolute acquiescence in what was to come that was really fatalism. On the brink of destitution and the disgrace of destitution, she was as calm as any burgess of them all looking forward to dividend day. She willed submission and quiet expectancy rather than their fruits, and never allowed herself to question that all would come right in the end.

And one day there fell, as it were, out of the blue, so free was it from aught of her contriving, a note in these terms. To be fair, however, the post was still the medium :

“DERRINGTON MANOR, ——SHIRE.

“The Hon. Mrs. Babynton Dart wishes to have the assistance of a shorthand writer and general amanuensis capable of performing secretarial duties. The name of Miss Meryon has been mentioned to her as one qualified for the post, by a person whose recommendation would be quite sufficient, and who desires to remain anonymous. Should Miss Meryon be disengaged, will she be so good as to call on Mrs. Dart between ten and eleven to-morrow

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morning at— No. — Charles Street, Berkeley Square, or to write to that address by return, in case she cannot keep the appointment.”

The paper dropped from her hands, the tension had been too great. The room swam before her. There was a lapse of consciousness marked by no sensational incident, but registered by the hands of the clock. It had been on the strike, as she remembered afterwards, when she had torn the letter open, sitting in her arm-chair. It had advanced twenty minutes beyond the hour when she opened her eyes again and found the letter at her feet.

The rest of the day was spent in futile guesses as to the identity of her anonymous benefactor, in which the names of Gertrude Holl and Laura Belton took their turn as claimants for her gratitude without leaving her able to discern the prize.

CHAPTER XXII

PRUE went to Berkeley Square next morning on the very stroke of the half-hour. When she had waited some time, a grave-looking woman came to scout as to her appearance and probable business.

“Are you the young person who sent up the name just now?”

“Yes, I ’m the young—person.”

“Mrs. Dart wrote to you?”

“Otherwise I should not have been here,” Prue would have said a month ago; but a good deal had happened since then.

“Yes.”

“Mrs. Dart is not up. Is it about—?”

“A situation,” said Prue. The lady’s-maid had compelled her to put herself on the level of a fellow-servant; and “score” was plainly written in her looks.

“Oh, the typewriter. Will you come this way?”

The room on the second floor, facing the square, was a place to lounge in and while away happy hours. One might even play at being at work there, Prue thought, as she surveyed the large table in the middle, fitted with practical tools. But certain mere exquisite nothings, in the plant of fancy pen-craft, redeemed the place to finer uses. A gold pen, studded with tiny turquoises, could

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hardly have come out with dignity from a struggle with a copy-book text.

The maid went into another room beyond, and returned almost immediately with a rather more respectful air.

“Mrs. Dart will see you presently, if you don’t mind waiting. We missed a train last night and got in late. We are in rather a muddle still.”

She waved her hand towards two or three great trunks standing on end with their lids open, and exhibiting skirts hanging as it were by the neck from the ceilings of their narrow cells. In this situation they were not free from a certain air of alienated majesty, common to all wearing apparel which has momentarily lost touch with its wearer.

“Perhaps you would like to see the paper?” and she took a broadsheet from a chair where it was drying itself before the fire. Then, closing an open dressing-bag with a snap, she disappeared with it into the next room.

The paper was *The Morning Post*, august as ever in every association but one—the announcement of its reduction of price to a penny. Prue turned it over aimlessly, awed in spite of herself. The news of the hurly-burly of that mere “rest of the world” beyond the borders of this postal district struck her as presumptuous in regard to its context. Battle, murder, and sudden death here! meetings of the unemployed there! Where was the policeman?

She glanced round the room. It was noticeable for its numerous portraits of the same person. A water-colour by Shannon of a beautiful and still youthful face, peeping forth from a cloud of diaphanous tulle, hung

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over the mantel-piece. A photographic study of the same features from life reclined on a tiny silver easel. A sculptor had tried his hand on the subject in a marble bust that stood on a pedestal in the corner. This was not all. A hand in alabaster, life size, lay on the table and pretended to be nothing but a paper-weight, though it was manifestly but another likeness, as far as it went. The girl felt that she had already made acquaintance, after a fashion, with the lady of the house. There was but one other portrait—a cleric—who looked high orders and a mind at ease.

The room evidently served as a kind of ante-chamber for all the callers in personal attendance. Prue was presently joined by a florist's assistant, a young woman bearing a basket of hot-house blooms which she at once began to arrange in the vases.

A third arrival was a dressmaker's shop-girl, or nothing.

Prue sat still as a mouse, quietly thinking her thoughts. She had never seen anything of the kind before. Aunt Edom, for all her state, was decidedly suburban, not to say provincial, and never touched these heights. Here was the thing as it was done by those spoiled children of Fortune who are born in the doll's house, and abide in it to the end of their days.

The atmosphere was that of a certain ease and comfort of body and mind, not to be properly enjoyed until all remembrance of racial labour in the attainment had passed away. Merely successful toilers are still in the prison-house of the heroic virtues, and only those who come after them may hope to attain to this Nirvana of

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effortless luxury. The first are yet in the grip of the heresy that nothing comes without the winning, whereas true inward peace depends on precisely the opposite conclusion.

The dressmaker now began to hold a kind of inquest on the skirts, scrawling the evidence on a sheet of paper.

“I can only make out fourteen,” she murmured.

“Where ’s the other, I wonder? fifteen was the count.”

“Fifteen new dresses for one visit!” cried the florist. Said Prue, “Oh!”

“Why not?” said the other, “and before she goes to Tadcaster next week, she ’ll have to shuffle the pack. It ’d never do to play exactly the same hand over again.”

“She must be dressing and undressing all day.”

“What else should she be doing?” said the maker of dresses. “People have got to live.”

The dressmaker began to warm to her subject. It was like talking to an intelligent savage who had learned to marvel at the wonders of civilisation.

“What about your dinner-gown—and your tea-gown before that?” she continued. “And before that again, you ’ll want a tailor-made of some sort, if only for the golf.”

“That ’s only three.”

“Beg your pardon, four—perhaps there ’s boating or a drive. And what about a little dance in the evening, or, for that matter, a big ball? And if it ’s fancy? Oh, my!”

“Five,” assented the other, as though she had won her case.

“That ’s one day,” said the dressmaker. “She was

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there three." Prue could not choose but hear, though much against her will. In her effort not to listen, a dainty paper-knife, with which she toyed with nervous tension, broke in her hand.

"You 've done it now," said the dressmaker, noticing her for the first time. "But never mind, she 'll never miss it."

Prue turned her back on both of them, and plunged into *The Morning Post*.

A moment more, and the maid beckoned to her from the half-opened door: "Mrs. Dart will see you now."

It was the portrait, with touches of colour that no palette could give. This chiefly in the intensive depths of the pink and creamy white of the complexion, as though these belonged to the very texture of the flesh itself. There was nothing to save the face from excess of softness but the glint, as of fine steel, in the eyes. She reclined in an easy-chair, and gave the original of the alabaster hand to a young woman who was busy with the tools of the manieure.

Prue was struck with a kind of awe. Never before had she seen or dreamt of a creation of art, a human flower the product of innumerable cultures, so absolutely complete. And with this, and the costly apparatus for it strewn all about, came the thought of those combs of Egypt and depilatories of fine gold, under glass in the museums, their anonymous wearers now little better than so much brown snuff in the adjoining cases. With this came a touch of pity. Given proper chances, such eyes might have been capable of doing justice to themselves in a shipwreck. And now—

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“Good morning, Miss Meryon. I hope you will be able to help me with my correspondence and things. I ’ve had a pain: I wonder if it ’s writers’ cramp,” and she glanced with tender concern at the hand that might still want other professional cares.

But the suggestion seemed too preposterous even for her. She laughed it off in a succession of subdued gasps, punctuated with pauses, as though to avoid the fatigue of a continuous shock.

Prue smiled too.

“I hear you are quite clever at the typewriter and all that.”

“May I ask who has been so kind as to speak for me?”

“Oh, a good friend of yours, I can assure you; but I had to promise not to mention the name.”

Gertrude Holl, Aunt Edom, Mary Lane, came rapidly into the girl’s mind, only to be instantly dismissed. The first knew nothing of her want of work. The next was wholly out of this sphere. Mary would have been sure to write first to her. Why not?

“Will you tell the—person that I am very much obliged. So much, in any case, and more, if I may hope to be able to suit.”

“I have no doubt of that.”

The girl dared not trust herself to answer. All her cultivated heroism rolled away from her now that the tension had passed and left her weak as a child. It still tried to vindicate itself to her as fulfilled prophecy, but there was no time for that in this moment of collapse. She could have cried her heart out then and there. The change was too sudden. This too sharp swing round into

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harbour out of a storm of death! The poor beaten and baffled creature needed the smooth water, if the other needed the wreck. Work—that is to say, peace ineffable now: and yesterday—nay, but an hour ago!

“What shall we say about terms, Miss Meryon?”

“Nothing at present, please. Anything you choose to name after you have tried me.”

“Oh, but I insist—a pound a week?”

It served Prue right. She might easily have had thirty shillings, if she had put a better face on the matter. Persons like Mrs. Dart have, in all innocence, quite romantic notions of the little on which others can live.

“Thank you; that will do very nicely.”

“You ’ve no idea of what a lot there is to do, and what hard work it will be. I shall want you to cut all my books for me, and to write my letters—some with your own hand. Then you must look through the papers, and mark things with a blue pencil. There ’s too much in them: they give one headaches—books, too, sometimes. Do you know anything about questions?”

“Questions?”

“Things clever people talk about at dinner-time, you know.”

“I ’m sure I could learn.”

“I ’m sure you could. But there ’s ever so much more. I made a memorandum of it— Where did I put it, Parker? Oh, she ’s gone. So stupid of me!”

The maid reappeared:

“The Archdeacon, madam,—will not detain you a moment,—in the drawing-room.”

“The dear Archdeacon! Certainly! To-morrow at ten,

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please, Miss Meryon''; and in another moment the girl was in the fresh air.

She took the park on her way home. Country cousins and what not were waiting to catch a glimpse of their betters in drive or row. They looked as happy as any foreign crowd kneeling to let the priests pass with their precious burden in the open street. They seemed so entirely convinced that they had found something quite good, in this uplifting view of opulent and powerful fellow-creatures who barely vouchsafed their worshippers a disdainful glance. When the sentiment of reverence is in perfect accord with the duty, you have the very poetry of adoration. Hard faces, quite dignified in their lines of toil, seemed to soften at the sight of this something not themselves, that was better than themselves, and to feel that all was going well with the world.

With what she had just passed through, it was a new insight for the high school girl into the fantastic conceptions of the Pagan heaven, which had puzzled her so much as a child. What, after all, if, in the land beyond nowhere, there were diviner beings who had no need of the bread-and-butter virtues that control the course of creeping lives? Better than all the literature of power, perhaps, to get oneself born in the right way!

CHAPTER XXIII

YES; right out of the storm into the smooth water and a sunburst as soon as she got into port. All the good luck seemed to come at once. Mrs. Dart's work was light and easy, and it left abundant leisure for other employment of the kind which Prue found through a friendly recommendation at the shorthand school.

Laura was hugely interested in the news, especially in that part of it which bore on the personality of Mrs. Dart.

"I want to know all about that woman, right here. What 's the colour of her eyes?"

Prue had to go minutely through the inventory of personal charm, material surroundings, and even character; and when it was over, Laura gave an approving nod.

"I like her style. She seems to go for everything she wants, and to get it.

"She 's all right," said Prue, "but most of her set are no doubt insane with the jumps—gadding about. The motor car has fixed it as the disease of the day. They never can stand still. They 're all over the place on the lookout for the untried. That little study where she sits in the morning is a sort of Clapham Junction that leads to every place in the universe—a mere from and to."

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“How sweet!”

“And the cost of it! Oh, Laura, the wicked, wicked cost!”

“What ’s that to do with it? Is she nice?”

“They ’re all nice. I sometimes fancy they ’ll wriggle through with their manners at the Judgment Day.”

“Don’t stop till I tell you.”

“She can manage three parties a night, and all sorts of things all the daytime without turning a hair. Masseuse waiting for her sometimes for the wind-up—to knead her to sleep after a medicated bath.”

“Husband?”

“India; home next spring.”

“You see I was right. She gets just everything she wants because she knows how to go for it. Now I know what you people mean by a ruling caste. That ’s the way kings manage. Their—what do you call ’em—responsible ministers before the footlights are as nothing to the others behind the scenes. They ’re crammed by experts for their daily miracle of the right word in the right place. Don’t call yourself a typewriter, Prue; you ’re a chamberlain at the very least.”

“I don’t want to call myself anything.”

“You ’d better see about it, though—what you think, you do; what you say, you are.”

“What stuff!”

“What impudence!”

“Laura, I ’m happier now.”

“And you ’ve come to thank your little philosopher and friend. Well, I thought you wanted tuning up.”

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“I did then, certainly.”

“And why not now too?”

“No, no; I can't live in that state. I just want to be quiet for a time.”

“Anybody can be quiet. I 'm going to have a good time—like the Honourable Babyngton. I want to see how it feels. I sha'n't be much happier, I daresay, but I should like to know, you know. We 're an inquisitive sex.”

“Why not let well alone? Are n't you happy enough as you are? I am: work and liberty—what do you want more?”

“I 'm rather tired of calling the shopmen sir, just to get orders for the Honourable Babyngton's signet rings. I should like to know how it feels to be called 'ma'am.' Is n't that a sign of respect here?”

“Among housemaids and—courtiers.”

“Well, courtiers for choice. Don't be angry; perhaps it is only my unclassified half. But if ever the Honourable Babyngton wants an understudy, perhaps you 'll mention me. I think I could do it better—there!”

“Don't be wicked, Laura.”

“Don't be silly, Prue. Oh, you do want shaking up over here.”

“I 've had shaking enough, I fancy. I 'm not taking any just now.”

“Good little gal! Blessed are the meek.”

“That 's not fair, Laura!”

“That 's my religion, anyhow. Good as the best of 'em, if I get my chance.”

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“A religion of getting on!”

“What ’s the matter with it?”

“Oh, nothing; but it does seem rather different from—from—”

“Doing your duty in that state of life—you mean. Do you think I don’t know all about that?” said Laura, quite changing her manner, and fixing her with a stern glance. “We ’re only playing at being work-girls you and I, and they ’d tear us to pieces, if they got a chance: go and see the others in the factories, the ropemakers, for choice. They fight one another with the knuckles and when the ’drink ’s in ’em will scare a man. I saw it once—never again. We ’re the aristocracy of their order. You must look one way or the other; and, the way you look, you ’ll go. I ’m afraid to look down.”

“Oh, I ’m tired of looking either way,” said the other wearily, “I wish someone would do it for me.”

“Your Prince Charming will evidently be the American man. But don’t forget: he did n’t begin with this passion for the emancipation of women. He was much too busy in making his fortune. In fact he was exceedingly glad to get the nice little things out of the way, like the other children, and to offer them all the distractions of the Doll’s House. He looked into the nursery one day, and was astonished to find what clever games they played. But he saw that he ’d have to alter the system—they were getting into mischief, too. Then he built them colleges. Some of them are only playing there now.”

Prue was at fault for a reply. The mood of heroic endurance was, perhaps, still latent in her, but now all she wanted for the moment was to bask in the sun.

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“Look here, Laura! When I came to you that day my trouble was breaking my heart; not so much because it was trouble, but because I thought someone was taking cock-shies at me in the dark. Why did all the hits seem to come my way? Was he a marksman after all? That did n't make it much better: I was as wretched as a cornered mouse. Anyhow, I could do nothing but put up with it. Now I know it is n't quite so bad as that—thanks to you. You gave me the freedom of your treasure-heap, and I picked out this—‘Difficulties are things which show what men are. Remember that God, like a gymnastic trainer, has pitted you against a rough antagonist. For what end? That you may be an Olympic conqueror.’”

“Dear old Eppy! is n't he just lovely? Why could n't he tell you that troubles are all moonshine, the sly old thing? But he 's quite last year's fashions: they 're not showing him much—even at the sales. You know better now. But let 's make sure of it; just repeat after me, ‘I mean to have a good time, Laura; I mean to have a good time.’”

“‘I hope to have a good time, Laura.’”

“‘Mean,’ please, you must be letter perfect in this part.”

“‘I mean to have a good time, Laura; I mean to have a good time.’ Will that do?”

“Pretty bird! Here 's your lump of sugar. Now you know the secret; and, if your books of magic did n't happen to be my books too, you might throw them into the sea.”

“It 's Saturday afternoon, and I 'm going for a spin in Richmond Park. Will you come?”

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Laura put out a dainty shoe from under the hem of her garment, peeped at it, drew it in again.

“Long walks, long feet. I ’m afraid there ’s no way out of that. Mind what you are doing. Come and tell me all about it afterwards: that ’ll do just as well.”

CHAPTER XXIV

THE park was glorious as ever in grateful acknowledgment of the landscape gardener's forbearance in leaving it alone. The girl went in by the Star and Garter, and, after a long ramble, out by Sheen Gates, and then by Barnes Common and Ranelagh on the homeward stretch. The night was falling as she reached Hammersmith Bridge. She was tired and hungry, and that of course is also to be happy when there is the prospect of a meal. She would have been happier for a companion: even Spagley was not in attendance to-day. He had been invited in the early morning, and was understood to have signified his acceptance; but had taken himself off, in the meanwhile, in the hope of catching the dog of a Punch and Judy show at a disadvantage under the encumbrance of his ruff.

To tell the truth about it, she wanted a human mate. Gertrude and Mary Lane seemed to have gone out of her life. Gertrude had left London; Mary had never come back to it, which was much the same thing. The St. Galmiers were out of the question: she shrank instinctively from the woman, and she despised the man. But for Laura, she would have been utterly alone, as in the days before her luck turned—days to which she could never look back without a shudder.

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She crossed the bridge, and then turned the corner by Biffin's to scout for the chance of a moment's rest. The little wayworn alley was for the moment all her own, and she leaned over the parapet to take a last look at the river before going back to town. The wintry sun was near the setting, the bridge, now towering above her at no great distance, stood out tremendous in its mass, fateful against the coppery sky. The water reflected the rising mist, and but little of the ever-diminishing brightness beyond. It had no transparency; it might have been some river of the underworld in molten lead. The few pleasure craft that keep the stream summer and winter, had long since come in, all save a boat just rounding the point. It stood out black against the bars of sunlight and the great expanse of sullen blue below. It was no doubt going at a good pace, though it seemed to float in mere metal in a state of fusion. But it drew nearer very soon, and then the girl made out an eight pulling strongly across the bows of a belated County Council steamer towards the place where she stood, now, with one or two others, who had come out of a boat-house behind to lend a hand in landing the party. Its nearer approach defined a female figure pulling stroke for the rest of a crew of men, and in quite business-like style. As they landed, they caught the wash of the steamer, broadside on, and all got a ducking—all but a bent male figure in the bow, who had jumped out before they were overhauled.

“The Doctor's all right,” shouted one of the men who had gone down to meet them; and soon the whole party reached the boat-house, the woman shaking her

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drenched skirts, and just as workman-like as the rest in her unconcern.

“Sarah!” cried Prue.

“Who ’d ha’ thought it, miss?”

But it was impossible to leave it there, in bare justice to the exigencies of the situation.

“My club—change in a moment— Will you come in and have some tea?”

Sarah’s club. There was no getting level with Sarah. She always had something up her sleeve. Prue thought all this in a flash, but she took care not to say it.

“This ’ere ’s the pressydent,” said Sarah, arresting for a moment the bent figure, now running nimbly indoors with articles from the boat. “Doctor—friend o’ mine.”

“How do?” nodded the Doctor, without stopping. “Certainly; do please come and have some tea.”

“Tell me all about it, Sarah, or else I shall give you away. You might n’t like people to know you were sly.”

“Not me; what is there to be sly about? The Doctor takes us out every week-end, workin’ gals and chaps—benefit o’ your health. Pull to Richmond, then walk across somewheres to lunch—ah, and want it too. Pull back in the afternoon, and here we are.”

Prue was handed over to a young man who was instructed to take care of her while the others changed. He led the way into the warm club-house where thirty or forty young people of both sexes stood waiting for the party in a room set out for tea.

She was welcomed by a handsome young woman wearing a silver belt of office as captain of the club, and was

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then turned over to an elderly man whose daughter stood by his side. Their being together, father and daughter, seemed only the accident of their joint-membership. There was no chaperonage, and none was needed; the girls seemed quite able to take care of themselves. The young men, as the visitor judged by their talk, were mostly members of some teaching institution.

Prue was still looking round, when the door opened and George Leonard stalked in—the first of the eight to come upstairs.

He greeted her warmly, yet with deference.

“I ’m afraid you will hardly remember me. But Sarah will soon be at hand to speak for me. I should have no excuse for forgetting my first subscriber.”

She had better reason to recognise him, if only he knew. The memory of their meeting at Pentonville rushed over her spirit, and brought a sense of confusion. Did he know after all?

“And may I ask after the health of *The Branding Iron?*”

“Thank you; we ’re going strong, income and expenditure nearly balanced, and at any moment we may be paying our way. You will be sure to hear of it: we shall brag, as a matter of course.”

“I never expected— Even Sarah was a surprise. All a matter of chance. I was just looking at the river; and then—”

“Oh, I came to lend the Doctor a hand.”

“What a strange kind of club. I wonder what it ’s about.”

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“It ’s the Doctor’s idea. You know the Doctor? Everybody knows him.”

“I ’m afraid I ’m not everybody.”

“Nothing in Harley Street, you know, and yet, in one way of looking at it, as good as all Harley Street put together. He certainly helps to keep people alive. It ’s the title of his University Degree.”

She bit her lip. “I know now; the great philologist who—”

“The very man, editor of this, founder of that, but biggest, and I hope, proudest of all, as founder of this rowing club for working girls.”

“And where do the men come in?”

“Oh, we have our modest uses—partners when the girls want to dance, bear a hand in the eight, and all that. I can tell you, we have our work cut out when Sarah is stroke. I ’m proud of Sarah; I brought her in. And they are not all like Sarah; they condescend to sweethearts sometimes. Most of our young fellows are select specimens from the Doctor’s class at the Working Man’s College.

“The club is his hobby. He ’s a great breaker-down of barriers in places of this sort; to say ‘snob’ in his hearing is to say ‘rats’ to a terrier. Look at these young men and young women all thrown together with mere honour and self-respect for their safeguard, and Mrs. Grundy’s occupation ’s gone, I verily believe, on my word and soul. He solves his life-problems walking, usually with his hat in his hand. He rows at eighty-and-one years as others row at eighteen. He eats like a

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hermit. His art of happiness is just as simple; he loves and lets others love him—the old rule.”

“I ’m in love with him already.”

“You won’t be without rivals; his girls and young men adore him—and one another, whenever they have a mind. Of course, such a club ought to break down in dreary scandal and misunderstanding. It does n’t—that ’s all. He sits among them patriarch and sage, and rules by his smile. He has brought them all to the water-side. Before he set to work, the little shop-girl was still in the fourfold bondage of her factory, her lodgings, her sham proprieties, and her stays. He has shaped her, and put the roses into her cheek.”

He paused.

“Stop me, please, when you ’ve had enough of it; but really I do like talking about the dear old chap.”

“So do I.”

“I verily believe he knows of no distinction of persons, or indeed of living things, except as against people who put on airs. To catch him at his best you should see him with a swarm of brats fresh from the slums, holding on to him by hands or coat-tails, as he leads them through Kew Gardens and talks about the flowers. They call him ‘master,’ ‘father’—anything that means love and trust. They fight for their right to be nearest to him; and that ’s the moment to get a sitting for his incomparable smile. When all the children are at school, and all the big girls at work, he puts in spare time with the pigeons at the British Museum in the intervals of his toil in the library. But here he is to speak for himself.”

He appeared at the head of his crew from the dressing-room, tubbed, famished, and radiant with health

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and good spirits. His cheek was grained with colour like an apple. His eyes, bright with shrewdness and benignity, lit up the whole face.

The girls clustered about him; he had almost to brush them off to reach his seat. No one ventured to offer him service as from youth to age: he was but an older boy. When he had shouldered his way to his place, this genuine love-feast began to the music of clattering crockery, chattering girls and men. The mighty tea-pots were as urns of a river-god of sculpture. His glance missed nothing; he had everybody's history at his finger-ends; and he gave it to Prue, who, as a new-comer, had a seat by his side.

He had heard somehow of her share in Mary Lane's setting of "The Pearl," and he talked to her about the poem in a way that made her mouth water for knowledge like his own.

Sarah was on the other side of him, and even she glowed in his ray. He evidently knew her well; for he played her to the bank of sociable give-and-take, like an angler landing his fish. He praised her as one of his champion scullers, and directed her gaze to a silver cup set in a place of honour, as to something she had yet to win.

When tea was over, they cleared the room for a dance. Between the dances they rested in a song. Then came the early hour for leavetaking and home, though sometimes, in the case of assorted couples, the good-byes were for the other end of the journey.

Sarah saw these departing with no sympathy in her gaze.

"I come for the rowin'," she said to Prue; "I don't

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take no stock in any o' this lot"—by which she was understood to mean her fellow-clubmen. "Skipjacks, I call 'em—shavin' to get whiskers, not to get 'em off. Who 's to see you safe 'ome. Wonder how you come to be out so far by yourself. Had you got lost?"

"Thank you, Sarah—thank you very much. Mr. Leonard has offered to take me to the train."

"Humph!" said Sarah; and she stalked away—Diana huffed by the defection of a nymph.

CHAPTER XXV

PRUE walked silent, troubled, not knowing what to do to convince him that she was perfectly at her ease.

She was still under the obsession of that memory of his earlier offer of escort. She plucked nervously at her boa, losing a feather every time:—"he knew me; he knew me not."

Then she said, on the impulse of one moment: "I have found work;" and, on the impulse of the next, wished herself at the bottom of the sea.

What could he know about it? What could he care, if he did know?

"I 'm glad, of course, though I was going to say that looks like worse luck for me. I hope it won't prevent you from coming over to help me now and then in my quarter."

"I should be pleased: I have a good deal of spare time. I am with a lady who pays me very well for the little I have to do for her."

"She might not like the idea of your connivance in *The Branding Iron*."

"That would be my lookout."

"I want someone to take my people about, and give

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them an idea of all the beautiful things to be seen for nothing.”

“There are not many beautiful things, I ’m afraid,” she said, reverting to the experience of her solitary life. “Do you happen to know how some work girls have to live?”

“I hope so.”

“How hideous it all is!”

“That depends on the way you look at it, I fancy.”

“Is there any way but one? Miles of dull and dirty streets: week days—organs, ‘all the winners’; Sunday—bells, muffin and other. Oh, the ugliness of it all! Guide people to the beautiful things! Where ’s the beauty? Who ’s to guide the guides?”

“I don’t know, but it ’s fairyland to me as it stands. It ’s the seriousness of it all, I think—the sincerity—as soon as you can get away from the quarters where they are merely playing at being alive.”

“I wish I could see it like that.”

“Well, try one of the great Saturday night markets—miles and miles of coarse grub—that ’s the word for it—tempered with mountebanks, ballad singers, lit with the roaring naphtha lamps.”

“I don’t see much fun in marketing on Saturday nights.”

“Maybe not, but it ’s sport of a kind, all the same. So serious, so very serious; one single Saturday night’s intermission, at the pay-table, and half of them would be without a meal. The people so satisfied with the squalid luck of the moment, the one good dinner of the week only one day ahead! Jocund as mountaineers some

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of them, and for the same reason that they live within a step of the abyss. It is n't all dejection; devil-may-care 's a good dog too."

"I thought we were talking of beauty."

"Will this do then—in Clerkenwell, hard by the smoking chasm of the Metropolitan at Farringdon, 'I know a bank'—I assure you I do—a place with a dovecote, and winding walks, and all the rest of it, and workers in the dinner hour. I came on it by chance the other day: the entry lay between two warehouses, and I thought I was trespassing at first. And all the people, in all the gardens, backing in the sunshine of the moment between the thunder-clouds of their lot."

"It 's all so grey, so squalid, so common outside. How much garden, how much more smoky Metropolitan and all the rest of it beyond. What about the warehouses?"

"Good Heavens! that 's where the interest comes in. What are you going to do about it? You must do something, or die. Hold on to the bit of garden, hold on tight: we 're going to get it all like that one day."

"I don't want to know it, place or people—there."

Indignation makes verses—and other things. She was in revolt. In spite of all she had felt for the unemployed in their squalid march, perhaps rather because of it, she loathed the very touch of poverty and squalor. Her angry pity, her joy in suffering for the sake of victory, were still perfectly compatible with the idea of a separation from the herd. They were, in fact, part of the idea. Her old sense of her right to the "good time," revived under Laura's influence, had but taken the new form of an aspiration for selectness. And she was more

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than ever disposed to regard all that was disagreeable as but a sordid accident of the human lot. The maxim, "all is good, there is no evil," naturally suggested a drawing-room, suitably furnished with upholstery and human beings, as the threshold of the perfect way.

"But you have to know it whether you like it or not. Please don't think me too dictatorial, it 's only one of my faults. You 'll find plenty of others by-and-by. Hold up your finger when you think I want pulling in."

"I 've seen enough of that sort of thing. I want a change."

"What sort of change?"

"Clear skies, clean streets, clean people."

"Eastbourne?"

"There are worse places," she said.

"I daresay; but think only of the church parade, and of all the prosperity on the trot to and fro in its narrow prison, like a collie in a cage."

"What 's wrong, I wonder, with Beachy Head?"

"The people at the top. Well, no, I don't exactly mean that. But sometimes you know one can't resist the paltry temptation of hitting the nail. Still they are rather trying, on their snug summits—say what you will."

"I was thinking of the view."

"I prefer the roof of a model in the Isle of Dogs. It 's a play-ground of sorts—and it looks down on the river, and the masts with their austere message from the furthest points of the earth, and the speck of a landing-stage where Frobisher lived, and Raleigh started on his last voyage—not that I care overmuch for either of 'em

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except as parts of the vista—and on miles of two-story houses with their swarm. Ah, there the caring comes in! All the insect figures so earnest and purposeful, whatever else they are not, even if they 're only going to the deuce in their own way."

"Too many are going the way of the corner public house, for my taste."

"Not half so many as you think. But I own they all have to keep their eye on the turnings. There 's a bit of the beauty of it. Everything is to be done with them and for them. The rest don't count so much, at either end of the scale. We talk too often of the horrors. We miss the possibilities. You might do anything with this lot, too poor for foolishness, not needy enough for degradation—the backbone of the country, if things were in their right place. Wealth is a mere craving, like gin and tobacco: we want a wealth cure. We 're rotting of prosperity ill-diffused; the aristocracy has long since gone out of the reckoning, the middle class was almost the first to go. Our entire hope is to start with this, as yet uncorrupted, mass as the beginnings of a new English people. Key them up to socialised wealth, purer light."

"And the others?"

"Save them from themselves, for all our sakes, in their silly waste and folly and pride. Teach them to feel the need of wise and prudent measures for irrigating the whole surface of society with the boundless riches that should be the heritage of the whole people. And don't let them ride off with a cry of 'confiscation': the business is much too serious for that—the thing, or the cry. Let us all try to set it right, shoulder to shoulder, and rich

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and poor, as we should to the cry of 'the country in danger.' It is a thing against nature: it can't last as it is." He stopped and broke into a cheery laugh. "I 'm afraid I 've been a bit after-dinnery. But really, you know, there 's a speech in every man, and most conversation is only the struggle to find an opening for it. This may be used in evidence against me, I am well aware, but be as merciful as you can."

They had reached the station. His hand was on the handle of the carriage door.

"I am sure you could help me if you tried. Won't you come with me for a ramble round some of the public galleries next Saturday?"

"If you think I could learn to be useful."

"I am sure of it, and, at any rate, it will do you good to see your pictures again."

"*My* pictures—a chromo, from a Christmas number!"

"Oh, that 's only the private cabinet. I mean the others in Trafalgar Square."

"What 's everybody's is nobody's."

"Are you quite sure that in things of this sort it is n't especially yours, if you like to make it so? At any rate, come to *mine*."

She might have stood more on terms, but the train shook itself for the start, just as he was saying, "Saturday at two—vestibule of the National Gallery."

It had to be "yes" or "no," for there was but just time for the word. "No" would have been shorter by a letter, yet she said "yes!" What can you do with people like that?

As the train moved off, two belated travellers came run-

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ning up, and in spite of official protests, succeeded in entering a compartment. It was Sarah and—a man. He was conditioned in every desirable way from Sarah's point of view, in being middle-aged and demure, but still there he was, to all appearance one of the sex she had forsworn. Mysterious Sarah. She did not see Prue. Prue took care not to see her at the other end of the journey.

CHAPTER XXVI

HER heart beat fast. It was her first male escort in anything more considerable than an Eton jacket. He was waiting for her at the rendezvous, and apparently in another frame of mind. This time he seemed as serious as one of his own heroes of the Isle of Dogs. It deepened her interest in him: he might have as many moods as the sea.

“I have to come here every month or so,” he said, “just to clear my eyesight for the beauty of the world.”

Prue thought what a splendid thing it would be to have such a gallery in one's own house, yet somehow she shrank from saying so. The next moment she did say it — just because she shrank from thinking she was afraid.

“Half the time you 'd never look at it, for that 's what it comes to. And besides, most of the great private collections are mere side shows, now that the Wallace has fulfilled its natural destiny.”

“Yes; but to feel that they were your very own.”

“How much ownership do you want? Won't this do? Last week I was looking over a 'very own' belonging to a friend of mine in the country. He asked me to bring down some of my men. I took them more for his sake than for theirs; he was laudably anxious, I understand, to promote the union of classes. It was a sore sight in

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second best, as most of such things are bound to be. What can you expect in pictures for £150,000? This makes amends.’

As they went in, he made her stop on the staircase.

“Excuse me for doing the honours of my own place, but this is worth a glance. Yet, after all, it is the mere casket and we want to get at the gems. Do you like pictures of children? Come and see one of Francia’s. Then we might look at Titian’s little dancing rogue of a baby satyr, on tiptoe with the very joy of life. We can take them in their order later on. And the next time you come this way by yourself, don’t forget the exquisite urchin in full pelt with the roses—Bronzino’s— Three such things in one gallery—beat them, if you can in the whole world.’”

She stopped, and took a seat in the first large room.

“Let us begin with all the pictures at once,” she said, “don’t you think that ’s the best way?”

It was the whole scheme of colour at a glance. Her gaze travelled swiftly round the room without taking detailed note of a single canvas. They were in a colour universe, glowing, brilliant, yet tempered to softness by the matted light—a suffusion of animated harmonies without a jarring note.

He watched her dreamy, half-veiled eyes, her parted lips.

“Now,” she said, after a while, “the things in the frames whenever you like.”

“We hardly want them. They ’ve already given us their meaning in one word, why trouble them for a thousand? What a happy thought. All the other arts have

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only the same word to say, though of course in their own ways—music, great architecture (great nature for that matter), peace, peace, perturbed spirit! Thank you for the idea.”

“Thank you for telling me what I meant.”

They rambled on from room to room taking the mere topical interest at no more than its real worth. Subject in art is as secondary as action in life. The spirit of the conception is the thing that counts.

“The golden hours on angel wings”—the greatest has told us how they fly. All life was redeemed to the sense of beauty. Now, for the first time, she felt what it might be to be alive.

All too soon they were under the portico again, and looking down on Trafalgar Square, bright in the wintry sun, and the scene beyond—a turmoil no longer, but only the harmony of a beatific vision.

“What would become of us sometimes,” he said, “without this temple on the edge of the slope, just to focus things a bit? And there ’s another not far off, not quite so happily placed, but still exactly where it ’s wanted. The day ’s our own. You have seen my gallery, come and see my bookshelves and my little stock of curios—mine and yours. But perhaps we might take a turn first, what do you say?”

They crossed the Square to Charing Cross, pushed on as far as the corner of the Haymarket, and then returned to their starting-point. She walked as in a dream, with the roar of the traffic for a lullaby. She was dimly, and at the same time, keenly aware—in the appeal to a sort of inner sense—of the great steamship offices with the tables

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of their sailings to every part of the planet, of models of great ocean liners—their drawing-rooms, boudoirs, dining-rooms, lounges, the very riot of modern luxury pictured as all afloat, with nothing but a plate of sheet-iron between them and the ocean depths. Other officers showed where you might pass in cushioned ease over and under Alpine heights in cars as comfortably lit and upholstered as the glowing chariot of that mad King of Bavaria who tore through the mountain solitudes at dead of night to ease his pain.

The big hotels filled for the luncheon-hour, the emigration offices had their contrasting crowds feasting on the sight of the “produce” in cereals and monster fruits, exhibited as bait for the settler. The huge maps in other windows carried out the same suggestion of limitless space, limitless opportunity, all radiating out from her, as a sort of insignificant centre of things, her horizon bounded by a London parish, yet yearning for her share in all that lay beyond.

He caught the look of wistfulness in her face, and perhaps guessing that he had missed his mark, led the way briskly towards the British Museum, steering her through the traffic where still all passed as a thing seen in trance. In New Oxford Street, however, he felt or feigned hunger, and she was still only coming out of a trance, when they sat in a corner of a well-known restaurant.

The delight of it—the Arabian Nights in smoky London! What an affair—a cup of coffee in a bun-shop! Well, don't laugh at her too much. It was her first café as well as her first escort. The highly sophisticated person who gave himself that forty-guinea a head dinner at

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the Savoy might still have envied her the novelty of the sensation. The people bustling in and out, many of them studious women from the neighbouring Reading-Room, the smart waiters, all ministered to the sense of adventure, as though the little London girl had suddenly been whirled away on a wishing carpet to some far-off land! The very aroma of the coffee was enough. It was reverie, vision, the East in the setting of a London fog.

And soon there came a touch of incident, which, in its small way, was adventure of a more positive kind. Subdued sounds of altercation in another compartment of the shop reached the pair at their table, but hardly went beyond.

It was but a Briton of sorts asserting his inalienable right to bully the foreign waiter as a dependent, but it was most exciting to Prue, as one witnessing a national sport for the first time.

“You did n’t pull it off that time, old chap,” said the Briton. “Better luck next.”

The Briton was not visible from the place where Prue sat, but she could just see the waiter in profile, erect, immobile, perfectly self-possessed. He was a fine young fellow of his inches, with the look of being somebody, in spite of his ridiculous evening wear in the broad daylight. He held forth a penny which seemed to have slipped out of the reckoning as he tendered change.

“Very sorry, sor: on the floor fallen.”

“How many pennies do you sneak that way in a week?” said the Briton genially.

The waiter flushed crimson, but never moved a muscle, and spoke, if possible, lower than before.

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“Very sorry, sor; it was an accident.”

“Now you may keep it for yourself,” said the Briton. “And there ’s a penny more to add to it. That ’s what we call a tip in this little country.”

The waiter evidently hesitated between the desire to choke him, and the wish to avoid a scene. The wiser course prevailed.

“Dank you, sor.”

“Now I ’ll give you another tip—what we call the straight one. Next time, don’t go collectin’ on your own hook for the *accident* fund. We don’t like it in this country.”

The waiter answered never a word.

It was impossible to go on quarrelling with such a creature. The Briton was evidently mollified—in part, no doubt, by the felicity of his own humour.

“You don’t make tuppence every time you serve a gentleman and lady—I mean a lady and gentleman—with a snack, in your (what do you call it—‘Vaite-land’?) ‘Land of waiters,’ as you might say—eh, mate, ha! ha!”

“He! he!” came in a softer titter, apparently from the lady in question.

The waiter smiled, and filled in his pause in the conversation by dusting the crumbs from the table.

“How do you like John Bull—eh?” said the customer, quite in good spirits now.

“I am not long in the gountry,” said the waiter evasively.

“Well, go and have a squint at it,” said the customer, “whenever you get a day off, and don’t forget Ports-

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mouth. Plenty o' ships. When 's this 'ere German fleet comin' to give us a look in, in a friendly sort o' way? Plenty o' room too at Portsmouth. Let 'em all come, friend or foe, waiter; that 's the idea."

"And while you 're about it," said the lady, "just take a peep at the soldiers at the Horse Guards. They won't hurt you, if you keep a civil tongue in your head."

Prue gave a great start, and craned her head a little so as to catch a reflection in a mirror—Miss St. Galmier and her brother Reginald!

She had just time to veil her face with a newspaper when they passed out, while the waiter still impeccably correct went off to attend to another customer, as one retiring in the company of his own thoughts.

"Empire and Impudence," said Leonard, "that 's the way I 'm afraid it touches the crowd. And, if you knew all, you might find that this waiter belonged to one of the great hotel dynasties of Bâle or Berne, and would hardly employ that wastrel to black his boots. Their youngsters often don the uniform of service, in this way, to pick up languages, manners, and customs. When shall we learn—"

"You forget that 'pa was a gentleman,' " said Prue.

CHAPTER XXVII

THEY found the Museum gate blocked by a group of ragged children, standing abashed before the policeman on duty.

“More infants,” said Leonard, “though late English instead of early Italian—worse luck! Let us have a look at ’em: they ’re always fun.”

“Wait a bit,” said the man of law cheerily—to a boy who had the king of Lilliput’s qualification for leadership, in being taller than the rest by about the thickness of a thumb-nail—“’Ow many of yer this journey?”

“Me an’ my little brother, an’ this ’ere boy, an’—”

“Stop a bit: what about them three little gals?”

“They ain’t my lot.”

“Glad to ’ear it: stand out gals. Now, then, what do you and your lot want to go in for?”

“To see the picters.”

“There ain’t no picters; you ’ve come to the wrong shop. Now shall I tell yer what yer want to go in for? You ’re the parties as went skylarkin’ among the mummies last week. That ’s what you are, if you ask me.”

“No, we ain’t,” said the delinquent faintly, and hanging his head as though wondering how one small helmet could cover all that policeman knew.

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“Well, the gals can pass. As for you, I should take a walk round the park if I was in your place: it ain’t far.”

It was a case of identification without finger-marks. They turned off without a murmur yelling defiance, and taking to their heels as soon as they got out of arm’s length.

“The London small boy,” said Leonard, “best of raw material if you catch him in time, and know what to do with him—mere gutter snipe and first cousin to the London sparrow, without the sparrow’s chances, as it is. The waste of it all! But let us follow the girls on the chance of sport.”

They passed an old gentleman feeding the pigeons in the quadrangle—“the Doctor”—and nodded a salute. The children stood helpless and demure in the great hall, and then, turning to the right as to the line of least resistance, entered the manuscript room. The little big sister taking a show-case haphazard puckered her brows over a missal in monkish script—and Latin at that—and passed on.

“Me too,” whimpered one of the still smaller fry, plucking at her skirt.

She turned back, took them one by one, tilted them, heels in the air, heads down, noses almost touching the glass. Then, rapidly restoring them to the perpendicular, led them away perfectly satisfied.

“That ’s about as much as most of us see of life,” said Leonard, “yet we would n’t miss it for the world.”

Again the hours flew. It was Egypt, Greece, Assyria,

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all as they might be seen from the empyrean, in a harmony of warring purposes and troubled lives.

Leonard was in great form now.

“Now you know why I felt so sorry for the man who had wasted a fortune on a private collection. He had his money’s worth, no doubt, but what a paltry affair was his gallery at £150,000 beside mine. How can you do anything worth talking of in pictures at a sum like that? My gallery has run into at least a million and a half, and I seem to want something to finish it off every time I take a turn in the place. What are his little snippets of private treasure to these I own as a citizen of no mean states? I would n’t swap my “Bacchus and Ariadne” against his whole show. The root idea of ownership is finally use. All these things are mine as fully, as absolutely as if I had won them by gambling for a fortune with other people’s savings, or inherited them from an Elizabethan buccaneer.” He paused and looked at her. “I’ve got lots more to say, but how am I to say it if you won’t give me a lift?”

“What am I to do?”

“Move an amendment, or something of that sort. All the fight seems to have gone out of you.”

“Fight! I wonder if—”

He watched her curiously during the long pause. When she spoke again, it was to take up his own fancy:

“*My* pictures then as well as yours.”

“Ours, if you please—ours.”

“Why not? In these things, I suppose, as in the skies and meadows, the eyes are the real title-deed.”

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“The private collector, the poor creature we felt so sorry for just now has no Van Eyck at all: we have the Jan Arnolfini. Why won’t somebody write the fifteen decisive pictures of the world! How many thousands a year our patrimony takes to keep up, with all its machinery of directors, secretaries, and what not, down to the very charwoman at the other end of the scale I really don’t know.”

“And I don’t care,” she said.

“That ’s the right frame of mind. Is n’t it enough to know that we own the frieze of Scopas, a horse’s head of Phidias, the Hypnos of Praxiteles, the majolica of Pesaro?”

“Spare me!”

“Very well then. I was about to include the Portland Vase, but swagger is a thing I hate. As for intaglios—”

“A friend of mine,” said Prue eagerly, “lives by doing that kind of work. Surely you must know her too. Laura Belton—you remember her—Sarah’s tea party.”

“Oh, yes. I never had the honour of exchanging a word with her, but I ’ve had her history in monosyllables from Sarah, as you may suppose.”

“She ’s so clever in all sorts of ways.”

“I don’t know that I ’m so very keen on clever people.”

“You could n’t help admiring her,” said Prue stoutly.

“I daresay; but now you ’ve thrown me out of my stride. Where was I? Oh, I know— All ‘mine,’ these unmatchable things for every poor devil in town. Why

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not patent the great invention in affluence of throwing everything into the common domain. My poor private collector with his trumpery sets in British authors, and classics of modern and mediæval lore!"

She mused: "How many books I wonder in *our* big room under the dome?"

"Oh, I can't count in millions."

"Well, how many in that big head under the hat, in the middle of the maze?"

"Really, you know that 's his business," said Leonard, "we can't go into details. Don't forget he is only one of our upper servants, put there to hook us out of the slough of reference whenever we get into a fix."

"I hope we pay him well."

"I don't know. Our Secretary of the Treasury looks after that. And he 's only one: think of the other big hats brooding over our manuscripts, tablets, and learned bricks."

"I fancy we 've been rather extravagant there."

"Perhaps so; but it would be hard to part with that choice thing in cuneiform chipped, I regret to say, about 2,500 years ago."

"Those housemaids!"

"Or with that obelisk of Shalmaneser with the pictorial inventory of Jehu's tribute, or with the Rosetta stone. My most miserable, most melancholy private collector made much of a Babylonian toothpick which he hoped was Assurbanipal's. I laughed and invited him to come and see that king and his wife at dinner, on the slab from Kouyunjik. It might serve for a kind of

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puzzle prize. 'Find the head of the King of Elam, which was cut off on the battle-field.' It hangs on the second tree from the left glaring down on the Royal dinner-table in impotent longing—just to whet the appetite of the conqueror for his twentieth course.

"Whenever I walk in such places I tell myself sad stories of the death of kings who tried to keep their booty all to themselves. One day they 'll come and implore us to relieve them of the whole weary load of parks and palaces, and all the rest of the rotting gear of personal use."

A heavenly day for little Prue, her first glimpse of the new Bohemia, of the new democracy of London town. Choice spirits, men and women, free as the bird; as nimble and pushing for a crust, and as soaring when they have brought that indispensable thing into the nest. Bohemia of the new time, with the old gin-shop and coloured cutty variety sunk comfortably into the slime of things. Bohemia of Nature, art, liberty, great thoughts, valiant deeds. How many are striving for it now who have to pass the indispensable balance of their lives, and pass it contentedly, at the draper's counter, or at the workman's bench! Everyone added to their ranks of God's own militia is a fighter for the new time—Gertrude with her passion for the right use of riches, Mary Lane with her disdain of them and her saintly poverty. A day of illumination for the little work girl in giving her a first conception of the grandeur of new ideals. The smug proprieties of class distinction in which she had been reared, seemed to wither in the searching light.

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And it had brought more intimate consolations. In this strange comrade, in this strong man—for such she felt him to be—had she found a friend on her lonely path, and a true spiritual helper at last?

Yes, from start to finish, with the bun-shop in mid-course, a heavenly day.

CHAPTER XXVIII

LEONARD had vanished, in one of the mysterious absences in which he left no trace of himself but *The Branding Iron* in its weekly issue. That midge of journalism was more audacious than ever; and its adherence to its purpose of focussing the life of one social plague spot had begun to make it a power in the land. It circulated by thousands, was quoted in Parliament, press, and pulpit, and sometimes sent its echoes to the other side of the world.

The little work girl was again very much alone, but she had begun to live at least, if living is to be measured by the intensity of sensations. She was entering into the great inheritance of the Londoner who has a shilling to spend, or only half of it at a pinch; nay, in the last resort, nothing but the "love" of the penniless. She hurried wildly to Polytechnic classes, County Council lectures, with the University "Extensions" as the promised crown of her course. The tic-toc of the high heels was as insistent in the passages of the great human hive in Regent Street as it had been on London Bridge, but this time it was the tattoo of ardour and hope.

Amazing portent of our time these universities of the

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poor scholar trying to win his way to the light. The students are all aglow with the new desire to be something, to do something, in rebuke of a spite of Fortune that has brought them to the banquet of life without the silver spoon, and with the hope of picking up a new learning of Dante, Shakespeare, Molière, which is part of the old, old story of the world. It is their chance; and they are ready to tramp for miles to the classes, after their day's work. Their generous curiosity for knowledge is born of the derided "rags," ha'penny and other. The newspaper, with all its faults, has made them athirst. The endless chatter about things, places, people, present and past, in the popular issues is, say what you will, a first stage. It is the little learning that ever leads to the wish for more, with the finer sort. The County Council lecture is an approach to the Pierian spring.

A strange and a suggestive sight one of these lecture-rooms with the faces, eager and questioning, the strained and deep-set eyes that have just begun to peer into the peopled gloom of history still appreciably limitless in time and space, and stirring with the majestic figures of the past. Many walk miles to the classes on a cup of tea and a biscuit, or, on the mere hope of it, when they have tramped miles back to their squalid homes. What a joy to have the shaping of them! What a national asset, if nations but knew! Well, there they are as they stand, to brighten one side of our balance-sheet as an off-set to the hooligans and the St. Galmiers so miserably entered as waste.

It had not escaped the notice of *The Branding Iron*.

"The popular institute is the English working class

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in training, not men for arts and crafts, but for life.

“We may look out for a Great Surprise one day, and that day quite soon at hand, a surprise for the English nation, and for the whole world.

“This is a prophecy; and smaller things have been made the subject of the puzzle prizes in the columns of our contemporaries.

“What is it going to be, ‘The Great Surprise’ in preparation for the whole British race within a few weeks of the present time?

“We do not offer an insurance coupon or a perambulator, but we are willing to receive guesses.

“We may say at once that ‘The Surprise’ is in the nature of a great beneficent ‘Conspiracy’: the rest our readers must find out for themselves.

“The British workman has gone to school, and something is going to happen? But really we must hold our hand, or we shall give the whole thing away in advance.”

SOME of these people were to be met on one night of the week at a little cenacle of Socialism fondly known to initiates as “The Society.” It was the same eagerness, tempered a little in its intensity by the conceit of the superior mind. Prue went regularly for the fun—the debates were so good—and one day she had Laura by her side—the latter with her coquettish band-box air, her toilette, like her manner, of perfect adequateness to the occasion. These adornments attracted a certain critical attention among the members. “The Society” has its typical girl; and a blouse is a conspicuous article of her

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uniform. It was once bright red: it is now fading to pink, some say, in the wash; others, as a result of a subtle change in the intensity of opinions.

It was to bring this blouse back to red again that the meeting was held. A member, representing the youth of the party, was to arraign its policy of slow and careful training of democracy for its day of power. Laura had come to see the encounter, with her insatiable curiosity that pastured over the whole surface of life. Prue could hardly keep pace with her questions. It ought not to have mattered in the least to either that the meeting-place was an old hall in a decayed inn of court, with a suggestion of long perspectives of time, and of a richly varied life of good and ill, in its panelled chambers all now sanctified by the great peace. It did matter: that was all: to both, especially to Prue, with her hatred of realism—by which term, like most immature persons, she simply meant disagreeable things—her craving for idealism and romance.

The little company of adepts and of devotees, men and women, was gathered from workshops and newspaper offices, from bar and pulpit, from mere domestic fire-sides. The old gang of founders sat, by a sort of prescriptive right, in the high places in front of the lecture stand; the others, in the degree of their stages of novitiate, on the remoter benches where finally they blocked the door. A few men came, Nicodemus-like, from the Government bureaux, where their right hands, which signed the official minute in the daytime, were to know nothing of what their left hands were going to do at night in turning the leaves of a Socialist manifesto.

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The lecturer was now on his feet. He pleaded for a new departure in English Socialism, for a deeper purpose, for a more vitalising method, for the trumpet-call that might bring down walled cities of prejudice, for a recovery of touch with the masses of the English people.

“You have left the old propaganda of passion and feeling,” he said, “for mere economics. Your whole being has become but a note of interrogation; your psalm of life but a blue-book. You are for gas and water and sanitation, excellent things in their way, yet but remotely tending to salvation. You have been seen in a scrimmage for the prize of an aldermanic gown. The cry for help that never ceases to rise day and night from the pit of our social system is apt to pass clean over your heads as you burrow in a model sewer. Come forth and stand by us in the old spirit, in the old way. Recover the old fire and the impulse of your earlier and greater day.”

There was applause when he sat down, and it was led by the women. He was one eminently fitted to plead with them, not only by what he said, but by his way of saying it. He had youth on his side, a sort of dispassionate earnestness, a suggestion of high studies in other fields of thought.

Then came the questions from the audience. They darted as from serpent tongues from different parts of the room. It was a veritable heckling. The soul of a man was being tried as in the process of the Book of the Dead.

“Do I understand the opener to say—?” “The opener has said—” “How does he reconcile this with—?”

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“Will he tell us exactly what he means by the term—?”
It was death or victory: he could not afford to fail.

The two girls enjoyed it hugely. All their sympathy was for the man at bay. He generally gave a good account of his assailants, and, where he lapsed for a moment into temper, it was but a charm the more. It was an intellectual combat in which a truism was an opening for the scorner, and a common-place was ruin.

After this new-fashioned torture of the question, came the speeches. They were limited in time: they had to be straight to the point. The old gang, the founders, were not going to abdicate without a struggle, and they gave this new candidate for the box seat of the chariot of the sun a hard time.

Prue in her excitement rose to shield him, but her nerve was not equal to the enterprise. Her tongue clave to the roof of her mouth. She balanced herself for a moment before the upturned faces of the crowd—a bench of judges, just, if you like, but pitiless—then sat down in time to save herself from collapse. She felt a touch, in the mist that was beginning to swim before her eyes. Someone thrust a smelling-bottle into her hand.

When the mist cleared she noticed that her benefactor was another woman, who had risen to speak, and had lost her turn by doing a good action.

“Thank you,” said Prue. “I hope I did n’t make an exhibition of myself.”

“Mere stage fright; you will soon get over that.”

In another moment, the good Samaritan found her chance, and she rose, to a sign from the chairman. She

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evidently had the habit of the platform. Her speech flowed in logic as in the womanly music of the intonation: not a thought was out of place. Is it not always the way with them? Everlasting are their surprises in all sorts of aptitude for those who judge them on their merits. The syllogism is ever in their minds; but sometimes they omit one of the propositions in compliment to hearers who are credited with the power to divine. This one made no such omission; and the applause was a graceful recognition of her avoidance of the excess of flattery.

“What is the secret of it?” asked Prue, when her comforter was again by her side.

“The woman’s secret, self-possession—keeping your face. Are n’t we all trained in that from the moment of our birth—to be ready to sink with terror, diffidence, mortification, to seethe with wrath, yet never to give a sign?”

“But the men don’t seem to be up to that!”

“They are such blushing, shy things; what can you expect?”

The next to rise was a reinforcement for the party in power, a sort of aquiline person, in the cut of him, say an old Roman with an eyeglass and a frock-coat, instead of the trappings of his period. He was a noted reviewer, for his living; a noted lecturer for the society, for his hobby. He had laid himself out for the vivisection of the lecturer, when a strange interruption drove him back to his place.

A white-bearded patriarch, verging on eighty, rose to deliver a monologue on his own account, regardless of the fact that another had possession of the meeting.

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The Roman stopped short, looked for help to the chair, sat down petulantly.

“You must wait, please,” said the chairman to the intruder. “You will be heard in your turn.”

“I was out on Kennington Common,” said the phantom, without paying the slightest heed to either of them, or, for that matter, to the meeting. If it was anything more than a soliloquy, it was all between him and the recesses of his own beard.

It was verily as one from the dead, but the words were a clue to his history—an old Chartist of the '48 revisiting a world of new doctrines, new measures, new men.

“I am in your hands, sir,” said the Roman to the chair, glaring a more intense scintillation of disgust through his monocle.

“I carried a banner, I did,” said the phantom, “got a whack from the end of the broken staff at the foot o' Wesminster Bridge. There 's the scar, if you think I 'm telling a lie—” and he pointed a skinny finger to a whiteness that was visible amid the silver of his hair. “Them was the times for Socialism. What are ye all at now?”

The Roman gave a snort and folded his arms.

“But, mind yer, it was the empty belly as floored me, not the peeler. I could ha' done 'im in fair fight, any time. Not a bite or sup the whole day.”

“Speak up,” said the meeting—they wanted to hear him now. The chairman smiled in anguish, but he ceased to interrupt.

“Whatever else was the matter with us, we was men. We 'ungered and we thusted for Socialism. Them was the days. Our delligits went up an' down the land,

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an' no expenses paid. When we got a bed, it was only a shakedown on the floor of a weaver's cottage, with a mate on each side instead o' blankets. Them was the days. Is Socialism any better, now that 's it 's got into the drorin rooms? I 've shook 'ands with Mister Robert Owin in my time. He was a gentleman, he was."

The chairman made a last despairing effort: "May I remind the speaker that the question is—"

"I don't care about no question," said the phantom stoutly. The meeting cried: "Let him go on."

"You 're all right, mates," he said, addressing the front bench. "You 've got the learnin', you 'ave. You can read books in French, I 'm told; aye, and talk like books on your own account. You 've got the starch in yer; an' the way you carry your upper lip is a sight to see. But 'ow about your entrils? Are you ready to fight for it? Lots of us was carried to the orspital. I 've got the *Times* newspaper, to this day, what give the list of the wounded:—'Jones, Samuel, coppersmith, broken collar-bone; Butler, James, labourer, compound fracter o' the thigh,' jest like the day after a battle; 'Sturt, Job, cobbler, severe concussion o' the brain, not expected to recover.' That was me."

"The question," murmured the chairman, with an agonised glance at the clock.

"I 'm coming to it. Do you know why you 're able to sit here and talk in peace an' quietness to-night? Bekos o' Kennington Common. We was beaten, an' we won the vict'ry; can you make that out, mates? The old Dook beat us—'im as did for Boney at Waterloo. Cannon on all the bridges; sojers behind; an' all the Gov-

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er'ment offices filled with gentleman specials shakin' in their shoes."

"An' why did we do it? Bekos Socialism was not—what d' ye call it now?—a doctrin: it was a religion, if it was n't always made on the same last as what they 've got in the churches now. There was a good deal of 'Our Father' in it, though it was set to the tune o' the Marsilase. It was a thing to pray for, if prayin' was your line; to feel for all the time. Liberty, equality, fraternity, an' 'and to 'and for the rights o' man. You must get back to that with all your cliverness—if you want to make Socialism the master of the world."

He stopped, and without staying further question, filed out, phantomwise still, with the serried ranks parting before him, as though to smooth his pathway to the shades. The last heard of him was a choking cough as the fog caught him by the throat.

CHAPTER XXIX

“**L**UCIAN! Lucian!” was the cry from all parts of the room.

A new figure rose from the Government bench, tall and spare, and shaking himself as for a clear course in the open. Nature seemed to have wrought him after a picture of Velasquez, in the pale complexion, the colour scheme of hair and eyes. He was a thing in cool greys, as one might guess, right down to the very recesses of his soul.

He was evidently as one coming with good tidings—the good tidings of himself. They laughed when he stood up, and before he began to speak. They laughed as soon as he opened his mouth. Their flesh quivered on their bones as they sat in the very ecstasy of expectation of his good things.

They were not disappointed. He played lambent lightnings on the whole surface of the debate. It was the humour of irony, the humour of doubt, critical, destructive, but delightful at that. He seemed to take one opponent after another, and to lay him on the flat of his back by a sort of intellectual jiu-jitsu. There was no violence in the operation; just a turn of the wrist, and there you were, staring up at him, helpless, unable to

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stir hand or foot. He was tender of the old Socialist, in his absence, but he laughed him gently into a sort of long sleep. "A religion" he asked—"what religion?"—"An enthusiasm—what enthusiasm?" It was the ghost of the dead and double dead romanticism and idealism revisiting us from the other side of the moon. Romance—the great heresy to be swept for ever from art and life!

Prue shuddered at him at first. Everything she had taught herself to cherish as the balm of life came under the spell of his mockery. Gallantry and chivalry!—things "treasonable to women and stultifying to men." Idealism! but a flattering name: mere "genuinely scientific natural history" the whole basis of the relations between human souls. She could have sobbed over it. It thrust her back into the cold and desolate region which she hoped she had escaped for ever. It seemed to be a theory of human relations formed by someone wanting in a sense, as though a man without a palate should talk of fine eating, a man without a nose should essay a poem of the garden, exalting the roots above the flowers.

Leonard's talk with her at the Museum had given new thoughts, new hopes—the individual taking his chance with the race, in disdain of the disgusting struggle for even the intellectual salvation of his own wretched soul. And here they were, all shattered, by a dialectician out for a lark. There was cruelty in his eye—the subtler vivisectional kind, not to men or women, but to ideals. What else had she to live by—after what she had gone through, after what was still before her in the hard struggle for a crust?

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Then gradually the tremendous cleverness of it all began to dominate her spirit. What matter whether it was true or false when it was so amusing. She laughed and chuckled with the rest: surely it was a sort of gift of the gods to be able to bring that assuagement to a weary world. And, in the intervals of the explosions, she wished someone would put him to death.

They were going out, when they found Leonard waiting for them at the door.

Laura remembered him; and it was clear that he had not forgotten her, though the recognition was evidently stronger on her side. He shook hands warmly with Prue.

"I 've had you both under observation all the time," he said, "though you never turned your heads my way. I hoped on until I heard the calls for Lucian. Then I gave myself up for lost."

"We could have made room for you," said Prue.

"I could n't have fought my way to your side. There were too many of us to the acre, or, at any rate, to the square yard."

"I began to fear you had taken a holiday in space," said Prue.

"No; I have n't left the cab radius, though that is sometimes as good as the other side of the planet."

"Is n't he just lovely?" said Laura.

"I am too wary to appropriate the compliment to myself."

"I hoped you would; and then I should have told you I meant Mr. Lucian. Do tell us what you think of him."

"Ladies first."

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“Not if they know it, in a matter of this sort. But meantime, as a working compromise, listen to our fellow-travellers in the mist.”

“A good idea.”

The outpouring crowd was naturally full of the subject, there were voices in the air as in an enchanted wood, for often they were voices and nothing beside.

“Had to miss the train or miss Lucian. Glad it was only the train.”

“Yes; that old jossler with the beard made me feel quite uncomfortable, till Lucian clowned it all away.”

“Lucian ’s always on the snigger now. I can’t stand him sometimes.”

“For ‘stand’ read ‘understand.’ Is that all you mean? It ’s the new school.”

“Just so—the Zebra or Wild Ass variety. Buck-jumping reason, sobriety, common-sense off its back every time they try a mount—with the sparks of paradox flashing from its heels. The very stripes are part of the advertisement.”

“Don’t you think he might save on that department, now that he has established the business?”

“You never can tell.”

“A man of his time: it ’s a puffing age. Not enough to have something to say: got to get people to listen. Oh, that long ear of the public, how hard it is to reach!

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Think of the great dead who have gone unread to Hades.”

“ ‘Lest we ’re forgotten’; that ’s the great preoccupation now. Why, the Church itself will soon be one huge advertisement from St. Mary-at-Hill to Lambeth, with the Archbishop just home from his starring tour in America in the millionaire’s car.”

“Lucian ’s a little too domineering to my taste. Reminds me of the King of Korea, who, in a time of stress, ordered the ‘immediate abolition of the national vices.’ ”

“It ’s a good fault. Some who are without it are like some preserves—the sugar kills all the flavour of the fruit.”

“Why can’t he leave Shakespeare alone?”

“Because Shakespeare won’t leave him: the provocation is intense.”

The voices died away. “So much for the public,” said Leonard; “now let us talk it over between ourselves.”

“You open the ball, Prue,” said Laura. “Let me see: where did the fog leave off? ‘It ’s a puffing age’ was the last thing that reached me.”

“What else is it?” said Prue, taking courage—“the modern system applied to the voice-production of a man of talent, and applied by himself.”

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“Worse luck!” said Leonard. “Once I was afraid it was going to spoil a gospel of genius in Lucian’s case. I fancy we ’re pretty clear of that danger now. Peace to his ashes: he was a good democrat.”

“A democrat done to death by the drawing-rooms,” said Prue.

“The wicked puffery,” said Laura, with a sly glance at Leonard.

“The long public ear,” pleaded Leonard. “What are you to do?”

“The sheer cheek of it all,” murmured Prue.

“That ’s the mere note of the race,” said Leonard—“the Keltic method. Deep calls to deep of airy insolence to bring them together in spirit all over the world. It ’s the French *crânerie*—good old Henri Quatre laying his whip on the table, casual-like, when he went to meet his Parliament—a journeyman tailor trailing his coat along the pavement in Rupert Street on a Saturday night: ‘Take it out o’ that now, bedad!’—Lucian going for Shakespeare: ‘Did ye see, boys, how I blackgyarded the big pote? How d’ ye like me now?’ All one and the same thing—the Kelt and a law of his being.”

“Shure, now!” laughed Laura, “I begin to believe the Kelt ’s the unclassified half of meself. Thank yer Honour for the compliment, an’ bravo!”

Leonard rejoiced heartily at this sally, and seemed eager to hear what she was going to say next.

Prue thought that he was “killingly funny,” the wretch, about the idealist lecturer.

“Faith! and the creature wanted his beating,” said Laura.

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LEONARD—Idealist! Romantic! Good Lord! I defy you to put pen to paper in literature unless you 're one or t' other. What 's he but an idealist of his own method?

LAURA—Do you suppose he does n't know that? But as long as people call for it, why should he stop? It 's hardly in human nature.

LEONARD—That 's very true; we 're all in the same boat. A bit of a mountebank, if you like, but his ointment really will cure chapped hands.

PRUE—So will the chemist's at the corner.

LEONARD—Yes; but nobody goes there. Old Mangin in Paris, who made a fortune by rigging himself up in helm and feather, and peddling lead pencils from the tailboard of a chariot and four, used to tell his customers to their faces that they left him to starve with exactly the same wares, till he took to playing the fool. Lucian has struck many a good stroke for the democracy, with all his faults.

LAURA—Don't you think the shortest cut to genius, or, at any rate, to its most startling effects, is just simply to say what you think?

LEONARD—Yes; but it must be what you think, not merely what you want other people to think you think. No one whispers with his own soul in epigrams. "The big fellows are talking to one another," said Millet, when the wind stirred the trees. "I don't know what they are saying, but I am sure they are not making puns."

LAURA—Lucian has cleared himself of that charge.

LEONARD—What charge?

LAURA—The punning.

LEONARD—I never made it. But you are right to stand up for him; he 's your creation.

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LAURA—Mine?

LEONARD—Yes; as one of “the sex.” It is the age of women. Their demand governs the supply in all the arts. They are the chief customers of poet, painter, seer. The archdeacon at St. John’s is a woman’s preacher; Lucian a woman’s political economist; the Platonist of Mayfair, a woman’s philosopher; the Kaiser, a woman’s emperor.

LAURA—Perhaps only a mere change of parts—the men growing more like women, the women like men.

LEONARD—I ’ve reversed the order of my climax, though, for the Kaiser is not the culminating point. Have you heard the latest from Berlin? His presumption, they say, is passing all bounds. The other day he jumped out of bed, and stuck to it for three mortal hours that he was as good as Lucian—about the only British jester, by the way, allowed to perform in Germany.

PRUE—Where ’s Lucian’s filial piety?—the last of the great Shakespearian fools rending the author of his being.

“HERE we are at the corner of my street,” said Laura, holding out her hand to Leonard. “Some other time, I hope,—good-night!”

In another moment the girls were hurrying off together.

“It ’s better than ‘forfeits’ or ‘puss in the corner,’ anyhow,” Laura said, in parting from Prue; “we ’ve been alive. I like him.”

“Which one?”

“Both.”

CHAPTER XXX

“I AM in town, my dear Prue, and you are to come and see me, please, to-night, just to show that there ’s no ill-feeling for all my long neglect of your letters. You must come in common fairness, to give me a chance of clearing my character. I hear you ’ve a dog: bring him along to see fair play.

“And, if you can, give me whatever fraction may be available of that wonderful woman-servant who used to be with you. I have a treasure of a ‘general,’ as it is, who cooks the dinner, valets me, and does lots of other things, and who, of course—sorry as I am to say it—is a foreigner.

“*P.S.*—The wonderful woman might turn up in the course of the evening, and have the benefit of your introduction.—Yours contritely,

“GERTRUDE.”

The letter was dated from Gray’s Inn. It was no sooner read than Prue penned another to Sarah urging her to appear, and make sure of the new place.

It was like something out of a past and half-forgotten life. The two old schoolmates had drifted together again, when they met in the City, but only to drift apart once

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more. When Prue returned to town, after her adventure as a strolling player, Gertrude had left—*The Branding Iron* dropping dark hints of some great social experiment. Prue wrote, and one or two letters were exchanged. Then she was caught up in the whirl of her life and death struggle, and her pride kept her silent. She hated to have to report herself as a failure. She resumed the correspondence, with the turn of her luck; but now Gertrude, engaged in some adventure of her own, was the laggard. The letter apparently was to make amends.

Gertrude had changed. Much of the old shyness had vanished; she had more of the repose of a person accustomed to face the world. And one rare, though by no means singular note of it, was that she had made some conquest of her incapacity for small talk. Her beauty had matured—the gawk of the school play-ground had become more completely than ever the graceful and loveable woman. And the tenderness of yearning for affection was still in her eyes, though it was still also, in some curious way, impersonal in its appeal.

Prue was at the rendezvous a full quarter of an hour before her time. She wandered through the beautiful old inn, and caught moonlight glimpses of the stately garden, where Bacon walked, and no doubt successfully wrestled with the temptation to write the “*Midsummer Night’s Dream*.”

Her knock was answered by the “*treasure*,” acting, for the moment, as hall porter, but manifestly anxious to revert to her duties as cook. She found time, however, to smile a welcome, and even to distinguish herself as a lady’s-maid by helping the visitor with her wraps. It

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would have taken a whole establishment to achieve as much on the British system, and then, perhaps, the smile might have been left out.

Gertrude advanced with open arms:

“Why not acquit me at once, and then we can skip the trial.”

“And the charge too, if you don't mind. And this is living in chambers. What a perfectly lovely place!”

“Well, you know, I still owe you two letters. I was so—”

“Dear Gertrude; you always were so clever; but however did you manage it?”

“What have I done this time?”

“Invading a real inn of court!”

“The rooms were to let, and I took 'em—that 's all.”

“Well, but you 're a woman.”

“I hope so; but that 's no bar nowadays. References, you know, and all that sort of thing.”

“So their chambers are going the same way as their clubs? Gertrude, how we are coming on!”

They went through the tiny suite of bedrooms for mistress and maid, sitting-room, kitchen, and finally settled down in the dining-room to a delicious little dinner, cooked to a turn. It was served by the feminine *chef* herself, in a new incarnation of which the principal attributes were the smartest of aprons and the prettiest of caps. The dog had been sent into the kitchen, where he refused an offer of risotto as un-English, and he soon sneaked into the dining-room in search of more hospitable fare. After their two cups of black coffee, as dainty as everything else on the table, the young women were in

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the mood for a good talk on old times. It was the hour for confidences; and Prue thought she saw her opportunity of clearing up the mystery of the friendly intervention in her favour with Mrs. Dart.

“Own up, Gertrude, that you helped me there.”

“I wish I could. As a matter of fact, I never exchanged a word with her in my life.”

“But she knows you.”

“We know of each other; that ’s about all, I think. You see, what should we have to say? I should only make her laugh, as she sometimes makes me wonder. It would be a poor sort of opening for afternoon tea.”

“Then it *was*”—but she paused before filling in the name—“pretty sly of him, I think.”

She tingled with the old suffusion of shame at the thought that Leonard must have recognised her at Clerkewell; and then, again, in a deeper shade of it, when she feared that Gertrude had noticed the first.

“Won’t you put me out of my misery, Prue? Who is Mr. Blank?”

“George Leonard, the editor of *The Branding Iron*. Gertrude, such a—paper, and such a lot in it about you and your work!”

“I know all about the paper, and want to know all about the man, for we ’ve never met. He ’s interested in my small doings, and he dogs me all about the country with post-cards, the dear old thing.”

“He ’s not a bit old.”

“Well, then, suppose we leave it at ‘dear’?”

Prue missed fire with the response.

“So my Leonard is also a Leonard of yours?” Ger-

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trude continued; that 's the only bit of news. Stay, there 's another: Mary Lane is coming up soon, and then we shall all be together again."

"Tell me a lot about yourself, Gertrude."

"Your turn first, I think."

"Oh, no; I 'm not making history just now. But I 've met a wonderful girl—Laura Belton. Did you ever hear the name?"

"I 've heard so many names lately."

"Leonard thinks her the cleverest creature he ever met, but he won't say so."

"I hope she returns the compliment."

"She can't help it."

The other looked at her curiously, and Prue's eyes fell beneath the gaze. "I want to hear your news, Gertrude," she said.

"I 've been making a great experiment," said Gertrude, and it has come out all right. It began long before I ran up against you in the City. But I could n't say much about it to anybody, until I had tried it for myself."

"It just thought of itself; I mean, it became inevitable. Look here, little one! By a strange will, my father left me a controlling voice in the management of a huge factory. Everything was done for me by my constitutional advisers. Still, I was queen when I chose to assert my prerogative. It was in the grimmest part of grimy London, with a whole population of 'hands' making money for me faster than I could ever get rid of it. What was I to do?"

"I 've never had the complaint."

"It was really serious, though it seems such a joke.

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I could do nothing worth doing with the money. Gambling, horse-racing, smart living generally, are not to my taste, and I 've neither faith nor hope in charity. Yet the hoard grew and grew, though we did our best to find investments to keep it down.

“Then I went one day, in an amateurish sort of way, to look at my factory and my hands—for the first time in all my life; and that only made the situation more hopelessly absurd. The hands were miserable-looking creatures, more incurably so, perhaps, because one saw them at the Christmas season, when we 're all under orders from the illustrated papers to look our best. Their faces had a curious shine as of tightened skin, their finery only advertised their want of clothes. And, if there was nothing else to give them away, it would have been their flesh—mere paste—and ‘seconds’ flour at that. I tell you, it was heart-rending, Prue.”

“I know.”

“I felt sick and sorry about it; and I asked the manager questions. I looked into the homes; and that made me feel worse. Then I began to inquire about the wages; and it all came out. These people had not enough to live upon as life should be lived. I felt good—for I had just been making speeches—and I told the manager he had better give them more.”

He smirked, said they were paid at the current rate, and that, if they did n't like it, there were hundreds eager for the job.

“I took that home with me, and went to bed with it; and I assure you it was not exactly an opiate. After a night or two spent in that way, I interviewed the family solicitor. He 's an old dear, who can say anything he

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likes to me—I used to climb his knee as a child—and he offered me a set of posers at once:

“‘It will eat up the working capital.’

“‘Not one bit—that remains intact.’

“‘What about the reserve fund, upkeep, wear and tear, and all the rest of it?’

“‘Just as they were.’

“‘Where do you get the money, then?’

“‘Out of my profits.’

“‘Do you know what that means? You ’ll have hundreds to live on where you ’ve thousands now.’

“‘Why not?’

“‘My dear young lady— Oh, it ’s too childish even to talk about. You must want more exercise. Why don’t you join a golf club?’

“‘But do tell me why?’

“‘Why, why! Bless my soul, you could n’t do it—that ’s all. Have you ever tried to live on even a thousand a year?’

“‘I live on less than that now, and have about twice as much as I want.’

“‘That ’s nothing to the point.’

“‘What is the point?’

“‘The point is that you must have the current rate of interest on the capital invested in your business.’

“‘So I do; I take it, every penny, only I want to spend it in my own way.’

“‘But you must n’t spend it like that.’

“‘Surely that ’s only a matter of taste. They don’t try you at the Old Bailey, just for keeping no more than you happen to want.’

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“ ‘Don’t you understand, Miss Gerty? It ’s a sort of fixed thing. Everybody else gets it; how are you to take less?’

“ ‘I see; whatever else I do with it—Monte Carlo, bridge, monster dinners, rivers of pearls, I must never give a penny of it back to those who have earned it all.’

“ ‘I wish your dear father had— Women are so un-business-like.’

“ ‘That ’s why they may yet save the world.’

“ ‘Do try the golf.’

“ ‘You see if I only took as much as I wanted, I could give the others the rest for what they wanted. Then we might be happy all round.’

“ ‘I utterly refuse to be a party—’

“ ‘He bounced out, still meaning well.

“ ‘Oh, how I worried about it. It was clear as daylight to me, but I was so awfully afraid to begin. Have n’t we all felt that ‘must do as the others do’—the pull of habit, custom, the sham proprieties, the feeling that after all it may only be a case for a sea voyage?

“ ‘Then one day I read about an American—‘Golden Rule Jones’—who had been in the same wretched plight and who had got out of it by doing just what I wanted to do—taking less to give the others more. And a first-rate man of business, not a ‘silly, sentimental girl.’

“ ‘That was enough for me. I cleared out of hall and mansion, went into a flat, and here I am to turn a dream into a reality, or to know the reason why.

“ ‘There ’s my part of the story, Prue; *The Branding Iron* will tell you the rest.

“ ‘Now you know why I let you drop out of sight so

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long. I was caught up rapt, intent, pitiless as a poet polishing a lay. 'You are requested not to speak to the man at the wheel.' But please come and like me now, if you can.

"Instead of rearing pheasants I am just trying to rear women and men. The other 's easier no doubt, but I shall pull through.

"I have now been at it long enough to feel quite sure I 'm on firm ground. I 'm building a new factory out in the country where, of course, I can make a fairer start. But I 'm very keen on keeping up the one in town. There 's more of the joy of victory in conquering here.

"Oh, the change already; and in the same people. I lay out as little as I can *for* them, give them as much as I can to lay out for themselves, without any interference from me.

"Joy to watch huge layers of despondency lifting from their lives, and the little bits of comfort, of their own choice, coming in—the clean shirt, the harmonium, on the hire system, even the saddle-bag suite. I 'm not accounting for taste, but it 's better in its way than the opening of a flower.

"I 've no patent rights in the matter: I 'm only doing the best I can to get the welter right. Restitution is the motto; and never a word of charity.

"My plan is answering very well, with few exceptions. Where it does n't, and the inefficiency is due to gin or idleness, out they go.

"The one thing I see, in the half blindness that lies on us all, is this: give the workers more in hard cash as

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their right, especially the humblest, and yourself, as 'capitalist,' less—for their sakes and for your own.

“The best of it is, that it can be done by anybody without waiting for the State. The State is not ready: think of dropping such an idea into the bear pit of Westminster!

“But the State will be ready one day, and then we shall see new heavens and a new earth. The old are ready for superannuation—both of them.

“It is the dear old formula in a new setting. More equality of fortune; the rich have too much, the poor too little. It 's a danger for all. More brotherhood. We are too far apart: the skies must one day rain fire on the way we live now.

“We must make a better distribution of the wealth, or perish of surfeit and want.

“Why, even in boundless America, with all its opportunities, they 've contrived in one century to start a pauper breed! It 's all done by the wretched turn of the hand, as cheap a thing as a conjuror's trick, that enables a few smart fellows to fob the riches of the world.

“The occasional dole to the victim only makes it worse. There was nothing very edifying in the Norman baron on his death-bed swapping testamentary monasteries against devastated towns.

“How strange it must be to pass into the beyond, and see the folly and the madness of some lives in the awful clairvoyance of the grave. Think of a disembodied company-promoter bursting with the desire of utterance; a stock-jobbing shade of the shadier sort positively split-

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ting for the relief of a scream that may carry as far as its old haunts; a votary of May Fair struggling to get back and take up a wiser parable! Perhaps this may explain the disordered state of some coffins, and the uproar of some spiritualistic *séances*. They are struggling to get out, and turn king's evidence against their own past."

CHAPTER XXXI

THEY had got so far when a single sledge-hammer knock at the outer door made them both jump.

“The ghost of the village blacksmith,” laughed Gertrude.

It was only Sarah, announcing herself in her own way. The contrast between her, and the light-built, foreign maid who ushered her in was sufficiently striking; and, to judge by a certain aloofness of disdain in Sarah’s regard, one of them seemed aware of it.

“Good evenin’, Miss Prue. Sorry I could n’t get here before.”

“How do you do, Sarah? This is Miss Holl, who wants you to come and help her, just as you used to help me.”

“How do ye do, mum? Very sorry, miss, I can’t; but much obliged, all the same.”

“Oh, well, Sarah, I warned my friend against a disappointment; I know how busy you are.”

“Ain’t so busy now; that ’s all over.”

“?”

“Well, it ’s like this here—I ’m married.”

“! ! !”

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They were but strokes on the sensory nerve at first: the words would not come.

“Married, Sarah?” said Prue faintly, at last.

“Married, miss.”

“You, Sarah?”

“Why not, miss?”

“Oh, of course, I did n’t mean that.”

She stopped, but her thoughts were busy. Diana in bonds: a male creature in the shrine of Sarah’s ’ome: it seemed like a betrayal of the whole sex.

“He ’s a steady man,” said Sarah; “he ’ll be forty in two years’ time.”

“I ’m sure I hope—”

“One of these ’ere travellers on commission.”

“Naturally,” gasped Prue.

Glittering as it was, even this seemed a poor outfit for the conquest of Sarah’s scorn of “chaps.”

“He ain’t doing much now, but he ’ll start on ’is rounds with a new patent pipe-cleaner, soon as they finish the works at Bow.”

“I ’m sure he must be everything we could all desire—everything.”

“Teetot’ler,” said Sarah.

“Just what I should have expected.”

“Name of Barker.”

“Just what I should have expected.”

Babble no doubt: but think of the shock.

“Proud to see you round to tea next Sunday, miss—”

“Delighted.”

“Well, I must be goin’ now. He won’t like to ’ave ’is supper if I ain’t there.”

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“Of course he won’t,” said Prue, as if she had known him from infancy.

“If you ’ll excuse me— Good-night!”

She was gone.

“Sarah married!” said Prue, as she hurried on with her own things. “I must go home and think it over, my dear: I ’m not fit for anything more to-night.”

The subject, however, did not keep that commanding position in her mind. The talk with Gertrude threatened to give the finishing touch to the changes of thought and feeling which she owed to the influence of Leonard. This passion for social justice was a new thing coming into the world, and it had already come into her own life. Perhaps Lucian knew what he was about in gibing at ideals. There were ideals, and ideals—some of them no better than those which the girl herself was now giving up, because they simply withered in the light of a brighter day.

* * * * *

The Branding Iron entered Sarah’s marriage among the local announcements, and gave a sympathetic sketch of her career under the heading “Wedding Bells”: “A valued friend of our enterprise is to be known as Sarah Ruskil no longer, Mr. William Barker having induced her to change her name. To her, its first news’-agent, as to another, its first subscriber, this journal owes a debt of gratitude which it can never repay. What she was to it, in its day of small things, can hardly be told. She canvassed for it among her customers, distributed

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it with her own hand, and never wrapped up a parcel in any other sheet.

“It was our wish to give our readers a view of her shrine, the little home, apart from her place of actual residence, which she had furnished entirely from the proceeds of her own labour, through years of toil. We had indeed hoped to supplement it with an interview. We regret to say, however, that our representatives (a youthful artist who means one day to be President of the Royal Academy, and another young gentleman, whose name will assuredly be coupled with the toast of ‘literature’ at that high officer’s festive board) were both driven from her door—not without the perhaps uncalled-for violence of a missile which, happily, fell short.”

Prue, as a “constant reader,” browsed from column to column, picking bits here and there, laughing or frowning, but never once throwing it down as of yore. One paragraph ran in this way:

“BRAG.—We must once more call attention to our improved appearance. It will be observed that we are now much enlarged, and machine-printed, like a paper in its right mind. We intend to do better still. Meanwhile, the old manuscript copies are at a heavy premium and are rapidly finding their way into museums and private collections. We thought of printing the first number in fac-simile, and giving it away as a Christmas supplement, but as will be seen below, we have a still better idea for the festive season.”

Most of the old divisions were there, but they had

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been very much enlarged—the ghastly “Fashionable Intelligence” in particular. There was evidently a rudimentary staff. The “Money Article” was a more faithful record than ever of the shifts and dodges of the destitute. The “Bit of Allright” heading of the first number had become “Bits,” and filled a whole column. It gave an impartial account of all the good done in the district and beyond, from London to Bournville and Port Sunlight, notably of the Women’s Clubs, with the great parent institution in Soho and the splendid and self-denying labours of its founder.

The obituary column, on the last page, contained an entry to the following effect:

“On the 10th, at Holloway, of strangulation, ‘The Bloke,’ well known in this district. He died as he had lived, game. No flowers.”

And following this: “OUR CHRISTMAS NUMBER.”

“The many friends of the Bloke, and others who may wish for a fuller notice of him, in the public interest, will do well to give their orders at once for our special Christmas number. The supplement will be devoted exclusively to a study of the Bloke’s life and times, and it will appeal, not only to his many friends in the neighbourhood, but as we hope, to a wider circle, extending to the uttermost ends of the civilised world. It will be offered gratuitously to purchasers of *The Branding Iron*, and will, we hope, make excellent reading for all admirers of the good old times, and of their survival in the life of our day.”

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SMALL CHANGE.—“A New Way to Pay Old Debts. The old plan is to make your money by screwing down your workpeople and then to found libraries or what not on what ought to have been their pocket money. I 've heard of one benefactor who keeps an unruly family in order by this device. Whenever they get too troublesome he fines them in another foundation stone, which means twenty thousand or so out of the inheritance.

“Not For Ever and For Ever. America won't go on for ever with her Baal worship of the multi-millionaire. There are happier portents already in her skies. We looked up to her once, and shall live to look up to her again.”

CHAPTER XXXII

THIS notice of Sarah almost inevitably drifted into the conversation, when Prue went to tea with "Mr. and Mrs. Barker." She found it lying on the table, face upwards, as though it had been hastily dropped at the sound of her knock. She was ushered into the best room of Sarah's shrine. Sarah's marriage portion had thus been far beyond the wont of her class. The bridegroom now took his ease amid her hard-won treasures of domestic comfort; and they had already lost some of that almost awful beauty of arrangement which had characterised them when they were not in use. Yet they were still the hire and purchase system in the glory of an achieved result.

There was everything delectable, except perhaps repose. The carpet seemed to rise at the visitor with the effulgence of its pattern, the antimacassars, glaring like the driven snow, took up the dominant idea of danger to the beholder. "Elizabeth, or the Exiles of Siberia," still glowed in red and gold from a side-table. The piano was a mirror which caught fantastic reflections of the fire. But for a few additions, nothing was changed:

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wry-faced as ever, King John still signed Magna Charta on the wall.

Prue saw it all at a glance: of these additions, Sarah's husband was really little more than the most conspicuous. He, too, might have come from the Hampstead Road, and might have been in course of settlement by instalments. His sleekness of manner seemed but furniture-polish in a new use. This was evidently his most striking attraction in Sarah's eyes. She had married to satisfy her sense of decorative effect; and in this, Prue thought, lay the full significance of her plea that Mr. Barker was middle-aged. She had been tamed, not by her feelings, but by her judgment. He had won her respect as something solid and reputable in human beings, no "skipjack"—as Prue remembered—like the youths who had incurred her measureless scorn at the club. His slight baldness was but another suggestion of a gravity of nature that was his chief recommendation. While completing the home, he formed a new guarantee of its stability; and his mere presence enabled her, in a manner, to look up to herself.

The very introduction was as something in cast-iron. "Miss Prue, Mr. Barker; Mr. Barker, Miss Prue." "The young lady what I told yer of," was all that Sarah vouchsafed, as a relief to the tedium of indispensable forms.

"May I offer you a little refreshment, miss?" said Mr. Barker, indicating a decanter conceivably of sherry, three glasses standing on their heads, and a neat pyramid of cake, a model of constructive skill arranged in the very centre of the table.

Declined with thanks.

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“Don’t know why we ’ve got the table littered with newspapers, I ’m sure,” said the housewife, removing *The Branding Iron*. It might have been a protest. Prue took it as a hint for the choice of a topic.

“You are quite famous now, Sarah. I can’t tell you how pleased we all are.”

“‘Mrs. B.’,” said her lord, with a slight emphasis, not without meaning for the visitor, “don’t take much stock in things of that sort. People that get their name in the newspapers are not quite the sort we care to know.”

It was not so very wide of the mark, his experience being mainly confined to the sheets that summarised the crimes and horrors of the week.

“Don’t you think they ’re of all sorts, good and bad?” said Prue.

“Mebbe; but you don’t hear much, even of the good ones, unless they happen to ought to be ashamed of themselves once in a way.”

“That ’s not exactly complimentary to our public men,” said Prue.

He looked at her curiously, as at one given to round-about forms of speech that no plain dealer could be expected to understand.

“All that I mean,” he muttered, “is, I don’t take a liberty with anybody, and I don’t want anybody to take a liberty with me. What business has anyone to put people’s names in print without their leave?”

“We ain’t got no reason to be ashamed of ourn, so what do we care?” said his wife. “Anyhow, it was kindly meant.”

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“Mebbe; but we don’t want any puffing and blowing about our little home.”

“Oh, as to that—” returned Sarah, hesitating between the conflicting interests involved in the discussion.

“It ’s a funny sort of paper,” said Barker, “if you come to think of it. I don’t know that I should call it a newspaper at all.”

“Perhaps that ought to take the sting out of the notice—from your point of view,” hazarded Prue.

Barker eyed her again in the same mystified way as before, and held his peace. There was a pause in the conversation, which seemed to occasion some anxiety to the hostess; and she made a gallant attempt to fill the void.

“S’pose you don’t see much of Miss Flipp now?” she said to Prue.

“I don’t remember the name.”

“Miss St. Garmy in the purfession,” Sarah explained.

She was going to leave it there, in her reluctance to speak ill of an old customer, but she felt that it was not quite enough.

“I should n’t, if I was in your place. People as lives by step-dancin’ ain’t no class for the quieter sort. Always on the go. So ’s ’er brother, come to that. You know what I mean—restless people; the ground seems to burn their feet when they stand still, an’ their feet, the ground, when they move.”

Prue laughed. “Funny Sarah! I ’m certainly not going to join either of them in a jig, if you mean that.”

Sarah paused.

“I ’m sure—” she said at length, by way of closing the incident, and as though to give a general assent to every-

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thing that had fallen from everybody. She was in no mood for strife. She looked round on the consummation of a great hope, the reward of all her sacrifices and of all her years of toil.

"I don't know that I care much about the title," said Barker, reverting to *The Branding Iron*, "too much like something in the cattle trade, if you ask me."

"'A. D. 1905'—what does that mean?" said Sarah.

"'After Death,' returned Barker, as though diffusing light. "Dessay he does n't know, himself."

He was perhaps running to a certain excess in his dominant virtue. Sarah was not prepared to hear anything against Leonard, even in the interest of her cult.

"This one would n't say it, if he did n't know, lay your life; he ain't built that way."

"As for that," returned Barker, drawing in his horns, "I never perused the publication in my life."

"Nor me neither, not much," said his spouse, "no time. But I 've 'ad the readin' of 'im for months, like print, an' that 's enough for me. You won't find 'is match every day. Such a gentleman, though 'is clothes is sometimes the worse for wear. He 's the sort that would n't mind walkin' on their uppers to give a new pair to a tramp."

"I never encourage tramps," said Barker.

"He 's got a good coat to 'is back, whenever he likes to wear it, lay your life," said Sarah.

Prue could not but listen. It was an allusion to a certain mystery in Leonard's life which had struck her more than once. But she tried to turn the conversation, just because she did not care to get her information in that

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Mrs. B., however, was in the mood to insist, as though she owed it to him as a vindication.

“He comes and goes, and, when he ain’t here, you bet, he ’s a long way off. They was only lodgin’s where I done for ’im and shut up half the week.”

Tea was served by this time, to Prue’s intense relief. The topic was becoming inexpressibly distasteful to her, and, to prevent any resumption of it, she took up another publication which had been removed to make way for the tray, and aimlessly turned the leaves.

“Now, that ’s what I call a respectable sort of magazine,” said her host. “I ’ve done business in the house of the gentleman that owns it—Lavender Hill, thousands a year—seven in family—one of the sons gone into the business, one into the law. And only a penny a week.”

Mrs. B. looked undisguised admiration of this masterly sketch of an ambition and of a career. It was so. The periodical in question was one of hundreds never seen, as the term is generally understood, never quoted, and yet winning a fortune for their owners. It supplied improving stories, with a dash of romance in them, for young persons who sought a union of all the forces of aspiration. These appeals had to be as artfully compounded for popularity as certain teas. The blend, in this instance, was evangelical piety and the Paris fashions. The great crises of emotion were dealt with somewhat in this way:

“Pressing the scented missive to her heart, after a vain attempt to read it a second time through her blinding tears of joy, she hurried to her room; and hastily exchanging her walking costume for a dressing-gown of turquoise blue poplin, lined with swansdown, she threw herself on her knees by the bedside, with its dainty cover-

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let in hand-embroidered linen, and poured forth her soul in gratitude to the Giver of all good."

Prue was not sorry when it was time to take her leave. Mr. Barker had evidently won Sarah by his steadiness, and that was as Sarah liked. But the visitor could not get rid of the idea that he was too consciously living up to his reputation. Every act and utterance seemed to be regulated with a view to this impression. Steadiness emanated from him, as its higher attribute of eternal calm from a Buddha. And, just for that reason, the girl felt some misgiving, emphasis being mostly the mere trading advertisement of truth, rather than the thing itself.

It frightened her as a sort of caricature of the marriage of prudence. Sarah had found no master, certainly, but had she found a mate? She had renounced matrimony, until it came her way without thought or contrivance on her part. It looked as though she had simply said "Yes," when she no longer saw any reason for saying "No." Was this the price of independence of soul and body? It seemed to reduce love to about the same level as painting in water colours. The girl was sick at heart.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE threatened Christmas supplement made its appearance at the end of the week. It was called "The Natural History of a Crime."

"As announced in our last issue, the Bloke was duly hanged, on the day appointed for that purpose, for the murder committed some short time ago within a stone's-throw of our office. He was the youngest offender of his season, being still in his twentieth year.

"We knew him well by sight; and, though he was not a subscriber, we were not without hope of getting him in time. They can't be too bad or too good for our taste; our motto is: 'Let 'em all come.' He used to stand at our street corner, with other legal infants, each as fierce and bloody-minded as an Italian bravo of the Renascence, and decorate the pavement in unpremeditated patterns while waiting for the dawn of a brighter day.

"True to our purpose of covering the life and times of the district, we have devoted all possible attention to his case. We therefore offer our readers the following memoir and character sketch of him as a bit of natural history—the natural history of a crime. It may be found to have the interest of a complete and inevitable transaction.

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They (meaning the authorities, society, or what you will) were bound to string him up. *He* was bound to get strung up; all was in order:

THE BLOKE—AS CELEBRITY AT HOME

“The Bloke was born of poor, but foolish parents, inefficient, who had not known how to make themselves count for something in the hustle of the world. The father had a vague indeterminate calling of which we have not been able to find particulars; but his earnings were so wretched that the wolf was ever at the door. The mother was a helpless slattern addicted to star-gazing through the end of a tumbler, the only glimpse she ever caught of the sky. The pair had been most carefully educated at the public expense for their several parts in life.

“The Bloke, their eldest son, and heir to all the conditions, came at a quite early age to the conclusion that work was a fool’s game. He began to suspect this one night as he lay hungry in bed, and in his corner of the human pigstye in which they all lived. No coin worth speaking of came their way. No one of them was worth anybody’s money. The Bloke himself learned nothing in art or craft. He spelt cat with a k, and had a hazy idea that Christ was born in China. The first peculiarity effectually prevented him from obtaining profitable employment.

“He tried it for a while, however, at first as errand boy at an oilshop (‘up early, down late; and had to give all the ’apence to muvver—yah!’) then, as a boy in charge of the tailboard of a railway van. This was a little more

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exciting. There was the pageant of the streets; and now and then they ran over something four-footed, greatly to the amusement of the Bloke.

“He grew apace; and within a year, after entering his teens, he fought his father on the question of the subsidies, and beat him—three rounds under Queensbury rules. The parent was a heavier weight; but, by sheer luck his head struck the kerb in a fall. He never seemed the same man after—but this, by the way.

AS GALLANT

“He was now able to have a gal, a person of surroundings exactly the same as his own. He ‘treated her up to dick,’ with penny ices and cheap Saffron Hill confectionery, ‘prime’! She was, if possible, more advanced in moral decomposition than himself. He came home one night, and found another Don Juan cuddling her in the gloom of the paternal doorway. This time he had the worst of the fight. But he waited for his Elmira afterwards, and gave her a warning stab with the ‘big bleeder,’ which he and his class invariably carry, and on which they always keep a good edge and point. Strangely enough, this paved the way to a temporary reconciliation. She admired his spirit, and was faithful even in thought for at least a fortnight. They had just turned fourteen years old at this stage.

“Then he lost his place through cheeking his superior officer. It had been rapidly tending to that all along. Work was irksome. ‘Yah!’ again; and finally, ‘Not me!’

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AS FREE LANCE

“Now he determined to live by his wits. This was heroic, with such a skull. If only he could have known the dire import of its elevations and depressions—all in the wrong place! From some of the former—for he came of an old, old stock—centuries of shifts and short commons looked down on a hopeless case.

“With this determination he seemed to reach maturity at a bound. Still a boy in years, he became a man in the full growth of his appetites and his passions. His upbringing—to speak of it with due civility—had begot in him a terrible callousness and indifference to everything that stood in the way of his bulldog will. It was the morality of the midnight coffee-stall, his only school of manners. He knew of but two motive powers, appetite and revenge, and he would not be said nay.

“He now joined a band of lads of his own age, regularly constituted for every species of crime, open, stealthy, gross, or infamous, with meeting-places, rules, obedience to constituted authority of their own choosing—a gang perfectly well known to every policeman that cracked his walnut at the corner of the street, and enjoying his large-hearted tolerance.

AS SPORTSMAN

“His new industry was betting tempered by theft—at this stage mere sneak-thieving of articles exposed for

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sale at shop doors. His betting was the outcome of his assiduous study of the evening papers. Thousands were spent in keeping him well informed on the results of every race, and ill-informed as to its prospects. Men lay out all night in ditches to report the morning gallops to him. Betting agents haunted the 'pubs' and the street corners of his habitat to book his transactions. Nothing could exceed their assiduity, their punctuality, their attention to business. If they had been toiling for virtue, they might have converted a nation of cannibals to a vegetable diet in less than a month. The very policeman, whose duty it was to watch them, often 'did a bit on his own' with them, to supplement his inadequate earnings.

"They waited for the workmen at the dinner-hour, in the neighbourhood of the big jobs. Their perfect network of supply and demand was never less than intact and all-sufficient at any moment, or at any place. They published private sheets to supplement the deliverances of the public prophets. Their 'Lightning Tipster' was supplied on the principle of the Penny-in-the-Slot on every race morning. They had a mid-day special which gave 'three naps,' and could always be obtained at the low price of threepence. For a remittance of half-a-crown, they sent a private wire, about an hour before the race. For the sum of seven-and-sixpence, their Guarantee Department undertook to pour in tips until the investor received a winner. The customers were promised an average profit on this arrangement alone of about £200 per annum. The periodical 'balance-sheets' issued in the interest of patrons were irresistible in their demonstration of inevitable gains.

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AS DANDY

“Sometimes he won a trifle—let us be fair to a great public industry. And, when this happened, he spent it like a man, on his ‘donah,’ or, still, like some men, on himself. He was quite a ‘torf’ now; and many a little factory girl fell a victim to his allurements, and to the notorious preference of this sex for the aristocracies of their order. His washing was done at the shirt-collar dressers, at any rate, such parts of it as the dickeys and false cuffs, which had to bear the ordeal of the public eye. He was shaved as clean as a calf’s head. He turned up the bottoms of his shabby trousers. His boots, if they were often patched, were always polished. His slouch cap—usually tilted at the back of his head to exhibit a tonsured design in flattened love-locks which looked as though it had been wrought in Spanish liquorice—was occasionally drawn low over his brow, as though in rehearsal of a final scene. He had his club in a betting den that was periodically raided by the police. As a person found on the premises, he was merely bound-over, when he might more profitably have been tied up at the cart-tail.

HIS HABITAT

“Animals are known by their haunts, as well as by their hides, and he was no exception. His hunting-grounds for prey were the busy thoroughfares in the neighbourhood of the great railway stations, or of the

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terminal taverns of the omnibus routes. When the thoroughfares happened to radiate from a central point in half a dozen directions, they were all the better for his purpose. The stations disgorged the travellers who were to be robbed, hoaxed, hustled, or lured with a view to that operation. The star points offered a choice of means of escape in the event of pursuit. The rays almost invariably started from a public-house, and led, in their course, to beer-shops in the meaner streets. The first were the open and public rendezvous, where the gangs celebrated their successes; the last, the dens, where in perfect seclusion they concocted their schemes. In one or other of them, at the proper season, the Bloke never failed to find a pal. It is impossible to exaggerate the terror, the dejection of soul inspired by the view of these places to the unwonted beholder—slatternly women of nameless industries, or of that of betting as the only one that would bear avowal; thieves of every variety from the unobtrusive pick-pocket to the militant knifing and bludgeoning man; fierce factory girls on the spree, and ready for a fight with the knuckles in their wrath. Hell surely, at its hour of high change, can have nothing to surpass it in its way.

“In every part of London, and not only at the cardinal points, there is a quarter like this—a quarter in which blokes are born, bred, maddened in the boozing dens, supplied with victims, kept, as in sanctuary, after their work. King’s Cross, with its star points of the Euston, Pentonville, York, and Gray’s Inn roads, is one such quarter, with its perfect equipment of bullies and female decoys, thieves’-kitchens, ‘fences,’ and all the

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other plant and *personnel* of this enormous industry. Judd Street, with its ramifications in Hunter Street, Leigh Street, Cromer Street, Compton Street, is another—a sort of point within a point, serving the North Western and the Midland Stations for every abomination of Babylon, as the other serves the Great Northern. It would be a weary round to perambulate the entire neighbourhood; and to do the same painstaking justice to all London would be like an attempt to map the Pacific Isles. The main thing is that there is no failure at any part of the vast circumference of full and perfect provision for all the industries of crime. Here the Bloke was born, as a lion into deserts, a lark into the air; here he graduated; here he preyed on his kind, with all the constituted authorities, administrative and religious, perfectly well aware of the fact, and practically powerless to say him nay.

“Given these conditions, and anything may happen at any moment. Their origin, as they stand in their present perfection, is to be sought deep down in time, in the long secular neglect of the masses as human beings, in the bestial ideals as to the meaning and purpose of life, that have ever prevailed among high and low. A statement of them is the natural history of a crime.

“The immediate cause of crime is often as trivial as the fall of a feather. In the Bloke’s case it was a mere fit of temper. He had just served a month in prison for a savage assault, and, on his release, had heard that the mother of his ‘fancy’ of the moment had said that she wished he might never come out. Then he made up his mind to murder both the mother and father, and to make

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a clean job of the business by cutting his own throat. On the physiological side, it was the badly balanced criminal brain that, once excited by opposition, is ready to curse the sun, and kill, kill, kill all round. Beside such natures, the monsters of drama seem very milk-and-watery beings indeed. The Bloke had been 'upset,' and those who had done it must die. He could not see any other way out of it. He bore the letters, 'I. L. S. J.'—'I love Sarah Jones'—tattooed on his person. The cross to his affections on the part of his prospective mother-in-law was a sort of *lèse majesté* only to be expiated in blood.

"He made the most elaborate arrangements for this act of retribution, first drawing out money from the Savings Bank to pay current expenses, and then making his will!

"Thus it ran: 'Carefully read this. One job; I hereby leave £5 to Mrs. Jenkins, and the rest of my property to my dear mother. Determined to swing. My watch and chain I leave to James Penny, my pal. My medal—he had been in the war—to Mrs. Jenkins if I succeed in murdering Mrs. Jones. God bless those who have done good to me!'

"On Saturday he was ready for the murder. He called on Mrs. Jones, invited her, in a friendly way, to come and drink with him—sure, of course, of the perfect efficacy of the lure. They drank and chatted, but she was an unconscionable time in getting ripe. Then he proposed that they should go to her lodgings for a cup of tea.

"They went, she stooped down to kindle the fire,

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looked up, saw something in his eye, shrieked. The rest was silence for ever, under a swift rain of blows with the poker, 'enough to kill a bullock,' as he afterwards complacently said. He had a razor in reserve, and used it, though not on himself. He meant to stay for the home-coming of the husband to kill him too, but the neighbours had taken the alarm and he fled, his hands (and even his face) 'a sorry sight.' He was soon caught.

"He sang music-hall songs in his cell all night, in a perfect passion of the gaiety of sated revenge.

"The law destroyed him, just as the gamekeeper destroys a rat or a mole. He was vermin. The act of destruction in each case is an incident of natural history. He was one of those strangely illogical animal products born only to be put out of the world.

"These murders and these expiations are going on constantly, and none but the gutter press pays much attention to them. It is a mark of gentility in the better sheets to pass them over in a paragraph of small print. In truth, they ought to have all the honours of the biggest type, just to show where we stand. The only inconvenience might be their crowding out the debates in Parliament and the fashionable receptions.

"The grinding economic conditions that produce them are everywhere—the demoralising poverty, the still more demoralising luxury, the wickedly won, and still more wickedly distributed wealth, ever making honest toil more and more of a fool's game for the mass of mankind.

"The horrid social conditions are everywhere—the great cesspool cities, ill-swept, ill-washed, wanting in simple pleasures, their coarse pageantry of fashion of-

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ferred to ignorance and discontent as an ideal of life, their elaborate provision of gin at every street corner to give the smug dividend-hunter the wherewithal to endow his church. The rich were never more indifferent about the poor than they are at this moment, when they have got them off their minds by liberal doses of the opiate of charitable and religious ministrations.

“Tears, idle tears; why this wringing of the hands? All has happened just as might have been expected, just as it has happened before, as it will certainly happen again.

“The same causes, the same effects. How will they work out at last? A Colonial paper has made a shot at it, somewhat wide of the mark, no doubt, by reason of the extreme length of range, but a fair try all the same. ‘Without any effective native-born army, without an agricultural population, its social life dominated by foreign plutocrats, its aristocracy largely devoting itself to satin waistcoats, skirt dancing, and bridge, England begins to present all the conditions which presaged the fall of the Roman Empire.’

“‘Why include the army?’ ‘Why not?’ For the peoples that do not consider, the hour of battle may also be an hour of a day of judgment. Ring out the old!’”

CHAPTER XXXIV

MARY LANE came up to town for the Christmas holidays and stayed with Prue. It was Prue's first house-party, and she was in a becoming state of excitement. If she had known her guest better, she would have felt no anxiety. Mary's clothes'-box proved to be no bigger than the one in which the Queen of Sheba, in Claude's picture, embarks her finery for the visit to Solomon.

Mary would have called on a king with no more preparation. She stepped out of the railway carriage the same radiant and saintly little creature as ever, embraced her friend on the platform, again in the cab, and seemed perfectly indifferent to anything that Fate might have in store. She was neatness carried to the point of fine art, from the spotless cuffs and collar that stood out against the dark background of her dress, to the demure bands of her hair, trailing down each cheek in the style of the last century. She looked as old-fashioned as a Madonna of an *objet de piété*, yet a madonna still. "Detestable taste in anybody else; adorable in her," thought Prue. "But there the right sort of woman can never wear the wrong thing: the wrong sort, never the right."

"I do hope you will be comfortable: I can only hope so

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now Sarah is gone—married. I 'll tell you about that later on, and about the poor old thing that helps me now! Well, you must take the will for the deed.”

“We all serve one another at the settlement,” said Mary; “it 's capital exercise. Why not pay your old woman her week's wages and let her have a holiday too? I can take her place.”

“She positively does n't know how to take a holiday: she was never taught to play. It 's heart-rending. I tried her once; and all she did was to go up to Hampstead to look at the pond where her son drowned himself when he was out of work. No, leave her to me. I 'm going to start her with an old age pension as soon as I can persuade her to give in. It 'll do me lots of good.”

There was another difficulty. How was she to amuse her guest? She had submitted it to Laura Belton for hints. Laura was not helpful. She had a lofty scorn of Cockney treats, and hardly cared to discuss anything short of the Italian lakes, with a week in Paris on the way home. She saved up for these superb ventures, went in style, lived at good boarding-houses, and, for a glorious fortnight, glowed in the thought that she had put heiresses to shame. But then her infant footsteps had trod a sacred soil, and she held the motto of its race: “The best is good enough for me.”

Mary solved the problem as soon as she heard of it: “Why not go and see all the cheap sights: they are generally the best?”

She took the matter in hand at once. She had come up on Saturday afternoon; and a call on Gertrude brought her to the end of that day. On Sunday they went to St.

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Paul's in the morning, to Westminster Abbey in the afternoon. Then Mary led the way home through Whitehall and St. James's Park, past Marlborough House and St. James's Palace, prattling religion, history, archaeology, landscape-gardening, birds, beasts, and fishes—everything but scandal, all the while. Their actual outlay was less than eighteenpence in omnibus fares for the pair.

The second day was just the same, simple pleasures restored to their natural sweetness by the absence of all false shame—a gallery or two, the Zoo, Regent's Park, and London from the top of Primrose Hill!

“Beat it, if you can,” Mary said, as the luck of the weather gave them the whole wonderful panorama in the clear sunset of a winter's afternoon. “Rome from the Pincian is only a second-best, at any rate, for thoughts.”

“What ought one to do, Mary—shed tears, or thank God?”

“Whichever you please, my little dear, since I'm showman for the day. The Zoo and a bun, she chuckled, as they trotted off. “Is n't it like a school treat? Never mind: the other thing debauches both rich and poor. There is n't a pin's-point to choose between them. I tell you this gin palace is just as awful, in its way, as a dinner at ten guineas a head.”

They got home, tired, hungry, happy. Mary lent a hand in laying the table and in washing-up, and had “meditation” in her room when the work was done. She came back, with a smile, to take her place by the trim fire and the glowing lamp, and to read Blake to the rapt listener, for whom, till now, he had been nothing but a name.

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“ ‘Every night and every morn
Some to misery are born;
Every morn and every night
Some are born to sweet delight ;
Some are born to endless night.
Joy and woe are woven fine,
A clothing for the soul divine;
Under every grief and pine
Runs a joy with silken twine.
It is right it should be so;
Man was made for joy and woe;
And when this we rightly know,
Safely through the world we go.’ ”

Before going to bed she made up her accounts: “Fares, 6d.; Zoo, 6d.; Snacks, a shilling—I don’t remember anything else. It ’s rather riotous, you know, but we are out on the spree. By the way, I must give you ‘Tiger, tiger, burning bright!’ before we turn in, just in honour of the Zoo.”

“Don’t you think Nature might have spared us the hippopotamus?” said Prue.

“Positively could n’t do without him: he ’s on his way to be a gazelle. You ’ll be wanting to do without some of the people in the crowd next. I tell you it ’s all divine.”

On Tuesday it was the South Kensington Museum, Kensington Gardens, Hyde Park, Rotten Row, at the same modest rates.

“It positively can’t last, you know,” said Mary; “but there *is* fun in making the money fly.”

They found a letter in the box from Leonard. Would Prue do him the honour to join him next day at a little

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dinner in Soho—just to have a peep at the foreign life, the real thing, as distinct from the make-believe of the smart restaurants? Miss Belton had already promised. The rendezvous would be at the door of a certain French house, where they would find him waiting to receive them. But his ambition went even beyond that. He had heard of Miss Lane's coming to town; and he hoped she would honour him with her company. Perhaps she might graciously bear in mind that they had already met, after a fashion, in the columns of *The Branding Iron*. There was still another favour to ask. Would Prue use her good offices with Miss Holl and bring her too? Both these ladies were among his patronesses, and he would not willingly let slip the opportunity of making their acquaintance.

“We must go,” said Mary; “I would n't miss it for the world. Just think of all the grand things he is doing, and then of all the nice things he has said about my pastoral play—if you won't take the other motive on trust. I warn you it will be love at first sight, after the ‘Natural History of a Crime.’”

“All right for us two, then,” said her friend; “but how about Gertrude? I must go and see what I can do. She has got over a good deal of her shyness, but this seems rather a large order, at short notice, for her.”

“I want to meet him: I mean to go,” Gertrude said, when Prue sought her out; “but oh, how the creatures terrify me!”

“Why? His foreigners won't be exactly alien immigrants, after all.”

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The other laughed.

“I don’t mean foreigners, goosey : I mean men, whatever their label. And this one ’s such a splendid fellow, and I do so long to know him. All the same, I wish— And then again, you know, I would n’t miss it for the world.”

“Why, with your goodness, Gertrude, and your talents and your beauty—please note the fine crescendo of attractions for the male—what have you to fear from any of them?”

“It is n’t that.”

“Such hectoring, masterful creatures?” suggested the other, by way of helping her out. “But don’t you think they are of all sorts, just as we are?”

“When they ’ve got you, they ’ve got you,” said Gertrude mysteriously. “But it ’s not that, either. Don’t think I ’m such a conceited little fool as to fancy they can’t help falling in love with me ; say you know it ’s not that.”

“I know it ’s not that,” repeated the other, with mock solemnity.

“But you need n’t attack it like a response in a catechism. I can get on with girls ; I always could get on with them. At any rate, I wanted to. You remember how I used to pin some of you little ’uns into tight corners, and insist on your being chummy at once. But the men things ; they are so terribly ‘manny.’ They can’t help it, I know, but there it is. I like some of them—this one in particular—and I admire—but—but—

“It ’s my little secret, and you ’re the first to hear.

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But I 'm not the only one with such a secret to tell. That kind of terror is a sort of vocation with some of us, and not the worst sort always—believe that. But there: what 's the use of playing bo-peep about it? I 'm going, Prue, you know, and I want to go.”

CHAPTER XXXV

THEY found him waiting for them at the door. "No toilettes, please," had been his final message, and they had taken him at his word. They stepped out of the grimy side-street into a bit of the foreign fairyland, for fairyland it is when these people, who happen to be above the degree of the poorest, sit down to meat.

The head-waiter in his jacket and apron (so distinctly simple and reassuring after the greasy evening wear of our British variety) led them to their table, glowing in whitey-brown napery, coarse but clean, and touched with a ray of crimson from the lamp. It was nothing out of the way in that line, but it had its suffusion of the comfort that was spread over the whole place—a cheery bivouac of the battlefield of life.

Their entry made a slight stir, for, with one apparent exception, they were the only English in the place. The others were unmistakably foreign, if only by the way in which they treated their napkins as wearing apparel. All were in the note of restful enjoyment and ease.

"It is Bohemia," said Leonard, while they were discussing their *hors d'œuvre* —, "only 'new style' and I thought you would like to see that."

They were all trying for something, passing on to some-

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thing, if only execution at the foot of a barricade. Meanwhile they came here to find their like, and to feed according to their funds. You could go as high as five shillings for a dinner, if you had it in your pocket; sometimes, if you had it not, but eighteenpence marked the aspirant stage. Much or little, they were all alike at the sacred hour—affable, human, talkative. Hark to the shock of ideas!

“Some of them,” Leonard said, “are going to be great players, great singers, great ministers—once upon a time to come. While waiting for promotion, they take classes in Clapham boarding-schools, at two shillings an hour, with the walk thrown in to give them an appetite for their only meal.”

“The one who has just come in,” asked Laura, under her breath, “with the fuzzy hair, and the dreamy eyes, and the paper parcel sticking out of his pocket?”

“Have n’t you answered your own question, mademoiselle?—the great composer of the day after to-morrow. His paper parcel, if you please, is the score of an opera—that and nothing less. Meanwhile he teaches the piano; and, for I don’t know how little a lesson, imparts a secret of touch that might entitle him to paraphrase the pill-maker’s ‘worth a guinea a box’ for every note.

“The one he is talking to, the young fellow cuddling the portfolio, is a *rapin* of the Beaux Arts. Nothing much, I ’m told, now or hereafter, by reason of an untimely decline into the illustrated papers, to keep a wife and four children alive. A good *rapin* all the same. The portfolio is full of sketches which he has been hawking about all day among City men qualifying for a taste

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in the fine arts. Ten shillings a sketch, if he can get it; but no reasonable offer refused, not even five at the closing hour that brings the scent of dinner from afar.

“The tall man, Miss Prue—I see the question in your eyes—the one with a stoop, and the extreme refinement of manner, is a lecturer on Patagonian literature. Nobody really wants Patagonian literature, so he dines only every other day. He had a momentary boom when his king drove through the City to lunch with the Lord Mayor. His audience at one of the literary institutes rose to five-and-twenty; but it was too good to last.”

“The young woman that he raised his hat to?” queried Mary Lane. “Don’t look that way, please.”

“The one in olive brown, as to the complexion, and smoking the cigarette—a hopeless passion, I ’m afraid. Even she does n’t care much about Patagonian literature, but they are exceedingly good friends. She ’s Russian, a sort of king’s messenger for the revolutionary party, carries orders, manifestoes, money even, as often as not, between Zurich, London—any other city of refuge—and Petersburg. She has just escaped from the fortress of Peter and Paul, with the help of her eyes and of a soft-hearted jailer; and here she is. The eyes are most useful; she gets her living by them as an artist’s model for the soft brooding motherhood of Holy Families.”

“The other features hardly make a happy family of it by themselves,” said Laura.

“That is the mere accident of her mixed parentage—half Italian, half Little-Russian.”

“I wish it were n’t quite so big,” sighed Mary.

“The mouth? Oh, that, I fancy, is the dash of Tar-

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tar which sometimes plays such havoc with the purity of the Russian type.”

“I only meant the world,” said Mary.

He laughed.

“That comes of personalities, and it serves me right. And yet I must still venture on one more, Miss Lane, to tell you with what immense interest I have followed your work in the villages.”

“You ’ve shown that already in your wonderful little paper. How did you find out about me?”

“I find out everything,” he said, “and I do so hunt for the good things to balance my weekly budget of misery and wrong. I think you have begun a great work.”

“Begun! No; I ’ve only taken it up. Others are at work on the same lines all over the country. The little interlude played is as old as the hills; all I have done is to go back to first principles, and put it on wheels. The English people are only to be saved by themselves from that triple-crowned tyranny of the music hall, the musical play, and the ‘revival.’ They have the stuff in them for the finest drama in the world. They ’ve proved it. Have you ever seen a ‘first night’ of the poor?—I mean pit and gallery, not boxes and stalls—hours and hours of waiting at the doors, sometimes in rain or cold, without turning a hair. There ’s one coming off next week, and Prue promised to take me; but worse luck, I have to go home. Go and see it, if you can. In any case, please don’t forget my new piece next spring. First night on a village green in Hertfordshire; you must come.”

“No; I want you to come to us.”

“London! I ’m afraid you are a little too—sophis-

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ticated. I don't quite see our little Thespian cart on the scene of your 'Natural History of a Crime.' ”

“I would guarantee you a house, and good order; and invite all the critics of the great dailies to come and see.”

“Oh, it haunts me; it haunts me, that Christmas number. And it 's all true; only the reality is so much worse. What have they all been about—law, government, religion, all these centuries, to leave us in a reek like that? It 's the wretched boy-labour for a living. What business had they to send that fledgeling to dance his devil's tattoo on the tail-board of a van?”

Laura chimed in from the other side of the table: “Can't you send 'em to your colonies? room to dance there.”

It was the first meeting of the two girls. Prue looked from one to the other, from both to Leonard, as a chaperon responsible for the introduction. There was something that was not exactly warmth of regard in Mary's face; and it was easy to see that Laura had her thoughts. It was impossible to have a greater contrast in style—Mary so sweetly old-fashioned, Laura with her taste in finery, her beaming good looks, her quiet self-assurance, her perfect ease. Leonard seemed to delight in both of them like a connoisseur glorying in his catholicity of taste.

“I don't want them to dance anywhere,” said Mary.

“Then let them sell pea-nuts,” said Laura. “They can't begin too early, if they want to be presidents.”

“Presidents!” echoed Mary. “The demand, I 'm afraid can hardly keep pace with the supply; and meantime—”

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“They ’ll still find a market for their talents,” said Laura.

“If it ’s only the kerbstone or the gallows.”

Laura turned to Leonard.

“Did you know Cecil Rhodes? There was a man! He would have settled all your problems for you.”

“Not quite all, I ’m afraid.”

“He made a good beginning, anyhow.”

“At the wrong end, as some of us think. I don’t know that our first concern is to send everybody to Oxford.”

“I thought you had been there.”

“That ’s hardly conclusive perhaps.”

“He enlarged your lordship of the earth.”

“Oh, as to that—but I ’m sure you ’ve read ‘The White Man’s Burden,’ or, at any rate, heard his whine.”

“But you are working for the same thing, at your end, wherever you begin.”

“Now you pique my curiosity. What end, if you please?”

“Power—the way to shape yourself, first to your own will, and then to shape others too. Is there anything else worth living for?”

“There are other things, I fancy.”

“But not in your ken, I ’m sure. Leave me one illusion of heroic purpose, now that the other has gone.”

“You do me too much honour; but human nature being what it is, how can I have the heroism to set you right.”

In spite of her self-command, a flush betrayed her pleasure in the compliment. She looked beautiful in the soft light. Leonard’s face wore an expression, whether

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of interest or of amusement, which showed that he was not insensible to her charm.

“She ’s a pagan,” whispered Mary to Prue.

Prue looked inquiringly at Gertrude, who had hardly spoken a word.

“I can’t tell,” Gertrude said.

“I mean Leonard,” said Prue.

“Still less; to judge by appearances, he may be one of the few who don’t want to be your master.”

“That ’s just it!”

“How extremely demoralising! It might be enough to make one want to be his slave.”

She would have turned silent again, but their host now took the matter into his own hands. With the freedom of movement suited to the place and the hour of dessert, he took a chair by her side, Prue watching the incident with a look of anxiety that was not completely allayed by the composure of her friend’s smile.

“This has been one of the greatest pleasures of my life, Mr. Leonard,” said Gertrude.

Only she knew what it cost her to get through so much, or so little, with credit, for her old shyness was coming back upon her with a rush.

“It ’s very good of you to say so. I ventured to think that I might make it easier for my guests, and for me, to ask them to come here. They have understood.”

“What makes it so very delightful, I wonder?” she said.

“The low ritual in dining, I think. We are beginning to tire of the high, even at the clubs. The rubric is al-

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ways the letter that killeth, in the long run, even in eating and drinking.”

“The butler being the letter,” she said, “and the liveried serving-men?”

“Oh, they are going fast under the new dispensation of the waiting-maid. The men linger here because they are human in having shed their tails.”

Her laugh put her more at her ease.

“And the guests of the old dispensation?” she continued. “Don’t forget them.”

“Can one ever do that? The latest financier and the latest poet who have arrived would be bad enough, but the old gang of distinguished nobodies, mostly without a thought to bless themselves with, often with not so much as a word!”

“Please don’t be too hard on the silent, Mr. Leonard.”

“How can we help it? They are so hard on us. Their muteness is a perpetual suggestion to the garrulous of a contempt that lies too deep for words.”

“It may sometimes be a silence of despair over the idle talk of the *menu*. ‘Liquid air,’ I understand, is now entered for consumption at some of the fashionable repasts.”

“No doubt, at a guinea a gasp. It would be pathetic enough if it were only once in a way; but now that, or something like it, is the folly of every day in the year.”

“The madness too,” she said gravely, “as we shall see in time. The little ceremony at the desk of ‘The Lancaster’ is only one reckoning; there ’s another to come outside.”

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“Yes, that world-renowned establishment is immeasurably more demoralising than ‘The Pig and Whistle’ of the slums. Dining is still under the domination of the hungry fellows coming in from the hunting-field, or from the trenches before Troy. When shall we have a new Temperance movement, for the platter as well as for the cup?”

“Never, I ’m afraid,” said Gertrude, “until we get rid of the notion that a man may do what he likes with his own—even his own digestion.”

He laughed.

“Beware how you tamper with the institutions of the country. The Lancaster, with all its faults, is a way of making the money fly; and the choice seems to lie between choking with the wealth, or choking with the provender. Hallo! what ’s going on now?”

There was a stir at the other end of the room. The fat old host, still in his jacket and cap as *chef*, stood beaming, in the midst of a group of customers, as though receiving their congratulations, with the Russian lady in advance offering him a bouquet. His delighted spouse—a match for him at all points, including the smile of happiness—and two or three grinning scullions closed in the scene at the kitchen door.

“It is his birthday, monsieur,” said a waiter, in answer to Leonard’s inquiring glance.

“That ’s the way we do things here,” said Leonard; “we are a mere family party on the slightest excuse.”

“Hush!” said Laura, “Fuzzy ’s going to play in honour of the occasion.”

The composer, under the gentle compulsion of his

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friends, went over to a piano in the corner, half hidden under a litter of newspapers. His protesting cry for aid brought to his side another customer, who carried a violin case, and who looked as though he might be due later at some public orchestra.

When this one, after glancing at his watch, took out the instrument, the whole babble of the restaurant ceased. It was the hour of coffee; the cigarette smoke curled in thin films to the roof; everyone looked happy as in a world where the main business was music, poetry, sweet thoughts. The very waiters paused in the act of reckoning, and cocked an ear.

In another moment all were free, equal, humane, under the divine ministration of art. The piano throbbed mighty chords as of a storm charged with a message of the grandeur of life. The violin took up the theme, in its own good time, and developed it into the most soothing insinuations of love and beauty which reached the innermost recesses of the soul. Oh, art of arts, art of the poor, the down-trodden—the only promise in this golden age of bullion of that other age of gold to come! Then, as the bow won its way to the ascendancy that is ever its due, the other punctuated the gentler deliverance with deep rhythmic throbs of the lower keys, until the close in a magnificent combined movement which seemed to shatter the low ceiling, and to show heaven and the quiet stars beyond.

All were transformed. It was as a draught of some elixir that gave to everyone the vision of his own most generous ideals. To some, the masters of bow and hammer directing the course of the sound storm were trans-

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formed into Hebrew seers, announcing, as from a mount of prophecy, the glorious destinies of the race. The poor *rapin*, coiled up on a tattered sofa, and hugging his knee, saw fame, honour, and the unworn shoe-sole, in an ecstasy of concentration. The Russian girl, with the parted lips and the stare of trance, beheld herself as the deliverer carrying light and hope into the dungeons of Peter and Paul that sweated river mud from every pore of their masonry. The waiters, now quite demoralised, sat down side by side with the rest, as though in the equality of the Ark or of the Judgment Day. The women of Leonard's party were under the same spell—Laura and Gertrude rigid as statues, Mary, rapt like the Russian, and holding with a grasp of nervous tension, a hand of Prue.

In one moment more it was all over. The musicians jumped up, hurried into their coats, and decamped, while a waiter, drying an eye with the corner of his apron, feebly bleated an order to the counter for a "bock." The earth and its passing hour of petty cares, petty oppressions, had them again, but not until one or two had made good for all their lives the promise of its brighter day, as the inheritance of the whole race of man.

CHAPTER XXXVI

IT was Sunday again, and Mary's holiday was coming to an end. On the Monday she had to return to the settlement to complete her preparations for her spring campaign with the new play. It was still like a holiday of school-girls—the Tower, the Monument, and the whispering gallery, the museums and picture galleries. Mary had been greatly disappointed in having to miss the new play. To her the theatre and the temple were but two faces of the same thing.

They were now finishing up by the great churches at service-time. Mary never could have too much of them, and for the moment they had the charm of novelty for Prue. For reasons she could hardly explain, the girl had remitted her church-going for some time. To-day they went to the Southwark Cathedral in the morning, and, in the afternoon, made a circuit of the City, to enable Prue to illustrate the story of her lonely walks in London when first she was thrown on her own resources. On such a day, of course, it was but a walk through the solitudes, if not through the ruins that await the New Zealander. The sense of contrast, however, made it just as impressive as the week-day scene. How still Lombard Street, Eastcheap, Tower Street, and the devious ways

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between! Here and there great new banks backed on old mansions still left from the Georgian or an earlier time. In one gloomy alley they passed the house in which Wren had lived during the rebuilding of St. Paul's. On their way home, through a more thickly populated quarter, they found another church, rapidly filling for the service. The temptation was irresistible for Mary, and they went in.

It was the beautiful evening service of the Church of England. The congregation lifted its voice in supplication for pardon for sin, received promise of absolution and remission, through "the power and commandment" given to ministers, richer promise of that assize of righteousness in which the people should be judged with equity—an imminent deliverance, amid the rejoicings of all nature, animate and inanimate, jubilant hosts singing to harp and trumpet, the very seas lashed into a fury of joy, the floods clapping their hands. Then the priest's voice was raised, in a prayer for the peace which the world cannot give that seemed to bring its own immediate fulfilment in the intense stillness of the congregation. Finally, came the pressing supplication recalling the gloom and the danger of mediæval cities—for light in the darkness, for defence against all perils of "this night."

The girls hurried away without exchanging a word—Mary as though still absorbed in the very ecstasy of devotion. The meal, the light, the warmth of lamp and fire, did something to restore their spirits; yet, for a long while, they exchanged common-places only, or toyed with the books which they were unable to read.

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"It was a splendid service, Prue," murmured Mary at length.

"Yes."

"And a full church."

"Yes, indeed, Mary."

Prue answered absently, as one waiting to be left to her own thoughts. There was a magnificent Spanish castle in the fire, and a breath might shatter its battlements for ever.

"What a good choir!"

"Yes—yes, Mary."

"How finely the little soloist took that high note in the first hymn—like a cherub coming down straight from Paradise for the service, and going back there to be put to bed."

The castle had gone to pieces in a sort of cosmic disaster. Prue's mind was freer now.

"And what a dear old man the rector! Did n't you just love him, especially when he stood up for the blessing?"

"It was all perfect, Mary, from first to last."

"Well, then—what was wrong with it, Prue?" was the next question—rather startling this time.

"Who said there was anything wrong with it? Dear Mary, how funny you are to-night!"

"Shall I tell you?"

"Of course, Mary."

"You have been so busy with that old fire that you won't help me out. This is what is wrong with it: there were no poor people, or so few that they were hardly worth counting. Everybody looked so—I hate to put it

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in that way—so distinctly middle class, so well dressed, prosperous, happy in their prosperity, and just as sure of it as they were sure of heaven. You never noticed that?”

“No, not in one way; I ’m so used to it.”

Again both were silent for a while, and then Prue: “You can’t have everything, Mary.”

“We *must* have everything in that place. How can we be satisfied with less?”

“I think you ’ll have to be, all the same, if you press me about it. I ’m beginning to know a little about the poor people now. It ’s only natural; I ’ve so long been one of them myself. And then, I ’ve been working for Leonard in his quarter—quite a long time.”

“Well, what is all that coming to, dear?”

“Only this: I think that all the poor muddled souls who can’t hit it off with this clever world have given up the hope of finding in the churches anything that suits their complaint. In their idea it is only a place of genteel resort for them ‘as have got the means.’ ”

“You must go on, Prue. You can’t leave it there. What are they looking for in the Christian churches? What do they fail to find?”

“The Founder.”

“Surely, surely He is there in every symbol, in every ceremony, almost in every word.”

“Yes, in them, and them only, I ’m afraid. The services are like the plays—running into mere dresses and appointments, spoiled by excess of ‘mounting.’ It is very hard to have it both ways.”

“He is there, Prue, I tell you.”

“Only as a sort of metaphysical abstraction—not as a

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living man—and that 's the only view of Him the poor are able to understand. Their idea of Him—you must n't be shocked, Mary—is the good comrade, who is, at the same time, the champion, the helper, the poor man's friend, a hero of popular legend, a sort of Robin Hood in the highest, who always strikes for the under dog. Don't look so scared, Mary, or I won't go on."

"But go on, go on; never mind me."

"You 'd be astonished to know—and yet, after all, why should n't you know better than I do? Why should n't you?"

"Perhaps I do."

"—How little they rise to the conception of Him as the Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, even the Man of Sorrows—all that the Church holds most dear. He is just the great comrade who tried to get lowly and foolish and baffled people righted, and died for it—worse luck! This one they don't find. The other, the composite personality, leaves them quite mystified, and I must say it, quite cold."

"I often talk to one of them, a subscriber to *The Branding Iron*, who preaches at Mile End Waste, and preaches religion, too, in his way. One day I ventured to call him a Christian Socialist, by way of a compliment, but he flew into a great rage. 'Nothing of that sort, young woman, if you please—a Socialist Christian, at the best. Don't put the cart before the horse.'"

"What did he mean by that, I wonder?"

"He meant that the Socialism was the touchstone, not the Christianity, as they understand it in the churches now. You could n't be a Socialist without being a

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Christian, whether you knew it or no. You might easily think yourself a Christian without being the other thing; and the Socialism was the root of the matter.”

“Good Heavens! the Atonement—”

“Never a word, never a thought of that.”

“The Mediator, the cleanser from all sin!”

“Never a word—the first Socialist, just that and nothing more—the one who came to bring more happiness in this world, to poor men and women beaten in the struggle—material happiness. Don’t be in any doubt about that—a more equal distribution of right down pounds, shillings, and pence—the second loaf in the cupboard, good shoes and stockings for all the children, and the Sunday suit for all.”

“What they think—what they say, when they are able to say it, is that the rich people and the theologians between them, often working hand-in-hand, have ‘nobled’ the churches and made their symbolic cup a mere opiate for hard luck, instead of the healing draught. The parsons are paid to keep people quiet—that is the ruling idea. They can’t get their money to go on with without the rich, and, so getting it, they, of course, preach the rich man’s creed.”

“But the Church! the Church! What does it matter where the money comes from?”

“This, I think, Mary: those who pay the piper will call the tune. But there, you know so much more about them than I do: I ’m only trying to tell you what they say. And you began it, dear, did n’t you, now? Who am I, to talk to you about religions, when I can’t find one for myself? I wish I could.”

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“But the sacred poverty,” said Mary; “I ’ve known that as much as anybody. I glory in it; I love it: I would n’t be without it for the world.”

“Mary, you are a saint and a poet, and God knows what else that ’s beautiful and fine. I ’m talking of the common run of men and women.”

“The dear Church preaches that, practises it.”

“Oh, Mary: only as a sort of grace of deportment. Believe me, people in West Ham look on your ecclesiastical anchorites as mere ‘ammytures,’ in the artistry of privation, with the sacred institution ever behind them as an ark of refuge to save them from the worst. Be out of work for six weeks, and out of earnings that never rise to more than the docker’s tanner, and see what you ’ll think of St. Francis and his flirtation with the lady of poverty then. I had a taste of that, Mary, until I worked myself up into a sort of hysteria of self-conscious endurance, with the help of Laura’s religion of the will—I have n’t shaken off the reaction against that ‘revival’ to this day.”

“Laura’s religion!” ejaculated Mary; “a gospel of mere getting on: let us keep to serious things. The dear Church, the dear, dear Church, with its feasts and fasts, one as holy as the other, its beautiful, seemly services of praise and prayer, ever mounting without intermission day and night, to the Throne of God!”

“Ah, Mary, if you did but know how a poor, dim creature, born into everlasting short commons, without vocation or vocation, stands apart from all that, and sees nothing in it but embroidered garments, and futile excitements about Quinquagesima Sunday and other

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functions with long names, that touch him no more than a birthday at Court!"

"The means of grace," cried Mary, wringing her hands, "the road to pardon, the road to heaven."

"Mary, they are not thinking about heaven. They are Second Coming people. They can't wait another twenty centuries; they want their great Socialist here and now, and with his whip for the backs of the money-changers in Park Lane. The poor man has a perfect terror of those people as clever fellows who know how to 'best' him 'every time.'"

"They circulate wealth, they make trade, don't they?" said Mary, rather helplessly. "I don't know. I despise them because they lead such foolish lives with their guzzling and junketing; but don't they do even something of that sort?"

"Whatever happens in science, invention, general progress, nothing but 'the irreducible minimum' ever comes the poor man's way."

"Come now, Prue; he does get some benefit from inventions. Surely such things as the sewing-machine, the typewriter, have done good for all."

"Look here, Mary! When the sewing-machine was invented everybody said there never could be another song of the shirt. Did the shirt-makers get the benefit of it? Never a bit. They only had to make more shirts a day for the same money, or less. It was actually worse for them. Before, they only pricked their fingers while they starved; the action of the treadle gives them cancer now. Has the typewriter made life easier for the copyists? Parliament made a law for employer's liabil-

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ity to stop the awful waste of life in the work-shops. I know of a bright genius in the building trade who insures his men all round for £400 a piece. When one is smashed, he offers £300 to the widow—‘have it, or leave it’—and pockets the balance. It is cheaper than fencing machinery. Do you think the poor churches—poor in every sense, don’t wince under that? But they’ve lost the power of rebuke. All improvements lead to sweating prices and the sweating dens. The clever fellows see to that. Listen to the yell of protest when some little thing is done to give a lift to the poor man—a cheaper tramway fare, a better chance in education, a school meal for his hungry child. Whatever happens, they always come out on top.”

“Always means eternity, Prue; time is but a speck on its face.”

“Mary, the poor man has an uneasy feeling that the clever fellows will somehow do him in the next world. No, no, ‘Here and now.’ That is how the Church began—I think I’ve read so surely; but you know so much more about these things than I do. The clever fellows got hold of it as a going concern, ‘imperialised’ it, and so began to make it pretty much what it is to-day. Charity is still its abortive message: justice is what the others want. But how can it ever preach the true renunciation, ‘Give up, give up; unload; stop the awful wickedness that gives the few what was meant for all’? The clever fellows have now appropriated both church and founder. When he appeared in altar pieces with the crown of jewels on his head, instead of the crown of thorns, the poor man felt that he had lost his friend. While we are

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still seeking for him, let us try to recover the old driving force at the beginning of the line. Where shall we start?

““ Fire, fire, burn stick !
Stick won't beat dog,
Dog won't kill rat
That ate the malt,
That lay in the house
That Jack built.””

“Prue, where are you going to? We are both looking for something—perhaps for the same thing—but we shall never find it on this side of to-morrow morning. Had n't we better go to bed?”

CHAPTER XXXVII

PRUE had planned a first night at the play for the wind-up of the holiday. A favourite actor and a favourite author were to bring out a new piece which had enjoyed the full benefit of the puff preliminary for weeks.

The girl had been an assiduous first-nighter in the days when she was quite alone. She had kept memoranda of hours of waiting for a seat in the front row, and of number of calls—it touched her sordid outlook with gleams of romance, especially the play on a first night. This was like the bibliophile's passion for early editions; there is no reasoning about such things. The passion had weakened under the stress of newer interests and a larger life, but it was there still. The sense of loneliness after Mary's departure revived it in its full force. There was no resisting it; she had to go.

It was impossible to go without a companion: solitary pleasures had lost their charm. Laura was appealed to. The promise of a sensation overcame her horror of a second-best. Prue had had the temerity to propose the gallery. The other naturally yearned for the boxes; but that being impossible, she made a stout fight for the pit, and had her way.

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Prue, an old stager, took charge of the preparations. To secure the blue riband of the occasion—best row and best seat—the girls had to be prepared to wait all day at the door. They started accordingly at half-past ten on a winter's morning, provisioned and equipped. They carried wraps, folding camp-stools, which looked like walking-sticks, books and papers, sandwiches, fruit, a flask of wine and water. Half-an-hour's brisk walking brought them to the house—only to find that they had lost the opening event—"first at the doors."

"How annoying!" said Prue.

The winners of this particular distinction were two ladies of rather diminutive stature. They were doubly veiled, white over black, and more effectually than any woman of the East. Prue exchanged nods with them as old acquaintance of the play-house door, but the intimacy went no further on either side.

"And who are our conquerors?" said Laura.

"No one knows. It 's hardly the thing to know—certainly not the thing to inquire. You nod on first nights; you hardly ever meet in between whiles, even by chance. London 's a big place."

"What enthusiasts! Are there many of you taken that way?"

"You 'll see by-and-by."

"Then why don't the managers give you better plays—a national theatre?"

"Only because they are like Carlyle's mankind at large, I suppose."

"Perhaps stalls and boxes pay best," said Laura.

"What does that matter? The others would pay quite

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well enough, if we gave them good stuff, and would enjoy ever so much better.”

“We have still our chance of ‘first in,’ I fancy,” said Laura. “We ought to be able to outrun that little pair.”

“Yes; but look at the other pair looming in the distance.”

The two new arrivals were apparently a brother and sister, who, in their turn, saluted Prue without a word. They had plenty of talk for one another, but it was wholly confined to the “shop” of their favourite pursuit. They seemed to estimate all things by their value in pit seats.

“Ten shillings,” said the youth, in answer to some observation of his sister. “No, thank you, that would be four first nights.”

“Have you got our five hob all safe?” asked the young lady, who was of a more practical turn.

It was now twelve o’clock, and the first hour of the long “wait” had passed. . . . The shivering units had become a line, long enough to promise an exciting contest for the blue riband, but still leaving the first row a certainty for all. Prue looked round for new-comers, and, to her terror, beheld Miss Evie St. Galmier.

She turned to escape: it was too late. Eva had seen her, and perhaps her movements of avoidance. In such a space there was nothing for it, but the cut direct or “How d’ ye do?” Cups of this sort are usually served brimming full. Eva placed her camp-stool just behind Prue’s.

Her salutations were effusive and prolonged, but there

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is an end to everything. Prue became absorbed in her papers, and Laura quietly assumed that they had never met. The sluggish hours crawled on, and he whose watch was fastest seemed the friend of his kind. The crowd increased, and a policeman took up his station to watch the line. It was now luncheon-time. The old hands exchanged dainties, and sometimes offered bite or sup to new-comers, as though in sign of welcome to the brotherhood. A few who lacked the vocation sneaked off to the box-office to see if there were any returned upper circles. They were jeered off the scene.

Endurance was one of the tests of the call—endurance and the merry heart of the devotee of a taste. They discussed popular favourites, including, of course, the hero of the hour, and everyone was allowed to have his say, if he knew how to get it said. Some of it was quite good, as to insight, and now and then as to expression too. It was the true criticism born of the wish to praise. Their presence in that crowd was a sign that they had come in the hope of being nobly pleased. Most of them were lovers of the mighty line, suffering, by the spite of Fortune, from over-much “City” for a living, and Kentish Town for a place of abode. The play took them out of themselves into the golden land. They knew the players, as it were, by heart, their history and the manner of their lives. They discussed by the real names of the cast, rather than by the names of the characters. A grey-beard maintained that there never had been anything finer than “old Phelps’s” first meeting with “old Marston” on the battlements at Elsinore. It was con-

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sidered unprofessional to fill in with the title of the piece. They quoted old play-bills as sporting prophets quote the racing calendar—without book.

One o'clock by the chime, and nearly half of their watch done. They settled down to silence and the magazines; some took a nap. Prue had dropped her paper and seemed absorbed in a piece of fancy-work. But it was poor make-believe, for she was really trying to look behind her to see how Miss St. Galmier was engaged. Eva was evidently rousing herself for a long talk.

“Who would have thought it? You here!”

“I was going to put it the other way.”

“And you might. I 'm not in the profession now.”

Prue was silent, in the hope of checking confidences.

“Well, it 's a long story I—”

“Some other time, perhaps.”

“You remember the little cat that I snacked in my advertisement.”

“Lower, please.”

To be cornered in any circumstances is bad enough; to be cornered in a crowd, where everyone may be a listener, is the extremity of anguish.

Miss St. Galmier sank her voice to a whisper, which, however, by force of habit, was still a whisper of the stage.

“‘Imitation the sincerest form of flattery, with compliments to the lady at Liverpool. E. St. G.’ Well, she was jealous of one of my boys, and she worked me out with the manager.”

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“Oh, please!”

“Play light, Miss Meryon, play light,” said Eva, with the flame of displeasure in her eyes.

“I beg your pardon; I ’m sure I did n’t mean—”

Eva was mollified, and her more merciful undertone was a compromise that Prue was but too glad to accept.

“Oh, she was as artful as a wagon-load of monkeys, and he was a fool. He offered to make it up, and to fuss me for lead in another circus. No expense spared, pictures as large as life, and ‘’Eavenly Evie St. Galmier, the only funny woman in the world’ as a standing advertisement in all the theatrical papers. It would n’t do. Do you know what I said to him?”

Poor Prue was in abject submission now. “Something clever, I ’m quite sure.”

“‘Not arf,’ I said—just that, and I gave him a look.”

“Well, I was out of work—puts you back ten holes, does n’t it, anything of that sort? Especially with another to help. But that ’s Reggie all over. Rather starve than be seen at a bar with anybody that ain’t no class. Our old aristocracy—that ’s good enough for Reggie. It ’s in the blood. Pa was a gentleman. If only he ’d brought us up to— I ’m not blaming him, mind; don’t you think that.”

It was piteous in its loyalty to her wretched ideals, and for the moment it quite turned the current of Prue’s thoughts. She could have cried over it.

“I had a try as a clairvoyante, but it ’s no good unless you can work it at the West End. But that ’s where the capital comes in. The half-crown touches in our part of the world won’t keep body and soul together.

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If I could have got to Bond Street, with Reggie as footman to open the door, I 'd have made a do. Why, a friend of mine there won't look at 'em under a thick 'un for every consultation—sometimes two. Do you know what I 'm up to now? You 'll never guess."

"Then I won't try."

"Female detective, my dear. Got to keep an eye on a pair here to-night. Don't take any notice of me."

Prue jumped up with flashing eyes: "Come along, Laura, let us take a turn; it 's rather stifling here."

They passed out, and Eva assumed an air of leonine watchfulness over their places. It was quite unnecessary. A respect for seats once properly secured was the unwritten rule. In another moment they were in the open thoroughfare and looking at the shops.

"She 's impossible," said Laura. "Let me snub her to death for you when we get back."

"Poor creature, she has never had a chance!"

"Why?"

"The wretched father, the wretched brother! She 's like so many of us: her men have failed her."

"Why did n't she shake them off?"

"Perhaps she could n't: she 's the woman still. Can't you see her spinning down, down, to her doom in the gutter? She 's in wild catland now; anything for a crust. Lots of us have to live like that. Did you see that case in the paper the other day? A cabby was taken to the hospital after an accident; and then they found it was a case for the women's ward. For ten years she had masqueraded as a man on the box—cape, comforter, badge, and, I daresay, language and all. She

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had been left a widow with three children to keep. There 's a woman bookmaker at the corner of my street; and we 've all seen the girl who draws pictures on the pavement. One half of the world don't care how the other half lives—there 's the mischief; not that they don't know."

"The men are luckier," said Laura; "there 's more scope for them in wild dogland."

"Oh, it 's much the same for both, I think, in this case. She and her precious Reggie—brought up on shabby-genteel shams and lies, never taught to look life straight in the face. A rich snob is bad enough, but a poor one!—and we seem to turn them out by millions now. I wonder what does it—the pomp, the glitter of the people above them, the rotten ideals? God help us all, when we happen to be born foolish on nothing a year."

There was a diversion on their return, and it became unnecessary to snub Eva to death. The manager had sent out tea to his patrons and a cry of "Good old——" rang all along the line when the rattle of the cups was heard. From that time forth there was no break or pause of incident until the opening of the doors. As they settled down, refreshed, to their last spell of endurance, they had to bear the chaff of the passers-by, the stare of astonishment as at creatures hopelessly insane. Nigger minstrels played and sang to them; imitators of popular characters reaped a rich harvest; the weary messenger-boys keeping places at so much an hour to their intense disgust, were relieved from duty, and joined the mocking crowd. At length came a noise as of thunder at the doors, the bolts were drawn, the maddened creatures

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poured in to the pay table—Prue and her friend first, Miss St. Galmier an easy second, the two old ladies tying for a bad third. In this order they entered the empty and silent house. Laura, without looking to right or left, ran straight to the middle of the first row, and drew out of her pocket a strip of blue ribbon, which, in another moment, with a hat-pin for a flagstaff, proudly floated in the breeze from the top of the barrier. Then sinking back, she steadied herself, while the whole scene swam before her eyes. In a moment more, she was roused by louder thunders from above, as the other crowd of first nighters poured into the gallery, and hurled themselves from its heights in their stampede for the best seats. The long sitting was over, and the thing that they thought most worth having had come to those who knew how to wait. Eva had taken no part in the struggle for the prize. She sneaked off to the end of the first row, as though to watch the opposite side of the house.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

PRUE began to do the honours of the house, but found her companion's interest in it quite languid, while the stalls and boxes were as yet but a void.

"The gallery is the best place, you know, Laura. The blue riband there sees everything."

"Who holds it tonight?" said Laura, turning to look at her colleague in honours.

"One of the best critics of the Gallery Club."

"What 's that, if you please?"

"Just a few who mean to have their money's worth—either out of the performance or out of the hissing. They 've more to do with the fate of pieces than all the critics put together."

"Thanks, dear: I think the pit 's quite bad enough for me."

Stalls and boxes now began to fill, and the orchestra set up those discords which are often sweeter than the pieces that follow, since they promise pleasure to come. The girls picked out celebrities by their published portraits, and Prue named the critics of renown. The house was now a brilliant sight—the best of every kind, good and bad, politics, art, science, beauty, rank, and the sheer wealth that dominates them all. Not to be there on such

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an occasion was to be judged and found wanting. It is with first nights as with certain orders of chivalry: many who don't care for them as a pleasure still covet them as a badge.

Laura glowed at the sight. It was a house full of the people who had arrived. She felt that she was in a current of power. Even those in the cheap seats were somebodies, if only the stoutest hustlers of their class. This reflection led her glance once more to the gallery, where they were not all critics or all philosophers by a long way. Some of the faces, with their eyes set on the glittering scene below, reminded her of caged animals glaring fury through their bars.

Presently she started and nudged Prue:—"Sarah in the front row of the gallery—Sarah talking to a man."

"Mrs. Barker talking to Mr. Barker, if you please."

"Why, he looks old enough to be her father."

"The fatherliness is an item of his inventory. She has married for that."

Mr. Barker was peeling the inevitable orange for his wife; and he still contrived to show solicitude by his manner of throwing the pips into the pit.

"Oh, dear," said Laura, "she 's falling to on the first half, and waving signals to us. What must we do?"

"Wave back for your life, or she 'll ask Mr. Barker to whistle. Hush: curtain!"

There was a burst of applause—without prejudice—and then the house was stilled to attention, friendly no doubt, but still ominous in being distinctly judicial. The actors seemed like the culprit of anecdote, who prayed, not for an upright judge, but for one that would lean a little. Attempts to give applause, on the part of well-

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meaning friends in the audience, were sternly checked. There was an outburst again, merely complimentary, when the great actor appeared—just as nervous as the rest. Applause is catching; and it was now given with less stint—at first to happy lines, at length to the situation on which the curtain fell. Pit and gallery had signed for the first act; and their decision had put the rest of the house in its place. The great actor, pale through his paint, came forth to bow his acknowledgments, carefully directing most of them to his masters above and below.

The girls now made a second search for celebrities that might have escaped the first muster.

“The boxes are easy enough,” said Laura, “but the stalls are exasperating. Look at that pair at the end of the second row to the left: they won’t get their heads turned.”

“Leonard!” cried both in a breath, as one of the persons in question rose to look at the house.

Yes, Leonard, and by his side a lady to whom he chatted as he used his opera-glass—Mrs. Dart!

“Hide me, hide me,” said Prue, almost ducking her head behind the barrier.

“Why,” returned the other grimly; “he ’ll spot us in a minute, whatever we do; face it out.”

“I did n’t mean that,” said Prue.

“What?”

“That I was ashamed of my place.”

“I did,” said Laura; and she hauled down her blue riband. “What *did* you mean, then?”

“Nothing; only the surprise, you know.”

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They were saved, however, by sheer accident. His glass was directed to stalls and boxes, and he exchanged nods and smiles. Then it took a more acute angle; and the gallery came under review. A smile on one side, the waving of a handkerchief on the other, showed that Sarah stood revealed. When he sat down, he and his companion began chatting again, with their profiles turned to the house.

“What a gentleman he looks in evening dress,” said Laura.

“Has he ever looked anything else?”

“Rather frayed sometimes at the extremities, I fancy.”

“What does that matter?”

“Not a bit, in heaven, I ’m sure,” said Laura.

Prue was silent. So the little mystery of her life was cleared up. Leonard, and none but Leonard, was the anonymous benefactor who had found her work at Mrs. Dart’s, in her great need. And none but Leonard had rescued her when she went on her fool’s errand to Pentonville. That was well enough as it stood, but it implied his knowledge of the errand; and this was humiliating. What must he have thought of her? She remembered their talk—how she had railed at the destitute wretch in the same plight as herself, and how Leonard had tried to give her indignation a better mark in the money-grubber who had tempted both to the quest. He must have recognised her in spite of the darkness and the drawn veil—perhaps by her voice, perhaps by the dog, for Spagley’s growl was an element of the adventure.

Yet, after all, he could not have thought so badly of her, else why had he recommended her to Mrs. Dart;

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why had he always been so generous and so kind? There was no shame in the situation, and the mere embarrassment was all the easier to bear; since, without it, she might never have known anything of his delicacy of feeling. Could anything have been more considerate than his persistent silence, and the way in which he had prevailed on Mrs. Dart to keep his name out of the transaction?

So the end of it was that she thought better of him than ever, and not so badly of herself as she had feared before it all came out.

Yet there remained one matter of even more pressing interest: Who was he, what was he after all? The editorship of *The Branding Iron* was but one of his parts. Sarah had dropped many a hint of his double life, clearly without having any clue to the mystery. "He comes and he goes," she had once said, in her oracular way. But where did he go when he was not at work on the scene of his "Natural History of a Crime"? He was a friend of Mrs. Dart, whose intimacy was a sort of certificate of social position, and his greetings to right and left in the play-house showed that he was quite at home in her set.

"Is n't she just lovely?"

It was Laura, of course—Laura with her gaze fixed on Mrs. Dart.

"I thought I told you so."

"You tried to; but you are not good at description. Half of it is dress, no doubt; but take the work as it stands."

Laura was happy, and therefore tolerant and urbane.

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She purred contentment. Her enraptured glance wandered from stalls to boxes—quite rarely to anything beyond them—and she felt good.

“It ’s a brave sight, Prue.”

“She ’s perfect in a way— I did tell you, whatever you may say.”

“Oh, I don’t mean her alone, I mean the whole flower-bed—women and men.”

“Don’t you think there are some exceptions—that creature who looks as if she had all her savings round her neck?”

“No, no, youth and age, good taste and bad taste, they ’re all in it together. They have the secret.”

“What is it, I wonder?”

“Power, power, sillikin! Have a good time, my little dear—if you want it in one word.”

“Getting on as the law of life, and snobbery as the means to the end.”

“Why not?” said the other, quite calmly; “you may give it any name you like: all I care about is the thing.”

“It can’t be right, name or thing; there ’s something better than that.”

“It ’s the way of the gods, at any rate.”

“The heathen variety, perhaps.”

“Has the world ever been different—ever once for a quarter of an hour?”

“Yes! Yes! A thousand times, yes!”

“Oh, I don’t mean when it was in short frocks.”

“When it was nearer to the heaven it came from—there!”

“Have a candy, dear, and don’t trouble to speak up.

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The world may be still cooling on its discharge from the other place. These people have got the secret, I tell you. What do you want more? The gallery clubbites may be nearer the skies, are they any better off?"

"We were meant for something better."

"How do you know what we were meant for? These are the practical people, and this is how they've worked it out. Their happiness is a going concern."

"Half of them are beasts of prey, I tell you; look at their faces."

"Don't call names. Perhaps they are meant to be just exactly what they are."

"Oh, Laura, what's the use of being alive!"

"Ask the Gallery club if they would mind changing places."

"Ask the tigers in the Zoo! What does that matter?"

"With all my heart: they are four-footers, we are two—perhaps that's all the difference. Be nice to the dam and the cubs—do any of us get much beyond that? Why worry to get yourself twice born? The new religions know a trick worth two of that—never say die. This world's good enough for me. Try another candy, dear, and have a good time."

The orchestra came to a dead stop—almost in the middle of a bar—the curtain rose. The piece dragged a little. The club sat in ominous silence, even the favourite was not acclaimed, though he was allowed to come and go without any sign of displeasure. But, as soon as he had left the stage, a cry of "Hand up them scissors" came in sharp, decisive accents from above, and was answered by "Scene painters to the front!" from the

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pit. The fate of the act trembled in the balance. It was saved by a love scene of great tenderness and beauty between the twin stars of the cast.

But somehow the scene before the curtain had now become the play within the play for both the girls. The house quite outdid the stage in realism and in interest, with Mrs. Dart seen "in the flesh" of a magnificent toilet, and above all, with Leonard by her side.

"I knew it, I felt sure of it," cried Laura. "*The Branding Iron* is only his plaything. What is he, I wonder, when he is really himself?"

The same question was in Prue's mind, but she took care to let it go no farther.

Laura really needed no answer; a listener was quite enough.

"He 's going to do great things, that man. He 's going into Parliament at the general election. Perhaps he 's there already. Do we really know his name?"

The "we" stung Prue into a shiver of irritation, but she held her peace. Laura was taking possession of him; and what Laura wanted she would surely win.

"Wait for that general election and you 'll all see sights. I could help him there."

The first person plural had now become the first person singular; it was intolerable.

"The paper may be good enough for him, Laura. It is first in his thoughts, that *I* know."

This at least seemed to enter another person singular as a party to the case. Yet, after all, what was it but the odious plural in another form?

"A little one-horse thing like that," said Laura,

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“never! He ’s up to something—what can it be?—perhaps a place in the coming Ministry? He ’d better go straight for it, and not fuss about too long in the slums, and miss his chance. How I could help that man!”

The second act passed in dumb show for the pair. Prue was in torment, Laura in the bliss of the great possibilities suggested by the sight of Leonard in his proper character. She was quite unconscious of the other’s pain. It seemed natural for her to bid for the first place as soon as it seemed worth having. Hitherto Leonard had been but an agreeable and, possibly, impecunious young man with a fad—clever, amusing, and all that, but not to be taken too seriously. It was different now; and she put in her claim of interest in his career with a sense of fitness that precluded all idea of cruelty or of usurpation.

“That ball of swansdown is never the woman for him!”

It was the third entr’acte, with Laura in a change of mood about Mrs. Dart, and still thinking aloud before the wretched Prue. The piece was now a dead thing for both of them: the play within the play was the all in all. Prue was the sparrow declining on a tired wing, Laura the hawk in chase, not of an enemy but of a dinner, and each following the law of its being. But the last cry of the pursuer brought a new torment for the pursued. Mrs. Dart! Leonard—was there still another in the hunt? If this was the significance of Leonard’s intimacy with Mrs. Dart, the proffered kindness of his recommendation was really the keenest of all humiliations. It left Prue as a thing of no account, between a

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patron and a patron's friend. All Leonard's attention to her, his comradeship, appeared in a new and an odious light; and she sank to the level of another "subject" in natural history.

The play within the play now became a grim comedy, with herself as a mere supernumerary of a stately cast in which Leonard and Laura and Mrs. Dart bore the principal parts. And, with these, Eva herself seemed to come in as a fourth character, with a whisper of such dire import that Prue could have died outright under its message of suspicion and of shame. Eva was there to watch "a pair"—What pair? Prue involuntarily turned to seek her in her place of ambush, and found her gaze fixed on Leonard and his companion. In another moment the eyes of the two girls met, with a nod and a smile on the part of the female detective of the plot.

Thenceforth all that passed behind the footlights, or before, was but the buzzing confusion of the sounds and sights of earth, at the moment of the lapse into insensibility under the influence of a drug. The applause at the final fall of the curtain which, to those with free souls, meant the salvation of the piece, was nothing to the wretched Prue but a murmur on the boundary line of two worlds—the world she was leaving, the world she was going to meet. The bowing figures before the curtain were but beings of a sinister dreamland. The girl followed the crowd on its way to the street, with all sense of its personality crushed out of her by the oppression of a weight of doom. She was faintly aware

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of Eva's rushing by her, and thrusting a piece of paper into her hand, but she lost all remembrance of it a moment after. And, leaving Laura quite unnoticed, she hurried home alone.

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE play within the play was not yet at an end. There was an afterpiece. The girl lay awake next morning wondering whether it was worth while to get up and face the sun, when she was roused by an urgent request from Sarah's landlady: "Mr. Barker not home all night; Mrs. Barker rather upset and gone away. Please come round."

She was soon at the house.

What did it mean? At first nobody knew. All they could tell her was that Sarah had come home by herself; had walked to and fro all night with much confusion to slumbering lodgers below; and had left quite early in the morning, without taking leave of anybody. The landlady had sent to Prue as the only friend of the Barkers whose address she knew.

This was the state of affairs when Prue arrived—a mystified matron, female lodgers sitting under her chairmanship in committee of the whole house.

There was at first little to guide their deliberations. Mr. and Mrs. Barker had set out for the theatre the best of friends. He was always most attentive; and he had actually returned to the house a minute after leaving it to fetch a warmer boa for Mrs. B. An hour or so

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after this, a little girl had called to inquire for him, "rather pressing," and had been directed to the theatre.

The first thing to do was to find Mr. Barker's place of business. Could Prue give any information on that point?

She could not. It was understood that Mr. Barker was waiting to start on a great venture in the commission line, on the completion of new offices, but that was not enough. It would have been enough, but for this crisis in his affairs. He had paid his rent with regularity; and the rest was nobody's business but his own.

The committee of the whole house was still at a loss when a knock was heard from without, and the landlady went to the door. She returned in a moment ushering in a young woman who had called for news, but had really brought all that was required.

This person, a stranger to all the parties, had found Sarah in a state of great distress the night before, and had brought her home in a cab.

This was her story. She had been at the play-house with the others, and had left the gallery immediately in the wake of Mr. and Mrs. Barker. The pair attracted her notice by Mr. Barker's great attention to his wife. He helped her to adjust her boa before they reached the street, and took other precautions against the midnight air.

They were walking away arm-in-arm, and in high good humour, when—here the witness was taken with a seizure described as a spasm, and she had to be revived by a draught of the refreshment already provided for the use of the committee.

As they walked away, another woman, fierce and for-

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lorn to look at, and holding a dejected child by the hand, planted herself right in their path, and brought them to a stand. At the sight of her, Mr. Barker mechanically dropped the arm of Sarah, and, turning ashy pale in the glare of the lamp-light, stood stock still.

Sarah, thinking he had gone out of his way merely to let the woman pass, made way for her, though not without the protest of a toss of the head. The woman, without paying the slightest heed to this, turned towards Mr. Barker, slapped his face, and said: "Robert Barker, when are you coming 'ome to support your lawful wife and child?"

Mr. Barker's placid acceptance of this outrage gave it the sickening effect of the impact of a blow on dead meat. He merely took out his handkerchief, as though to wipe off the stroke, but he said never a word.

"He 's a-going home with his wife, if *you* please," said Sarah with an inflection of high disdain. "And who are you? before I call a policeman."

"I 'm Mrs. Robert Barker, *Miss*," said the spectre, "and them 's my marriage lines, if you know how to read them. So who are you? before it 's policeman for two. Eighteen months' desertion in Sunderland, and looking for him all over the country, till I see his name in print, and that brought me 'ere."

She dropped a newspaper in her agitation; the young woman picked it up; and she now laid it before the committee. It was the copy of *The Branding Iron* in which Leonard had written his complimentary notice of Sarah's change of name.

Sarah now paled to a deadlier hue than her mate; and,

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with an eye that outblazed the intruder's in fire, turned to him, only to read a full confession in his state of utter collapse.

Never a word had he spoken from first to last, and now he simply walked away into the night, pursued by the jeers of the crowd. The woman and child followed him. Sarah stood quite still for a moment, and then reeled into the young woman's arms.

A policeman now appeared, with the formula which bespeaks a law-abiding people: "Pass along, please." A few words from the crowd, a searching glance at Sarah gasping for breath in the woman's arms, showed him that it was not enough for this emergency. He at once became quite tender, helpful, and considerate in his own way, drew out his note-book, and giving his own support to the sufferer, called a cab for the pair.

"Hospital, if you 'll take my advice," he said. as he closed the door.

Sarah shook her head.

"Home, then?"

She shook her head again—this time with a shudder.

"Come, come; be reasonable," said the policeman; "one or t' other it must be."

Sarah now broke silence for the first time and simply gave her address.

"Is that yer *'ome*, dear?" said the young woman.

Sarah shuddered once more, and repeated the address.

She lapsed into absolute silence after that, refusing all further aid, sitting in rigid lines in the vehicle, like a figure carved in stone, and with an eye set on vacancy. On reaching the house, she paid the cabman without a

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word, and with a liberality that seemed meant to strike him dumb. Then pressing the woman's hand, and leaving two shillings in the palm, she let herself in with her latchkey, and disappeared.

The story was now taken up by the landlady. Her lodger must have passed an awful night. Her sharpest trial was yet before her. She had gone back to the shrine which represented the grave of her happiness, if only to leave it again, and for ever, with the morning light.

Her first care had evidently been to weed out of her garden of dream everything that belonged to Mr. Barker, even by the mere implication of joint ownership. All of his wearing apparel, his smoking gear—including an old razor with which he cut up his tobacco—down to a penny bottle of blue ink, which he had used in preference to the black, and a pen of his particular brand, was carefully collected, and made into one huge parcel, bearing the initials "R. B." and, in lieu of address, the words "For the Pleeceman." His presents to her, mostly little nothings from the fancy bazaars, were first torn or broken to pieces, and then, with their finest particles of destruction, consigned to another parcel inscribed "Dust-hole"—that and no more. His portrait was in this heap, together with a large envelope full of torn letters, and labelled "Lies."

Another package consisted of a small amount in silver and coppers which, though it must have formed part of her own savings, had now suffered contamination by his proprietary touch. The bank-book that represented the residue of all her earnings was in this collection. There was a considerable sum to the common credit, but it

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naturally now stood in the hateful name to which she had no longer a right. She had thus reduced herself to absolute beggary—perhaps in real uncertainty as to her rights under the marriage law, yet more probably because she scorned to dispute with her betrayer the wages of his sin. A letter to the landlady completed her preparations for flight.

“DEAR MRS. —,—Enclosed one and sixpence, all I got left. Keep it towards week’s rent, sell the sticks, and pass balince to a ’orspital if accordin’ to lor. Shall never want same again. “S.”

There remained but one more duty, a sort of commemorative service of her invincible neatness, over the sepulchre of the once ’appy ’ome. Everything was left in exquisite order, the carpet without a speck, the remains of their last fire, carefully collected in an ashpail, the very grate blacked in a sort of superfluity of the niceties of domestic ritual for this funeral rite of despair. Thus had Sarah chosen to expiate the misfortune of her undoing which, in her eyes no doubt, was also the crime of her credulity in listening to “chaps.” And thus had she stolen out in the silence of dawn to her purgatory of poverty and of solitude.

Where had she gone? Prue undertook to find out. She had been cowed for the moment into a complete forgetfulness of her own sorrow, appalled by the thought of the overmastering horrors of that night.

Two days were passed in a fruitless search, visits to the police stations, advertisements in the papers, private

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detectives—all the apparatus of public search. On the third, Prue had an illuminating thought, not her own exactly, but a remembrance of something she had read. Most fugitive creatures still make for their old haunts, even criminals who have everything to fear from discovery. She went straight to the garret in the slum which Sarah used to inhabit while furnishing her home in fairy-land. Sarah was there lying half dead with grief, sleeplessness, and want of food.

Even now she was hardly to be won into speech by kindness, or weakened into it by the misery of the situation. Prue, entering without knocking, found her lying on the bed and glaring up at the London sky.

“Who ’s there— ’Ow dare—”

“It ’s me, Sarah—Prue.”

“You no call ’ere, miss, without nobody ask you to come.”

“Sarah!”

The sullen pride of her was still unbroken; she turned her face to the wall. It was her mode of doing penance for the accursed lapse into tenderness, which had been the cause of all her woe.

Prue divined: “You need n’t say a single word, but cry, dear, if you can.”

“Not me!”

“Not a single word, Sarah; I know everything.”

“’Ave they caught him?”

“I think so, dear, but who cares about that. I ’m going to make you comfortable.”

“Shut the door; shut ’er out.”

“Who?”

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“That woman—the street—she kills, kills.”

Prue stole softly to the door, turned the key, but only to put it in her pocket so that it could not be used against her, ran downstairs, gave the necessary orders, and was back in a trice.

She was only just in time. Sarah had risen to lock everybody out, even her benefactress; but, tottering with the weakness of her long fast, had slipped, and lay prone on the bare floor in a passion of tears. Her proud spirit was broken, but her reason was saved.

The rest was easy. Soon the doctor had come and gone, and his patient was fast asleep under the combined effects of food and an opiate. There was a cheerful fire in the grate, and Prue sat by it to watch through the night.

To watch, and to take up the burden of her own grief, now that she had given first aid to the other in greater need. The tremendous shock of Sarah's sorrow had mercifully diverted the girl from all thoughts of herself, perhaps saved her from collapse. But now her own trouble surged back on her again, with all the added fury of reaction.

What was wrong with her life, oh, what was wrong with it! Was it this, that she had nothing to live by, was rooted in nothing? It was no question of this creed or that, but just only of something to hold on by, to work for, to keep as the pole-star of her voyage. The poor plutocrats had that in their dismal way: it was a wretched creed, but it was better than none. Laura had hers too, and it served after the same fashion. Happy plutocrats! happy Laura! Unhappy Prue, disdaining these, yet still with no true foundation in higher things—houseless while waiting for a better house.

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What was wrong with Sarah's life? Want of a worthy object, want of something worth living for. She had lived for independence, as if anybody could live for a negation of that sort. Independence of what? Who hath it? "He that died o' Wednesday." A fine thing that.

Suppose it was put the other way. Sarah had sought independence, to win prosperity. Still you had to carry it further. Prosperity, and to what end? Happiness perhaps. Well, look at Sarah now!

The object then had to be larger, worthier. Try the old-fashioned doing right, the still older-fashioned righteousness of the Hebrew. That seemed nearer.

"But what do you mean by righteousness—question begging term." This from an intrusive small voice that seemed to have been briefed by the Devil.

She took no heed of the interruption. Strive for righteousness then, and it will bring all else worth having, even prosperity as the greater the less.

Yet this would not do; she remembered her book of Job with Froude's luminous commentary—Froude, no doubt, with old Carlyle at his back. Prosperity is no hall mark for righteousness, has nothing to do with it, as effect and cause. The whole meaning of the poem is that the comforters were on the wrong scent with their wretched moral, that the misery was the punishment of faults. He threw it back in their teeth, would not admit the wickedness, admitted only the sores.

"And the sores as the fruit of righteousness—a fine thing!"

No, no, there was other fruit, and blessedness was its name—the state of feeling that you are in the right stream of tendency, that what you are doing is going to

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come out all right in the end, if not for you, then for the race. Mary Lane—that saint, had got blessedness, and, having it, felt that she had all. What cared she for rewards, if only she could kindle the light of happiness in another's eyes.

“How are you to know it, how are you to feel it?”

“Fool, look in thine heart and—live. Your finest, deepest intuitions are enough.”

“No—not enough”—the intrusive voice again, clamouring for a definition.

“Well, do good to others, think last of your blessed self. What has saved me in this welter of my own soul but the accident of Sarah's prior claim. But for that I might have gone mad.”

“Can you be sure then?”—the voice once more. “How many a man, still more many a woman, has to say: ‘I have done right as I am able to see it, in self-denial, devotion, yet have I ever caught most of the buffets going in the strife. While this other dines to the music of lutes, and is going to make a good end: think of Laura.’” “No, no: never of her again! Whatever else is true, the cult of the good time must be a lie.”

“Yes, I can be sure, if only I make a right choice of what I put first. For Mary Lane, humanity is enough, for me perhaps, only one of its items must serve. Love something, your race or a fellow, with or without return, and let others love you in the same way. Love is sacrifice willingly borne, sacrifice is blessedness—bliss.”

Left sighing. Ah! If! Yet she had found her religion after all.

CHAPTER XL

PRUE had evidently missed a career in not going into diplomacy ; in less than a week she had brought Sarah back to the abandoned 'ome.

How it was done can hardly be told. It is easier to say how it was not. Neither scolding nor argument, the two persuasives that leave most troubles just where they were before, had any share in the process. It may be enough to say that Sarah was induced to come in as caretaker of her own property while waiting for the expiatory sale which, as Prue hoped, never was to be.

This served to set her to work again, for, to look at the treasures was to begin to fondle them with the polishing cloth. And with work, she soon began to mend, though she was still wretchedly weak.

Mr. Barker's association with the place was the first difficulty to surmount. Prue met it by carefully removing every article that might serve as a memorial of his personality.

He had been arrested ; and this, it was thought, Sarah ought to know. She was acquainted with it through the good offices of the landlady. On the night of his exposure the wife had held on to him like a second shadow, and

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policeman considered unprofessional on the part of even a married man. Beyond this, there was no further allusion to the matter on either side. This suited Prue as well as Sarah. For both, he was a part of a fatal night, which was all horror in the retrospect.

One evening, however, the tabooed topic was nearly revived by accident. Prue, who spent all her spare time with Sarah, was diving into her pocket for some trifle she had bought on the way, when she came upon the playbill of the performance. She smuggled it out of sight before Sarah caught sight of it, and then, wondering how it had found its way there, remembered that the dress happened to be the one which she had worn on the night of the play. A further search in the pocket resulted in the discovery of another document. Concealing this in her grasp, she found an opportunity of mastering its contents, while Sarah was busy with the manufacture of a flannel petticoat for Mr. Barker's child.

It was the scrap of writing which Eva had thrust into her hand as they left the play-house, forgotten at the moment, and never opened till now. And thus it ran in a pencilled scrawl:

“O. P. box my little lot. Must make tracks after them at once. Sorry can't stay to say good-bye. See you again soon.

“E. St. G.”

She nearly betrayed herself by a cry, as the full import of it flashed on her mind.

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“My little lot”—evidently the wretched pair that Eva was watching. “O. P. box”—Leonard and his companion were in the stalls on that side. Yet why had Eva laughed and nodded in their direction? Merely to draw Prue’s attention to their presence in the house, and without the slightest idea of connecting them with her odious office.

Oh, the happiness of it now, and, with this, the sense of humiliation! To say that she had believed the worst was not true. In her distraction of mind at the time she was not to be charged with anything that bore the responsibility of conviction. She had simply been maddened by the torture of Laura’s talk, and this had come to her but as a new and more exquisite pang.

Yet the shame of it was not to be put away from her so easily. It involved an unworthy suspicion of two persons both of whom she ought to have held danger-proof, in common loyalty—Mrs. Dart always kindly and considerate; Leonard, friend of friends, and comrade too.

She was returning to her seat when there came a knock at the sitting-room door.

Leonard!

He seemed intensely excited, and could hardly control himself for the ordinary greetings. He came in flourishing a sheaf of telegrams, and with the word “victory” on his lips.

They had not actually met since the night of the dinner at the restaurant. He had never looked better. The purposeful cast of the face had been softened to a greater lenity of expression. The pallor of his face, the

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strong and regular features, with the dark curling hair, had their appropriate setting in the evening light.

“My dear Sarah, I never hoped to find you up and about. Miss Prue: it seems a long time since— I only came to ask for your news, and to bring you some of mine.”

“Yours fust,” said Sarah.

“No, no,” he said, looking from Prue to Sarah, from Sarah back again to Prue; “how thoughtless, how selfish of me. Forgive me, both of you, and watch me, each in the other’s interest—Miss Meryon when I ’m rattling on beyond Sarah’s power of endurance, Sarah when I ’ve too little mercy on her friend.”

“There ’s nothing the matter with me,” said Prue, “except happiness, I think—to find Sarah so much better.”

“I felt I must have news of both of you to-night, and I left another sheaf of these unopened on my desk, just to run round. Another time—” and he was making for the door.

It was impossible to let him go like that. Prue looked from him to Sarah, from Sarah to the telegrams twisted now like a thunderbolt of Jove in his grasp.

Then, with a sudden illumination, she saw it all at a glance, and found the compelling word.

“I know,” she said, with gleaming eyes, and clapping her hands; “first news of the General Election, and of the Great Surprise. Labour ’s come to stay.”

“Yes,” he said, grasping her hand, “you ’re first, now as ever—first subscriber, first to guess. It is the

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General Election, and with it the fulfilment of the prophecies. Labour triumphant—that and nothing else—at last.”

So it was. It was the first day of the great upheaval which was to change the face of English history in our time.

A new flower of life and light had come—as yet without a label—as an old one had passed away with the Victorian age. The time between had not been lost by the seed lying in the earth. Such deaths and such births are always marked by intervals of no moment to any but the husbandman.

Almost the very earliest results were decisive, for the whole land was aflame. The great cities had gone for labour and its allied interests; the country had followed suit. The twin-brethren of the hoe and the hammer had established their natural kinship of equality with the wealth and power of the realm. England had come into line with the world movement in its most advanced stage, and with such a swing of purpose and of energy that the next stride might give her the leadership for humanity at large.

“Me,” said Sarah, holding out her hand for the telegrams.

They were evidently but the blessed word, Mesopotamia to her, but they brought joy to the only two friends she had in the world, and that was enough.

“What a time we ’re ’avin’, to be sure!” she said.

“See,” said Leonard, “if she is n’t ‘getting well visibly’—with apologies to an eminent master of fiction.

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Never tell me that good news is no medicine;" and he gave her a kiss.

She grew deadly pale, and with a sort of instinctive action wiped off the salute with the back of her rough hand. Then again she looked beseechingly up at him, as though for pardon, and said, "One more!"

He gave it with a will.

"It 's good to see you both so gladsome; but it 's a bit too much for me all the same. If you don't mind, I 'll go into the next room and lay down. Miss Prue, won't you make Mr. Leonard a cup of tea?"

The duties of hospitality are imperative. Prue had to stay, though she would have given the world for Sarah's relief of solitude, just then and there. She still felt humiliated in his presence. Sarah had the right to rejoice in everything that made him happy, for she had ever been his champion through thick and thin. But as for her—who was she to look him in the face? She had yielded to the treason of doubt, the unforgiveable sin.

"And still I am not happy in spite of Sarah," he said, after leading the invalid to the door. "It is the way of destiny, the way of life."

"And why not?"

"Because the news that is going to cure Sarah brings something akin to sorrow to you. You are troubled: I see it in your manner."

"You are quite wrong."

"In your eyes, then. They always have told tales against you, and they are my unsalaried spies."

"Spies!" Unhappy choice of a word! She shivered

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a little, and—served the tea. “Tell me how it was done,” she said, by way of helping them both out of the difficulty.

“It was done, Miss Meryon,” he said, resuming, not without an effort, his lighter vein, “by means of the Great Conspiracy!”

CHAPTER XLI

SHE laughed, and he laughed with her: the pleasantry had answered its end.

“Yes,” he said, “the Great Conspiracy, one of those conspiracies formed in broad daylight, and for everyone to see and hear. These are the deadliest, and they ’ve done most of the big things in the world.

“It was simply all the—I want a word for it—all the men who had felt the pinch of the shoe, all over the country, laying their heads together to do the trick for themselves, and waiting for nobody’s leave. You remember Vivian Grey’s ‘nothing is permitted: everything is done.’

“They were of all the callings where the shoe pinches most—factory lads, pit-boys and miners, navvies, carpenters, shop hands, cobblers who had stuck to their last till they were sick of the sorry return it made them in bread and butter. And what they wanted was to have a say, as experts, in the making of the laws they were called on to obey.

“To find the best was the job. They were years at that with their lanterns, not only in every market-place, but in the polytechnics, institutes, lecture-rooms, and

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what not, where their fellows were training themselves for their new part. You 've seen something of that, Miss Prue, I remember your telling me so. You 've seen them making overtime in the classes at the end of a day's work that would take the pluck out of a horse. Toiling for knowledge, hungering and thirsting for it—it 's no bad way. It makes you hold on tight to your morsel.

“So, after a while, still plot, plot, plotting, in the deadliest publicity, they had their band of picked men—in bricklayers with quite a turn for the mathematics of Mr. Karl Marx; counter jumpers, deep in Jevons and Mill; dustmen, if you like, who knew their ‘Decline and Fall’ far otherwise than Mr. Silas Wegg; certainly bargees whose English was as pure as Addison's in both senses of the word.”

“I know half the men whose names are in those telegrams,” said Prue, “I 've met them in the classes.”

“Well, there they were ready to go anywhere and do anything as soon as the hour of the election struck. And, with this, the constituencies mapped out for invasion, as England is said to be mapped out in the archives of the German staff—weighed, counted, tabulated, from top to bottom, from side to side. The Primrose League work a mere parlour game! For this was business: hardly a man of them but had known what it was to tighten his belt on an empty stomach, as part of his lot in life.”

“I 've been hungry too,” said Prue to herself. “It 's just capital exercise, but I fancy you may carry it too far.”

“All this was mainly the work of two men, the Apostle

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and the Organiser of Victory. The first had long been at his post, the movement being a thing in the providence of God. He was a pitman of the hardy North—'Scotland for ever' is still a good cry—who had thought it all out; felt it, which is better, in the darkness and solitude of the mine. Meditations are much more purposeful there than among the tombs. He had risen from the pit to Parliament, but it was at first only a change of solitudes, for, through long years, he was little more than a party of one. He was a Socialist, with the doctrine like a burning fire within him, a fire that seemed to blaze through him whenever you looked into his eyes. They were the eyes of a dreamer for all that, but of such dreams—poverty, misery, vice no longer the almost inevitable lot of countless millions of women and men. He put them in that order for, without being exactly a courtier, 'ladies first,' in all ameliorative effort, is his rule of life."

"I 've heard him speak scores of times," she said, "and I love him. Socrates must have been like that—so gentle, so quiet, and strong."

"Hardly, as to the fun, I should say. This one is as incurably serious as if he had come back from the dead. Perhaps it 's the pit. I believe they won't tell half the things they see and hear down there, not even to Royal Commissioners.

"The Organiser of Victory was at hand in a brother Scot, a Highlander by race doubled with a Lowlander in the outlook on life—the most formidable combination I know. He was of peasant stock; he had been schooled by the dominie of his village; and had perhaps ran

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barefoot to his lessons. I know that his children run barefoot for health in their London home, and have their reward for it in looking the stoutest little cherubs ever caught out of bounds. His next stage was 'Glasgie' for the humanities, London for press work; finally a happy marriage with one of the most refined and charming women of her time—Socialist as you all are, or may be made to be by pity and love.

"He fashioned the band of conscripts into an army for the polls, drilled them, brigaded them for the field, financed them too by treaties of mutual help with all the other popular parties, who, from first to last, worked hand in hand for the triumph of the common cause. What a labour! What endless journeys by day and by night to all points of the compass, and the remotest in our isles—sometimes further afield in special missions. Speaking here, treaty-making there, and finally when the hour came for the shock of battle, feeling that he could await the issue with a mind at ease. The rest you know, or will know in all the glory of an achieved result, before the week is out."

"Why, you 'll swamp the House!" she said.

He laughed:

"We 've no such ambition—shall I say no such fear. A victory may easily be too complete. All we want is a look in proportion to our importance in the country, and that we 'll get."

"Not quite for the first time," she said. "There were brave men before Agamemnon: have n't I read of labour leaders who served in Parliament years before you were born."

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“Only as individuals, never as a party.”

“Party! I sometimes dread the word from what I see of its meaning. Why a workman’s party any more than a brewer’s party? Won’t the nation do?”

“Let the others begin; we are only following suit. We must work with the weapons of our time.”

“And what are you going to fight for?” she said—
“the sacred right to get as rich as the others—if you can?”

“And to remain as poor as most, for that ’s what the juggle comes to for the bulk of the race. No.”

“You are forgetting your share of the work in *The Branding Iron*.”

“I am constitutionally incapable of doing so. At least, it is the line of the entire movement, in showing the efficacy of small beginnings. Small beginnings are the only hope of suffering causes. If we had waited till we were capitalised from above, or patronised, there would have been no Labour Party, and, in the same way—if you ’ll excuse the anti-climax—no *Branding Iron*. What I ’ve proved, I hope, is that any man with faith and energy, and something to say, can start a paper for himself in a back parlour—if it happens to be the paper that people want. If it does not, where ’s the use of it anyway? The usual plan, I know, is to go round with a sample of your principles, and try to persuade a syndicate to lend you a quarter of a million of money. The syndicate cuts out half the principles, and offers half the money; and that ’s considered a deal. There ’s another way.”

She tried to make her escape, feeling that what she

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most wanted to hear about, most wanted to say, must still be left unsaid—the mystery of his double life, his intimacies in quarters which she could not hope to reach, she, nor even Laura, which was still some assuagement of the pang. Yet, as to that pushful person, after all, who could say?

“This is a mere incident in your life,” she said. “You ’ll leave us for greater successes, higher things. The little *Branding Iron* will one day be a memory, and with it all your friends—Sarah, Mary Lane, Laura—”

“Go on with the reckoning, if you please.”

She left it there.

“If you *think* that,” he said—“especially as to the name you have left out—it would be about the only disappointing thing I have ever heard from your lips. Why should I forget? In the past few months I have lived in the greatest fulness of being I have ever known.”

“Yes, but other triumphs, a larger career.”

“Please don’t talk to me, or of me, as if I were a caliph in masquerade. I ’m with my own folk at last: and I ’m never going to leave them again.”

“I saw you at the play the other night.”

“With Mrs. Dart, the most amiable and kindly of women, whatever her class, and, I hope, always my good friend. I wish I had seen you.”

“I took care you did not.”

“Oh, that ’s all right, so long as only the misfortune was mine, and not the fault.”

“Were n’t you with your people, then?”

“Quite out of my sphere, I assure you; but you know things of that sort are not always matters of choice. I ’ve

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got my work to do—that 's the main point; and I do it in all sorts of places and all sorts of ways.”

“Sometimes among all the ‘celebrities of the day.’ ”

“Take care, or you will drive me into autobiography. In fact, here goes for it, and without further apology, for you 've brought it on yourself.

“I 'm a poor man's son, especially a poor woman's—a Board School boy at the start, will that do? The dear old Board School gave me what the State, with a big S, ought to give to every boy and girl, a chance of the best education in the land—what the State does give, as a matter of course, and without thinking twice about it, in all the countries that mean to hold their own in the struggle for life. England gives this in the pitiful halting fashion to which she is bound by the snobbery of her class system, and by the fiendish device of penalising national duties by throwing them on overburdened rates. However, it was not for me to look the gift-horse in the mouth. By hook or by crook, I won my way to Oxford—only to find that Oxford has quite as much to learn from the poor scholars as it has to teach.

“When I came away from there, not quite at the tail-end of the list, I had to live, and I went into journalism. It was not exactly the journalism of *The Branding Iron*, but of the great dailies, the great reviews, every one of them like a department of state. I had the luck of my opportunities, and I got on. I 'm the ‘George Malby’ of the reviews, if you care to know it, and I hope you do, for you once did me an honour I have never forgotten in praising an article of his to my face. Malby was the name I brought into the world with me; George

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Leonard was added to it by my godfathers and godmothers. I was 'George Malby' then in my work for a living, 'George Leonard' when I came down here, to start *The Branding Iron* for love. There 's my small mystery, and the only one, for what it is worth. I had to keep the issues clear, as between my public in one part of the world, and my public in the other. It was awkward, though, to have the editor of one of the reviews asking me to make *The Branding Iron* the text of a slashing article on 'the gutter press.'

"I might have gone on as 'George Malby' for ever, but I felt that, at best, it could only baulk me of all that I held highest in life. I might have had a great review of my own—the chances were not wanting—but, with all its implications, this must have taken me further and further away from my own people. What I longed to do when I left the University was to report myself for service to my class, the class from which I sprang. There were plenty to serve the others—the classes with which I came in touch in the ordinary course of my career. Loyalty to your 'fellow-subjects' of the whole universe—ah, the unimaginable felicity of the phrase—is not that more beautiful than the loyalty to all the Charlies over the water that ever had to cut and run to save themselves from a righteous doom?"

He stopped short, troubled by something in the wistfulness, the pain of her look.

"What has become of all our old comradeship?" he said. "You used to be so frank; you are keeping something back. Is it anything about Sarah? There will have to be a trial: he 's held for full-fledged bigamy now. But we 'll see her through all that, until she goes

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back to hopeless drudgery—wondering why God took the trouble to make the world.”

“No,” she said, almost vehemently; “Sarah is all right: she can go back to solitude, and that ’s better than the tribal home. Dear old Aunt Edom! I wrote to her for Christmas; she made me a suitable reply; and now I ’m ready to accept my final destiny at any moment.

She looked charming in her excitement now, in spite of the tinge of displeasure, which was usually something of a disfigurement. The face was never without expression: it was of endless interest and beauty in that way.

“Then it *is* about you,” he said. “Come, secret for secret—I have told you mine.”

“No secret,” she said, “only a truth. It ’s harvest-time, and I not among the husbandmen, not even among the gleaners. I can feel it all, just as strongly as you, yet here I am without a part. Oh, why was n’t I born a man?”

“Thank God you were not.”

“You ’ve done so much for me. But there ’s no more to do. You ’ve carried me as far as I can go—how far, for all that, I alone know.”

“Secret for secret. Do you suppose I gave you mine for nothing? Won’t you understand?”

“What can I have to tell you that you care to hear *now?*”

“Won’t you understand? From the day of our first real meeting, at the boathouse, you were first in my thoughts.”

“As a scholar perhaps, as a chum for a ramble.”

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“Believe me, I am not quite such a young man from the country as perhaps I look. Do you think I had not my own purposes, my own hopes, my own little conspiracy, if it was only a conspiracy of one?”

“Look here,” she cried passionately, “I began my wretched little life with no other idea in it than my indefeasible right to have a good time. I loathed poverty, I almost loathed poor people. I dreaded pain, as we all do—that’s nature—but I never saw any other way out of it than to grab at all the pleasure that was going, and leave the others to take care of themselves. I doubted all this in the heart of me, for all that. Then came Laura with her gospel to teach me that it was the sum of things.

“Then came you—I must say it—to give me the sense of pity for that huge mass of mankind who are left out of the reckoning, to make me feel that the only thing that counts is to take one’s chance with the race.

“Your pity for yourself,” he said, “was only a perversion of your pity for the race.”

She went on: “I can’t rise to these things as abstract principles: they have to be said to me in my own fashion. They were when you spoke. You did not know what you were doing: I tell you, you were teaching me a religion. We women won’t have your precious ‘principles’ in any other way.

“Do you remember that phantom at the lecture, and his bitter heart-breaking plea for a religion of Socialism? It haunted me: remember what some one had said before him: ‘Democracy will have to be a religion, or nothing, with its doctrine, its form, its ritual, its cere-

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monies, its government as a Church—above all, its organised sacrifice of the altar, the sacrifice of self. This is the deepest craving of human nature. All attempts to reconcile man's heroism to his interests have ever failed. His goodness must make him smart.' ”

“I know it by heart now, why should n't I: I 've read it a hundred times? And here 's a bit more”—

“ ‘So is there no escape from the Iron Law of brotherhood. All solutions but this have had their trial, and all have failed. Never was their failure more awfully conspicuous than it is to-day, when nine-tenths of mankind still live as brutes in regard to all that makes life worth living, while the other rots in character with the infirmities of plethora and excess. Ring out the old, ring in the new!’ ”

“And now it 's all over; and it is n't to be that; it 's only another party in Parliament—perhaps another class interest—and all the rest of it, and poor little me, I 'm left out in the cold with my poor little religion all to myself.”

“A religion of two, at any rate,” he said very gently. “Here 's a disciple on the spot. A religion of democracy, as well as a doctrine; what a tremendous idea! You said just now I had given you something: see what you have given me in return. I want that religion for *The Branding Iron*.—And you for myself,” he added, drawing her towards him, and looking into her eyes.

“No, no,” she said struggling for her freedom. “I won't come in like that, as a female counterpart of the messenger boy?”

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“And you for yourself, then,” he said, still refusing to let her go. “How am I to live, or work, or even understand, without you?”

“Just as the others do. They have left out the women; and think of their triumph to-day!”

“And of their failure to-morrow if they don’t bring you in, without your finer intuitions of pity and of love?”

* * * * *

“And Laura?” she said archly.

“She ’s the cleverest little girl I know, and she ’s sure to do well. Won’t you go in and give Sarah the good news?”

THE END

