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THE PARTNERS

CHAPTER I

TORTUOUS DIPLOMACY

'IT'S tryin' , Jossy, vary tryin'; but we mun trust in God, and wait.'

'Wait! I'm sick of waitin'! We'll be waitin' when the Judgement Day comes at this rate! We mun do summat! ' And little Joshua Sweetlove, the emphatic and explosive Grindell barber, banged himself back into the summer-house corner, and pulled furiously at his long, clay pipe.

Peter Waine moved uneasily in his chair. There was little use in arguing when Jossy once got steam up. They were occupying the old climber-covered summer-house at the far end of Peter Waine's back garden; and, as the dull season was upon them, they had

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drifted back to the old, intensely interesting, but wearisomely postponed topic of the long-projected new Wesleyan chapel, for which they had great need, substantial funds, but no possible site. For Grindell was squire-and-parson ridden.

Jessamine Cottage was the last house in the town, for the villas farther down the road called themselves the suburbs, or, more frequently, `The Avenue,' that being the fashionable title for the highway still called by many the New Road, and by Jossy and his democratic customers Ginger Lane. The cottage had a white front door with brass knocker, and stood back some paces from the road. It had also, as a concession to modernity as represented in the owner's daughter, a French window in the gable end that opened upon a small lawn studded round with rose-trees and old fashioned flowering plants. As charming a little spot, hidden there behind the great hedge, and taking you by surprise as you opened the gate, as it would have been possible to find in the county ; and old Peter Waine, retired grocer, took great pride in it.

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Peter was a large-made man in everything but height, and had the heavy, lumbering ways and easy complacency of his type. He had been the first declared Methodist in Grindell, and for years, in his heavy, stolid way, he had quietly endured and defied petty social persecution, until he had gathered around him quite a nice little society, which included Joshua Sweet love before mentioned, and one or two other Grindell characters. They had worshipped for many years in the long, low upper room over Pixton's tallow-candle works, and during most of that period they had worked and prayed and saved for their new sanctuary. But all attempts to secure a site had so far failed, and Jossy had worked himself, with his native impatience, into the conviction that their leader, Peter, who in the old times had done many a quietly heroic thing for his faith, was becoming in the days of his ease and leisure rather too much reconciled to the *status quo,* and had so long preached faith and patience that he had ceased to make even such efforts as he might for the

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desired end. Many and. many a fantastic scheme had the fertile brain of the barber elaborated, and many and many a battle royal had these two fought over their pipes in that summer-house; but lately Peter had been suspiciously evasive and conciliatory, and to Jossy that was more alarming than all his slow stubbornness.

'Faith, man!' he blustered, in reply to one of Peter's textual quotations. ' Faith without works is dead! The Lord helps them that help themselves.'

Peter ran his fingers through his long red hair, which was as yet only thinly streaked with grey, and shook his head dubiously. He was the figurehead of the society in Grindell, but often only the cat's-paw of the volatile barber. More than once he had been made ridiculous about this site question, and had also been the victim of one very elaborate practical joke. But as he grew older he seemed to become more sensitive to these things, or rather his daughter did, which was even more important.

'I know about every inch o' land in this parish, and we've done all we can do

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'All we *will* do, thou means.'

Peter turned a reproachful eye towards Jossy's corner ; but the barber stared back, and puffed out columns of defiant smoke.

'I said as we're doin' everything as we knows on, and I say it again'; and Peter emphasized his statement with the end of his pipe-stem.

Jossy, having evidently got what he was fishing for, sprang to his feet, thumped his fist on the hard table until Peter's tobacco box danced again, and shouted, glaring fiercely at his friend, 'An' I say we haven't ! '

Peter half rose in sudden indignation at this blank contradiction; but on second thoughts he sank back, shook his head, and murmured sulkily, 'It's easy talkin', Jossy!'

'Aye, it is! Easy talkin' about faith an' waitin' an' patience. We've been talkin' for twenty yer, and all the time the Lord has been sayin', "Stir yoursels! Why don't they stir thersels! " "Do summat! Do summat," says the Sperit! An' we have done, haven't we?'

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'I say as we've done everything that mortal man could do'; and Peter rose sternly, and stood looking down at the barber.

'An' I say we've never done no sitch thing!' and the fierce little barber sprang up to his friend as though responding to a challenge to fight.

The two eyed each other askance, for all the world like two young cockerels at bay, each too intent on the point in hand to realize how farcical the position was becoming.

`Joss Sweetlove, has thou come here to day to insult me?'

'Peter Waine, are thou gettin' into a ungodly temper? '

'Well, of all—'

'Aye, of all—'

But these were only the growls of truculent retreat, and as each sank back into his seat a strained and frosty silence fell upon them.

For three or four minutes there was nothing heard but the monotonous p't p't of their pipes. Then Peter sighed heavily, shook his head at a little knot of button roses peeping round the trellis-work front of the

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summer-house, and finally stole a long, shy glance at his companion. Joshua, who knew his man, pursed his lips more prominently than ever, and stared before him with injured resignation written on every feature of his obstinate face. Peter shuffled his big feet and cleared his throat with unnecessary energy, but the barber was as hard as stone.

Another long stare at the rose-buds, more shuffling of uneasy feet, and then several sidelong glances towards the opposite corner; but the barber's turned-worm sort of face relaxed not a muscle, only his toe beat a steady tap on the boarded floor.

'There'll be a deal of apples this year,' ventured Peter, gazing down the garden at certain heavily laden fruit-trees. There was apology, surrender, and pleading underneath his tones; but the adamantine Joshua neither heard nor saw.

Peter rubbed the floor again with his slippers, beat impatient *ran-tans* on his chair arm with the hand that was not occupied with his pipe, reached for his brass tobacco-box, and then, jumping sud-

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denly to his feet, pipe in one hand and tobacco-box in the other and the blood rushing to his indignant face, he strode up to his tormentor and fiercely demanded, ‘What is there as mortal man could do as I haven't done ?'

Jossy threw back his head, lifted his eyes to recent cob-webs near the summer-house roof, and laughed a hard unbelieving laugh.

‘Bring it out, man! Don't sit there like a grinnin' gate-post. What haven't I done? What wouldn't I do?'

The barber, secretly hugging himself for the success of his ruse, had a face as flinty as ever.

‘Trot it out, man!—trot it out!'

The sphinx was still—the sphinx.

‘I'm ready, man!’—and here Peter, goaded to madness, excitedly jerked himself to his full height—‘I'm ready! Mention one thing!—one little thing as could be done to get that land! Mention it!'

Suddenly Jossy jumped to his feet, stood sideways up to his man, held out a stiff palm, and punctuating every word with a two fingered slap upon it with the other hand,

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he cried, ' There's land to be gotten, an' thou can get it. But thou'll no more get it nor I'st get a dukedom!' and he glared fiercely up into Peter's face.

And there they stood, eye to eye, the barber's blazing with accusing light, and Peter's changing from resentment to wonder, and wonder to surly doubt. Peter sighed and moved uneasily; but Jossy's eyes were still holding him, and so, with a shake of his big

body and a protesting snort, he wrenched himself away and dropped back into his chair, crying sulkily, `Aye, it's easy talkin'.'

The ice having been once more broken, and Peter's curiosity aroused, whilst his word had been pledged, the astute barber once more lapsed into silence as he recharged his pipe.

Peter, as the other well knew, was on tenter-hooks. `Well, man, what is it, an' where is it?'

'Thou won't get it, Peter, I know thou won't, an' it's as easy for thee—or her—'

'Where is it, then?'

Jossy's pipe was going by this time; so,

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looking over the top of its bowl at his friend, he set his face resolutely, and, as though anticipating and defying resistance, he said, 'It's t' lower corner of Blandon's wood yard.'

Peter scowled, stared hard at his friend in an effort of recollection, and then opened his eyes in blank amazement.

Jossy's foot was tapping the floor again, and as each looked at the, other the first flickers of amusement began to curl the corners of his mouth. From amazement Peter passed to alarm, and the alarm changed to odd confusion, as though some secret had been touched; but as Jossy was watching him narrowly he had to fence.

'But what!—why!—haven't we tried for that afore?—twice afore?'

Jossy blinked his eyes in mute assent, but would not release the other's gaze.

`Young Frank's as big a Churchman as his father was.'

Still the barber only nodded and blinked; and if there had not been such volumes of significance in his eyes, Peter might have breathed more freely. As it was he only

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wriggled in his seat and rubbed his left ear.

The pause continued, the barber was actually grinning now, and presently he got up, walked over to his friend, smote him heartily on the back, and cried, ' It's Providence, Mr. Waine!—it's a blessed Providence !'

Peter was struggling vainly to express his protest; it was the old story of the spider and the fly, and the poor fly was already realizing the inevitable. ‘But—but—why, man, it's ridic'lous ! '

‘When a man's i' love, Peter, when a man's i' love—think o' Queen Esther!' and the merciless spider gloated over his wriggling victim.

‘But!—but thou'rt talkin' Dutch! I don't know what thou'rt drivin' at ! '

Jossy, glowing with the pride of great discovery and greater diplomacy, stood back and beamingly surveyed his companion. ‘She's a beauty, an' she's a red-hot Methodis', an' she'll do it like a good 'un.'

‘Do what? What the plagues o' Babylon is the feller ravin' at?'

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'Egyp', not Babylon, Peter; I'm talking about *her.'* And he jerked his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the house, ‘It's a Providence, man! She's been raised up to do it!'

Confused and utterly dismayed, Peter gazed at his friend as the mesmerized hare gazes at the serpent, and then with a sudden effort he turned his back on his persecutor, deliberately picked up his tobacco-box, whisked his long pipe under his arm, and started without a word for the house. Jossy watched it all with demure complacency, and, as he expected, before Peter got many yards away he stopped and came stalking back,' Joshua Sweetlove, I'll give thee one more chance: if thou's got owt to say to me, say it! *I'm* not fond of Chinese riddles, if thou art!'

For answer the barber caught his friend by the coat, pulled him unceremoniously into the summer-house and down into his chair, and then, standing over him, he demanded, ' Is young Blandon in love with your Hetty or is he not?'

‘How should I know? I never—And

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what if he is?' And Peter looked his fiercest.

Jossy, suppressing another triumphant grin at Peter's giving of himself away, braced himself for a second effort, and demanded, ‘Does young Blandon own that there land, or does he not?' And before the other could choke back his wrath to answer he went on, `Well, then, there we are! Two and two makes four, and the ground's as good as got!'

The scared, exasperated ex-grocer was perspiring profusely and rubbing his big, round face with a red pocket-handkerchief. The position was excruciating, and its whole difficulty was manifest only to himself—and his tormentor. He lived in chronic suspicion of his own spiritual loyalty, and was haunted ever with misgivings that his easy-mindedness was at bottom worldliness and degeneracy. H e was the inspirer and sustainer of Grindell Methodism's ambition for a new chapel, and he had another source of trouble known only to the barber and himself. His dead wife had always been a better Methodist than he, and, whenever he did anything

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that came short of his full duty to his religion, this departed saint was sure to visit his slumbers, and the one dread of his life was that she would some day take up the chapel site question. This secret he had foolishly confided to his friend, and had no doubt whatever that the barber would manage somehow to bring the departed lady into the case some day or other. But, on the other hand, the suggested plan was unthinkable. He was the very last person in the world to interfere in the delicate details of a love affair of anybody's; but when it was his own daughter's, and such a daughter,
the thing was plainly impossible. He had more than an ordinary parent's shyness where their children's courtships are concerned, and as he pictured himself suggesting Jossy's fantastic idea to Hetty, he shuddered and groaned again.

‘Joss Sweetlove,' he burst out, `thou'st gotten the wickedest, mischeevousest brain in this country-that's what thou hast!'

The barber smiled in sedate resignation.

‘Now look here, Mr. Slyboots, thee go an' do that job thyself!'

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‘Me? I'm not her father!' and it was now the barber's turn to look alarmed.

‘Thou'rt her leader, an thou's a fine long tongue, and' (Peter was just realizing his advantage) `thou'rt allus sayin' what thou'd do an' what thou'd say an' how thou'd manage children. Speak to her thyself!'

Joshua was sitting up in stern resignation. ‘Peter Waine, thou never hed no delicacy—me?

‘Joss Sweetlove, thou never had no consideration—I *say thee*!'

There was a pause. Joshua was feeling that something was slipping from his grasp, and he had need of care; so he collected himself, sank back into his corner, and cried with regretful sadness, 'Oh, if I wur her father!'

‘Oh, if I *wurn't* her father!'

And there they stuck; the one defiant but uneasy, the other disappointed but resolute, and there was a long silence.

‘I thought I should ha' seen the new sanctuary afore I died,' sighed Joshua, with a pathos that went right to Peter's susceptible heart.

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Tears were coming into his eyes, things he could never abide, and he was just about to stammer out some lame encouragement in the old vein when they heard the opening of a door and the flutter of skirts, and as each jumped and sat up guiltily the figure of a radiantly pretty girl framed itself in the doorway.

Yes, 'radiantly pretty' was Hetty Waine. After an unnoticeable girlhood and an equivocal early womanhood, she had at twentythree suddenly blossomed into an undoubted beauty, with a perfect complexion, large, dancing grey eyes, a tempting little mouth, and a wealth of golden-brown hair. In perfect health, free from serious care, and

also from affectation, her high spirits gave animation to her movements and light to her features. Only recently had Grindell awakened to her existence; but now all the males in the town, staid fathers and middle aged bachelors included, were at her feet, and she had come all unconsciously into her own as reigning beauty of the old place.

'Whatever is the matter?' she cried laughingly, arching her eyebrows and glanc-

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ing from one to the other of the elders. 'What a noise you do make; I could hear you all the way from Pottington's back door.'

But the two men were too embarrassed to answer; guilty, scared looks were on their faces, which they felt were giving them away; and whilst Joshua shrank deep into his corner, wondering how much she had overheard, and whether her advent at this moment might not be another ' Providence,' Peter was feeling his fears of discovery doubled by dread of what the barber might say. He could no more introduce the subject under discussion to his daughter than he could have made a political speech; but Joshua's delicacy, if he had any, went by rules of contrary, and where should he hide his guilty head if his friend broached the terrible subject?

'We were talking about that there site,' said the barber sulkily, and with a defiant glance at the terrified Peter.

'I might have known it,' laughed Hetty, with a gesture of mock wearisomeness. The site question seemed part of her life; she could not remember a time when she had

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not heard it debated. 'It appears to me you ought to stop talking and do something;' and, pulling out a little bundle of 'work,' skewered through with a long needle, she stepped into the summer-house and sat down a little distance from her father.

'Right, woman!—right! My stars! it *is* Providence!' And the delighted Joshua smote his leg with his hand emphatically, and then, springing at his confounded opponent, he

stretched out a challenging hand and demanded triumphantly, `Worn't I sayin' it not ten minutes sin'? Worn't I sayin' them vary words?'

Peter, who had been momentarily relieved when his daughter sat down near him, thus saving his face, and giving him an opportunity of signalling and scowling at the barber without being seen, had a sudden return of his terrors; and as Hetty, following the barber's gestures, unconsciously turned her eyes to ward him, he felt as though the floor were opening under him, and was consumed with nervous anxiety that Joshua should resume his seat.

'Sit down, man!—sit down!' he cried, in

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most evident anxiety; 'we can't make sites; can we?' And as the barber protestingly obeyed, Peter followed up his exhortation with a series of terrific grimaces, one eye on his daughter and the other on the man in the corner. But the fates were against the poor father, for Hetty, more amused than interested, presently broke the silence that had fallen upon them by saying smilingly, 'Well, have you heard of another site, Jossy?'

'Yes, we have; t' best site in t' town! Made for t' job!'

Hetty had raised her eyes from her work to the barber's face, and Peter, squeezing himself hard into his corner, was holding a clenched fist close to the side of his head and shaking it with intense fierceness at the man in the other corner. And before Hetty could ask the question which Joshua's remark so plainly invited, he burst in, ' Oh! shut—Oh ! O—h! '

Hetty turned quickly, with a little cry of sympathy ; whilst Peter kept on rubbing briskly at his outside leg, and to explain the savage expression she had surprised on his

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face, he cried, ' It's that rheumatism ! My opinion it's going to rain.'

Father's rheumatism was as old a topic to Hetty as the site question, so her sympathetic glance was blended with curiosity, for this troublesome complaint had a mysterious connexion with bad collections at the mission-room, slack tenants of his property, and other unpleasant experiences.

Meanwhile the barber, waiting like a terrier on the pounce, was trying to avoid Peter's eye and catch that of his daughter's. The ex-grocer, however, had a sudden inspiration, and continued to rub his leg with brisk energy, scowling and groaning the while, and so, as he intended, she hastenedaway to fetch a rug.

The moment her back was turned the two men sprang up and stood glaring at each other in fiercest defiance.

'If thou breathes a word to that poor girl—'

'If thou flies in t' face o' Providence like this—'

But there was a flutter of skirts again, and Hetty found the barber sitting in his corner

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as though an earthquake would not move him, and her father rubbing his leg as for dear life; both men, however, were very red in the face. Father took a long time to get his lower limbs satisfactorily enwrapped, and made, during the process, many suggestions which would have broken up the party if they had been acted upon. But as Hetty knew how much her father enjoyed the summer house, and how conversation, even fractious conversation, with the barber relieved the tedium of his retired life, she ignored the hints, and affectionately fussed about him, until he was fain to acknowledge that his pain was `easing off a bit.'

The barber, grim with sternest resolve, was biding his time. `As we was a-sayin'—' he resumed, as soon as Hetty had settled into her old seat.

'Oh! I say,' broke in Peter with a nervous trepidation oddly out of keeping with his sudden information, and with drops of perspiration standing on his brow, 'Withersedge has sent word he cannot preach on Sunday, and he's sending young Stebbing.'

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The barber, a local preacher himself and a martinet in discipline, would ordinarily have been effectually diverted by information like this; but now he simply waited until Peter had finished, eyed him over with pitiful disdain of his transparent subterfuge, and then turning towards Hetty again he resumed, 'As we wur sayin'—'

A shuffle, a groan, and a sudden burst of confused sound, sufficiently curious to have interrupted anything, caused the barber to pause; and as Hetty also lifted her eyes, poor Peter was fain to look as easy as he could.

`As we wur sayin',' repeated the inexorable Jossy with slow doggedness, 'we've found a site, and a grand 'un'; and he turned and fixed Peter with his eye as though defying him to contradict.

'You have! Where?' Hetty was less hopeful than her father, but she liked to promote talk between the two.

The barber was watching the writhing man in the corner and feeling a momentary pang, and so he merely shook his head, and said solemnly, 'A reg'ler grand 'un.'

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'But where is it, and are you sure about it?'

Jossy had burned his boats, or he must surely have relented as he watched the excruciated, pleading face in the corner. But he knew he dare not think, and so, staring fixedly at Hetty's left ear, he replied huskily, 'It nobbut wants a bit o' pluck and manewvering, an' it's ours.'

Hetty, genuinely interested at last in this stalest of stale topics, asked eagerly, `Then, why don't we get it?'

The maddened father in the corner had tried to rise in protest; but he fell back, sick with fear.

'There's nobbut one person i' this world as can get that land for us.'

'Who's that, pray?'

A perfect burst of smothered groans from the corner; but even the tortured sufferer there was fast coming under the spell of the conversation, and covered his cries with another vigorous rub of his leg.

'Who is that, pray? Any friend?'

'One as ought to be a friend, as says she is a friend.'

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'Oh! a woman, is it?-Mrs. Tudge?'

Mrs. Tudge was the magistrate's wife, who had been brought up a Nonconformist.

'No, *You*!'

'I?—I?' And Hetty's eyes widened with amazement.

'Yes, you! You could get it with a word, with a twiddle of your little finger.'

Peter was sitting like one mesmerized, great beads of perspiration all over his red face.

'Oh, Joshua!—I ? Whose is the land, and where is it?'

'It's t' bottom plot in Blandon's woodyard, and—'

But Hetty had suddenly sat bolt upright, her eyes distending, and the blood leaving her face until her very lips were white. Then there was a choking gasp, a long, frightened cry, and she fled from the summer-house with her face hidden in her hands.

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CHAPTER II

SELLING A SWEETHEART

FRANK BLANDON was a handsome fellow; he was also by general consent the cleverest and most taking young man in Grindell. That he knew it and presumed upon it was accepted as one of life's inevitables; and considering that he had a doting mother and three equally doting sisters, who lost no opportunity of sounding his praises, nobody greatly wondered at his vanity, especially as he was so pleasant and friendly with it. But somehow he never looked quite himself in his dingy, sawdusty office; and

on the afternoon when he first becomes known to us, he looked particularly out of place and uncomfortable. He was tall, lithe, well built, and his clothes fitted him perfectly. Fair-complexioned, with brown hair, eyes, and moustache, he had that engagingly frank

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and open expression which is at once the charm and disappointment of his type, and which wrought so much both for good and evil in the history of his and our Norman ancestors.

But this afternoon his face is dark, with a gloom that is almost savage; his eyes are furtive with apprehension, and his usually lightsome mind is racked with thoughts which make him that he can neither sit nor stand. He is alone; and whilst the whir of the saws drowns all other sounds, he paces his narrow office in a vain endeavour to keep down excitement. Another turn across the floor, an eager peep over the whitened lower half of the window, an impatient survey of the yard and the entrance gate at the end of it, one more glance at his watch, and with a smothered anathema he flings himself into the only chair in the room with a tortured, 'Fool fool ! '

There was a twin rose-bud in his button hole which Hetty Waine had given him that very morning; but neither flower nor giver interested him just then, and he rose

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hastily and resumed his sixteen-feet pacings across the floor.

'Never again!' he fumed; and then, as in approaching the window he raised his head' never a—Ah!'

A telegraph-boy was coming up the yard, and Frank snatched up a pen and put it behind his ear, hastily selected a pencil, and was suddenly absorbed in oiled-paper building-plans. But the very intensity of his expectation caused him to start violently at the familiar knock, and he was so excited he forgot even to say, `Come in!'

The second knock brought him with a bound to the door ; and, snatching at the salmon-coloured envelope, he banged the door in the astonished messenger's face, and

had reached the desk again when he remembered to call ' No answer!' A moment later he had been on the high stool, and the chair, and at the window; but the telegram was still unopened. Then he took it up, walking wildly about and labouring to recover self-control.

‘Hit or miss!' he cried thickly, holding the envelope at arm's length as he

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staggered about. `Neck or nothing! Life or death!'

There was the usual exaggeration in these tragic exclamations. But when at last he tore open the missive and glanced at the contents, his real fears were serious enough; and, whilst his mouth half.opened and his breath came quickly, a sickly pallor took the places of his flushes, and a sudden, deadly calm settled on him.

It was only a brief sentence in a mongrel code, but it told him that the Grand Scienna shares, in which he had been making a deal, had gone the wrong way, and he was some hundreds of pounds the poorer.

He stood for a long, strained moment in the middle of the office, and then absently took out his watch. Another knock, and this time he turned to the desk, set his face at the window, struggling fiercely to obtain command of his features, whilst one hand groped again for a pen.

The bank-clerk who was now entering found a man so immersed in a building-plan that he had not heard.

‘Beg pardon, sir! Borwood & Lyngate's

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bill—due to-day, sir. We waited until nearly three—'

‘Ah! Dixon, that you? Eh—what? A bill, did you say?' and it was the easy, popular Frank Blandon who spoke, and in his most comfortable manner.

‘We expected you'd forgotten it, sir, but—’

‘You're quite right, my friend! and'—with a glance at his watch—’Oh, bless us, it's seven minutes to three ! I was under the impression-been so frightfully busy lately that it was *next* Friday.' And he took down a patent file to reassure himself. 'Ah, bless us, it is, by Jove! Well, Dixon, this *is* a pickle; what's to be done?'

Dixon would like to have said it didn't matter; but he knew a little too much to make that true, so he changed from one foot to the other with an equivocal smile.

‘Ah! well, old fellow, it's awkward, but it cannot be helped; you'll have to tell Wignall I'll call in the morning.'

‘We-that is, Mr. Wignall-will be in the bank an hour or two yet,' ventured Dixon.

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'Oh, that's lucky! All right; the fact is, I--er-I--my partner generally-yes, yes, I'll attend to it myself, Dixon.'

Dixon's relief plainly showed how little he thought of the partner; the 'myself' set him quite at his ease, and after a few words more he departed.

‘Oh, curse these shares! They were dead certs. What shall I do?' And, flinging his pen upon the desk, Frank resumed his painful pacings across the floor.

Two years before he had succeeded to his father's business, though the founder of the concern had in his last days introduced a perfectly unnecessary partner. Whilst the firm had been simply George Blandon, it was deemed ' as safe as houses' ; but Blandon & Co. dealt in bills and other shifty financial expedients, and Grindell pitied the popular Frank for the clog his father's folly had fastened to his heels. Since his father's death he had been urged again and again to get rid of his low partner, and more than one substantial man had offered to join him. But to Frank's great public credit it was noticed that he scrupulously regarded his

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father's wishes, and even affected to respect the man to whom he was thus so unfortunately tied. Sam Broome, the 'Co.,' came of peasant stock, and the detrimental changes in the habits of the firm were just such as might have been expected from such a source, and synchronized with the date of the change. Frank had been so constantly pitied that he had come to pity himself, and the man who gets there has his feet on a dangerous slope.

Broome had been successively errand-boy, apprentice, workman, and foreman before he was made a partner, and still confined his attentions to inside management; whilst Frank, who had spent his youth with a firm of architects in the county town, looked after the outside affairs and the finances, or, as all feminine Grindell sympathetically put it, 'had all the harassing and worry of the firm,' and, in spite of his high spirits and wonder ful constitution, it was telling upon him. Of late he had looked haggard, and was at times peevish at home, and Mrs. and the Misses Blandon would very much like to have given ‘that Broome ' a piece of their mind. He

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took his share of the profits, and his sister had become dressy and aggressive. Whydidn't he take his share of the pains? But that was the way of things in this unsatisfactory world; the amiable and generous were always taken advantage of, and the coarse and ungrateful always had the plums.

Frank Blandon listened to these domestic moralizings with a beautiful resignation. Anything that might reflect on his partner always had to be wrung out of him; and if there were so many things which circumstances compelled him to allude to, how many more must there have been which he kept locked up within his own faithful breast! Of late, however, he had not spoken much of these matters in the family circle, and it was noticed also that he did not encourage any hope of a change in the partnership. Things were not going very well just then in the business, and you `mustn't swop horses whilst you're crossing the stream.'

This unfortunate partnership was not the only injury under which the handsome fellow was suffering. The firm of architects with which his father had articled him had found

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that he was so remarkably clever that they had kept him doing their own work instead of giving him the requisite time to prepare for his examinations; and so, of course, though others infinitely his inferiors had ‘passed,' he had continued unqualified until his father, in a fit of indignation (at the firm, of course), had fetched him home and put him into his own business, not many months before he died, thus spoiling his career. It was a great shame for a young fellow of his gifts to be confined to a mere trade, and a greater shame still to be hampered and humiliated with such a partner.

As young Blandon paced the dusty office that trying Friday afternoon, scowling and imprecating under his breath, and looking anything but a martyr, the door opened again, and that objectionable partner walked in.

The contrast between the two was extreme. Broome was five or six years older than his colleague, and looked even more. The pinching poverty of his boyhood had left its mark upon him, and he was sallow and plain-faced, with premature lines across

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his forehead, and crow's-feet in the corner of his eyes. `British working man' was written all over him, and the word that best describes him is ' common.' He had common, dark hair, scanty, uncertain sort of whiskers, and a half-sulky, half-diffident manner which made a distinctly unfavourable impression. He looked as though under better conditions he might have been stout, was taller than he appeared, and was altogether devoid of anything that could distinguish him. He came into the office much as he used to do formerly in his character of errand-boy, and his manner was quietly apologetic.

On hearing the hand on the door-latch, Frank had turned hastily to the desk, and Sam, taking up a plan from the little paycounter as he passed, went and spread it on the other end of the desk by the window, thus placing himself alongside his partner, but some feet away. Neither spoke ; and as the silence lengthened, Sam, with his head still on his drawing, stole a long, anxious look at Frank and stifled a sigh. Again he looked, but Frank was utterly

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absorbed, the fact being that each was waiting for the other to speak.

Sam took another glance at his companion, another dree look at the drawings, and then, with a dry little cough, turned towards the door.

Frank, poring over his oiled paper, went a shade paler; and when Sam had reached the narrow lobby outside, he mustered courage to call 'Sam!'

The junior partner came back, and stood with the door-handle in his hands, but never spoke.

‘Come here, man! here's something wrong.’

Sam silently closed the door, and going over to the empty fireplace turned his back to it, put his hands behind him, and waited.

‘Don't you know that Borwood & Lyngate's have a bill due to-day—a three months' bill for two hundred odd?'

Sam glanced at the clock, which now stood at eight minutes past three, and realized that bank hours were over; but he only dropped his eyes to the floor, and waited. If he would only speak, it might

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help Frank to blurt out all he had to say; but the delicate instinct that talks in order to encourage difficult admissions was apparently not in Sam Broome.

‘We've only about thirty pounds in cash, and the bank can't—well, they've stopped the over-draft.'

It didn't appear that Sam had grasped the situation at all; his eyes, which had been lifted to Frank's whilst he spoke, were now wandering heedlessly about from clock to safe, and safe to ironmongery shelf, and he lifted a long sigh that seemed suddenly to become a stopper for his lips. As a matter of fact, he knew little of the business part of their affairs, nobody esteemed him as of any account, and until recently he had been quite content that it should be so. He had so worshipped old George Blandon, and was so proud of his position in the firm, that he never dreamed of asserting himself. Latterly, however, Mr. Frank had seemed quite anxious to consult him, and Sam was not to be outdone in generosity; the more his partner honoured him, the more resolved was he not to meddle.

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‘Well, man, can't you speak?'

Sam's eyes rolled to the dirty ceiling, a flattered smile indenting one corner of his mouth. `I'll leave it to you, Mr. Frank.'

'But you can't; we are in a hole, man! I don't know where to get a blessed bob!'

The smile, so idiotic and aggravating to his overwrought partner, still lingered on his face. It was nice to be thus consulted, and trust must repay trust.

'You know, Mr. Frank ; do just as you like—you know.'

‘Do! I'm stuck!—fast as a thief! For goodness' sake, man, shut that door and be reasonable.'

Sam, doing as he was bidden, let go the door handle, and, rolling toward the desk, put himself into an attentive attitude; but his smile of half-incredulous unconcern was as distinct as ever.

‘I've kept these things to myself as long as I could; I've struggled with them until I'm ill. We're up a tree, man! on the edge of a precipice! If that bill isn't met, we've got to shut up shop! Now do you under stand?'

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Sam plainly didn't. Mr. Frank was rather given to exaggerated language, and the idea he suggested was simply unthinkable. But Frank looked annoyed; and so he took another shy glance round the office as though appealing to the fixtures for a hint, scratched his head, and emitted a wavering, half-protesting sigh.

`Well, man!'

Another smile, a wriggle, and another look round, but not a word of speech.

'Hang it, man! say something! Don't you see I'm ill? I've struggled and striven and worried myself to death; I've tried to spare you all I could ; and now, when the pinch comes, you haven't a word to throw at a dog.'

Sam's head dropped in self-condemnation, his sallow, common face flushed with shame, and he cried penitently, `Don't be vexed, sir! It's awful kind of you to tell me things; but I'm such a duffer. Go on, sir!'

It was a long, rambling statement, with awkward omissions and contradictions which even the confiding partner could not help

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noticing; but when it was over, and the 'Co.' had realized that there was something to do, he became another man.

'But we aren't goin' to stick fast for a couple of hundred, sir.'

'I tell you we haven't got as many shillings, man!'

Sam stared hard at his partner, his soft eyes blinking rapidly; and then he lapsed again into his usual silence, under the evident presence of a new thought. The little American clock ticked loudly, the drone of the saws filled the room, whilst Frank watched his partner with fierce impatience, and changed from one leg to the other as he waited; but no word came, for Sam was clearly off to dreamland.

'I have seen it coming for months, but did not want to trouble you.'

No answer; and Frank, on a rack of impatience, scowled and bit his lips, whilst his partner, moving away from the desk, stared vacantly at the back wall.

Frank's manner changed, his face took on a sudden meekness, and, with a desperate attempt to swallow something, he said apolo

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getically, 'You haven't—you couldn't—you don't know where you could borrow it?'

Sam turned sharply round, glanced quickly at his companion, his eyes blinking rapidly, and his breath coming short and fast ; but he only turned away again, and resumed his study of the back wall. Frank watched and waited, eyeing the fellow beside him as though he would like to have kicked him; but Sam neither saw nor heard.

'Curse the thing! The whole concern may go to Jericho for me!' And Frank, exasperated beyond endurance, flung pen and pencil madly at the dingy window and cracked a pane.

Sam's eyes came slowly back from dreamland, and he turned and surveyed his angry partner with dull surprise. Frank had dropped his elbows on the desk and buried his flushed face in his hands. Comprehension came slowly back to Sam's wooden face ; he surveyed his companion from head to foot, opened his mouth to speak, but checked himself, and then, turning away, resumed his stare at the wall.

There was another long silence, and a

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sense of the ridiculousness of the situation was creeping into Frank's mind, when Sam's eyes came slowly back from the wall, and he began to sidle away towards the corner made by his end of the desk and the chimney. Frank had turned to watch him, and their eyes met, and at last the taciturn ' Co.' condescended to speak.

'Mr. Frank, do you really think owt of Hetty Waine?'

And as he spoke Sam crowded deeper into his corner in his effort to get out of his partner's reach.

‘Hetty Waine? What on earth!-stick to the point, man!' and Frank was glaring at him in stupefied amazement, Sam measured his partner over with envious admiration ; and then, with a long, long sigh, he said, 'You can just have any woman you like, you can!'

Frank, still struggling with his astonishment, gasped out, 'Yes; but I'm not going to marry to save the business, if that's what you mean.’

Sam was still watching him intently, his low brow puckered with scowls of craftiness.

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‘Then you don't think nowt on her, Mr.Frank?'

Frank was uneasy; his relations to Hetty Waine were common property, it appeared, and to admit or deny just now was equally inconvenient.

‘Oh! well, she's--But what has that to do with these dirty money matters, man ? Confound it! Talk sense!'

Sam stared and stared with the same crafty scowl and the same inane backward shrinking.

‘I'd give more nor two hundred pound to be in your place.'

Frank gasped, and then smothered his cry. At another time the idea of Sam Broome `putting up' to ravishing Hetty Waine would have seemed a screaming joke; but he could not afford to offend him just now, and so, to flatter him into complaisance, he said, `Well, why not, man? The field's open yet, and you've the same chance as-as the rest of the world.'

Sam shook his head sadly, and then in melancholy tones he groaned, ' There's no chance for nobody whilst you're about, sir.'

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Frank smiled the smile of easy superiority. He had the reputation of being a master-hand with the fair sex; but as he smiled, his quick brain, still intent on escape from present embarrassments, had an inspiration. He always had to put words into the slow

Sam's mouth for him, and so he asked half earnestly, `You don't mean you'll buy me out, Sam?'

He blushed as he made the suggestion, and the now trembling 'Co.' was blushing too. Sam was shrinking away again, and as Frank, in spite of himself, burst into a great laugh, the partner hung his head in shame and groaned, `God help me! I believe I'd do anything to get her!'

Frank was thinking rapidly; relief from a difficulty much more serious than it had been made to appear to Sam was the all absorbing idea in his mind. Money, instant money, was the paramount need of the moment, and he suspected that his coarse partner had it. He was not formally committed to Hetty Waine; but the pressure of circumstances had been stimulating his fancies of late, and Hetty's modest fortune might

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become absolutely necessary to him, and even the prospect of it would make creditors easier to deal with. But he had recently made another conquest; and if this financial crisis could be tided over-well, at any rate he would have time to look about him.

'Well, I'm not engaged to Hetty as yet, but—'

'Oh! Mr. Frank,' and the stolid Sam became quite excited, `I wouldn't interfere wi' true love, you know.' And to Frank it sounded like the, spoony protest of a novelette-reading servant-girl, and he could scarcely keep contempt out of his tones.

'Well, I'm—Hetty's the finest of fine girls, you know, Sam; but—well I'm not sure—er—that I'm quite—'

'In love, sir? That's what I was meanin'; if you aren't, sir, and it's only like—flirting, as it were—'

'If I'd stand out of the way and give you a clear board—'

'No, no, sir! not a clear board, there's lots after her; but you're the one, sir, and nobody's no chance whilst you're in it.'

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There was that in Frank Blandon which was rising in indignant protest against the wild-goose idea he was playing with. It was debasing to himself, taking a mean advantage over a simple but trusting man, and it was treason to her with whose name he was trifling. But he was in desperate straits; trouble to him was not a thing to be fought, but fled from; and so in that office that Friday afternoon this ridiculous compact was made—that upon Sam finding the money for present emergencies Frank was to leave Hetty Waine to herself, and thus give his partner at least an opening. For Sam seemed to have got a fixed idea that if she could not get Frank, the next best thing in her eyes would be Frank's partner. Poor Sam had much to learn of the hearts of women.

But when Frank discovered that his companion had money, he suddenly remembered certain personal needs of his own, and suggested to the working-man partner the loan of another hundred pounds.

Sam, who was standing again at the desk, looked round with alarm, and began to

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retreat into the corner. `A hunderd pound more, Mr. Frank!'

'Yes, I really need it for affairs of my own. A personal loan, you know—nothing to do with the firm.'

Sam looked appealingly at his friend, and then stammered out, ' It'll take all I have, Mr. Frank!'

'Yes, but it's only a loan-a brief loan; I'll pay it back soon, and-er-well, I might be able to give you a lift with Hetty.'

Sam stood suddenly bolt upright, and then came close to his partner. 'You'll speak a word for me? Help me with her-you mean that?'

'Yes, yes; why not?'

'Why, Mr. Frank, if you'd do that, if you'd only—do that—'

'Certainly! If I don't have her, I'd sooner you than—'

'It's done!—it's done, sir!' and the simple fellow's eagerness was pathetic. 'No loan, sir; just help me, say a good word for me. I'm not you, but I'm your partner; say one good word for me, and the money's yours.'

Presently they went together to see the

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bank-manager; but as soon as they had parted, it came to Sam's slow-moving mind that Mr. Frank could not speak to Hetty without seeking her society ; and though he had probably never heard of Miles Standish, he was tortured with the fear that the dearly purchased help might turn out the gravest hindrance, for just for the moment something had gone wrong with his confidence in his partner.

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CHAPTER III
JOB'S COMFORTERS

NO observant person could possibly have mistaken the room into which Hetty Waine entered when she fled from her father and his friend. It was low and cornery, with two odd windows where you least expected them; the furniture, four-post bed, big squat wardrobe, low settee, and spindle-backed chairs were all of dark old oak, but so smothered in covers, fringes, embroidery, antimacassars, and woman's needlework of every conceivable kind that the sex of the occupant was proclaimed in every corner and by every arrangement. It was not necessary either to glance at the toilet table with its array of simple but mysterious knick-knacks; for every part of the room proclaimed that here dwelt a woman, and a pretty, dainty woman too.

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Hetty had thrown herself on the settee under the window which looked over God sham fields, and which was wide open. The scent-laden breezes with their drone of soft nature-sounds filled the room, the window sill was occupied with a long box of mignonette, whilst climbing roses festooned the sides and hung over the top. But for once Hetty was oblivious to it all, and as she lay there, with her hands folded behind her head

and her lithe figure stretched at full length on the couch, her eyes were closed, and the constant changes that swept over her lovely face indicated unusual mental disturbance. Only the heat kept her still, for her nimble brain was hopping and skipping from point to point, and her thoughts bounded from extreme interest to extreme alarm, whilst great unheeded blushes swept over her face, dyeing even her eyelids with deeper colour. The door was locked, there was no one to see, no prying world to draw harsh conclusions; and her thoughts rushed madly over each other in fierce efforts at self-assertion. The idle gossip of two old men had upset the placid little lake of her

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life, and she was suddenly struggling in roughest, coldest waters.

Her intimacy with Frank Blandon was so recent, so casual, and so transparently unsignificant that if even anybody had seen them—But here the blunt uncompromising Methodist in her, often her most unpleasant companion, compelled her to admit that though her outward behaviour to the young man had been the properest and his to her the most respectful, she had insisted to her self that it was more than common politeness, and the way he had begged the rose from her that morning—But she was off again; the middle-aged Methodist had vanished, and once more a beautiful woman was dallying in an old tree-bowered lane with a handsome young Adonis after love's eternal way. Six months ago Frank Blandon, the Grindell lady-killer, would not have given her a second glance; but now she was beautiful!-beautiful! He was such a king among them that he treated all women a little patronizingly, even flippantly, and they were proud to be noticed even on those terms; but his manner to her—she might

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have been the Hon. Mary Grace herself! He was only a tradesman, but he dressed in brown leather gaiters,¯ fancy waistcoat, and fine shooting-coat, and was on easy terms with the Squire's nephew, and might have had any of the dozen eligible `quality ' young ladies in the neighbourhood. But, oh, she was now beautiful! he, the one man of taste amongst them, had shown he thought so ; but the sour-faced Miss Methodism came

back all at once, and she felt suddenly chilled. He was a known trifler, his name had been linked with those of half of the eligible girls she knew—more than one had gone suddenly old and untidy and Frank Blandon did not pretend even to the decent morality of the average Church man. The scene in Bracken Lane was back with her—it had been with her most of the day—and in a few moments she was in the Elysian fields of incipient flirtation again, a smile played about her tempting little mouth, and lustrous light was rising into her eyes, when, with a little start, she came back to realities again. Her name would be linked with his—itself almost a

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disgrace in her strict circle—and she was being regarded as a providential instrument for the realization of a long-delayed achievement. She was in the old lane again asking for the sale of the land, she saw herself shyly announcing her success to her father and his friend, saw the foundation-stone ceremony—Heigh presto! she was watching Frank's face as he heard his and her names associated, hearing his scornful laugh and his half sneering lament about `those petticoats.' He would cut her in the street, she would be spoken of pityingly as another of his victims, she would lose her good looks and become a Grindell dowdy—And then she began again, and went over it all a second time; and the more she thought the more she shrank from the consequences of what she had done, but the more, also, she felt sure that at the long last the stern old Methodist in her would conquer, and she would do her dreary duty. It always had been so, she had fought many a little battle, had broken out many a time in rebellion; but that sober, middle-aged Methodist double

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of hers was remorseless, and had always had her way.

Meanwhile, what was she to do with her father and Jossy Sweetlove? Her very manner of leaving them—silly that she was was suspicious, and confirmatory of the barber's contention. There was nothing, nothing whatever in this very slightest intimacy.

Oh! it was absurd; but the middle-aged lady, now deep down and very sulky, was contradicting, and it was ridiculous to discover that for once that hard voice gave her pleasure and brought back her brighter visions. But she could not even deny so intangible a thing without confirming the very impression she wished to remove. It was an absurd and most provoking position, and all she could do was to laugh it down and disarm suspicion by gentle raillery. But, unfortunately, the march of events gave her no time, for the very next morning her problem became complicated by a most unexpected and amazing circumstance.

The household of Jessamine Cottage consisted of four persons: Hetty and her

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father; Wess (John Charles Wesley), her fourteen-year-old brother; and Jim (Jemima) Grubb, their middle-aged servant house keeper. Hetty was titular mistress, and managed her father, who required no particular regulation; but Jim was the real ruler, and, though outwardly austere and uncompromising, she was the devoted slave of the son and heir, so that the tail of the family wagged the head, a condition of things which secretly amused the father but awakened the occasional indignation of the daughter. Jim was almost a gipsy in complexion, but was round-faced and warmly coloured, whilst her high cheek-bones and decided chin admonished discretion in all who had dealings with her.

The earlier meals of the day were taken in the large, brick-floored kitchen, which was the acknowledged domain of Jim and her idol, and Hetty was never allowed to forget for long that she was there on sufferance. On the morning after the events described in the last chapter Saturday morning—the breakfast was half over when Hetty appeared. She was too

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healthy to have lost much sleep through her perturbations; but she arrived down stairs in a-for her-severe mood, the ultimate feeling in her mind about the occurrences of the day

before having been that of annoyance. Her fresh young beauty was too familiar a thing to attract any notice from the rest of her family, and as she drew up in her light morning gown to the table her father was busy with the morning paper, whilst Jim surveyed her curiously from the pantry door, and Wess had thrown back his curly black head in a vain attempt to balance a fork on the end of his nose, and under cover of this gymnastic freak was screwing his eyes round towards his sister's plate to a degree that threatened a permanent glide.

'Wess dear, don't do that; you'll—'

But she stopped short; her hand had touched a letter lying under the edge of her plate, and the first careless glance brought a startled look in her eyes, whilst the second made her duck her head over the missive as though scrutinizing the post

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mark, but in reality to hide her face. She felt those 'horrid' hot blushes coming, and instinctively looked up, partly to keep the tell-tale colour back, and partly to discover if she was being observed.

Jim was rattling pots in the pantry with unnecessary violence; and Wess was screwing his eyes round at a frightful angle the other way, whilst the muscles of his face and the veins of his neck betrayed that he was struggling fiercely to keep back a wicked grin. Apparently his whole soul was absorbed in balancing the fork.

Hetty's heart sank; she feared no one as she feared those two, and she comprehended but too clearly that they had already examined externally what the post had brought her. She put the letter aside with a pretence of indifference; but evenwhilst pouring out her coffee she let it over-run as she stole a second glance at the missive. It was in a blue business envelope, with Blandon & Co., Builders, Grindell, printed on the top edge of the front. She sat up and tried to compose herself,

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abruptly terminating her brother's performance by asking him to pass the butter.

The preparation of the toast gave her opportunity for glancing again at her note. It thrilled her to think that it was from Frank; but no man would send a *billet doux* in a business envelope-at any rate, Frank Blandon would not. The writing, too, was poor and rather laboured-not a clerk's, certainly; and yet surely it could not be *his* writing. Then she sat abruptly up again, suddenly aware that two pairs of black eyes were boring into her like searchlights. The optical torturing instruments turned quickly away, and Wess was scowling ferociously at an advertisement on the back of his father's paper. But she was not deceived; they were dying of curiosity, and she would let them. The note was probably one of those unnecessary little messages which amorous young gentlemen usually find excuse for sending to the girls they fancy in order to initiate correspondence; but trifling though it was, she could not read it with those boring eyes upon her. And

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yet to leave it and carry it away to her room would only justify their silly suppositions.

But just then—oh, merciful interposition!—her father laid aside his paper and called for the 'Book,' and Hetty was never more thankful to drop on her knees in her life. A sober restraint was upon them when they rose from family worship, and it just lasted long enough to effect her deliverance, for with a sudden intuition she turned, fixed her eyes on her persecutor, whilst her left hand felt for the letter, and a moment later, with a meekly triumphant little mock curtsey, she left Jim looking 'dished' and Wess uttering a subdued whistle of discomfiture, and scampered away to her own retreat. But quick though she was, her old maid double entered the room with her, and a pretty to do there was before she could get her letter opened.

'It is a letter—a real long letter,' said Hetty the beautiful, with a shy blush.

'It's tickets for the flower—show, and highly improper,' retorted old maid Methodist.

'It's a request for an interview; it's long

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enough for a propo—' began the happy maid.

'It's sent from the office on business paper, and disrespectful,' interrupted old maid Prudery.

'It is nothing!—nothing!' protested hopeful youth, somewhat hypocritically.

'It's the thin end of the wedge, and wicked,' insisted sage old woman.

A little paper-knife settled the question, and a moment later the happy maid was reading a veritable proposal, though the printed heading did stare so at her whilst old maid Methodist made running comments thatwere soon lost in astonished exclamations. It was a long letter, and prolix and various, passionate enough for the beauteous maid, but respectful and serious enough for solemn Miss Methodism. The writing was common, the spelling not immaculate; there were adoration and business, humble pleading and harsh commercial boasting, as of one whose chief earthly glory was his connexion with Blandon & Co.; and when the astounding production had been got through and the signature reached, it would have been hard to say

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whether Hetty the maid or Hetty the Methodist was the more amazed. It was a proposal clear enough, and sufficiently hot and eager for any woman; but it was not from handsome Frank Blandon at all, but from his insignificant, commonplace partner, Sam Broome.

The first feeling that took definite shape in the welter of emotions was that of disappoint ment, and the second was a sharp sense of the impropriety of the first. She had a little thrill at the discovery of another worshipper at the shrine of her beauty, and several little stabs of inconsistent resentment as she realized how much could be said from the commonsense point of view for this latest aspirant. Ashamed of her first feeling ofdisappointment, she now felt that she ought to be ashamed of her lack of interest in the offer now made to her.

She turned the letter over absently, and studied its closely written lines; but awoke presently to the discovery that she was chiefly wondering whether Frank knew of the letter, and whether he could have had anything to do with its composition. She tried to realize

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herself as Mrs. Sam Broome, but found presently that she was analysing Frank's manner when he asked for the little rose she had given him. She compelled herself to recall all she knew about Sam, and awoke to the fact that she was debating Frank's seriousness and his reputation for flirting.

She read the epistle again, and yet again, for only certain parts of it adhered to her memory, and the thing she knew most definitely at the close was that Sam seemed inordinately proud of his connexion with Blandon's, and evidently regarded that as his chief recommendation. She even caught herself feeling very serious as she wondered whether Frank would be pleased or other wise if she accepted Sam, and she was alarmed to discover that the suggestion that Frank had been paving the way for his partner annoyed her.

Then it was the turn of the ludicrous site question, and she found that the project might help to reconcile her father to parting with her; but the momentary gratification thus created had to be sternly resisted, for it was grounded on the immodest supposition

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that Frank would be her husband. How would the site question be affected by her acceptance of Sam Broome? Did the much-coveted land belong to the firm or to the Blandon family? But the question was, What did she think herself of Sam Broome? Alas! in a moment she was deep in recollections of what Mrs. and the Misses Broome had always said of that person.

Reflection was growing more painful, and so she turned once more to the passionate

parts of the letter just to recover herself. And so that long, bright summer morning wore on, and two hours after breakfast she was no nearer a decision than the moment she fled from the kitchen. But domestic duties called her ; presently she would have the whole afternoon to herself, and mean while there was work to be done. She stepped to her glass, brushed back her hair, glanced absently at the condition of her dress, and descended into the kitchen again, for getting momentarily the danger that lurked in that castle of her tormentors.

'Bang!'

She had entered Jim's throne-room with

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her thoughts in the clouds, but the bang brought her back to harsh realities again, and there stood young Wess, his back to the door he had so promptly closed, and a look of elfish triumph on his face; whilst Jim had risen from her employment of floor washing, and was standing arms akimbo near the other door.

Wess gave a wild Indian whoop, and leered at her victoriously; she had forgotten that it was Saturday morning, and the young rascal would not beat school. Fairly at bay, Hetty called up all her dignity; and, discreetly preferring her female antagonist, she turned upon her coldly, and was about to demand explanation, when Jim anticipated her by crying sternly:

‘Miss Hetty, don't you think no better of yourself nor that?'

‘Jemima!'

Jim's name never got its due length in that household except under very serious circumstances.

‘Are you a silly froth-top simpleton like t'rest on 'em that's a disgrace to their sexes?'

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'Jemima Grubb!'

Now, Hetty had hoped to find Jemima alone and obtain information about Sam Broome, who until now had never particularly interested her. The attentions of Frank Blandon were secrets of her own, which she had imagined she could play with in perfect security, and here they were presented to her as commonest property—for there could be no doubt as to whom she meant. But the things she was hearing were perfectly scandalous. Frank did not belong to their circle; his name was scarcely ever mentioned in the family; and she had assumed that the opinions held by her lady friends about the young builder were the opinions of the whole town. Her amaze ment at this attack, therefore, threw her off her guard for a moment, and she turned in sheer stupefaction from Jim to Wess, and almost gave herself away as she gasped, ` Why, Wess, what do you know about him?'

It was all that was required, and in a moment she was being bombarded from first one and then the other.

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'He's a bad 'un!—through an' through bad! '

'He's a low down 'un! Why, Het, he bets! ,

'He's no more religion nor these here pattens!'

'He drinks! he's i' debt! He sitteth in the seat of the scornful, and standeth in the way of sinners.'

The excited denunciators were not more breathless than Hetty herself. She had never heard more than the barest hints of such things, and was simply astounded. These two were old allies against her—the only two persons who ever crossed her; but at this moment the family fighting instinct came to her rescue, she drew herself up to her fullest height, stepped back a little, took them both in with a glance of triumph, and, sweeping them a grand curtsey, laughed in their faces, and said:

'Peeping and prying oft leads to crying (one of Jemima's pet nursery proverbs). All this because you thought my letter was from Mr. Blandon. Well, it was from somebody else.'

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Wess was clearly *nonplussed*; but Jemima, possessing knowledge she was too discreet to impart even to *her idol, looked* grim and unconvinced.

Encouraged by his ally's look, Wess plucked up again, and after a moment's hesitation he left his post, and, standing where he could watch his sister's face, he cried:

‘Well, you daren't show it to us, any way!’

‘Show it to you! how dare you, sir!'

‘She daren't, Jim; see, she daren't! It *was* a love-letter.'

And then Hetty, generally quite a match for the allied powers, and not averse on occasion to battle, made a slip. With another taunting little curtsey, she avoided her brother's eyes, and cried, ‘ People don'tt usually send love-letters in business envelopes.'

But as she spoke the little evasion collidedsomehow with her sturdy honesty, and sent a colour-signal to her cheeks, which the watchful Wesley recognized instantly.

‘It is, Jim! it's a love-letter! Look!—

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look!' and pointing to his sister's now flaming cheeks, he turned to his fellow conspirator and crowed in wicked triumph.

Hetty moved back a little with her head down to get time for self-recovery, for Jemima's black eyes were boring holes in her hot face. She remembered that in the three other prematurely frustrated little ‘affairs of the heart' she had had, Wess had on each occasion known all about matters almost before she had realized them herself. She knew also that he had substantial reasons for encouraging her suitors, and had been able to replenish chronically depleted capital thereby. But the others were quite ordinary persons, more after Sam Broome's style, whereas Frank Blandon was known to be lavish of money. Why, then, was the always mercenary Wess so fiercely prejudiced against the young builder? and why was Jim, who always talked worldly prudence to her on matrimonial matters, also so strong in her opposition? There was evidently much

to reflect upon and get to know in this tangled affair, and she must have time to think. And so,

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intent only on getting away, and too old now to fight her way out as of yore, she said, with a show of jaunty defiance:

'And what if it is a love-letter? And what if it is from Frank Blandon? What is that to either of you?'

They stood looking at her in evident doubt; and whilst Jemima, understanding, of course, many things not apparent to Wess, drew down her black brows and scowled in baffled perplexity, Ness, full only of one abhorrent thought, drew himself up to his full height, opened wide his eyes in amazed protest, and was just commencing a reply that betrayed, even in its first sentences, much more than juvenile prejudice, when the back door opened and in walked 'Father.'

A great fear leapt into H etty's heart. Wess, who usually thought that the less a parent knows about matters the better, was now excited enough, she could see, to table the whole thing then and there. She could manage them all separately; but if the question were broached now, what Ness knew and Jemima knew and her father knew put

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together, would make a terrible tale indeed. And so in her desperation she plucked the hapless cause of all this hubbub from her bodice, thrust it at the astonished Ness, and cried

'There, sir! there's the letter! read it for yourself, if you doubt me!'

It was a happy shot, springing from an unerring instinct; for whilst Jemima made a sudden exclamation of protest, Wess drew back with a haughty toss of the head and a scornful lip, and she, confident at any rate of present safety, escaped from the kitchen.

That was the most restless day of Hetty Waine's life. The flattered maiden and the suspicious woman struggled incessantly within her, and the various issues of the complicated situation chased each other through her brain the whole day long. She had relied on being able to get from Jemima some particulars about the man who had written to her, but that sententious lady now knew too much to make inquiry safe. The opinions of her brother about Frank were, she supposed, intensified editions of MissGrubb's own; but, on further reflection, she

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was not quite sure of that, and if her surmise was not correct, then the case against the young builder was so much the stronger. She persuaded herself that Jemima's standard of conduct was so narrowly Methodistic, that Frank would not in any case be able to satisfy her; but the language used by her critics, though they were both addicted to exaggeration, scarcely justified that conclusion.

Of Sam Broome she knew little; but she could easily understand that he was credited with those homely virtues of honesty, industry, and devotion to duty, which went for so much and more than excused the absence of polish with such persons as Jemima, Jossy Sweetlove, and even her father.

It really was a fine proposal—in parts, if she had cared at all for Sam, it would have seemed a lovely letter; but here, instead of passing to the serious question whether she cared for Sam or not, she was suddenly falling in love with Joss Sweetlove's ridiculous proposal of the day before, and revelling in the delicious idea that what neither money nor influence nor prayer

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had been able to accomplish for Grindell Methodism, a mere word of hers had done.

As the day wore on her restlessness in creased; her father obviously avoided her, and had an embarrassed, apologetic look when they met; twice at least she surprised Wess and Jemima in solemn, muttering converse, which she feared boded ill for her; her old

maid double seemed to have taken possession of the bedroom, and gave her not a moment's rest; and there was that tantalizing letter, that demanded some sort of answer at once. Oh, that she could escape from it all into the woods and fields and solitude! The little house felt like a prison.

And at last she succeeded. It was warm, and the air was soft and fragrant. Her desire had been to get *away* and sit in some cool shade or by some murmuring stream and think. But Hetty was young and strong, and her thoughts were many, and took tyrannical possession of her; and so she simply walked and walked, and still walked, until, just as the sun was dipping behind Hapsby Knob, she turned in at the

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top end of Bracken Lane with a sudden sense of weariness.

'Good evening!'

The voice was low and respectful, thougha trace too familiar, and Hetty with a start and a blush turned round to greet Frank Blandon.

He wore a faultlessly-fitting light suit, and the rose she had given him yesterday was in his buttonhole, surrounded with fresh maidenhair. He was as smiling and hand some as ever, and would have held the little shy hand she gave him had she permitted. All the maiden was rising in her, she could scarcely speak for choking, and her only hope was in walking on. He dropped quietly into her step, and talked of the weather and the beauties around them, and when twice at least his hand touched the little one swinging at her side she drew it away. H e still talked, hinting compliments and playing with words as though on the verge of open admiration, and she was praying that he might not see her trembling.

He talked and talked, and once almost touched her arm as though he would have

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taken it; but she seemed to have eyes in her elbows, and moved away. He still murmured on, and the very lowness to whichhe had dropped his voice contained a

subtle flattery. All woman, only woman she seemed, and lovely enough for summer's own goddess; but she was fighting her own battle, and secretly despairing of the result. He stopped, but her feet carried her on in spite of herself, and he caught her up with a laugh and another compliment.

Fifty yards farther, the tumult within her became almost unbearable, and then she pulled up and put out her hand to dismiss him. They were not more than half-way through the lane, and he looked disappointed.

`Good evening, Mr. Blandon! Yes, the air is delic— Ah!'

He had clung to the hand she offered, and was drawing her towards him. Then he let the hand go, and was throwing out an arm to catch and kiss her. She had been fearing some such thing for two minutes, that seemed two eternities; but it was quite a new Hetty Waine who stood there in the lane, cold and proud as any

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queen, and looking straight into his quailing eyes, until he felt a perfect scoundrel before her, and could have sunk in shame at her feet. It was a long moment, and when at last she spoke it was the very last word he ever expected to hear from her—or from any woman:

'I did not know you were so vulgar, Mr. Blandon!'

It was he who moved first. With flushed cheek and dropped head he muttered some sort of apologetic protest, but came no nearer, and a moment later he was going back up the lane ; and she, who had stood it out like an outraged empress, burst into a half-hysterical little sob, and fled on swiftest foot towards home.

And when they both had gone and the lane was quiet, a slim figure crawled out from behind the bole of an old tree in the hedge, and a boy, nipping his hands together between his knees in ecstatic triumph, cried, between rapturous chuckles

'Good lad, Het! Old Het for ever! And bad luck to Bummer Blandon!'

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CHAPTER IV

CROSS CURRENTS

WHO will ever make clear to us all the complicated inconsistencies of the human heart? The Hetty Waine who at the critical moment had been so high-spirited and self-respecting in Bracken Lane, and had so easily repelled a too-bold lover, was another and much weaker person when a few minutes later she threw herself upon the couch in the window recess of her own room. She was limp, dispirited, disappointed. All the woman in her was protesting. She could feel that strong arm about her still, and every drop of blood in her body seemed to be surging up to that little spot on her cheek where the kiss would have fallen; whilst she thrilled at the thought of what might have been. Right, honour, conscience, seemed mere words, and old maid Methodist had become

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for the time positively detestable. She always knew it would be so: she was made for romance, for excitement; all the woman in her cried out for a handsome lover, an adventurous courtship, and a dream of bliss ; and she knew all the time that she would make a humdrum match of unimpeachable respectability with some decent common place chapel-man.

She thought for a moment of the letter she had to write; but in briefest time she was brooding over Frank and what he would do next. Her rebuff in the lane had been so palpable that the high-spirited young trades man would henceforth give her a wide berth. That was right, as satisfactory as it could possibly be; yet at bottom it was not what she really wanted. Wanted! Why be hypocritical? She knew it would not be so; it would make him more in earnest than ever, perhaps turn indefinite trifling into serious endeavour. But the next moment she was asking herself whether she had not known this all along, and had repulsed him with the secret consciousness that it would stimulate his ardour. And then Hetty

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Waine abhorred herself-an easy thing for her to do at any time.

This humbling thought gave a momentary chance to Sam Broome, and he was soon getting a consideration which her slight knowledge of him did not quite justify, but which was prompted by a blind impulse of atonement. And so the moments fled by, and phase after phase of her difficulties passed before her active mind until, more to escape from her perplexities than to settle them, she arose to write her letter. More easily said than done. It was not that she had no experience of the task, not that her mind was not made up; but—but—the good parts of Sam's long epistle all came crowding into her mind, and she found herself standing at the window and actually crying because she had to hurt another's feelings.

Oh, was there nothing less she could do? A new humility and tenderness were upon her. Was there nothing gentler, less disappointing? For, let him be what he might, this latest of her lovers was most dreadfully in earnest. Couldn't she put him off? write nothing that would greatly hurt, but

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nothing that would encourage, and just let him down gradually? He was almost a stranger; but your real woman has always a tenderness for the man, however homely, who has paid her the compliment of a proposal, and so she hesitated and searched for a gentle subterfuge. And as she wavered and delayed, her opportunity passed, for there was a knock at the door, and Jemima, spruce and shining in her Saturday afternoon gown, stood in the doorway holding out a note. There was scornful disdain in her looks, and she held the letter as though loath to touch it.

‘And you're wanted.'

Hetty took and glanced at the missive, and then back at the housekeeper.

'Wanted! Who wants me?’

Jemima, lofty and inscrutable, as though forbidding the thought that she had forgotten for an instant the doings of the morning, tossed her head, and answered, ‘A man.'

'A man?—not Mr.—'

Frank had flashed into her mind—he was coming to apologize; but she checked

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herself, and asked coaxingly, `Who is it, Jim?'

But Jemima, still unrelenting, was already halfway down the stairs, repeating laconically as she descended, ' A man.'

Hetty, curious, but a little vexed, stepped back towards the window, and glanced again at her letter-her second letter-and hesitated whether to open it before she went down or not. But perhaps the man, whoever he was, had brought the letter, and was waiting for an answer. On opening the epistle, how ever, she gave a little gasp, and absently raised her hand to her heart. It was signed 'Frank Blandon.' She put it down some what hastily, and turned to descend the stairs. Then she came back and took up the note, but stood wavering and undecided. She must not keep the visitor waiting—she would go; but her eye caught the first lines of the communication, and the man down stairs was forgotten.

Three times she went through that epistle before she could grasp its significance; it was a surprise, a perplexity, and an embarrassment. It took the wind out of her

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sails; it accused, humbled, and excited her. There was the expected apology; but it was strangely dignified, and had an undertone of protest, almost of rebuke, which put her in the wrong. There was an avowal of love, full, frank, and unrestrained, which made her feel that she had been the aggressor, and had trifled with honest, wholehearted advances. And then there was a declaration, a passionate, almost bitter complaint of the lightness of women, and the heartlessness with which they sported with the holy mystery of love; the whole closing with another avowal of devotion and an appeal for justice or at least a hearing.

Hetty had gone hot and cold as she read, and the close of the third perusal left her almost dumfounded. She was angry, she was ashamed, she was smitten all over with self-reproaches; every line of the letter was a fresh amazement, every glowing word a new rebuke, and even old maid Methodist within her seemed to have gone over for the nonce to the enemy.

But there was another knock at the door.

‘Oh! Ah, yes, I'm coming, Jemima.'

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The door was thrust open a little, and through the inch-wide aperture came the solemn rebuke, 'So's Christmas.'

Aroused at last, Hetty glanced at her glass, brushed back a wayward lock or two, and surrendered to her keeper, who marched stolidly downstairs like a jailor leading a prisoner. At the stairfoot she stood aside to let her young mistress pass, murmuring as she did so another of her quaint proverbs, `When fools have bethought themselves, the market's over.' But the crabbed bit of philosophy missed its aim, as Hetty was already in the little drawing-room. She would need all her courage, she told herself ; she was going to be very firm, but very kind-yes, especially she must be very kind.

‘I had to come, ma'am. I couldn't wait.'

And she was aware that the little soft hand she had held out was being shaken and eagerly clung to; whilst two poorish eyes, suddenly alight and glowing, were devouring her with hungry, beseeching looks.

‘It was very kind of you, Mr.—Mr. Broome; but won't you sit?'

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‘Sit, ma'am! I can neither sit nor stand nor walk nor think. I know I've been bold. I've took you unawares, ma'am; but I couldn't I couldn't do no other!'

Hetty's heart sank. His 'ma'am' and his bad grammar chilled her, but—well she dare not look into his eyes.

'You're very kind-much too kind; but—'

'Yes, ma'am, I know, ma'am; but I'm getting on, you know. I'm a partner now—Blandon & Co., ma'am; and I could keep you respectable.'

Hetty was recovering; this kind of wooing helped her. But she must be kind—very kind.

'Yes; but I'm afraid I—'

`Yes, ma'am, of course! I'm not quality, and my folks are nobody; but I'm getting on, I am really! I shall soon be ready—'

'Yes, Mr. Broome; but you mistake me, I don't know you, and—and—'

'Well, ask Mr. Blandon, ma'am, and he'll tell you; and oh, ma'am, I could just fall down afore you!'

Oh! it was going to be much harder than

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she thought; these dull people are often very dogged.

'Yes, Mr. Broome; but you don't understand, I—'

'No, ma'am, I don't; but you could teach me. I'd learn anything, I would truly.'

'I—I was not thinking of that. Don't imagine I desp—I think little of you; I should hate myself. It is not that, Mr. Broome.'

'God bless you, ma'am! I'm nothing, I know I am nothing; but a lady like you could—'

'Oh, no!—no!' And Hetty was shaking her head energetically; for the fellow would energetically not see, and was turning all her words to his own advantage. 'Mr. Broome, this is a question of love, the great, awful, holy question of love ' (this with a vivid blush); 'marriage is a life-long union, and I haven't thought of such a thing—how could I?'

Broome, his soft little eyes swimming withmystic light, snapped her up before she had finished.

'No! no! you're wanting to try me, and prove me, ma'am, and find out all about me.

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Yes, of course! Ma'am, I'll wait. I'll give you time! I'll do anything on earth if you'll give me a chance.'

There was a pause. Oh, why was she so weak? and who could have thought that this plain, uneducated nobody could affect her like this ? She must be firm.

'Mr. Broome, I cannot listen to you, and—and you really must not think of it.'

This was said very slowly and deliberately—she really was taking a proper stand; but all at once some queer emotion, coming she scarce knew whence, welled up within her, and she added, 'I really respect you very much—as far as I've known you, and I'm greatly obliged for your-your preference; but—well, I never thought of such a thing! Never!'

For twenty minutes more he pleaded, most of his arguments rubbing the woman in her the wrong way, and at last she had said the words she hoped never to need to say, and he sank back in his chair and buried his head in his hands; she really thought the fellow was crying.

But Sam, uncultured and simple, was yet

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too much of a man for that; and when he lifted his head and rose to go, he had himself well in hand.

'Miss Waine,' he said, and his face was deadly white, whilst his small eyes were wells of anguish that haunted her for days—'Miss Hetty, you're above me, and since I've been here you've been going miles and miles higher every minute. You're so kind, you make me feel like a—like a snail in its shell, Every moment I stop here you go higher, and I sink lower. I know now how awfully I've insulted you—'

Hetty, with sudden tears in her eyes, sprang forward to protest; but with a strange new dignity he raised his hand and stopped her, and then went on:

'I'm a circus clown putting up to an angel. I can never have you, I see! I don't know much about angels; but you've made me feel to-night what they must be like. My

inward parts has been washed in a wonderful bath, and I feel like a man in another world. I'll not trouble you, I'll not even come near you; but I'll get that good ness you've got, and I'll love you for ever

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for showing me what it's like. I've a broken heart, I've a hopeless future; but I've found out how grand it is to be good, and I'll love you as no man ever loved his wife for teaching me.'

It was the strangest speech Hetty had ever heard, and struck into her a tremulous awe. She had no eyes nor tongue to speak; and when she came to herself, she was alone in the room, and could hear Jemima giving information about the weather to her departing guest as though her announcements were the newest of new discoveries.

Joshua Sweetlove was a great diplomatist, and had a more substantial claim to that distinction than usually falls to the lot of his class, for he had achieved one brilliant success. I t occurred many years before our story opens, and had nothing to do with this history, except that it served always to remind Joshua of what was expected from him, and to stimulate him to further endeavours. He had bought, for the proverbial old song, the little shop in which he carried on his business. It was in a very advantageous position in

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Market Street, and had been coveted, waited for, and bidden for, both by owners of adjacent property and the ordinary local speculator, times out of mind during the previous years; and when everybody had given up the effort to obtain it, Jossy had gone and got it without any difficulty.

A little low two-story affair, with a bow window jutting upon the pavement, and giving the building a corpulent appearance, it stood wedged into the middle of a row of tall shops and offices which lined the principal street of the town. It was at once an eyesore to the aesthetically minded, an aggravation to the town improvement advocates,

a red rag to property jobbers, and a Naboth's vineyard to its neighbours. A fine stone-fronted wine-and-spirit merchant's store was on one side, and the most fashionable draper's shop in Grindell on the other. These were both ornate triumphs of modern local architecture, and were always tastefully painted; whilst the barber's shop was always brazenly shabby, and seemed to glory in its lack of decoration.

It was perfectly well known in the town

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that the sale of this little freehold would have enabled the barber to retire in a small way; but as the wine-and-spirit merchant, who had resorted to every possible expedient to get hold of the property, said to his friends whenever the provoking subject came up, 'That jackass wouldn't part with it if he was starving! Aggravation is milk and honey to him.'

That Joshua understood the situation to a nicety goes without saying, for not a week passed but he detailed for perhaps the twentieth time to some leisurely customer one or other of the deep, dark schemes which had been concocted for getting possession of his shop, and the triumphant manner in which he had detected the conspiracies and defeated them. That the shop was still resorted to by most of the male tradesmen of Grindell, its owner's obstinacy and loquaciousness notwithstanding, can only be explained by the general inconsistency of human nature, though the barber himself naturally enough ascribed it to his own superior skill in his profession.

There was a back entrance to the shop—

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another neighbourly grievance—which enabled customers to come and go by Little Gungate, thus avoiding the publicity of the main street ; and by this long passage young Blandon visited the barber on the very evening of the day on which he had been repulsed by Hetty Waine, and about an hour after he had dispatched to her the letter already described. He was in a somewhat sore and fretful mood that was fast becoming

chronic with him, and did not at first notice that his old antagonist was unusually bland and conciliatory. The barber would attend to him himself, and in the inner room, a place usually reserved for favourites, friends, and the gentler sex, a double barrelled favour which even the preoccupied builder could not help noticing.

‘Hair cut? Moustache? and shave? Right, sir!' And the barber commenced to fix his cloths, humming as he did so a snatch of a Methodist tune in greatest good humour.

‘I've said it afore, sir, and I'll say it now to your face: you've the fashionablest shade of hair in this town, sir, bar none.'

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A compliment from Jossy Sweetlove! Frank could hardly believe his ears; but personal vanity was stronger in him even than suspicion, and he muttered something which the barber seemed too busy to notice.

‘For a gent, sir, of course ; there's a lady in Grindell as beats you ; but then ladies is ladies.'

Touched on another of his weaknesses, Frank was pricking his ears.

‘A lady? Who may that be?'

‘It's just the exact shade, sir '—snip! snip!—‘awful fashionable, and she's enough on it for a dozen grand ladies'—snip! snip! snip!

‘Indeed! Who is it, Joshua? '

'I don't think'—and the barber stood off to take a professional glance at his work—no! I don't think as you'll know her' snip! snip!—‘not intimate. She's one of our mission-room young ladies.'

There was a little intentional sting in the young ladies,' for the barber knew full well that Frank did not ordinarily give that title to the frequenters of the candle-loft. Frank guessed instantly who was meant, and knew

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well enough how intimate the barber was with the Waines. It happened also to be a subject upon which he was much interested just then; but it would never do to show it too easily, and so he ventured, ' Not Edie Plewman?'

'No, sir'—snip! snip!—'Miss Waine, sir—Waine, the grocer's daughter. Ah! sir, it's a living treat ; but I shouldn't talk to gay young Tellers like you about sitch things'—snip! snip! snip!

Frank had a fit of cold suspicion. Was this most unusually civil barber pulling his leg or pumping him? Had anybody seen anything? Had Hetty gone home and blabbed? She looked angry enough when she left him even for that, and these Methodists had some amazing notions of things.

There was a pause, broken only by the sound of the scissors, until Jossy, who could never wait, went on, `They say she's turned out a beauty—a little on this side, sir—I'm no judge of sitch things, but I do know she's clever'—snip! snip!

'Clever, is she? They're not often pretty

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and clever.' And Frank was labouring to preserve his air of indifference, and also venting one of his pet notions; he disliked clever women.

'Well, I know she's clever—and good too, as good as gold!'—snip! snip!—she is that!'

'She's a pattern Methodist, I suppose you mean?' This with a perceptible sneer.

Joshua's eyes were blazing, and he only just missed his customer's left ear. I Methodist, sir? Out—and—out! That girl would give the very hair—grand hair—of her head to get a site for our new chapel.'

Frank nearly jammed his head into the scissors' point; but as the barber sprang back with an exclamation, he had ` time to recover himself, whilst a whole crowd of sudden schemes sprang into his brain. The barber meanwhile was making hideous grimaces to himself in a glass which the visitor could not see.

'I think she is rather pretty,' drawled Frank, purposely ignoring the point and wishing to mislead him.

‘There's summat wrong with the law

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when folks can't get a bit a-land for payin' for it.'

Of all things Frank dreaded a political argument with such a redoubtable democrat as Jossy; but the barber's last remark put spurs to his already rapid thoughts.

'Ah! you Methodists want land for nothing.'

‘Nothin'? We'd pay anything! Twice times, four times the vally to get what we want. Haven't we tried times and times again?'

Frank knew all this as well as his informant; but the thoughts now racing so madly through his brain had suggestions in them which were tempting him sorely,and were as new as they were alluring—a whole scheme, in fact, was rapidly shaping itself within him.

Joshua was delicately trimming the moustache, and talking, therefore, was perilous.

'You're mixed up wi' property, Mr. Blandon; you don't happen to know' snip! snip!—‘of a good site '—snip! 'any price awmost'—snip! snip! snip!

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‘I? No—er—does she—is Miss Waine strong on getting the site?'

‘Strong! I tell you, sir, that lady would do anythin' to get it, just anythin'!'

Frank, lathered now up to the eyes, could not speak, and so Jossy, briskly rubbing the razor on his strop, went on, ' There's one nice little site as we've all set our hearts on.'

Frank was still helpless; but his eyes asked the question the barber was angling for. ‘It's just a nice size, and conven—well, we'd pay double for that to some plots. Mr. Waine and his daughter was talkin' about that site no longer gone nor yesterday—a little bit more back, sir.'

Frank was on a terrible strain of curiosity, but began to think that his very compulsory silence was helping him.

'The man as sold us that there plot 'ud get God's blessin' on him as long as he lived.'

But that was a wasted shot.

'He'd hearn all our gratitood—Mr. Waine's and Miss Hetty's too.'

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The blinking of Frank's eyes told the wily barber all he wanted to know, and so he went on, ' I can just see her now. If she was hearing as we'd really got it wouldn't she be beamin'!

'What plot is it ?' asked Frank, forgetting his condition, and imperilling his chin in his eagerness.

'Steady, sir!—steady! Near touch that! It's—er—it belongs to a gent as could spare it easy, and isn't bigoted, I hope. We're all goin' to the same place, you know. Towel, sir?'

Frank had risen, and was wiping his face at the glass; whilst Jossy stood watchfully waiting for the next question, but careful not to discover any particular eagerness.

'But you candle-garrets have no tin ; you'd want it for nothing, I suppose ?'

'No, sir! We can pay, thank goodness!' and then, with a sudden recollection of Hetty's charms, the barber added, ' If, we couldn't get it given, sir.'

'Given? Absurd! Land's land in these days, Jossy. But where is it?'

'It's yours, sir—bottom end of your

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wood-yard, sir; there's only lumber on it now.'

'O—h!' and Frank burst into a great laugh. 'That's your little game, is it! Why, man, that site is worth a pot of money!' And he paused, waiting somewhat eagerly for the reply.

'Never mind, sir! Anythin' in reason. Can we have it, sir? that's the point!'

'Have it? It! Why, man, that plot's a gold-mine! My partner thinks it worth heaps!'

'But can we have it? Money's no object. Let's have it, that's all!'

And the barber would have argued the point ; but Frank wanted time and solitude to consider all the bearings of the question, and so, slipping his pence on the table, he swung out, crying as he departed, ` We'll see ; but you must be prepared to pay for it, Jossy.'

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CHAPTER V

A BARBER IN LOVE

FRANK had scarcely closed the hairdresser's little swing door when the barber executed a wild war-dance, stopping suddenly in the middle of it as a new idea broke upon him. Then he treated himself to another spin round the room and a prolonged series of grimaces at the glass, threw off his apron, put on his coat, opened the inner door for a stern admonitory glance at his assistant, who was struggling with a series of stubbly week old chins in the shop, and then followed Frank down the passage, and off towards Jessamine Cottage.

Jossy always walked very fast; but on this occasion inward elation lent, speed to his heels, and he almost skipped down little Gungate. Coming to-the cross street, however, he turned down Bob Lane, which led

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past the grocer's premises. He never by any accident visited his friends by the front gate; it would have been a concession to formality which he scorned. His pace slackened as he approached, and the gay triumph of his manner slowly changed to demure complacency, and from that to a wheedling, conciliatory expression which sat somewhat oddly upon him.

As he neared the back gate he took a careful survey of his surroundings, ' that young Turk of a Wess ' being one of his pet aversions and his most ingenious and persistent

persecutor. Arrived at the back entrance, he dropped into an artificially indolent saunter, and became engrossed in cloud effects. Truth to tell, Jossy was a victim of the tender passion; but his courtship was so irregular and so unpromising, that he who was pugnacity itself when visiting the master became meek to the point of abjectness when he waited upon the servant. In his case, the course of true love not only never ran smooth, he could not be sure it ran at all; for Jemima had always proved a most difficult

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and obstinate Juliet, and the consummation seemed as far off as it had done when he commenced his suit eight years before. The negotiations had so far been conducted in great secrecy; but Jossy had recently discovered, to his great perturbation, that Wess had found him out. He did not realize, however, that the young rascal was tightening his grip on Jemima, and bringing her into more complete subserviency to himself by a skilful use of his invaluable knowledge.

Jossy's study of meteorology was so profound that he did not appear to be conscious of the fact that he had opened the little gate quite noiselessly, and wastaking his absent-minded steps so softly as not to be heard in the front garden or the more distant parts of the house. It was purest accident also that he happened to note that Jemima was sitting with her knitting in the lattice porch of the kitchen door, and that the door leading into the inner apartments was closed.

Not even the keenest of observers would have believed that at that moment the

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truculent barber was bursting with a great secret or inwardly struggling with the fierce uprisings of pride and hope. He seemed to have surrendered his whole soul to the sweet witchery of nature, and to be utterly absorbed in the charms of that perfect summer's eve. Jemima apparently neither heard nor saw him, though his shadow had fallen on the door-flag, and he had given a soft, deprecatory little cough. Another admiring survey of nature, and he was standing on the edge of the flag. Jemima was looking through him,

past him, under him, over him—anywhere but at him. Jossy coughed again, and began to hum a low tune; but Jemima's thoughts were a thousand miles away.

The shuffle of shoes on the stone, a hungry glance at the three-legged stool by Jemima's side, another mysterious clearing of the throat; but Jemima absently withdrew her stare at vacancy, and took a glance of critical measurement at the stocking on her needles. Another shuffle, a wandering glance around, and then the barber hazarded

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'This weather looks like lastin'.'

'Like some folkses impidence!' and Jemima took another squint at her work.

Jossy waited, took anotherr survey of the clouds, and then, staring hard at the sinking sun, informed that luminary regretfully

'Some folks has no feelin's.'

Jemima's mouth corner relaxed into a little smirk, instantly repressed and turned into sternness, whilst the stocking was warningly notified

'An' some folks has no sense.'

Jossy glared at the sock with inward wrath; but the remembrance of his wonderful secret softened him, and with a sudden renewal of confidence he took the single step necessary to place him against the trellis-work, and propped his arm against one of its laths. He had not often got as far as this before, and Jemima' was a little astonished and curious, though she gave no sign.

'Senseless folk has sense sometimes.'

And there was something in the tone that piqued Jemima; but assured that she

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was safe enough of any news, she went on with her banter, and merely remarked, 'Seein's believin'.'

Jossy was beginning to fume; he changed legs, glanced maliciously at the busy needles, then at the rosy face above them, kicked at the edge of the flag upon which he

stood, and then, unable to contain him self any longer, he burst out, `Jemima Grubb, I could make thy mouth water.'

Jemima affected to yawn, lugged a length of worsted from her ball, looked him over with provoking consideration, and replied, ‘Better my mouth nor my eyes.'

` Thy eyes 'ud cry for joy if they knowed what I know.'

This was palpable enough surely; but the question so artfully angled for did not come, and the aggravating creature actually yawned again.

He could not stop now, however, and so he plunged on, `Some folks talks an' talks an' talks; I believe in doin'.'

Jemima laughed—that is, she made a peculiar sound which the intent hairdresser could only interpret in that way; but her

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face, was as expressionless as ever, and just when he was going to burst out again she drawled sarcastically, 'Aye, barbers is poor talkers.'

Goaded and desperate, Jossy sprang for ward as though to annihilate her, checked himself abruptly, stood towering over her with blazing indignation, uttered a smothered word that sounded like 'Jezebel,' and, wheel ing round haughtily, stalked off towards the yard-gate.

There was the flicker of a smile playing around Jemima's firm mouth, and a little half-weary, half-protesting pucker in herbrows; but she did not even raise her eyes to watch his departure, and in a moment he was back.

‘Woman! thou'd snigger an' snigger if a feller wur dyin' for thee.'

There was a pause, just long enough to make him realize that he was going rather far, and then she turned up a face as bland and innocent as that of a girl, and said smilingly, ' ‘Is it dyin' for me or livin' wi' me thou'rt after, Jossy?'

‘Mockin'!—mockin'! That's all thou cares

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about t' new chappil?' And the barber stepped back to watch the effect.

'T' chappil! Oh, I thought it was me thou wur goin' to die for!'

'If I do summat for t' chappil it's summat for thee, isn't it? Didn't thou say thou'd never be wed in nowt but t' new chappil? Well, it's goin' to be, woman! I've gotten t' site this vary night-nearly.'

Jemima now gave her first sign of genuine interest.

'Aye, nearly! it's been nearly a dozen times ; but I never said nothin' of the sort.'

'Thou never said!-well, woman, that bangs all! Thou never said!' And the poor barber stood gaping at her in speechless protest.

Jemima, now in her most amiable mood, smiled up at him, and asked

'What have you been up to now?'

'Did—you—say—you'd—be—married—in—that—new—chappil—or—did—you not?' and he beat the words on the palm of his hand with a stumpy finger, and glared relentlessly down upon her.

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'I niver said I'd be married in no chappil in this wold—nor church neither.'

Jossy plunged off in another journey to the gate, but stopped halfway and came fiercely back. `Woman, that site's as good as got! That chappil 'ull be built afore thou're twelve months older; but if thou gopes off thy bargain, I'll—I'll bust t' job! "No marriage, no chappil," says Jossy Sweetlove.'

Jemima's brows -were raised in smiling protest. `Joshua, nobody's stoppin' *thee* gettin' married!'

But the barber's last utterances had risen to a shout, and there was a sound of foot steps in the lobby, and a hand was placed on the inner door-knob. Jemima rose hurriedly, but assumed her most indifferent air, and as she turned to her favourite Wess, the tails of the barber's coat might have been seen disappearing through the yard gate.

It is one of the ironies of life that self-indulgent people, who take extraordinary pains to avoid pain, generally get more

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than their share of it. Frank Blandon's one aim in life was personal ease and gratification, and in the pursuit he found more inconveniences than could have resulted from severest self-repression. What a tangle and a torment his life had suddenly become! Whichever way he turned, he was confronted with difficulty; the more he plotted and schemed, the more hopeless the muddle be came. He was very sorry for himself. It was not as though he was bad, and had deliberately designed to do wrong; things had gone against him, and he had been driven to dubious courses by sheer force of circumstances. Nobody wished to be honourable and straightforward more than he did; but if things were so perverse, what was he to do?

When he made that ridiculous compact with his partner about Hetty Waine, he had intended, of course, to keep it. She was only one of half a dozen girls who were mad about him, and he did not know that there was anything more about her than the rest, except that she was the latest he had ' taken on.' He had not perhaps

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thought so much about the bargain before pledging himself as he ought to have done; but, then, he was in a hole, and the suggestion was really so ridiculous that nobody would think seriously about keeping it. It was a pure accident that had thrown him in Betty's way in Bracken Lane, and exposed him to that most unexpected rebuff; and if that action of hers had changed him, roused the devil in him, and made him long for her as he had never yet longed for a woman, why, that was her doing, and she must take the consequences. Nothing could have been more opportune than his visit to the barber's that night; at any rate, it would pave the way for him until such time as he could get the girl's affections engaged—he could make love quicker than any lawyer could make a deed—and he had no personal objections to her Methodism. Besides, the fact that he knew they probably could not have the land under any circumstances should not prevent him from using the idea as a bait until he had got the girl fast. ' All's fair in love and war.'

But here those miserable financial diffi-

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culties came in to complicate things; he must have money, and soon. He had acted as he had done since his father's death because he knew that he could marry money if the worst came to the worst. But the money lay in places where Methodism and Nonconformity were anathema, and in the one direction he was disposed to look the least trifling with Dissent would have been fatal. More than once in his stroll along the less-frequented lanes on his way home from the barber's he had thought of the extreme course of marrying Hetty; but the reflection that Peter Waine's money, or such portion of it as would fall to Hetty, would not help him permanently in his difficulties, and would not be forthcoming at all until the old man's death, put this heroic expedient out of court. The situation was perplexing enough to have entirely absorbed his mind; but it did not. Again and again he was back in the quiet old lane and beholding the scornful little queen and her prudish indignation, and by the time he had reached his mother's villa and had settled down to a heavy tramp

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about the garden paths, business debts, complications, and, all had been forgotten, and Hetty Waine, and Hetty Waine only, filled his brain and heart.

The maid brought him two notes—a telegram and a letter. When he had got a light and opened his notes, his face relaxed a little. The telegram informed him Randaff bonds had gone up, and his venture had made him £ 180; it also offered urgent suggestions as to other movements, and asked for instructions. He toyed with the flimsy note with a relieved look, and consulted a little book he kept under lock and key.

The second note was from his friend Brimelow, inviting him to lunch next day, and hinting the allurement of ' interesting company.' Frank knew well enough who the `interesting company' was, and once more, as he dropped into his easy-chair, he gave himself up to his perplexities.

Brimelow was a sort of small 'squarson' at Hapsby, a little hamlet lying on the borders of Grindell. He was a High Churchman and exclusive, but had the best

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table and wines in the district. Frank's occasional admission to the select circle, which the vicar was the centre, had been considered his greatest social triumph; and though the patronage had never been extended to them, his mother and sisters thought and spoke of the connexion much as the poor relations of literature are made to speak of their kinsman peers.

The interesting person named in the letter was Miss Ethel Diana Mellor, who had been presented at Court, was a substantial heiress, and ten years Frank's senior. The young builder had met her the previous Christmas at one of Brimelow's parties, and since then the lady's visits to her parson uncle had been somewhat frequent; so much so, in fact, that the bachelor vicar had rallied Frank on his conquest, given him some details of Miss Mellor's financial condition, and hints sufficiently definite to justify the conclusion that his way was open—at least, so far as the lady's family, i.e. himself and another brother, were concerned.

Though of almost Italian complexion, which ages early, Miss Mellor looked

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younger than she was, and made little secret of her partiality for the dashing young tradesman. Complacent half-smiles played about Frank's mouth as he lighted his cigarette and lolled back in his chair; he did not often have two such comforting letters at once, and he was disposed to make the most of them. But the light soon left his features again, for, with all, he could do, the fresh young beauty of Hetty Waine seemed to bring out and emphasize Ethel Mellor's age and sallowness; and the more he saw the advantage—the absolute necessity—of securing the older woman, the more he longed for the other.

Yes, there was the whole situation: if he turned to Ethel, it meant an entire change of position and a great social triumph; it meant also, permanent escape from financial worries, and in fact from business altogether. If he decided on the more difficult conquest, it would not greatly relieve his monetary embarrassment, nor change his status; it would mean a nasty row with his women folk, and perhaps unpleasantness with his partner; and yet, and—yet all the distinction

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and affluence that were dangled before him with E thel herself into the bargain, did not seem at that moment worth one of Hetty's little fingers. Far into the night he sat and brooded, cigar following cigarette, and pipe cigar; but, when, long after midnight, he groped his way to bed, he had settled nothing.

He awoke next morning to one of the finest Sundays of a remarkably fine season; and when he presented himself just before church time at Hapsby Lodge, he was dressed as only he knew how to dress, and was in such high- spirits that the fair Ethel, as she walked by his side to worship, felt that life had little else to give. The villagers standing about the old lych-gate and lining the footpath through the yard put on demurest Sabbath looks as they passed, but broke into significant nods and winks as soon as they were by. At Hapsby Frank was always a punctilious High Churchman; but this morning he was decorum itself, and contrived to give both the vicar and his niece exalted ideas of his devotion. Nothing makes people of his temperament so easy with

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themselves as the consciousness that they are pleasing others, and, in spite of morning resolutions, the devout saint of the Church had become the sparkling, flattering, amorous lover before the end of their walk through the plantation and the Hapsby old woods. At lunch he surprised even himself, and kept the portly vicar rolling about in his chair and readjusting his napkin whilst he told story after story of most diverting character. The repast over, the two males were left to themselves ; but when at length

the good vicar dropped off to sleep, his guest, softly opening the French window, let him self out upon the garden, where, as he shrewdly anticipated, he found Miss Mellor. The soft, flower-scented air, the drone of the bees, and the wine he had taken at lunch, all had their sensuous effect upon him, and even the seasoned Ethel was a little surprised at the ardour of his attentions.

They had found a garden-seat out of the view of the windows, and Frank was growing more ardent every moment, and moved closer to his companion. Then a fit of sudden silence fell upon him, which the lady

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was fain to disturb. He burst into fresh rhapsodies about her hair and eyes, took her hand, which, after the first gentle protest, she allowed him to retain. He was now speaking of himself, and had suddenly discovered all sorts of imperfections and insufficiencies in himself; she was gently protesting, of course, and quite absently leaning a little more towards him. His eyes were ablaze, his lips white and trembling, and the words of avowal were on his lips, when suddenly the voice of the vicar was heard, and they had to spring apart and emerge from their retirement to greet a lady caller.

It took Frank some time to recover his naturally easy manner, and when that came back it was accompanied by a fit of coldness amounting almost to fear. There was not, that he could think of, a solitary reason why he should not consummate what he had begun; the day was not over, and, if he judged rightly, Ethel Diana would give him his opportunity after dinner. The arrangement would solve every difficulty, and remove every trouble he had; it would give him ease and modest luxury, and, above all, an unassail-

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able position. Why, then, did he feel so relieved, now that he was cool, at the vicar's interruption? and why was he so anxious to get away? Ethel, putting her own con-

struction upon his sudden dumbness, walked quietly by his side, and protectingly under took the conversation as they paced about the sheltered side of the- fine old house, and at last took the lady visitor indoors, giving her lover an expressive glance as she did so as though to relieve him of doubt. But the easier and more certain the conquest, the more he wanted to fly.

His invitation did not include dinner, but he could see that both the vicar and his niece were expecting him to stay; and even if he went away, he must return in a few hours with a definite offer, or the connexion he prized so much must be lost for ever. Oh why had he not been more cautious? Why had he gone so fast and so far? It was the easiest of all things for him to reason himself into the `can't—help—it—now ' position, and thus swim with the tide; but he was encountering inward repugnance which surprised him scarcely less than it annoyed him. He was

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saying `H'm' and `Yes' to the vicar's discourses on the good points of his favourite French roses; but his brain was on fire with the true coward's unreasoning fear, and he was, wishing himself anywhere but where he was.

But at that moment fate did him a good turn, for the vicar's coachman came round through a side-door from the yard and informed him that his mother had that morning fainted in the parish church, and was reported to be seriously ill. The parson, full of sympathy, pressed the dog-cart upon him, and undertook to excuse him to the ladies; and Frank, his head singing like a bell that had been struck, and with thoughts of every thing on earth but his ailing parent, jumped into the conveyance and hastened away.

The report proved to have been exaggerated, for Mrs. Blandon, though still pale and shaky, was sitting up in her pretty back room, and seemed almost grateful for a sudden disorder which gave her such proofs of her son's devotion. Frank was so grateful for his escape, however temporary, from his dilemma, that he lingered with her for

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some time, served her himself with afternoon tea, and positively refused to smoke even the innocent cigarette lest it should affect her.

But the relief he was enjoying brought with it a natural reaction, and the rebound to easiness brought back some of the old desires. He grew dull, bored, and taciturn, and accepted without even a show of reluctance his mother's affectionate dismissal. Twenty minutes later he was reconnoitring Jessamine Cottage.

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CHAPTER VI

SCENES IN A SUMMER-HOUSE

NOW Hetty Waine, as she dropped into fitful slumbers on Saturday night, had decided that Frank's letter was not to be answered at all. She was glad to have it, to be able to think better of him, and to know that he was not the coarse flirt she feared and popular rumour asserted; but the affair must go no farther. The responsibility now rested with her, and it was best to give no opportunity for a continuation of the intercourse. But she awoke next morning with quite other thoughts—with the delicious realization that she was the most desired object of two men's affections, and her first half-hour was a delightful dreamy reverie, such as maidens delight to enjoy.

Slowly, however, the sense of the Sabbath stole in upon her, and brought a crowd of deeply cherished memories and associations,

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and in a few moments old maid Methodist was in full possession. Sunday was always a busy day to her; but the heat took hold of her earlier than usual. The long morning school, with her duties at the harmonium and in her class, followed by afternoon service in that stuffy, smelly upper room, exhausted her; so her thoughts were once more getting out of control, and as her head began to ache a little, she accepted her father's sympathetic suggestion that she should leave her instrumental duties to Wess—who was

a local musical prodigy, and played so marvellously by ear that he could never be induced to learn music—and stay at home. She was rather ashamed of the relief which the suggestion gave her, and fell in with the proposal; yet justified herself in' part at least with the reflection that a girl who had had two offers of marriage in one day might be expected to be a little weary.

Left to herself, the quiet of the house seemed to soothe and rest her; and after bathing her brows in eau-de-Cologne, she lay down on her favourite couch in the window of her own room and gave herself up to her

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own thoughts. For a time all was well brain seemed suddenly to have a freak, and was occupied with things as remote possible from the subjects which had been troubling her.

Then she was seized with a sudden desire to read Frank's letter again, and the more she resisted the more persistent it became, until she wished, most heartily that she had gone to worship. She vowed also that she would burn both her offers before she slept that night. She lay perfectly still, her hands behind her head, her small feet peeping out from under the bottom of her simple white gown, and her eyes fixed on a straw-framed text on the wall; but her face had uneasy flushes upon it, and stillness became more of an effort to her than activity. She arose and looked out of the window, turned away again and began to pace the room, sat on the side of the settee for a moment, and then resumed her pacings. Five or six times backwards and forwards, and she descended into the kitchen for Jemima's oracle, *The Methodist Magazine.* A momentary glance at the portrait and pictures, and the publication was laid down with

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a fretful sigh. The room became closer, and she wondered whether for the first time in her life she was going to faint. Then she went to the window again. The church bells had stopped ringing, everything was peace ful around her; but within was uneasy fear and restless, undefinable desire. Then she started downstairs for the garden, paused on

the first step and almost turned back, grew still again with a sudden impulse to go to the service late though it was, and finally with a strange waywardness picked up the rejected magazine, tossed an old garden-hat on her head, and strolled out to the summer house.

She was not quite easy about her self indulgence in staying away from worship, and was a little shy of being seen in the garden at that hour. Once safely in the retreat, however, she would be hidden from prying eyes. She was debating still with herself whether she ought to send young Blandon at least a formal acknowledgement of his note; she was partly to blame for his presumption. He had asked her certainly for the rose she had given him last Thursday;

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but she need not have gratified his desire. His note had effaced much of her resentment, and she need not do more than formally acknowledge it. All the same, there was that within her which forbade the concession. She knew much better than her father what Frank's reputation was; she knew also that some of the other girls with whom he had flirted in the town were as respectable as she was; she knew that he was a bigoted Church man, and would never be anything else; and she knew that in her and her father's sense of the word he was not a Christian.

She grew very grave and still as she turned the thoughts over. She wanted to be loved passionately, utterly loved; she wanted an exciting, romantic courtship, and—ah! yes, she liked Frank Blandon all the better for the very boldness she had resented. She sighed as she thought of these things; he was so handsome, so gentlemanly, so popular—

`Good evening, Miss Waine!'

He was there before her very eyes, with his fashionable straw hat in his hand, and a grave, respectful, apologetic look on his face as he bowed.

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'I've rung the front-door bell three times but I thought somebody must be at home, for the doors and windows were open '; and with another bow he was inside the summer house, and making as though he would have seated himself by her side.

Her heart was in her mouth, and her face crimson ; but some powerful uprising within her brought her to her feet, and he shrank back and propped himself lightly against the trellis-work entrance.

'Pardon my intrusion! I had offended you, and was desperate'; and he was devouring her with his eyes, whilst his tone was humility itself.

'But—but' –and she dare not take her eyes from him— 'how did you know? I—I ought to have been at the service.'

There was no flinching in her look. He realized that he would need all his resources, and had already backed another step.

'I didn't know; my good angel brought me. I've done wrong, and am seeking forgiveness.'

'Oh, how handsome he was! how perfectly becoming his dress, and how subtly flattering

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his manner! Betty felt resistance melting rapidly away; but something within was helping her to preserve outward coldness, and so, keeping him away with her eyes, she demanded

'And if I forgive you, you will leave me?'

He cast upon her a look that had reduced more than one Grindell maiden to clay in his hands. H etty felt that she was failing, was being mesmerized, and for her life she dared not flinch.

'But you don't forgive me, even with your eyes.'

She dared not blink or move or even draw her breath; she had never known what real effort was before.

'You are the most ravishing and the most lovely—'

'Stop, sir!'

She was white and stern, and every feature was rigid; but his burning words were still singing in her soul.

'You are taking another great liberty your third and worst. Will you leave me, sir?'

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Oh! how beautiful she was as she stood up to him, a white incarnation of offended dignity; the means she was taking to repel him were inflaming his desires into madness. She was the stronger of the two; eye to eye she was his master, and with a baffled sigh he took another half-conscious step backwards, crestfallen and abashed. Had he understood her better, that was his opportunity, for no sooner was she sure of her conquest than all the woman came rushing back to plead for him, whilst his confused and beaten manner appealed to her as his boldness had never done. Having him now at a safer distance, she was fain to seek the support she so sorely needed, and dropped into her seat, eyeing him watch fully as she did so.

There was a long pause. Every woman he had ever had amatory dealings with had been slightly different from every other; this, however, was an entirely new and immensely more difficult sample, and his courage did not respond as he expected, but left him nonplussed and humiliated.

Then he had an idea; perhaps it was

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her Methodism that made the difference, perhaps these sectarians were as bigoted and prudish as he had always heard. He eyed her over uneasily, moved a step nearer, and placed his hand on the trellis-work again.

'I came partly to see your father.'

'He will be home by eight o'clock.'

She was leaning against the back of the summer-house now, and watching him under her long lashes. There was a glint of curiosity in her eyes.

'I would do anything to make atonement for my—my rudeness.'

‘Except the atonement I most desire.'

‘What is that?' and under cover of his somewhat eager question he was swinging himself a little nearer.

She raised her eyes again and checked him, and then answered coldly, 'That you will leave me at once.'

`Miss Waine, I—’ and he would have been in the summer-house and at her side if she had not risen to repel him; as it was he moved back again and stood with explanatory hand in the air, a somewhat

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grotesque figure, and stammered out, `I—I really am profoundly sorry, and will do anything to prove it.'

‘No, you will not ; you will not go.'

His hand had dropped to his side, and then both were raised to the lapels of his coat. `I will go at once if you will forgive me—and let me come again.'

A long, discouraging shake of the head; she parted her lips to give a reason, but checked herself in time.

‘Will you let me prove my penitence by my actions?'

‘By one action—that of leaving me.'

‘But I can do a really important thing: I can get you a site for your new chapel.'

Hetty went hard and curious both at once, and unfortunately did not quite conceal the latter feeling; so he went on eagerly,

‘It may be difficult and expensive, but I will do it—anything on earth, dear Miss Waine, to please you.'

He was not helping his case; in fact, she was disappointed now at his lack of delicacy, and resented his assumption that he was offering to bribe her. She was

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getting somewhat confused, however, many points were claiming her attention at once. Why had he mentioned this particular matter just now? I t was barely forty-eight hours since she had first heard of it, from Jossy Sweetlove. Surely the impetuous barber had not pushed his idea as far as to— And yet, why did this suitor of hers mention it now, and in this particular connexion? Dearly would she have liked to question him. Perhaps this accounted for the Bracken Lane incident, for the tone of his letter, and for his present intrusion. But she was not sure enough of herself to ask questions was to encourage his presence, and give possible openings; her only safety lay in laconic perseverance. He was watching her narrowly all this time, perceived her hesitation, and formed his own conclusions.

'I might become a Methodist, you know. I'd turn over; you shall convert me. Oh! I'd be a Jerusalem Jumper—Dear Miss Waine!' and he had plunged forward dropped on one knee, and snatched at her hand, whilst his face, flushed with eager

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passion, was turned up to hers in eager entreaty.

For that night, however, he had wrecked his last chance. The things he spoke so lightly of held great places in her mind—greater, perhaps, than she had thought; and the gulf that separated them seemed suddenly to yawn-before her, profound and impassable. She was on her feet almost before he touched her; fear, hesitation, and pity were alike forgotten, and she stood before him once more the indignant queen of the old lane.

Picking up his straw hat, she handed it to him, and dismissed him with a cold courtesy that forbade protest. In the same high manner she followed him out of the summer house and past the end of the cottage. Twice he stopped and turned to protest, and twice with cold, disdainful eyes she compelled him to proceed. She listened freezingly to his half-pleading, half-threatening appeal at the gate without a quiver, or so much as a word; she fastened the gate after him, and even haughtily watched him as, still protesting, he went into the road; and then –ah!

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then she rushed with a broken sob indoors, and up to her own room, where she flung herself on her couch in a passion of tears.

Forty minutes later, when the warm day was changing into a tender gloaming such as poets love, the little summer-house was occupied again. Jossy Sweetlove had had a very trying day. His easy-tempered, comfortable friend the grocer had been taciturn, distant, even sulky, all day. The barber had a secret that would dispel it all, and make him the happiest 'of old men again, and he had never had a chance of telling him. Never was proverbial hen more restive with importunate egg than Joshua had been all Sunday, and as the day wore on he became testy and morose, so that by the time the evening service was concluded he had taken the savage resolve that all the Peter Waines in Christendom should not drag his secret out of him.

Force of habit, however, was strong, and as Sunday night would not have been Sunday night if he had not visited Jessamine Cottage, he poked his churchwarden up his

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sleeve and made his way to the accustomed place. He found the summer-house filled with smoke, and the ex-grocer deep in moody meditation. Filling his pipe, and lighting up in self-defence, he took his old seat, and sulkily waited for Peter to commence; but the old man did not seem aware of his presence. Joshua eyed him in surly speculation for a time, and then demonstratively cleared his throat. Peter glanced at him, shook his head in expressive melancholy, and emitted a contemptuous 'Humph!'

Then he glanced again at his companion, fixed his eyes on a broken bit of trellis-work, stared hard and dolefully at it, and once more wagged a woful head.

‘Rheumatiz?' demanded the barber, in tones of snarling concession to the require ments of politeness.

Another and longer series of wags, culminating in a sigh that would have excited the curiosity of a stone pillar.

`Collection down?'

Wag, wag, wag went Peter's head, as though the question were so ridiculously wide of the mark as to be an aggravation of the

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original trouble. Jossy scowled, stared hard at his friend, lifted his eyebrows in sudden, painful surprise, and cried, ' No! not—she hasn't been again?'

Peter shook his head once more turned his eyes resignedly upwards with another sigh, and then, shutting his eyes tightly, groaned aloud—'Twice! twice in two nights!' The barber's face lengthened in most genuine sorrow. The departed Mrs. Waine had become a sort of second conscience to her husband, and any transgressions or derelictions of duty on his part were sure to be followed by a midnight visit from her. These were times of great heart-searching for the old man; and, remembering her earthly anxiety about the new chapel, he had dreaded the time when she should take up this subject. The discussion reported in our first chapter had convicted him of unfaithfulness to his trust—a thing never difficult to accomplish—and at last the blow had fallen. Joshua's eyes sought the ground, and the two sat in silence until the barber's pipe went out.

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‘“Peter!" she said, “Peter!"'—and the old man was holding out his arm and extending his hand as though addressing a meeting—‘“dost thou dwell in cedar houses, whilst the ark of the Lord is in a—a tallowshop!" 'And the excited old fellow, whose voice was broken pathetically, dropped his head back against the wooden wall, turned his face upwards, and nipped his eyes together tightly to keep back the shame of unmanly tears.

Joshua sat staring at his cold pipe in sudden discomfort. Then he got up, and, stepping in front of the summer-house, took a long, critical survey of the speckless sky, hissed a few bars of a tune from between his teeth, and then, falling back into his seat, announced to himself, to the sky, to the breathing flowers, to anything and anybody, except the groaning Peter, 'All things works together for good.'

Peter's head was again in rapid motion, and this time it was vigorous enough to express resentment as well as unbelief.

Joshua dreely studied his pipe-head, and

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then declaimed, as though reading some inscription on the bowl:

God moves in a mysterious way

His wonders to perform.

He put such intense expressiveness into his quotation, that it penetrated even the ex-grocer's heavy sorrow, and he held his breath to listen.

`When the tale of bricks is doubled, Moses comes.'

The big head was again in motion, but much less decisively; and the experienced barber, knowing well the signs, prepared for his grand coup.

He waited long enough to give impressiveness to his great announcement, eyed his man with calculating deliberation, and then, suddenly springing to his feet, he smote the woful Peter heavily on the shoulder, and cried triumphantly, 'That there site's as good as gotten!'

And after all it was a misfire. Peter did open his eyes, did slowly straighten himself to something like decent attention, but it was clear at a second glance that the shot had not told. Joshua's look of eager expectation

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faded into. disappointment, and then into impatience. 'Why, man,' he cried, 'I sattled it all last night! That site 'ull be ours in a week from now!'

Peter did not seem to hear. Pie was staring in moody abstraction at the flowers outside the summer-house; then he lifted a heavy sigh, eyed the barber over from head to foot, dropped his head back against the wall, and groaned out despairingly:

'I wish I wur dead!'

Amazement, exasperation, and serious alarm were all depicted on Joshua's expressive face. This was a totally new Peter, and he sighed helplessly as he looked him over. 'Peter Waine!'—and he shook the limp ex-grocer with petulant energy—`what's all this? What's come over thee?'

Peter sat like a log, and his ruddy face was almost white.

'What's up, I say?—what's up?' And Joshua began to look frightened, whilst the hands hanging at his side jerked about with helpless, restless movements.

'Thou'rt ill! thou'rt bad! I'll fetch Balshaw!'

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But Peter was rising to his feet, and held up an arresting hand.

'Joshua Sweetlove, what am I? what does thou call me?' And the stricken old man patted himself mournfully on the chest.

`I call thee Peter—Peter Numskull.' And the barber looked much more fierce than he felt in his effort to arouse his friend. Not Peter, but Jephthah! I'm Jephthah Waine, the sinner! Jephthah Waine, the wicked father, that's what I am!'

'What's up with you?' But there was a quiver in the barber's voice that more than neutralized its fierceness; his friend's condition was wringing his heart.

'Didn't Jephthah sell his daughter for a word ! Didn't he spoil her life and break her heart for his religion? That's me!—that's me O Hetty, my lass, thy father's a Jephthah!'

The barber was fast becoming as distressed as his friend. He stared at the grocer still on his feet, stared at his pipe, head, and his boots, stared round the summer-house, as though seeking some unseen oppressor with whom he could expostulate, and then fell back into his seat in temporary collapse.

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'There's thee staring at me every day, and t' mission-room staring at me every Sunday, and her staring at me in my very bed; it's enough to drive me stark crazy, that's what it is!'

This was bringing it home to the meddle some barber with a vengeance, his distress at Peter's condition lashing his conscience as he listened, and a whole vista of unconsidered dangers suddenly opening before him. As sensitive as he was impetuous, he struggled for a while with his crowding and accusing thoughts, and then burst out, 'Hang t' site! hang t' new chappil! Let 'em go! We'll stop wheer we are, an' be jolly!'

Peter was still standing; but the bitterest was already past, and he was looking down on the self-reproaching barber with a tenderness that made his plain old face beautiful.

'Jossy, that young feller isn't a Christian.'

The barber was nodding to himself, but could not look up.

'I know nothing against him ; but he isn't religious at all.'

Jossy was staring hard at his friend's boots, and as yet could find nothing to say.

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My dear lass is a member, a joined member, and she's—she's no mother.' Jossy winced suddenly, and his eyelids were blinking at a frightful rate.

'She be a lamb among wolves, a rabbit among terriers.'

The barber was trying to speak, but could not.

'I'd give every stick on earth I have for a site; but—but she's my daughter.' The barber was suddenly still—very still.

'I'm getting on, thou sees, and I'st not be long here, and I couldn't-couldn't sell her soul; now could I, Jossy?'

The barber sprang up and snatched at his friend's hand; for a long moment they stood looking into each other's moist and glistening eyes; and then the agitated Joshua cried, ' Peter Waine! Souls is more nor sites ony day! We've lived in t' tallow-shop, and we'll dee i' th' tallow-shop. There's no landlords i' heaven, thank goodness!' And then he burst away, and went flying along the garden path, and out for once at the front gate, noisily blowing his nose.

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CHAPTER VII

A LITTLE HITCH

WHEN Sam Broome left Jessamine Cottage by the, back way after his interview with Hetty, he looked older and sallower than usual, and held his head stiffly up like a newly enlisted soldier at his first drill. He was staring hard before him without seeing

anything, and his lips moved as though in silent prayer. When he emerged into the road just where Ginger Lane becomes `The Avenue,' he paused, and looked around; and as the evening was soft and quiet, and his feelings were too turbulent for the society of his fellow creatures, he crossed the white high-road and struck down Bracken Lane. His pace slackened, and his stiffly-held neck gradually dropped into its more natural position—a little on one side. For a couple of hundred yards he

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stalked along, increasing his pace at every step to keep up with his rushing thoughts. Suddenly he stopped, and appealing to the thick hedges, the gorse, and the high bracken, from which the old lane took its name, he cried in a sort of melancholy ecstasy, ‘My gracious, isn't she a good tun?' As no answer came to his amazed inquiry, he started forward again, but almost instantly checked himself. 'Beautiful that's nothing! she's—she's good, she's kind! Why, I might have been a lord!' and a smile of incredulous delight played over a face that was set in deepest dejection. He put his head straight again, and started for another burst of walking. Ten yards, however, brought him to a stand once more.

‘Lady? Why, man, thou never met a *real* lady before!' And then, after a moment's reflection, he challenged the gorse-bushes again, `Gracious goodness! was there ever such a fool as me?'

He dropped his head now, and sauntered absently along, until another turn of thought pulled him up with a protest almost fierce,

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‘I'm a fool, I tell thee; a great, swelled-headed fool! Why, man, she's a saint a saint *and* a queen!'

He was standing now, and glaring at a bramble-bush as- though he saw some fear some reptile under its trailing branches. 'It *was* an insult! a downright—Partner? Aye, but putting a mongrel into a new kennel doesn't make him a prize-dog, does it?' And

then he added, with a smile that had the sorrow of utter despair in it, ' And she took it like a heavenly saint!'

Still as the very trees he stood now, and his eyes were searching the dust under his feet. ‘God bless her!' he groaned; and then, shaking his fist into the heavens in a frenzy of anguish, he repeated, 'God in heaven bless her!'

Unconscious of anything but the struggle within him, he began to stumble, forward, and as he did so his thoughts evidently took another turn. He was quiet now, and his face had a puzzled look. 'Of course that's it ! He's done as he promised. He's a fine sight why, goodness,

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that's it! *He*'s the man for her!' And appealing to the bushes and old hedge trees with a dropped jaw and a look blended of amazement and horror, he stared about him, aghast at the horrible suggestiveness of his own belated suspicion.

However distressing his thoughts up to this moment, they were as nothing to the hurricane of inward desperation that now burst upon his soul. Fear, shame, amazement, and hellish jealousy were all struggling for the mastery within' him; he clenched his hands, sent his elbows into his side, shook like a leaf, and burst into a cold sweat.

'That's why he grinned! that's why he blushed! that's why he said so little! he groaned.

`Sam! Sam! you've been a fool, a perfect, wooden-headed fool!' And then, after squeezing his flattened hands between his knees, he added, 'Oh! why did he ever make me a partner?'

Absorbed in his own torturing thoughts, Sam had not noticed that he no longer had that part' of the lane to himself. A

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boyish figure, however, had been leisurely approaching him for some little time. The new-comer's short black curls were crowned with a grammar-school cap turned peak

backwards, and he carried a couple of long sticks under his arm, whittling away at the ends of them as he strolled along. He had already noticed that the person approaching him was indulging in ' queer antics'; but it was only on nearer approach that he settled the question of identity. He was still some paces away, and though excited somewhat by the signs of extraordinary distress, and a little embarrassed with a boyish fear of intruding, he was too much and often afflicted with boredom to have many scruples in the presence of a diversion, and so he cried out, `Hello, Sam! got the toothache?'

The sudden grotesque rigidity Sam instantly assumed gave him away more effectually than his gesticulations had done.

'Hello, Master Wesley! is that you?'

And he relaxed into an overdone assump tion of ease.

But Wess had all a boy's directness and

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contempt for evasion, and so he persisted, `What were you mouthing and gaping like that for?'

'Oh! nothing-nothing, Master Wess! Grand evenin', isn't it?'

Wesley always regarded references to the weather as the last refuge of cowardly evasiveness; here was evidently something to conceal, and therefore something that must be found out. He glanced at the sky, then at Sam, drew up the stick that had been threatening to slip from under his arm, and, resuming his whittling, demanded, 'Your young woman been quilting you?

'Young woman? Haven't got one, my boy; never had. That's a poor sort of knife you've got, Wesley.'

There was an implied invitation to come to the woodyard and get the, blade ground in Sam's last sentence; but Wess, whilst duly noting the offer for future use, felt that his suspicions were being amply justified, and so he asked relentlessly, 'Leave all the courting to Blandon, I suppose?'

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'Ha! ha!—Yes.' Sam's laughter was apparently more painful even than his groans. 'He's the one for the girls, isn't he?'

'*Some* of them.' And there was in tentional significance in the emphasis of the first word. But Wess was still busy with his stick, and afterr making the chips fly in silence for a minute or more, he raised his head, and cried suddenly, 'Why, Sam, he looked worse than you!' And before the puzzled Sam, who was scowlingly be labouring his sluggish brain to follow the erratic leaps in the boy's- logic, Wess shook his stick at a blackberry-bush, and cried triumphantly, `Well done, Het, old girl!—well done, Het!'

Sam sprang round with a startled ejaculation, clearly expecting to encounter the girl whom he had just left; then he looked the other way up the road, and then back at his companion, and finally fell back, with raised brows and half-opened mouth, dumb with astonishment.

Boylike, Wess was silently revelling in the sensation he was producing, although

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he entirely misunderstood its bearings; but following his own line of thought, he re-sumed his operations with the knife, and, to start conversation again, said, ' I'm sorry for you, Sam, I am-honest.'

Then he did know, and Frank had been doing his part.

'Me! I'm a fool, that's what I am!'

Wess was a boy, and addicted therefore to didactic moralizing-to other people; and so, to comfort his evidently distressed friend, he said in the manner of a man of fifty, `Better be a fool than a cad, Sam.'

'Cad? *Him*! Mind what you're saying, boy!'

The imperturbable Wesley solemnly shook his head, and with even greater gravity replied, ` It's a fact, Sam! he's a bummer. If I'd a-been her, I'd have smacked his face for him!'

Sam was getting angry-the boy was simply insufferable; but he must not show his feelings until he knew all he desired.

'Why, Wess, it was nothing! He was doing his best for me!'

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‘For you?'

‘Yes, for me! I asked him to do it!'

Wesley's sticks had dropped to the ground, and he was looking about for a big enough stone; his lips were drawn together, and there was the light of battle in his eyes. ‘You asked him to kiss my sister in the lane?'

‘Kiss? What on earth are you talking about?'

'He did! I saw him myself!'

`What, young fibber! you saw him kiss—'

'No! no!—kiss? He didn't know Hetty; but he tried—the beast!'

With distended eyes and panting breast Sam glared at the indignant boy as though he would have struck him down. `You're mad, Wess!'

‘I tell you he did! this very after noon, in this very lane!'

Sam was plainly losing his grip of things; wave after wave of pure bewilderment was breaking over his brain, and he stood there gaping at his companion in dumb stupefaction.

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Wess, hugging himself on the dramatic sensation he was creating, picked up coolly the sticks he had dropped, and commenced carving his initials on the thin green bark.

‘Honour bright now, Mr. Wess; you're kidding me! you know you are!'

‘All right, if you don't believe me.' And then, as another curious idea struck him, he broke off, and demanded ` I say, what made you say he was doing it for you?'

‘I didn't! Oh, did I? Oh, that's no thing!'

But Sam's confusion was telling another tale, and so Wess lifted his precocious head and eyed his friend from head to foot, demanding as he did so, `I say, Sam, you aren't sweet on her too, are you?'

'Me? Oh! get out, Wesley; I'm—'

‘You are, then! Well, that's a corker!'

Sam, now as much alarmed as puzzled, began a series of protests which his stammering belied as soon as uttered, and finished with a final lamentation: 'She's miles above me, Mr. Wesley.'

Wesley's changing face was a picture, amused suspicion giving way to the handsome

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generosity which he felt the situation demanded.

'Oh! that's all right,' he cried, with a large and patronizing gesture; 'why shouldn't you go in as well as he?'

'Me? Master Wess—I never—'

'Yes, you! Jim's for you, I know, and so am I—or might be.'

This hasty reservation had delicately distant reference to the perquisites which the younger relatives of pretty girls regard as their natural heritage, and Wess had difficulty in preserving due gravity.

Sam's restless hands were groping their way into the sidepockets of his serge jacket, whilst his eyes and mouth were changing every moment as he gaped at the nonchalant youth. The dominant instinct of devotion to the house of Blandon pulled one way, and black jealousy, all the more fierce because of its helplessness, was pulling the other ; the situation so suddenly opened before him paralysed him, and he lifted a long, deep sigh, and still glowered heavily at his com panion.

'Two to one on you, Sam; money down!'

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cried Wess encouragingly and then he went on with the whittling of his stick.

'Me? Me again the master? I couldn't, Wess!—I couldn't do it!'

'All right! don't sweat yourself ; but she won't have him, anyway—I'll see to that.'

The easy grandeur of the boy's manner tickled poor Sam in spite of the misery within him, and a sickly smile played for a moment about his mouth-corners.

'Why, Wess, you don't know! No woman can resist him, if he likes; look how handsome he is!'

'Red-nob!' was the contemptuous comment of the boy.

Sam laughed, and immediately frowned in angry shame at his own frivolity; then as it came over him that he was making himself ridiculous by thus arguing on so delicate a subject with a mere lad, he said, 'That's all boys know about such things. Well, I must be moving on, Wess.'

Wess was criticizing his work on the stick, and did not appear to heed; but as the other moved off he cried, without raising his head,

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'Better try yourself, old chap; two to one, mind, on the junior partner!'

Sam burst into a great hollow laugh as he turned away, and as he went down the road he called back with hard face and set teeth, No chance for me!-no chance for me!'

With head bent and hands deep in his pockets, Sam strode off along the lane, struggling vainly to get some clearness into his confused and confounded brain. The son of a widowed charwoman, he had had to fight all his days with poverty and misfortune, and in the long discipline he had grown so accustomed to disappointment and so familiar with the homely angel of resignation, that he held all his hopes in a loose hand, and it seemed a perfectly natural thing when he was making the most daring flight of ambition in his life that he should meet with discouragement; and so he had, or thought he had, relinquished his pursuit of Hetty with comparative ease, every gentle word and kindly glance of hers having helped him to his conclusion.

He knew the fight within himself was not over, for he was naturally dogged and

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persistent; perseverance against odds had been his one reliable quality and the Secret of such successes as he had achieved. But he had expressed himself so definitely to her in order to cut off his own retreat and make the struggle with himself the easier. He had

scarcely spoken to her before, and the gentle dignity of her manner had revealed a character so utterly out of his reach that he must make haste to quench his own desires. And surely the discoveries just made would help him: he, the rival of his partner!—the thing was scandalous, positively disgraceful! To stand in the way of the son of the man who had given him his one great chance in life was a piece of monstrous ingratitude, and must not be thought of for an instant. Frank Blandon was the very man for Hetty Waine, and it was just like his own stupidity never to have seriously thought of it.

Why, then, was he so excited, so rebel lious, so desperately eager for her? He was jealous!-madly, unscrupulously jealous! and the gratitude and obligation of service which he usually felt had vanished, burnt

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up like tow before the white heat of his unruly passion. Self-suppression had become almost second nature with him but as he strode along that old lane, the cords that bound the beast in him snapped as did the withs on the awakening Samson, and hate of his partner, fierce and deadly, and reckless defiance of God and men, alike raged madly within him. All he had ever suffered from society during his long, hard struggle came back to him, old dead grievances sprang into savage life; the sense of his inferiority to Frank and Hetty, and the realization that he had been tricked by his own partner, added fuel to the fire, and he was out of the lane and half-way across Hapsby Moor before he came to himself.

The heather had just burst into bloom, game started up here and there, and rushed away with angry screams and thudding wings, and the sun was going down in a bath of glory; but Sam Broome walked amid raging fires, and the beauties about him only heightened and mocked his misery. Farther and farther he went from the road, and deeper and deeper he plunged into

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the gorse and heather; and at length with a cry, half prayer, half curse, he threw himself upon his face amongst the bushes, drove his finger-nails into the mossy turf, and snarled and whined like a baffled beast of prey. I t was a terrible struggle; fierce elemental passions, so long and steadily repressed that he had almost forgotten their existence within him, had now escaped control, and raged and rioted until he shook like a man in a palsy, whilst every higher motive was cold and dead, and the very desire to resist had gone.

Sacrifice, resignation, patience, the good angels which so long had shaped his life, seemed now so many unmasked and drivelling spirits of cant and hypocrisy; the only realities were self, hatred, and revenge. He rolled about on the turf, tore spitefully at the tufts of wild thyme and rock-rose, savagely drove his toes through the thin soil to the hard limestone, sat abruptly up and stared defiantly at the sinking orb of day, and then threw himself back with his hands under his head staring at the earliest stars. And the mood held: he did not re-

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sist it, he did not want to resist it; for once he would think and feel himself, the proper natural man of him should have its fling.

Suddenly he sat up again, listened for a moment, caught the thud of heavy feet, and sprang hastily up. A horseman was approaching, and coming across the heather to shorten the winding moor road. His first impulse was to plunge deeper into the moor, but a glance told him that he was not only seen, but recognized; so he stood still and waited, struggling to straighten his distorted features.

'Hel!—Hello! Whoa, Snider! Well, now, this is rum! How do, Sam Broome?'

The speaker was a little man on a very big horse. He was dressed like a country gentleman of the smarter sort, with white hat, drab gaiters, and rakish red-waistcoat. His face was as red as his coat, and his features were pronounced enough to amply justify the universal nickname of ' Punch.'

Mr. 'Punch' Price was the only active member of a century-old firm of accountants, who were also valuers, stock jobbers, auc-

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tioneers, and property brokers, whose head quarters were in the county town, but who time out of count had had an office in Grindell. He was far away the best-known man in the district; and, though a w ine bibbing, hunting, swearing old sinner, had a reputation for business shrewdness, sterling integrity, and knowledge of men and things, which placed him in a class by himself. He was executor for more people than any three lawyers in the neighbourhood, was reputed to know more farmers' law than the county attorney himself, and held property and business secrets enough to have qualified him for county arbitrator had there been any such official.

As he knew everybody, he of course knew Sam, and looked down upon him from his high saddle with a quizzical glance of surprise and delight. `Why, Sam, I was thinking about you-be still, Snider!-this very minute! I've been thinking about you all day, blowed if I haven't!'

‘Yes, Sir! I know, sir! We shall have the men on the job by ten, o'clock on Monday morning.'

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‘Eh? What? Oh, hang that!' Mr. Brice used a coarser word—` we've got other fish to fry; I've a spanking good thing on for you—a stunner!'

'Thank you, sir! we're not over busy—'

'Oh, stow it, man!—we! It's for you, man! – you yourself! Confound you, Snider!'

Sam's head was down. What was coming now? Surely he'd trouble enough. But ‘Punch' was speaking again.

'You're the man for the job! I've picked you out myself, and you're a made man any minute.'

‘What is it you want me to—you're very kind, sir—’

‘Huh! Stow that! It's five hundred a year, if it's a shilling. You'd be your own gaffer, and could double it if-and oh, ha! ha! ha! yes, by Jingo!—and the girl thrown in'; and Mr. ' Punch ' slapped his corduroy thigh with wicked glee.

`Excuse me, sir; but I don't I don't seem to—'

'Of course!—whoa, lad!—how the name of patience can you! Well, listen to me

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Oh, blow the beast! hold his head whilst we jaw.'

Obeying this jerky command, Sam laid a hand on the bridle, and waited.

'It's like this, man. You know old Donkey Smailes—him with the cock-eye—, he died a week last Thursday.'

Sam nodded, but his eyes wandered to the flooding purple in the west, and ' Punch', with an irritable twist in his saddle, raised the stick of his whip, and using it to attract the amazingly absent listener and emphasize his words, went on, ' Well, like all the other idiots about here, he must go and make me his executor.'

Sam stared hard at the mounted speaker; but only in a vain effort at attention.

'Well, the old muddlehead turns out to be worth about twice as much as he thought he was, only everything's so messed up nobody on earth can straighten it out.'

`Yes, sir!'

'Well, you're the man for it! Managing partner-pull things together, a bit for me, a bit for her, and a clear five hundred a year, if it's a penny, for you!'

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'Punch' was scowling fiercely as he finished, to conceal the professional pride with which he made this magnificent offer; but Sam was still staring into the setting sun.

'The concern's thirty years old, the old squint-eye built it up himself—far too much timber stocked for one thing; but you can rectify that.'

Sam's eyes were wide with a dull, far-away wonder; but even ` Punch' Brice could see that it was not with what he was hearing.

'Pull the thing round, and you can pay us out any time-cosy thousand a year, my lad; at least, if you bag the widow.'

'Mr. Brice!'

‘Well, why not? Don't be so sanctimonious, man! She's younger than you, been an old man's darling, as they call it, about six years; but that needn't spoil her for you.'

Sam was coming to himself at last, and turning amazed and utterly incredulous eyes on the horseman, he cried, 'You don't mean to say, Mr.—'

‘Oh, wake up, pudding-head! Haven't

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I been saying so this last ten minutes! What's up with you, staring there like a stuffed pike?'

‘You want me to manage Mr. Smailes's—'

‘Manage your grandmother—own it, man! Partner with her and me, and buy us both out!'

Sam felt as though his head was bursting, and queer shivers were creeping about the roots of his hair. 'Me? Mr. Brice—me?)

'Aye, you! there it is, man! I'm making a man of you for nothing, lucky duffer that you are!' And the little man's face went red with flattered self-importance, and he glowed upon Sam in proud delight.

‘But!—but!—Why, it's twice as big as our business! '

'And more than that; it 'ull be a business when yours—Oh, hang it! say Aye, and be done with it.'

‘But it's—I—I couldn't manage 'em both!'

‘Both?—both? Oh, and her! Why, man, she'd drop into your hands like a plum into a lad's mouth!'

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‘Oh, not that!—the business. It's five miles away, and I couldn't manage them both!'

‘Both! Not much! Why, man, you must chuck yours; your petty concern's nothing to this!'

Sam's head was going in slow dissent. What? Eh! Oh, no! he couldn't pay you out! But that's nothing; let the wretched thing go—it is going, anyway.'

Apparently not observing these last mysterious observations, Sam, still staring amazedly, began, ' If you really mean it, Mr. Brice—'

'Mean it! Listen to me! Haven't I left my dinner to come seeking you! Saturday night, too!' And it was clear that Mr. Punch could think of no stronger evidence of his earnestness.

'You're awfully kind, Mr. Brice, but –'

'Kind! bosh! fiddle! It's a matter o' business, man; are you on, that's the point?'

'But do you really want me to manage that great concern? Why, sir –'

'I want *thee*' – Mr. Punch often dropped

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into loose language when he got angry—'to come and gaffer old Smailes's timber-yard— partnership to start with, and chance of the whole concern when thou can find the cash, Is that clear enough ? '

Sam lifted a long, wondering sigh, and stared hard at the accountant without speaking.

'Confound the fellow! I might be asking him to shoot himself!'

Still Sam stared, and found nothing to say.

'Oh well, here.' And with sudden impatient scorn the red-faced little man jerked his horse's head from Sam's grasp, and prepared to ride off. `Look here! I can find twenty men, an' wi' money, too, that will jump at it; so—'

'Mr. Brice, forgive me! I'm so bewildered and staggered, I cannot think.'

`Then hurry up, man!—hurry up! What is it to be?' And, gratified by the stunning effect of his offer upon his companion, the irascible ' Punch' fumbled with his bridle and waited.

` I don't know what to say to you, sir,

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for your goodness; but it's so very sudden, I cannot—,

‘Who said you could? Do you think I want you to buy a pig in a poke? Take time—take a week; will that do?'

‘I'm afraid, sir—‘

‘Oh, bother afraid! Come to the "Red Bull" coffee-room next Friday, at eleven sharp, and bring your wandering wits with you next time.'

‘Yes, but I fear—'

'Fear nothing, keep your mouth shut, turn it over, and come with a "Yes, if you please, sir." 'And then, as he was galloping away, he turned in his saddle and added, ‘Never mind the brass—I'll find the brass.'

Sam watched the departing agent until he vanished round the shoulder of the hill, and still stood there like a man in a dream. This astounding offer, so flattering to one who had known so much of the world's hardness, so tempting to one who had won small advantages by hard endeavour and many sacrifices, and so disturbing an intrusion into his already harassed and burdened mind, seemed to have brought intellectual

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deadlock, and sheer stupefied helplessness was creeping over him. The older troubles were still there; but this new suggestion, introducing as it did so many complications, utterly dazed him, and all feeling seemed to have passed away. He turned round and took a last look at the setting sun why, he knew not; and then, kicking moodily at the clumps of gorse he never seemed to see, he moved slowly back towards Grindell and home.

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CHAPTER VIII

A QUIXOTIC PROPOSAL

THE Broomes lived in Moxon Street, and occupied a house of which Sam was heartily ashamed. As his sisters boasted with a pride that utterly scandalized him, it was 'almost

a villa.'Sam's early years had been spent in Candle-house Square, near the Methodist mission, and the family would have been there still but for the interference of old Mr. Blandon, who had insisted that the junior partner's residence should at any rate not dishonour the firm. But the removal to such a pretentious dwelling had been a great trial to the only male member of the family, and even now he could not be induced on any consideration to use the front entrance. His sister, who was a school teacher-apprentice, had collected quite a long list of pretty titles for the new abode

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but Sam would have none of them, and had grimly nailed No. 47 on the only place upon the gate-post where a name might have been painted. It was only a better class six-roomed cottage, standing by itself in a small garden; but Sam hung his head when he approached it, and looked very solemn indeed when his vain-glorious women-folk aspired to lace curtains.

To this modest abode the pallid, heart weary fellow returned after his distracting experiences in Bracken Lane and on the moor. His mother was a Methodist, and he and. his sisters had been brought up at the mission; but in old Mr. Blandon's last days Sam had gone to church, and since then had shown a strange and distressing partiality for the Quakers, who had a very modest little meeting-house at Hapsby. This was the only trouble his mother now had, and as in every other respect he was a model son, she had to content herself with the hope and prayer that he would eventually find his way back to the 'true fold.' She was a very plain old woman, with traces of her life-long struggle with

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poverty on her face; but her dress was always scrupulously neat, and the kitchen Sam entered was spotless. He assumed a careless air, and began to hum a tune as he entered; but he might have spared himself the trouble, for his mother's first glance brought the corners of her mouth down. They spoke of the heat and the approaching day of rest, but

Sam sat *down* like a stranger not sure of a welcome, and studied his parent carefully whenever opportunity served. He got up presently and changed his coat, sat down again, and at once remembered some other cause for a journey upstairs—he was evidently very restless. Usually he was the first to retire for the night, but now he sauntered to the door, and thence into the garden, but was back again in a moment or two, and began poking about on the mantel-piece as though in search of something he never found. Another journey into the garden, a long loiter at the door, and then a remark about the hour which set the watchful mother upon hurrying the girls off to bed, in spite of his half-hearted protest. It was now

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dark, and, when the lively Dora at last finished her demurrings on early retirement at the top of the stairs, mother lighted a small lamp, carefully closed the door at the stairfoot, and quietly sat down by the cold fire place to darn stockings. This was an unusual thing for her to do at this hour, but she had read the signs, and was waiting to hear. Sam was gnawing the nails of his little finger, and did not know that he was beating a tell tale rat-tat on the floor with his toe. There was a thud and a suppressed scream of laughter overhead, and mother gauged the seriousness of what was coming by the fact that the smile she looked for on his face did not appear, and that he did not seem to have noticed anything.

She bent her head a little lower over her work and sighed; these signs only appeared when there was something wrong at the saw-mill.

`Would you like to be rich, mother?'

This was an old question, and brought back to her a boy perched on a stool and staring into the fire in the little home of Candle-house Square. They were sweetly

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pensive reminiscences therefore, and as her face lighted softly, she replied, 'I am rich! very rich!'

He had fallen to nibbling at his nail again; what he had to say evidently took much arrangement. 'Yes, but really rich-three times as rich as you are?'

‘I should like to be rich enough to build our new chapel--I've cause enough, thank God!' and the soft glow on her face was meant to be a caress. He was slyly watching her over his offending finger, and so she smiled to herself and took another stocking.

`Would you like to leave Grindell-and the mill?'

'Mercy, lad, don't frighten me!' and she was looking hard at him now, and her tones were almost angry.

‘If we could get double the money-and more?'

`Don't, Sammy! Don't never talk like that, my lad!' and she held out her hand as though towards some evil thing she saw, whilst with the other she covered her heart.

‘Mr. Frank may want to get rid of me some day.'

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‘Oh, lad, what's come over thee—you're hurtin' me!'

'But he may, mayn't he?'

‘Sammy, the Lord put you there, and the Lord must remove you. Oh, don't frighten me like that, lad!'

'The same Lord that put me there may remove me, mayn't He?'

‘Till He does, Sammy—till He does, we must wait and be thankful.'

‘But what if He's called me somewhere else?—called me to—day?'

'Sammy, it's the devil a-tempting thee Oh! we're so happy, and—oh! lad, what is it?' and she had him by the arm and was hugging it as though ithad been his neck. And then it was all told; and with a heart that eased as he spoke, Sam detailed his interview with

'Punch' Brice, and supplied such facts as were necessary to make the situation clear to her. She was hanging upon him, and searching his face, as though suspicious lest something should be held back; and when he had finished he put her gently into her chair, and fell upon his finger-nails again whilst a long, painful pause prevailed. 'He's given

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me till next Friday,' said the son at last, repeating information he had already supplied in order to start her talking; but the perplexed woman had nothing to say.

‘He's serious enough, and—and I believe I could manage it.'

She started up as though to speak, but lapsed into painful silence again.

` It came to me; I didn't seek it.'

Still there was no response, she appeared to be trembling; had she not inspired the very ambitions that were now frightening her? At last she rose to her feet, her face set and solemn like that of a prophet, but her body swaying about with the conflicting emotions of motherhood, yearning, and struggle for duty.

‘Sammy, weren't we saved from the work house and starvation by Blandons?'

‘Yes '—almost eagerly.

`Haven't we got all we have and all our blessed comfort through Blandons?'

`Yes.'

`And haven't you been made a master tradesman and set on the way to great success by Blandons?'

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'Yes.'

‘Then'—and her eyes were shining now—‘then, laddy mine, we'll let well alone. Duty is worth more than money, and there is that maketh himself poor, yet hath great riches.'

It seemed to Sam that her pleading tones entered one ear as sweetest music, and the other as clashing discord. If he could have told her all, if he had dared to confess at once his great love and his new great hate, she might have spoken differently. But the next moment he was sure she would not; he knew also that he could not have borne to hear her say other than she had said, and so, though hell and chaos were still raging within him, he choked back every rising desire, and hoarsely muttered, ' Thank God for a good mother!'

As Frank Blandon left Jessamine Cottage on that fateful night when Hetty had dismissed him, he was the subject of new and utterly strange emotions. The apparent ease with which she had overcome him, and the spiritless way he had accepted his rebuff, are not to be attributed to the weak

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cowardice which `lets I dare not wait upon I would.' The fact was, he was at sea the unexpected, the impossible, had happened; and the very bases of his philosophy as to women had crumbled to pieces there in that old summer-house. There were women, or at least there was one woman and a woman of inferior position to him self, too-who did not want to marry him; who had refused him, disdained, literally, and in cold blood rejected him—*him*!

His experience of the sex had made him wary, astute, and slippery, driven him to measures of meanness by the very boldness and pertinacity of their pursuit of him; but here was one who would not have him when she could. Ethel Mellor, a born aristocrat, was languishing for him at that very moment; but this common little shop-keeper's daughter flouted him. He was not angry; yet he was staggered, dumfounded, and entirely out of his bearings. There was some sort of conveyance coming down the road after him as he strode along with head sunk in shoulders and eyes on the ground, and so he turned into Bracken Lane to

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avoid being overtaken. The devil was rising within him. That he should not be able to have his will with Hetty Waine as with other women was monstrous, and that he should have to wait and resort to diplomacy even was irritating, considering what sacrifices he was making for the little jade. Oh! she should smart for this; the more pains he had to take to catch her, the more would he humble her when he had caught her. It was her Methodism, he supposed; the prudish scrupulosity of the `unco guid.'

All the better; to bring one of these sanctimonious ones to heel would be something worth doing.

What precisely was her game? What did she expect to gain by her crafty holding off? She wanted a formal proposal, wanted it in black and white. Ah! he had always understood that these ` pious ' folk were uncommonly 'downy' where the main chance was concerned. She wanted to be sure, did she?—to have him hard and fast? Well, she should see—and here he stopped to glare at the trees in the lane with a fierce vindictive grin. She had bested

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him, queened it over him; not only out generalled him in tactics, but had over powered him by sheer force of superior personality. Amazed, intensely humiliated, and raging with revenge, he strode along the quiet old lane, the prey of goading, exasperating emotions. Consciously or otherwise she had taken the surest way of enslaving him; for in spite of his rage he was now so much more in love with her that he could no longer help himself, and the thought of abandoning the quest never even occurred to him. How to reach her, subjugate her, bring her to his feet, was now the question of questions.

The information which greeted him almost before he opened the door at home, that the vicar of Hapsby had sent to inquire about ‘Mother,' though proffered by his sisters with eager excitement, scarcely reached him—it was like a message from another world with which he had remotest connexions; and without a thought of his sick parent he retreated to his own room, locked the door, lighted the gas, and gave himself up to tobacco and his all-absorbing perplexities.

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It was ten o'clock next morning when he appeared, in his most self-pitiful mood, at his mother's breakfast-table. Mrs. Blandon had quite recovered-the vicar's flattering message had done marvels but her son made no inquiry after her condition, and the chattering raillery of his sisters about the unusual smartness of his dress evoked no

response. He was sacrificing himself for their ambitions, and they had nothing to offer him but thoughtless chaff. He called at the woodyard a little later to see the letters—lie had been specially careful about these of late—he gave an order or two to the workmen, and then strolled off with painful reluctance to Hapsby Vicarage, where he knew he was expected. Fortune, ill-natured jade, always his enemy, was now doing her very worst; and he was being driven to that which his soul hated. Yes, he was the victim of his family's social ambitions; he could have courted Hetty Waine, and won her, but for his mother and sisters and their set. He was being sacrificed to a woman older than himself, and with irksome, aristocratic notions, just to keep the world's conventions and

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gratify women's ambitions. They had driven him to the blunder which had estranged Hetty, made him a hateful traitor to his trust ful partner, and even-so completely can the selfish soul deceive itself-driven him to devious gambling courses which threatened his ruin, and which he would never have drifted into but for the dull decorum of his mother's house. And then Hetty Waine suddenly returned to him, radiant, innocent, and—most seductive temptation of all—unattainable. The thought awakened all the old desires in him, passion, stronger, wilder, and more wilful for its recent repression, surged up within him; and he might even then have turned aside from his fatal errand, only his thoughts had caused him to walk faster than he was aware, and he was already at the vicarage gates. Miss Mellor had gone for a long drive, but had left a note for him; would he step into the study, as the vicar wanted to see him.

Frank's heart began to thump and his head to buzz. What did the lady's odd absence and her letter mean? A chill crept over him; something else was wrong. Every

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thing was `queer' this morning. The vicar usually came out with a jolly shout to greet him; but now the study door was shut, and he had to knock. There was no cheery come in,' no fussy dash at a pile of cigar boxes for a 'decent brand'; he was coolly invited to a

chair, whilst coward conscience began to raise 'pandemonium' within him. The vicar was writing at his desk, and Frank dropped into a chair with the usual references to the weather.

'Er—a—yes—I say, Blandon, what's this I hear about the Methodists?'

The tone was cold and hard, and Frank in his injured, self-pitiful mood turned surly.

'What do you mean?'

`Why, you are selling them a site, aren't you? ,

'Who says so? '

'Never mind who says so; is it so, or is it not?'

The vicar had risen, and was leaning against the mantelpiece, looking at him with stern displeasure. Qualms of sudden fear struck the coward soul, and with many motives struggling together and making dis-

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traction in his brain, he fell back on the dominant impulse for immediate relief, and answered:

'I'm as much likely to sell a site to the Methodists as you are.'

'But—but they think so; old Sweetlove is bragging about it, and—and you're spooning with old Waine's daughter.'

Frank went a sudden sickly white, then flushed red, and wanted to fly at the barber's throat or knock the haughty vicar down, and consigned all women to bottomless perdition. Connected thought just when it was most needed became impossible; he could not even remember the course of the conversation. All he was conscious of was a blind impulse of violence; and so, goaded and utterly reckless, he sprang to his feet, and glaring at the cleric, he shouted, `And what if I am? What's all this to you?'

The vicar stood there looking at him, looking him through and through, apparently reading in the tense silence his very soul. Excuses, apologies, falsehoods, sprang to Frank's lips; but the cold eye of the aristocrat quelled them all, and at last Frank heard,

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like a voice from another world, 'Thank you!—and thank God!' and as he moved to reach the bell-rope he added icily, ' Now I know you, sir—and you may go.'

How he got out of the room and away from the house Frank never knew, but when he came to himself he was striding along the road towards home at the top of his walking speed, scarce knowing whither he went. Back in his own room, however, he grew, outwardly at least, more collected; but a few moments later he was weltering in a deep, dark morass of vain regrets. Now that his prospects with the vicar's niece were wrecked, he suddenly recollected all they were worth, and how all his future hung upon them.

For it so falls out,
That what we have we prize not at the worth
Whiles we enjoy it; but being lacked and lost,
Why, then we rack the value.

The sophistication of cowardice fought hard within him, and it took half an hour to beat it out of refuge after refuge, and bring him to the facing of the cold and fatal facts. But there was no escape, and, once convinced of the real situation, he became the prey of

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remorses and self-recriminations of the cruellest kind. The personal attractions of Ethel Mellor, the secure financial position, the social distinction, and all the other advantages that went with her, now put on hues of splendour that were tantalizing to his selfish, ease-loving nature; whilst the shame and ruin that now faced him without these advantages seemed sterner and more cruel than ever. Two hours earlier he had looked on these things with fastidious reluctance; now he realized that life would be difficult, wellnigh impossible, without them.

Suddenly he remembered Ethel's letter, and took it from his pocket reluctantly, guessing already something of its purport. As he read, his heart sank within him, and his very fingers shook.

‘SIR,--I cannot pretend to misunderstand your intentions of yesterday; but as I happened to be driving through the Avenue when you were leaving your grocer-girl, you

will understand why I cannot see you again. I am deeply grateful to the Providence which interfered to save me from so terrible a

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fate. Do not trouble to reply or to see me again.

'Yours indignantly,

'ETHEL D. MELLOR.'

For a full minute that letter was stared at, and then Frank Blandon dropped back inhis seat and bellowed—wildly, pitifully, despairingly cried; and a few minutes later hewas rushing frantically from room to room in his mother's house, followed by three tearful, shrieking women, and theatrically brandishing an empty revolver. He had remembered, however, to pick up and conceal his lady-love's letter; and when after two hours of distressful struggling he had been reduced to calmness, he allowed a terrified mother to drag out of him, bit by bit, the confession that business worries, brought about chiefly by the miserable stupidity and bungling of the man to whom his father had tied him, had brought upon him the frenzy which had wellnigh proved so tragical (!). Reluctantly he promised never to think of self-destruction again, more reluctantly still to accept ill-spared financial sacrifice on the part of his

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doting parent; but reluctance became immovable obstinacy, which quite allayed any possible suspicion on the part of his women folk, and filled them with secret pride in his dutiful loyalty, when they insisted that he should get rid at all costs of the obnoxious and dangerous Broome.

'It is hard, it means pinching poverty to us,' sighed Mrs. Blandon to her daughters.

But his love for his dead father's wishes is beautiful; and if he can put up *with the* wretch, we must.'

'Yes; but it grows worse, mother,' objected Clara, the second daughter, who was supposed to be devoid of insight into character, and was always a little critical of her brother.

`Yes, love, it does; but it is a lovely thing in the dear boy, and that Broome will have his reward.

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CHAPTER IX
A FIERCE QUARREL

MEANWHILE the much abused 'Co.' was passing through experiences wholly different from, though not less painful than, those of his partner. He had gone to bed after his soothing interview with his mother, in comparative composure; but as soon as he grew quiet, the sultry air, the solitude, and the soft silence made him very wakeful, and soon all the bewildering medley of his thoughts was back upon him, and he lay struggling with point after point of his complicated anxieties. Accustomed to self-renunciation by the experiences of a life prematurely seasoned to disappointment, he had surrendered Hetty Waine with surprising ease; but away from the glamour of her presence, and face to face with the fact that he had a rival, the old longing had come

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back with redoubled force, and he already realized that he had undertaken a sacrifice greater than he could make. Suspicion of his partner, too, was taking definite shape within him, and fact after fact came back to him to confirm convictions against which he found it useless to contend. 'Punch' Brice's offer seemed to have dwindled in his mind, and but for a new suggestion which arose in his mind that it might help him at Jessamine Cottage, would have been dismissed as a dangerous and inadmissible temptation. Gradually the least pressing and important of his many interests obtained ascendency, and after long, close thought and much restless tossing about, he settled down to a consideration of the other causes of his perplexity in their relation to the chief

concern of life-his relations to his partner. Only those who have bit by bit won their way in life from pinching poverty to comfortable respectability can appreciate the value he set on the position he had attained. A peasant through and through, and breathing every day a social atmosphere only possible now in remote country towns; trained by a

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mother who had been originally a domestic servant, and whose old Methodist creed of sternest self-repression had been supported by the unanswerable arguments of extreme poverty—the position to which his old master's kindness had raised him seemed to impose upon him the heaviest obligations and bind him by bands of steel to the Blandon interest.

It had been a point of honour *with him* not to `pry' too much into the affairs of the concern, but to labour with every faculty he possessed and every moment of his time for its prosperity. He could never repay the debt he owed, but at any rate he could do his utmost to acknowledge in some measure his obligation. He had been willing, almost proud, to sacrifice his savings to the temporary necessities of the firm, for it eased a little the weight of obligation, and gave him a comforting consciousness of usefulness; but the events of the day just closed had seriously staggered him. Jealousy apart, the suspicion of Frank's double-dealing was irresistible, and with this as a starting-point, numerous little straws of evidence from recent happenings came

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together in his mind, until the result fairly startled him. Again and again *his* better nature rose in protest; but each time it was borne down by the sheer weight of evidence, until when the first streaks of dawn broke in upon him he had reached the utterly repugnant but irresistible conclusion that there was a screw loose somewhere in the firm's finances.

He half-rose from his bed with the in tention of going to the office and examining the books; but a sudden recollection that it was the Sabbath checked him, and he fell back upon his pillow with a protesting moan. He did not regard himself as a Christian;

deep dark gulfs of natural depravity, he told himself, separated him from that happy state. But as he lay there, with his face buried in his pillow, there seemed to rise on the far-off edge of the black waters of his sorrows a bright little disk like a young moon, in which were dimly defined the features of Hetty Waine. He lay a moment, holding his breath with thrilled intensity, and gazing at the lovely vision like one hypnotized; but the black waters

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rose again, the momentary gleam was blotted out, the thing suggested was not for such as he, and he rolled over with a choking sob. But it carne again, held hint again, it was fainter, farther off, but it was still there; and though he nipped his eyes together to get rid of the mocking impossibility, it returned. Sometimes he lay still to stare it out of countenance, sometimes when his mind had gone back to sadder things it returned upon him with startling vividness; but all through those hours of gentle dawn it came and went, a mocking delusion, a fantastic dream, utopian for any one, but for bad Sam Broome, born in sin and shapen in iniquity, Sam Broome, who had never so much as been at a penitent form, and never seen the inside of a class meeting since his mother took him as a child, an utter impossibility.

This tantalizing, undismissible idea was with him all that day, with him in the house, with him amid the solemn quiet of the little Quaker meeting-house, with him in his wanderings over Hapsby moor; and though his jaded brain sank into dreamless slumber

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almost as soon as he laid his head on the pillow that Sabbath night, it was the first clear thought that reached him when his mother awoke him on Monday morning.

What this haunting vision really was will appear in the sequel. Suffice it is to say, that Hetty Waine was the soul and centre of it, and the memory of that interview in the little Jessamine Cottage drawing-room was acting like a charm upon him, and had already become a master-force in his life. He was far from really believing in it; he had

little faith in his ability to do his part in it; but it had a marvellous attraction for him, seemed to take hold of some unguessed power in his own heart, and with little hope of being able to realize it, was already making tentative preparations for a commencement. The ultimate end he could not believe in, but the first steps were plain and clear, and must be taken at once.

During all the earlier parts of that Monday he was going about his ordinary duties with more than usual haste, his thoughts meanwhile making him unusually absent-minded and quiet. He instructed his mother

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to send supper to the office, and was soon absorbed in his first real scrutiny of the books of the firm. For some time he went about his work deliberately, but the end of the first hour found him perturbed and petulant; little irritable exclamations broke from him, clouds gathered on his plain face. He flung the books about as though angry with them, and commenced to search in every accessible drawer, cupboard, or shelf for that which he could not find.

It was dusk by this time, and he lighted the gas. His supper arrived, but he received it sullenly, answered Dora's questions with laconic brevity, but called her back to carry a message to the rest that they must go to bed and not wait for him. The supper remained untouched, the desk became littered all over with piles of account-books, invoice files, and letter-cases; and presently he began to pace about the floor of the little office in serious agitation. Every now and again he made a fresh plunge at the books, but returned again with increased excitement and distress. For fully half an hour he sat and dully surveyed the crowded, tumbled

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desks, and at length set to work to put all things in their places and commence afresh. His face was sickly grey by this time, and the roots of his hair grew dank. Slowly now, and with a composure that was costing him much, he recommenced his investigations,

and by laborious, roundabout methods, forced upon him by the confusion apparent every where, he doggedly struggled his way to the final fatal facts. The day dawned, and he was still there, growing more wretched every moment as the truth became clear to him. Every now and then he broke off to pace the office and mutter maledictions upon himself; and just as the workmen began to arrive he finished his labours, stuffed some closely written memoranda into his pocket, and made off home for an early breakfast.

It had been a terrible night; the situation he now, for the first time, dimly realized was serious in the extreme, and the Sam Broome who returned to the office about ten o'clock looked older by years than he who had entered it the night before.

He was joined a few minutes later by his

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partner, whose handsome face had a wary, apprehensive look on it, and whose fine eyes glanced hither and thither in furtive restlessness.

'Morning, Sam!'

Sam's head dropped over the plan he was studying; but he could not speak. Frank took a peep at the correspondence, and was relieved that there was apparently nothing alarming in it.

'Well, Sam, how's the courting going?' Sam winced, kept his eyes self-protectingly upon his work, and then with a mighty effort replied, ' Ah, sir, that lady is not for me.'

'Oh! Well, I did my part; I saw her twice, and did what I could.'

Some strange convulsion seemed to be shaking Sam, and Frank pitied him.

'I—I—Mr. Frank, that lady is an angel of God.'

'Ha! ha! Yes, they're all angels, my boy, till you get them.'

Sam's manner became so suddenly icy, that Frank realized he had somehow blundered.

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‘Try her again, Sam! “Faint heart," you know.'

Sam was deep in his drawings again, though the other could not help noting that his lips were nipped together and his hands clenched. Suddenly, however, he stood up, fixed his partner with a piercing look, and asked calmly, `Why don't you go in for her yourself, sir?'

‘I?—Ha! ha! what's put that into your head?' And the latter part of the sentence was spoken with sharp suspicion.

‘There's no lady like her in all the world, Mr. Frank.'

‘Tut, man! You don't know women as I do.'

'Mr. Frank, she's as good as she is beautiful; she'd say—She'd make a man of you, sir.'

Frank blushed to the roots of his hair; and then, with a new thought, he said, 'Why should she take me when she won't take you?'

‘We're different; you've style about you, and good looks and position.'

Blandon was puzzled. Why was his

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partner taking this odd course? Was he merely pumping him? If so, what did he know, and what was he after? The least word might give him away, and Sam was evidently excited, and taking pains to conceal it.

‘But you're not giving her up like that, man? Why, you're inviting me to cut you out.'

'Mr. Frank, I am out; I never ought to have thought of such a lady. Go on and prosper.'

Several questions rose to Frank's lips, but were checked in time. The sallow-faced fellow seemed to assume that he wanted H etty. How had he got that notion? and what was he up to? Was Sam speaking with any particular knowledge of the girl's mind?

‘She's not exactly my sort, you know, Sam ; I don't know that I—’

But the other broke in upon him a little fiercely, 'Yes, you do, sir; nobody could help falling in love with her.'

Mr. Frank's misgivings deepened. He began to be afraid of this simple fellow;

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it was clear that he knew more than he was saying.

'I do? How do you know? Did she—'

'Mr. Frank' and Sam, white to the lips, laid down his pencil, and began to shuffle back towards the corner which was his usual retreat when embarrassed Mr. Frank, I want to speak seriously to you if you will listen.'

'Well?' And Frank laughed harshly to hide his qualms.

'I spent all yesterday going through the books.'

Frank checked a hasty cry; but his partner's eye was fixed upon him, and he suppressed himself with a curious swallowing struggle in the throat,

'You mustn't be angry, it's too serious; but we're in difficulties. And there's your character, and your dear father's, and your mother's, and—and—excuse me speaking so plain, but we are in great danger, and you must settle down, sir. You marry her, sir; she's a saint and an angel, and she'll put you right, and we shall pull through.'

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Sam spoke with deep emotion, thrusting himself farther back into his corner as he did so; but there was no flinching in his eyes.

'What on earth is the fellow—How dare you examine the books without me! You're forgetting yourself, sir!'

Sam closed his eyes, but did not seem to hear.

'Yes, sir; she's wonderful! She'd steady you; she'd stir up all your best nature; she'd make you good and true, and-why, then we should pull through.'

'But!—but! Why, man, she's got nothing, an odd thousand or so; but what is—'

'No, no, sir! but she's got goodness and love—why, Mr. Frank, that lady would make a fallen angel holy.'

Frank was dumfounded. The heroic self-sacrifice, the doglike devotion, the sublime faith in the best things that echoed in his partner's halting words, were lost upon him; he was simply wondering what crafty dodge was now on foot. That his partner, so deeply in love with Hetty four days ago, should now be so solemnly urging her upon

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him was an astounding thing! What could be the inner meaning of it? But the fright he had got about the books was the upper most thought, and so, returning to that, he cried,` We are not talking about her, we're talking about you prying into my concerns; I won't have it, sir!'

'I must, sir!—I must—!' And Sam, though very humble, was clearly very determined.

'From this day forward I must know all that's going on.'

Frank's recent experiences had not left him even normal self-control, and so, though he had come to business that morning with an urgent necessity upon him for conciliating his partner, he flushed hotly and cried, `Will you, indeed? Touch those books again, and I'll chuck you out of the concern!'

Sam seemed to quail, his head dropped, and his body went suddenly limp; and so the bully in Frank rushed in to improve the advantage. `You forget yourself, sir! But for the old dad, I wouldn't have you here a day! Don't try me, or out you go!'

Sam was struggling with the memory of 'Punch' Brice's wonderful offer, and could not

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for the moment reply. What of self-consideration Frank had was now coming back to him, and he turned away to re-examine the letters and cool himself.

An icy five minutes' silence fell upon then, during which Sam with a long sigh stole back to his desk; and the other, watching him slyly out of the corner of his eye, had time

to collect his thoughts. He was hoping that Sam would speak; but the moments went by, the noisy little American clock tore away at its work until its tick, tick, became maddening, and at last he swung round, crying

'Look here, man! I f you value your place in this concern, you must do something.

We are in a nasty mess; we must have money, and a lot.'

Sam shook his head mournfully. `I've no more money, Mr. Frank.'

'But you must. What are you here for? Why shouldn't you stand the racket as well as I!'

'I don't know where to get another five pounds!' and Sam's face was grey with a sickly emotion Frank took for fear.

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Then the whole concern may go to smash! Confound you, you'll have to do it! Do you hear? you'll have to do it!' And Frank, ruler in hand, was standing towering over his partner white with rage.

Sam winced and cowered, but would not speak. Slowly a sickly smile broke over his face, and he was turning towards his companion, when the other, misinterpreting the look, and utterly beyond himself with exasperation at his own mismanagement, brought the uplifted ruler crash on Sam's brow, and he fell to the floor like a log. Next moment the infuriated man flung the ruler from him with a woful cry, sprang out of the office, and dashed down the yard at the top of his speed.

Before he had gone far, however, a thought more terrible than that which was speeding his feet stopped him. Where should he go? What should he do? He dare not go back, he dare not face his fellows, he longed to know what his mad blow had dore ; but face once more the stricken and perhaps lifeless partner he could not. He darted down a back lane towards the moor; but stopped by

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the memory of the fallen man, he again glanced round with a terrified look, and saw cruel spies in the silent trees and a mocking frustration of concealment in the bright summer sunlight ! He groaned and wailed, and then looked round like a hunted thing for possible onlookers; this way, that way, backwards, forwards, he stared with white, haunted face and shaking limbs, and then with a gulp of despair turned homewards, to fling his terrors on those who loved him, and leave them once more to extricate him from the difficulties he had made.

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CHAPTER X
A SKULKS RETREAT

IT was a miserable-looking man that scrambled to his feet by the help of the office-stool legs; there was a great red and purple weal on his forehead, his sickly face was grey green, his lips swollen and his eyes caverns of despair. His head reeled about so that he had to hold up by the desk to steady himself. Thus supported he struggled to the door, closed and locked it, and then, picking up a marble paper-weight, he leaned heavily upon the desk and pressed the cold surface of the stone to his brow. For a few moments he struggled with qualmish sickliness, and glanced vainly round for a glass of water. The office began to spin round him, and he had to clutch at the desk again to keep himself upright. Then he staggered to a chair, still holding the cold marble to his

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forehead, but becoming each moment more conscious of the flac! flac! of his wound and the hell of passion surging in his soul. Then, sick and reeling, he groped his way to the cupboard, took down a small bottle containing brandy which was kept on the premises for accidents, put it to his lips, tasted it with a nauseous squirm, went back to his seat, and speedily forgot his pain in his raging anger. Then the storm broke, and for five frantic minutes he raved about the little compartment like an infuriated beast. The stolid slowness of his ordinary manner was the result of sternest self-repression; he had

deep strong passions, and knew it, and these raged for the moment with such intensity as to frighten him. Remembering even in his paroxysm how easily he might be overheard, his cries, though thick and hoarse, were smothered, ` He's taken my wife, he'd take my position and my good name, he'd take my very bread, and he's felled me like a dog! O—h! '—and dancing into the middle of the room he clutched his open hands together as though they were tightening on an enemy's throat, and hissed and snarled more like a baited beast than a

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human creature; but it was only for a moment. When the first spasm had spent itself, carefully cultivated habit began to reassert its power, he stood there in the middle of the floor, and looked round like one awaking from a nightmare, and then fell forward on the desk and buried his still rocking head in his hands. He must have remained in that position unconscious of the flight of time and everything about him for some twelve minutes at least, and when he did move it was only to turn his head sideways and stare absently at the dingy advertisements on the wall. He heard neither the racketty clock nor the droning saws; a softened manner had come over him, and his thoughts were evidently of tender things.

'You *did*, Mr. Blandon!' he muttered, as though talking confidentially with one invisible. `You took me from the very gutter! You gave me my first chance. You saved my mother's life and my sisters' and you made us what we are!'

He paused a little, and then went on, `You *did,* sir! You loved him dearly, and you meant me to help him. Mrs. Blandon was your

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dear wife, and the young ladies are Your daughters, and the name of the firm is your own noble name; but, O sir—' His mut, terings here became inaudible for a time; then he raised himself a little, felt at his wound, shook suddenly with returning passion; and then, drawing himself stiffly up, he went on,

'What is it? What is a bit of a knock to what you've done for me? I must!—I *must*! O God, help me!'

Other thoughts came crowding upon him, his mutterings. ceased, his head dropped aain upon his open palm, and a long silence prevailed. He winced now and then, turned first one cheek and then the other upon his spread hands, and gradually went so still that he scarcely seemed to breathe. Thus he remained for some time, only the rapid blinking of his eyes giving any sign of consciousness; and then he whispered, 'It must be!' then louder, 'It *must* be!' then standing up suddenly he almost shouted, `It's the only way! She can save him, and only she; his character, his future, his mother and sisters, me and mine, all depend on that. It must be!—it must!—it *must*!'

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Still standing and still staring before him with rapidly blinking eyes and raised brows, labouring evidently to bring a misgiving heart to the necessary steadfastness, he was suddenly aware of footsteps in the passage, and a rattle of the lid of the letter-box.

Absently he picked up the note that came through, and though it was addressed to the firm, he had now no scruple about opening it.

` DEER SIR,

`This is to inferm you by these presents, That we Do not want Your Land in the wood Yard for Our new chappil.

Yours in Christ,

'JOSHUA SWEETLOVE.'

Sam scowlingly tried to collect his thoughts. Having, of course, never heard of the subject before, he was at first very much mystified, and the pain in his head made connected reflection difficult. Gradually, however, by putting this and that together, he was able to guess something of what was forward, and the fact that money thus obtained would help them in what he now realized were serious financial straits quickened his powers and

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brought up a little sigh of relief. But why were the Methodists, whose position and aspirations he understood exactly, declining the best plot they could have had? Clearly he must see the barber at once, for the money might be of some service, and—but here there were footsteps in the passage, and the sweep of skirts, and the next moment Clara Blandon burst breathlessly in upon him.

`Sam Broome, what have you— Gracious, your head! Why-why, you two have been fighting!'

She was quite a tiny little person, with dark hair and eyes and a keen witty-looking face. She was the only one of the family who bore her father's features, and had always that air of neatness about her which had distinguished the late head of the firm. She had also always shared her father's partiality for Sam, and in her girlhood had got herself into trouble by manifesting quite a kindness for the shy apprentice who came to the villa to do odd jobs. But Mrs. Blandon had very promptly nipped the 'highly improper' intimacy in the bud, and Clara had had to content herself with

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occasional opposition to the family sentiment when the junior partner was under discussion. She was a very independent, self-reliant little person, and had a reputation for unconventionality which was a constant humiliation to her more sedate mother and sisters. She and her brother had never got on very well together, her uncompromising scepticism about him being a constant cause of domestic discord.

‘No! no! Miss Clara-it's nothing. I just—'

‘Don't fib, sir! Come here now!' and she was round the little counter corner, and had his head between her cool hands before Sam could finish his evasion.

‘It's a blow!—be still, now! don't tell me! This is Frank's work. Get me some water and white rag. Surely you keep sticking plaster about somewhere.'

In a moment she had the office hand basin filled with water and the patient's head in chancery, whilst with her own little edged pocket-handkerchief she was sopping the wound and rattling on in her own most energetic fashion.

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‘Two great men fighting like silly school, boys—be still, sir!—and what about, I wonder!—did that hurt?—there now! where's the plaster? A nice object you'll look, Sara Broome: I'm ashamed of both of you.'

‘It was my fault, miss; I ought—'

‘Stuff and nonsense! I know better! No! no! stand still! If I don't give that wretched boy— Will you be quiet there!'

And as she laid her hand across the wound to fix the plaster down it almost looked as though she would have kissed the ugly patch.

'That will do! Your head's like a drum, I know! Now tell me all about it!' And a little fainter than she would have admitted with her amateur surgery, she took refuge in the one arm-chair the office possessed.

`It's nothing, miss. You're very kind; it was my fau—'

'Fibbing again! I know you, Sam Broome, and I know our Frank; and I want the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.'

But Sam had no notion of talking business with his partner's sister, especially

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this one, and so with a wriggle and a rub at the sound side of his face, he said: 'Miss Clara, it's nothing! it really is—'

‘You won't tell me? Then I'll tell you! He’s busy spooning, and neglecting the business, and things are going wrong—I *know*.'

The mention of Frank's love-affairs touched the great wound in Sam's heart, and thrown off his guard, he cried, ' No! *no*! miss, that will help. It is the best thing he could do.'

Clara laughed. `Yes, I suppose it is. I don't know what she sees in him, and it hasn't come off yet, you know.'

Still bemused, Sam became quite eager. Ah, yes! she'd put him right-she's grand! She's a saint, she is! '

'*Is* she! She's. grand enough, but as for the sain— But what do you know about her?'

Sam's quivering heart had a fresh stab. Oh! I've known her a little all my life; my mother, is a Methodist, you know.' But Clara was on her feet in amazement. 'A Methodist! who are you talking about?'

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Sam recovered himself, realized that he had blundered somehow, and so assuming a sudden waggishness that was pathetic under the circumstances, he shook his head and cried, ` No! no! miss, I mustn't tell, you know; love-secrets, you know!'

'But—but, why, you great goose, Ethel Mellor isn't a Methodist!'

'Ethel Mellor?'

'Yes! isn't that— Why—why— The fellow hasn't two girls again, has he?'

'But Sam had closed like the proverbial oyster, whilst the office began to spin round again. Now that he recollected, he had heard his partner's name linked with that of the Hapsby vicar's niece before. Why, that would be better from the business point of view than the other; and if it were so, the way was open to him again with Hetty Waine. But what duplicity! What heart less trickery it suggested on the part of Frank!

'Go on, man! Has he two? Who's the other?' And the excited little woman was at his side, her small hand on his arm, and her eyes on his in a way that made

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equivocation difficult. Sam was in the deeps, and scarcely knew what to do; a word might spoil everything, and so, to avoid those bright embarrassing eyes, he turned away and shook his head.

'Sam Broome, tell me, who's the other?' and she shook his arm imperiously.

Another weary absent-minded shake of the head, and so the lively little lady turned from him with a pout. 'All right, I'll get to know ; he's at home yonder, and thinks he's killed you. He's carrying on like one demented. You're not killed yet; but I'll get to know, Sam Broome !' and, finishing her disjointed tirade with a pettish flirt of her skirts, she vanished as abruptly as she had come.

Sam's head was ringing like a beaten anvil, he could not hold his thoughts together long enough to make connexions, and twenty disjointed notions were coming and going in his brain in as many seconds. But there was another rush of little feet and fluttering skirts.

‘Methodist! Why, you mean Hetty Waine?'

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Sam fought hard for an empty face, but it was no use.

‘It is! It's Hetty Waine! Why, he wouldn't look at her-none of us would!’

'Miss Clara, she's a—’

‘Stuff and nonsense! Our Frank marry a Methodist! He never thought of her! Never! never! never!,'

Sam was having difficulty with his temper, but there came to him just in time the consciousness that Hetty was being dishonoured by such discussion, and so he answered, somewhat sullenly, ` Well, Miss Mellor then; is he going to marry her?'

Clara in her turn grew cautious, and feared she might be jeopardizing a family secret, and so she said more soberly, 'No! no! only a notion of my own. Don't breathe it to a soul, will you, Sam?'

Sam gave the required assurance, and then said, 'Miss Clara, I should like to talk to you if you have—'

‘Oh! but I haven't. They sent me to see, and I'm wasting time; but I—I'll come again, and then—when he isn't about—but not one word of Miss Mellor!'

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'And not a word of Miss Waine!' Sam had to catch her at the door to add this; but she gave him a sagacious series of nods, and was gone.

Left alone, Sam had to betake himself to the arm-chair and wait some moments before he could realize the new situation. Frank was flirting with two girls, but the feelinos aroused on those lines were so fierce that he had to cram them back and turn to

safer aspects of the case. Miss Mellor was rather out of his reach, and the thought that his partner aspired to her took his breath away. He set as high a value, however, on Frank's looks and style as the Blandon ladies did, and the thing did not seem impossible. Now he began to see things differently. This was why Frank had been so careless about the business, and why he had let them run behind in their payments. His mind was upon other things, and of course if he did marry the heiress the business would be a minor matter to him. The weight on his heart seemed to lift as he reflected. Why, perhaps as usual he had been too anxious,

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perhaps his stupid way of taking everything seriously had misled him, and he had been too hard and obstinate with his partner. But the heaviness came back as he thought of Hetty; he had only her young brother's word, and-yes, there was Frank's own half-admission. Frank had notoriously light ideas with regard to women; like enough he had gone to fulfill his bargain with him, and been carried away by Hetty's beauty. He could very well under stand a thing like that. Besides, he had felt all along as though he were betraying Hetty in wishing her such a husband, and this danger would now be avoided. He always had been guilty of meeting trouble unnecessarily, and this was doubtless a case in point. Perhaps if Frank married the heiress he would sooner or later want to retire from the business, or else wind it up; and if that could be brought about at once, it might open the way to his acceptance of' Punch' Brice's tempting offer. Perhaps if he became sole proprietor of the business, or went to the larger concern, Hetty might- But here he pulled himself

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up with a withered smile and a dogged shake of the head. Hetty Waine—fool that he was to think of her at all-was miles and miles above him, whatever he might become. But at this point two work men came in for instructions, and both stared curiously at his plastered brow and went away again, whispering earnestly to each other. Then the

second, or noon, post arrived, bringing only a solitary letter. This, when opened, contained a long statement of overdue accounts, and a curt demand for payment that brought back all his trouble. He would go to dinner before the regular time, and thus escape the eyes of his employees. An ugly bruise would be more easily explained to a mother, who had bound up many a one for him, than to workmen, who knew that he had never been out of the office.

He pulled his hat over his eyes as far as he could, and was just closing the office door when Clara Blandon returned with a breath less message that he must go to the villa at once to see his partner, who was raving like a lunatic. 'Don't walk so fast, I'm out of

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breath!' commanded Clara, as they turned out of the woodyard.

'Is the young master very bad?' asked Sam anxiously, as he dropped into an easier step.

'Don't know! Bad or mad-or both,' was the testy reply.

'Things are rather worrying just now,' ventured Sam, in contrite apology, both for himself and his partner.

'And so you worry other people! That's just like men-boobies!'

'I'm sorry if I've upset—'

'Oh! hush, it's my belief you're screening him, Sam Broome. He doesn't spare you, I can tell you,' and the little lady looked very indignant. 'Look here!' she continued, almost stopping in the road as a new thought struck her. 'You tell them I patched that wound, and I'll never speak to you again, Sam Broome.'

It was clear by this time that the little creature was very perturbed about something, and Sam, with a little pang of sympathy, hastened to say, 'Never mind, miss, we shall pull through.'

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'He *will*! Oh! yes, his sort always do ; but how about you-and us?'

But they had arrived at the villa, and Clara, as he opened the gate to her, puckered her whole face in a series of cautionary frowns, evidently intended to put him on his guard. Somehow Sam began to feel that in spite of her manner she was not entirely unfriendly to him. The maid who opened the door was taking him straight to Mr. Frank's room; but Mrs. Blandon's gaunt figure appeared in the lobby, and, pointing to the drawing-room, followed him, carefully closing the door after her as she did so.

'Broome,' she said, in her haughtiest manner, 'this is a scandalous affair, and may be very serious for you.'

'Oh! ma'am, I'm so sorry.'

'Yes; but you should have been sorry sooner. We've borne with you much and long, but a thing like this we cannot pass. How did it happen?'

She had glanced sharply at his patched forehead upon entering, but was not now inquiring about that, and *Sam* was in great

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straits how to speak. `Oh! ma'am, it was my fault, I—'

`You forgot yourself; you let your low blood get the mastery of you, as I always said it would to my late husband. Well, sir, you have the pleasure of having thrown your young master into a serious illness. Does that satisfy you?'

`Oh! ma'am, I'm sure I—I—'

'You have also the pleasure of sending yourself back to the bench again, that I will see to. A worm will turn, and we've put up with you much too long.'

Sam stood like a guilty convict, with puzzled indignation fighting fiercely with his ingrained reverence for his old master's lady.

`Now, look you here, sir! My son insists on seeing you.

`Yes, ma'am.'

`The noble-hearted boy'— her her voice broke—'has much more forbearance than I should have; but, mind you! not a word of business! not a syllable to excite or worry him. Make your peace with him if you can, but remember, I have a place in the business

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yet, and shall have something to say about this.'

Mrs. Blandon had really waylaid Sam for the purpose of ascertaining the real cause of the quarrel, for Frank's wild ravings had awakened all sorts of terrible fears; but the sight of the transgressor had so stirred her resentment that she had forgotten her original intention. When Sam, conducted with a series of mysterious nods, hushing frowns, and uplifted hands, entered the ‘sick'-room, he found the patient lying full length on the sofa with wet cloths on his brow, a decanter of brandy and bottles of sal volatile and eau-de-Cologne on the table at his elbow. At the other end of the sofa sat Miss Catherine, who glared at the new comer with blighting coldness; whilst the other sister hovered round the sufferer's head, and was half-hysterically fumbling with the wet cloths. The patient looked ill enough, glanced for an instant at his own work on Sam's forehead, and then closed his eyes as though so small an effort was too much for his exhausted condition. Utter misery fell on poor Sam as he glanced round

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on the scene, and he felt the guiltiest Mortal on earth, and stammered out a sentence or two, half sympathy, half penitence.

Frank languidly waved his hand for the dismissal of his women-folk. There was hasty re-adjustment of his head-cloths, whispered exhortations to this and that precaution a loving kiss or two, and the three women trooped out, the elder lady shaking her head at Sam to bid him remember his instructions.

‘Oh! Mister Frank, I'm dreadfully—I’m cut to the heart that—'

‘Oh! never mind that.' This was spoken in a sort of querulous snarl. `Sam, I'm floored! I've overdone it. I'm to go away, they say, and have rest.'

‘Yes, sir!' cried Sam eagerly, and smitten with fresh shame that he should have goaded a sick man like this. 'I didn't know, sir; I was that bothered—'

`Yes, yes, I excuse you, Sam, but-but I shall want some ready money, you know.'

‘Y-e-es—yes, sir! of course, sir!' and the junior partner was ashamed at his stupid hesitation in answering.

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‘And, Sam, do you really want me to go in for wine's girl?'

'Y-e-e-s.' If ever yes meant no in this world, Sam's did.

Frank was too ill to notice the sign, and went on with his own ideas. `Well, look here!' and he sat up with amazing sprightliness for so sad an invalid-'those Methodists want a bit of land in our yard. Well, go and see old Waine and Sweetlove, pretend that there's a chance for them, get thick with them, and pile it on about about me.'

‘Y-e-s.' A very glum expressionless sort of assent this.

‘I've helped you, and you must help me you know, especially if she's about.'

‘Yes.'

'You've been a Methodist, haven't you? You'11 know where to touch the old jokers.' And the sick man was almost jocular.

There was not even the monosyllabic `yes' this time, but F .rank was too absorbed in his plots to notice.

`How much would you ask for it, sir?'

'Ask? Oh! couple of hundred. But you're

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not to sell it, man ; it's really not ours—it’s mo—' But here he checked himself, and then resumed, ` Egg them on ; crack me up; and meanwhile I'll be helping myself.'

Sam had been gradually filling with feelings of utter loathing of the man he was looking at, and who was supposed to be so ill, but with a mighty effort he choked back his anger and forced out another meaningless ‘Y-e-e-s.'

‘Well, that will do; pile it on thick with the old joskins, and—er—Sam, mother's fearfully rampagious about this—er—you know; but you square the old buffers, and I'll square her.'

There was a knock at the door. Mrs.Blandon came in to insist that the interview had already lasted too long, and Frank, the exhausted invalid, once more fell back on his couch, whilst Sam was conducted to the door. The gauntlet he would have to run at home about his bruised head kept his thoughts occupied for some time; but, that over,

he made a hasty meal, and hastened back to the office to face the new situation and decide upon his course. That proved an eventful

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afternoon. There were the day's letters to be attended to, and two small accounts to deal with; there was the money to find for Frank's holiday, and several worrying matters in the shop; and, when he did get time to himself, `Punch' Brice's offer came back, appealing to him in his utter sickness of heart as it had never done before. The Blandons would never understand, never believe anything but that they had been foolishly indulgent to him; his recent insight into his partner's real character made him despair of any attempt to make things better under the present arrangement, and the sense, sudden and sharp, that it would be criminal to facilitate in any way the scheme for securing Hetty for Frank, drove deep into his soul and brought him to a complete standstill.

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CHAPTER XI

SUNDRY NEGOTIATIONS

WE left Sam Broome labouring in his little office with the confused tangle of his circumstances, and wading deep in a morass of difficulties that threatened every moment to engulf him. Whichever way he turned his course seemed dangerous, and a sense that he was proposing the impossible to himself grew strong within hint. His great plan of saving the business, the Blandons, and Frank himself looked more and more quixotic as he considered it, and he began to fear that the attempt he was making might only exaggerate the mischief and precipitate the ultimate crisis. If he could! –if he could! But the idea, which had become alluring in proportion as it grew difficult, seemed now to fill his mind and lay a grip upon his imagination which was fast

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becoming an infatuation. And in that hour of his dire extremity Sam prayed-prayed as his mother had taught him in days that were gone, prayed like a baffled, stranded soul that has been beaten out of every other hope.

‘Are you him?'

Absorbed in his troubles, he stood at his desk with his chin propped on his hands and his eyes staring through the window, and had neither seen nor heard anything until the question just quoted brought him back to realities, and he turned round with a start to behold a tall, handsome woman about his own age, and dressed in well-made widow's weeds, who was eyeing him with studious, calculating curiosity, as though she were buying some coveted article of dress and begrudged the high price.

‘Yes, it's me! I'm Smailes's widow, and I've come to have a look at you.'

Sam, with a clumsy imitation of his partners grand manner, hastened to offer her a seat, and to inquire what he could do for her.

Her eyes and hair were black, and she had that clean-skinned, highly coloured

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complexion which denotes the country-bred woman. Her appearance did not suggest that the decease of the late lamented Smailes had exactly broken her heart or seriously affected her health, whilst her manner was an odd mixture of rustic shyness and good humoured *naïveté.*

‘Yes, I may as well; warm, isn't it?'

And she took the chair, and commenced wiping her face with a handkerchief edged with broadest black, whilst her eyes followed Sam's movements with a curious, roguish slyness. O n the whole, she must have seen something encouraging in the young builder's looks and manner, for, peeping over the edge of her handkerchief, she remarked, 'Well, you aren't exactly—but, there! what does it matter! the heart's the thing, isn't it?'

Sam looked ridiculously embarrassed. Whatever did she want?

‘They said the office was easy to find, so I thought I'd have a look at you.'

Sam bobbed a clumsy acknowledgement, and must have looked curious, for the black eyes twinkled behind the black-edged cambric, and she went on, ' Plain an' steady,

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that's my motty. I think I shall like you, mister.'

Sam bobbed again, and immediately felt disgusted with himself. The situation was fast becoming ridiculous.

‘You are Mrs. Smailes, I suppose?' And then he checked himself-he had heard her say that already.

‘I am, mister. He was oldish, you know, and queer; but I put up with him, and did my duty by him. Hay dear!' And the dancing black eyes were buried again in the black border.

Sam waited with sympathetic delicacy for a few moments, and then, as he caught the glint from her eyes, once more he ventured:

‘I think, ma'am, there is a mistake.'

‘What about? Aren't you him? Are you the other one-Blandon? That old Punch said I wasn't to—'

‘No, no, ma'am! I'm Broome, Sam Broome, but I'm afraid—'

`Oh! don't be frightened. You'll do; you will, certain. I like you real well, now I've seed you.'

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What could he do but bob again, and hate himself immediately? This must be ended.

'Yes, ma'am, but I'm afraid—'

‘Of me? Oh laws! Why, there's nothin' to be afraid of in me!' And as she sat up there and held herself stiffly, as though challenging inspection, even the pre-occupied Sam had to admit to himself that she was a bonny woman, whose weeds became her exceedingly.

Whether it was that his look betrayed his thought, or that some other idea struck her, we cannot pretend to say, but next moment she had left her chair, was standing at his

side with her neatly gloved hand laid confidingly on his arm, and all the power of her eyes pouring into his, as she said, in a deeply confidential tone, `Old “Punch” doesn't know I've come; I just took the notion of it, and came right away. Why, man'—and here her fingers clasped his arm, and her voice fell again—‘it's a lot better nor he thinks. I know, and you just trust to me.' Then she held herself off for a moment to watch the effect, and added, ' I

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like you—plain and honest, I like you real well.'

But Sam, under his homely exterior, had shyly delicate sensibilities, and these, shocked by her freedom, came to his rescue.

‘Madam, this is Tuesday, and I have until Friday to consider this matter. When Friday comes I—’

‘Oh! of course.' And she went demurely back to her chair, and commenced to use her handkerchief again. 'You'll excuse me, mister, I'm not myself, you know-all this trouble, and the worry— Oh, mister! if you knew how I am worried!'

‘Soft-hearted Sam was now abusing himself for lack of feeling; but before he could find words she went on, 'I'm being robbed every day before my very eyes. I must have somebody, and "Punch" says you re—'

`Yes, yes, madam; but—’

‘Oh, you must!—you must! I'm a poor, lonely widow. They are all against me, and robbing me fearful.'

‘This was an appeal to both his pity and his business instincts, and Sam was visibly' shaken.

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`You've a mother yourself, they say, and sisters; and if you were to die of a sudden, how—and “Punch " says you're trusty and good. Oh, what shall I do?'

Brice's opinion of him was very sweet to Sam just then, when all the world seemed against him; he was fully alive also to the peril that might overtake his dear ones if any accident occurred to him.

'Yes, ma'am—yes! I'm very sorry for you, and will help you if I can; but there are so many things to consider, and other responsibilities, you know.'

But Mrs. Smailes had another idea, and burst out impetuously, 'Come and see me, and see the concern. Come to-morrow. Oh! if you only knew, you would come. Don't be hard-hearted!'

Sam only partially heard her; he was reflecting that this might be a divine interposition, and that this woman had been sent to open the way for him out of his many perplexities. The idea of helping one in such need was very tempting too; but he knew that there were serious considerations on the other side, and so with a tentative

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promise to do what he could, he got rid of his visitor, whose last words were a blend of artful coaxing and pathetic lamentation.

Alone once more, he was ashamed of his early suspicion of the woman who had left him, and so the pity which had been awakened by her later words had full scope, and made a very strong appeal to him. But as soon as he turned again to his own difficulties and the issues involved he realized that he was sinking deeper into the bog, whose bottom he imagined he had already touched. All the rest of that day, and most of a sleepless night, he strove with himself and his circumstances until the pressure of time and the absolute necessity of immediate action added their drops to his bitter cup, and threatened to drive him beyond the power of connected thought.

With a benumbed brain and utterly jaded nerves he went to work on the Wednesday morning to get together the ready money his partner required for his holiday. On the previous day he had obtained some slight clues to the secret of their embarrassments, and realized that Frank had been,

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and was, perhaps, still, speculating on the Stock Exchange; but how to discover the extent of those transactions, and the liability to which they were committed, he saw not.

When he took the money to the villa, Mrs. Blandon treated him to another sample of her gifts of obloquy, and peremptorily refused to allow him to see her son. Sam was within an ace of throwing everything up, but some odd, lingering thought of loyalty to Hetty Waine held him, and he went back to his desperate endeavour. An hour later he received a note from the bank, informing him that the firm's cheques would no longer be honoured; and just as he was locking the office door to go to dinner, a dingy, half-clerical-looking person served an execution upon him for an amount which would ordinarily have appeared trifling, but which now seemed the proverbial last straw.

Meanwhile tame, sleepy old Grindell was buzzing with an extraordinary sensation ; the old honoured firm of Blandon & Co. was tottering to its fall, and all through the

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incompetence and stupidity of the present junior partner. Frank Blandon was utterly crushed, and his mind had almost given way. Mrs. Blandon had quarrelled with the old family doctor, and called in a physician who served the local aristocracy, and that great light had diagnosed ' extreme nervous exhaustion' with serious possibilities of brain trouble. He prescribed entire removal from ordinary scenes of life, complete rest, and abstinence even from newspapers and letters. The barber heard of it quite early, and one of the first things he did was to post off to the cottage of the Broomes. Mrs. Broome sat peeling potatoes, and at sight of her all the barber's nasty resolutions vanished.

‘Hello!'

‘Hello!'

The barber glared down at her as though her quiet manner was some monstrous offence, but he did not speak. Mrs. Broome was used to him, and looking up with. a placid half-smile she pointed to a chair. Her calmness destroyed the little rag of self-control that was left; why didn't

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she give him the proper opening for the delivery of his staggering news? 'Well, woman? '

'Well?'—and she was actually laughing at him.

'Where's your Sam?'

'He's at the works'; but the potatobasket fell on the rug, and a woman with a white face continued, 'He's not hurt, nor killed?'

'Killed! He's worse nor killed he's disgraced!'

The drawn face relaxed, a soft smile that would have inspired the crushed and despairing Sam, had he seen it, played about the pensive mouth, and a steady, almost triumphant voice replied:

'I know our Sam, Jossy.'

'Know? dost know he's a swindler, a stupid block-head that's ruined a grand business?'

Surprise and resentment flushed into the dim eyes.

`Who says so?'

`Who says so? Bill Spinton says so, the town says so, all Grindell says so.

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Woman, it'ull be in t' County Times o' Saturday!'

The quiet old creature was getting excited at last, for she put her hand upon her heart, and seemed to have difficulty in breathing.

'Don't frighten me, Jossy—but there! there! what is it all about?'

Jossy, a little scared by the signs, resolved inwardly that at all costs he would be calm, so he took the chair he had previously neglected, drew it up close to the old lady's side, and putting on a look of scowling gravity burst out, 'Blandons' is busted, your Sam's blamed for it, and t'other chap is goin' off his nut!'

There was a pause; the silvered head bent forward, the wrinkled chin fell on the hard breast, and the shaking hands pressed heavily on the heart. But it was only for a moment; instantly the face, firm and set, though ghastly pale, looked up again, a soft,

quiet light blushed into the old eyes, and the trembling lips murmured, 'I know our Sammy, Joshua.'

Jossy sat gazing at her for a moment,

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fire and tears struggling together in his blinking eyes, and then he cried, 'Dost know as he's a thick-head, a muddler, and bungles everything?'

'No, I don't.'

'Dost know as he's feathered his own nest out o' th' business ever sin' old Blandon died? '

'No, I don't.'

Then Joshua arose in the majesty of long-restrained indignation, and standing over her as though she were the embodiment of all her son's badness, he shouted, 'No, nor I don't nayther! Niver! niver niver!' And then, breaking off and shaking his fist at her, he went on: 'Sithi, woman! if thou'd a-weakened on it, if thou'd abudged one solitary little inch, I'd a-bashed thy white cap in—that's wot I'd a-done!'

Mrs. Broome received these terrible announcements with quiet indifference, for her thoughts were on other things, and by and by Jossy had to explain and submit to searching cross-examination. Long before she was satisfied, however, he began to be restive; he was longing for his next great

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sensation of announcing the news at Jessamine Cottage. He broke away at last, though she seemed very, loth to be left with such scanty details, and her look as they parted was very wistful. He flung behind him hasty promises to return, and had got half-way down the garden path, when he came skipping back, and stood over her again with all his old fierceness.

'As soon as I'm gone thou'll start o' cry in'?' he cried, with stern suspicion.

'I winnat, Jossy! I winnat!' and she struggled to straighten her face, like a schoolgirl forbidden the luxury of tears.

`Then thou'll howd thy head down, and stop i' th' house and mopse?'

'I winnat!—truly, I winnat!'

'Then thou'll let thi heart down an' give up prayin'?'

'Nay, niver, niver, Jossy!'

'G-l-o-r-y!' shouted the excited barber, much more demonstrative than he felt, but with a roughly kind purpose of comforting his old friend. `Then wee'st win!-if thou pulls, and he pulls, an' we all pulls, wee'st win!' And the last words were flung upon

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the quiet air of the garden, for Jossy's coat-tails were already round the house corner, as their wearer flew towards Jessamine Cottage.

A few minutes later he stood in the Waines' big kitchen, secretly gloating over the sensation he had produced.

Peter was shaking his head, and inclined to moralize on young men who left their mother's church. Jossy watched him much as a terrier watches at a rabbit-hole. Then he spread out one great palm, extended two fingers on the other hand, with which he intended to beat out the points of his argument, and commenced.

'Now look you here, mister' Jossy only said ' mister' to Peter when he was angry with him-'Has thou known that there lad all his life?'

Peter, staring broodingly at his friend, gave his head a little side jerk, as though adjusting an unmanageable collar, and waited for the next.

'Has thou iver known anythin' again him –by, with, or through?' Another side jerk of the head, and

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Peter's eyes began to twinkle with new thoughts.

‘Has that lad been a husban' to his mother and a father to them lasses iver sin' he were a kiddy?' And as he beat out each word with his two fingers, Peter followed his action, and greeted each stroke with a separate side-twist of the head, each more decisive than the last. ' Did he come to t' Sunday school wi' patched-up clothes an' brussen-out shoes, to let his sisters hev new frocks many a time?'

Peter's head had now stopped its twistings, and he was staring hard at the barber with glistening eyes.

‘Did he royle and moyle at nights, an' larn hisself to read an' reacon as good as good as me myself?'

This lofty flight of comparison, which may strike the reader as something in the nature of an anti-climax, seemed to impress Peter more than anything that had hitherto been advanced. He began to shake his head in slow, solemn wags of intense conviction, eagerly watching the barber's lips as he waited for the climax. Joshua was

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so fully enjoying the conquering sweep of his own resistless logic that he went more leisurely to his grand finale. The open palm was thrust out as far as it could reach, the argumentative fingers were raised above his head, he swung backwards a little, and then, rising on tip-toe, he came down with a series of tremendous whacks on his open hand, and demanded, ‘Did—that—there—lad—promise—t' biggest—subscription nobbut—us, to—t' new—chappil? an', is he—payin'—it to—this—vary—day?'

This last demand made such an impression on the susceptible ex-grocer that his eyes were gleaming with ready tears, and his big, plain face beamed with shy delight.

Hitherto the men had had the argument to themselves, but there was a lady present who did not usually allow herself to be ignored. In a discussion like this she was no longer a mere domestic, but one of the responsible heads of the Grindell Methodist Church. She had listened to Jossy with looks of reluctant sufferance which gradually grew to contemptuous disdain, and so, turning to her master as though the barber was

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no longer present, she remarked: `Let alone bombaciousniss ' (Jemima was not averse to the coining of a word upon sufficient provocation), `that there lad is t'quietist, hardworkinest, straightforradist lad in this town.'

As she paused to give her words due effect, and prepare her next statement, Peter gave his head another series of side twists, watching her narrowly as he did so.

While them there Blandons has been blabbin' about and rennin' him down to everybody, he's been keepin' a roof over their heads.'

Peter was forgetting his neck jerking, but gave his shoulders a great shrug, and his eyebrows were distended in sheer amazement.

'He's niver taken nothin' out of t' business sin' he went into it—nobbut his bits o' wages ; an' he thinks there's nobody like 'em in this world.'

The irrepressible barber here broke out in exclamations, and seemed about to intervene; but Jemima turned upon him a disdainful shoulder, and, ignoring him as

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really as though he had not been present, she continued, `That there lad hez one ter'ble fault.'

'Wot's that? wot's that?' snapped the barber, and Peter looked what he was—clearly too astonished to speak.

'He's that soft about old Blandon—as knew what he was doin' when he picked him out for a pardner—that he'd lie down an' let 'em walk over him.' And then, as she surveyed the effect of her words upon her hearers, she tossed her head contemptuously, with a sly glance at her master, and cried, `That's his Quakerism, I reacon. I'd Quaker him if I had him here! I'd larn him a bit of good owd original sin!'

Jossy held the private opinion that Jemima might some day have to be expelled for heterodoxy, the theological views she expressed being often of a scandalous and revolutionary character; and so, to protect her from herself and get her away from such dangerous ground, he gave the discussion a sharp turn.

'But, woman, t' bums is in!'

Jemima blanched, her armour of easy

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contempt was pierced at last, and young Wess came bounding into the room all white and breathless, and with news that even the restraining presence of his father could not check. 'Why, Jim, Blandons' have the bailiffs in!'

There they all stood, looking at the panting Wesley, and glancing shyly at each other, as though the lad had blurted out some shameful secret; and then, as old Peter turned to his son, with a soft and belated 'Hush!' Jemima's hands went up hurriedly to her face, a smothered burst of tears escaped her, and she broke out, 'oh, Betsy!—poor Betsy Broome!' and rushed into the pantry, banging the door after her.

But that night, when the rest had all retired, she, the barber, and Peter sat there in long and anxious confabulation; and when at last they separated, Joshua Sweetlove went home to a long and careful examination of his savings bank pass-book. 'Souls is more nor sites,' he kept repeating to himself— souls is more nor sites.'

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CHAPTER XII

THE CRISIS

THE last persons to hear important news are usually those most concerned, and so it was Thursday morning before Hetty was informed of what had happened, or was about to happen, to Blandon & Co. She had noted odd things which, when she did realize the situation, explained themselves, but at the time her preoccupied mind had scarcely taken them in. Her father had spent most of Wednesday afternoon in long, solemn confabulations with the barber in the summer-house, and whenever she had come across either of them they seemed to be studying her with curious, mournful interest.

Jemima, most perplexing circumstance of all, had taken to treating her with marked gentleness, as though silently offering sym-

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pathy. But the news, when it did come, reached her from the most improbable of all sources-Frank Blandon himself. That prostrated victim of extreme nervous debility had somehow found strength to write her a letter; and when, after Thursday's breakfast, she took it away to her room to read, ambiguous and perplexing though it was, it produced a revulsion of feeling in favour of the writer which surprised even the recipient herself.

The writer commenced with an ominous exhortation to her not to take too seriously the information he was about to disclose, as signs of distress in her would only add to the burden of his misery. I t then informed her of his sudden collapse, the serious view taken of it by Dr. Blenkinsop, and the imperative command that compelled him to betake himself to the seaside. Reference was then made to rumours she had doubtless heard of the financial embarrassments of his firm, and she was reminded that though it was necessary that his mother, sisters, and friends should be allowed to believe that these were the causes of his

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collapse—and he had suffered enough, God knew! from other people's folly—she, and she alone, knew the true reason. Then came a long, vague paragraph in which she was exhorted not to distress herself, as both she and the world would soon be relieved of his presence, and might then be willing to give him now and then a kindly thought. The letter concluded with a wandering, maudlin farewell which filled a whole page, and was a curious mixture of fulsome flattery and artfully implied reproach. The first rapid reading produced dazed bewilderment the second, taken more slowly, resulted in such a rush of contending emotions that she dropped with a gasp into the nearest seat, and sitting bolt up right stared at the epistle with wide-eyed dismay.

For the first few minutes she could not think at all, but panted and rocked herself in a vain endeavour at self-command. Then ideas came thick and fast—suspicion, resentment, indignation, and finally one great sweeping wave of pity obliterating every previous emotion, filling every nerve of her

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body and gushing out at her eyes in showers of compassionate tears. Frank Blandon had played his last card—and won. Had he been there at that moment he would have found his hitherto difficult task easy enough; for the next half-hour she was the victim of passionate, shame-stricken self-reproaches, and equally passionate longings to make reparation. Old maid Methodism was the hatefulest of all things, and the `hard, narrow' creed of her father's Church cynical cruelty; she herself a selfish, prejudiced little wretch; whilst Frank's handsome face and figure, his gay, alluring smile, and his immense popularity, standing out as they now did from a horrid background of undeserved calamity and perilous sickness, made a pathetically fascinating picture that thrilled every nerve of her body.

She was well aware that this was but one aspect of the situation, and that the colder, safer one would have to have its say ; but this was only the greater reason why it should have full fling and riot within her, after its own painfully pleasur-

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able nature. More than once she rose to her feet with a wild impulse to see him before he left the town; but the spell of her delicious dream was too strong, and she easily lapsed into sensuous self-abandonment again. Presently she dried her stillflowing tears and took up the letter again. She hated gossip so much, and knew Grindell so well, that she had not regarded the vague rumours she had heard about Frank's difficulties with his discreditable partner; but now her heart burned hotly against Sam Broome, and she felt that she had been most mistakenly considerate to him. She realized that the purchase of the land for the chapel site might have been a providential arrangement to help Frank in his perplexities, and that she had thoughtlessly frustrated it. These were, however, but passing impressions, wiped out again soon enough by the sweet thought that Grindell's handsomest man was seriously sick of love for her. Oh, the delicious flattery of such a thought!

She had thrown herself on the couch under the window by this time, but soon

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discovered that the movement was the commencement of a new phase, a phase of imperious constraint to action. Her heart was still in her dreams, but her brain would no longer consent to be hypnotized, and twenty startling questions began to clamour for attention. It never occurred to her to doubt any of the facts as hinted at in Frank's communication, and as she went over it for' the fourth time she could not find a single sentence to which she could take exception; and yet—and yet—reluctant though she was to admit it—the tone of some parts of it jarred upon her, and the impression somehow grew unpleasant. A man in his state of body and mind could not be expected to choose his words very discreetly, and yet-yes, it was unreal, cheap, even cowardly-only she could not decide exactly where. Then she reproached herself for thinking such mean thoughts, whilst her lover was in peril perhaps of his life—almost beyond himself with mental distress. Sweet, tender pictures of what she, she could do, and the trans-formation she could make, not merely for

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Frank, but for so many others, floated about in her brain, and she awoke suddenly, to find a silly simper on her face and pitiful tears in her eyes.

But at this moment she was interrupted, for Jemima, duster in hand, came into the room in pursuit of her daily duty, but with a significantly wooden face and alert, wary eyes.

'You've heard about young Blandon, I reacon,' she commenced; and Hetty's disappointment at the intrusion gave way to the desire for further information, and so in a few minutes the two were engaged in earnest conversation, both evidently more intent upon acquiring than giving information.

The talk took up time; and when Jemima, somewhat disappointed, at length took her departure, Hetty found herself cool and critical, with old maid Methodism in full command. Left thus to herself, however, she took another glance at the note, and soon

found her own frank, warm nature reasserting itself. These emotions quickly grew again to glowing, proud delight that

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she was loved, really passionately loved; and by the one man whose preference was most flattering to her. And thus the old conflict between the two parts of her nature was resumed, and for long hours, in spite of sudden intermittent reminders of the pressing necessity for action, she paced about the room, trembling one moment with pity that was fast growing to some deeper feeling, and gazing the next at the letter with puckered brow and timorous, mistrustful eyes.

And all this time Sam Broome was fighting his terrible battle in the wood-yard office. He had found the money for Frank's holiday by emptying his mother's and his sister's money-boxes, pawning at Brixford the gold watch and chain old Mr. Blandon had given him on his death-bed, and appealing to two tradesmen for advances upon work not yet finished, and by these means he had man aged to get rid also of the man in possession. But the mischief was done, and the rumours of the firm's position had spread so rapidly in the town and neighbourhood, that everybody suddenly realized their need of immediate

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cash; and bill after bill came in to the distracted junior partner, until the very number of them made him heartsick, and black despair settled grimly on his soul.

All he could do now was to cease searching his brain for the means to pay, and settle down to a blind sort of waiting for the coming crash. It was hopeless, it was madness to go on trying; very well then, he would try to be found at his post and go down with the rest when the blow fell. Nothing affected him now : three telegrams, cryptically worded but terribly eloquent to him, came just before closing time, and he left them lying there for any workmen or customer to read, and even a couple of curtly worded notes, informing him that the writers had been compelled to hand their accounts to Brice & Co. for instant collection, evoked no sign of interest, except that they diverted his

thoughts for a moment or two to the offer made by `Punch,' and Sam smiled bitterly as he reflected how easily he could get clear of every embarrassment by a word, and by leaving the Blandons to fight things out for themselves.

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As he locked the safe and desk before departing for the day, he was awakened from his lethargy by another visit from Clara Blandon. She closed and seemed almost inclined to lock the door after her, stepped up to him without a word, took his head between her hot little hands, and critically examined the, wounded brow then she pulled forward the arm-chair, set it coolly before him, sat down in it, restlessly swinging one small foot, and commenced a series of cool, keen, evidently carefully premeditated questions, which startled Sam by their point and the knowledge they displayed.

The interview was a long one, and neither wariness nor sulky obstinacy availed him; bit by bit she drew her facts out of him, and then vanished even more suddenly than she had come. On her way home, however, she was muttering to herself, and shaking her little head in most evident excitement. `It'll come to that,' she cried; `there's nothing else for it-if it isn't too late! Yes, one of us will have to marry that fellow: yes, I suppose it will-it always is *me,* it always is!' But to do the energetic little lady justice, it

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has to be recorded that she did not seem wholly inconsolable at the prospect.

On the whole, her visit seemed to have an awakening effect on the almost stupefied Sam; the discovery that one person at any rate saw things as they were eased his stunned and despairing mind, and the thoughts suggested to him awakened one last desire to overcome the difficulty and save the concern, the Blandon family, and him. self from ruin. He spent a sleepless night, therefore, searching for expedients, and the first thing he remembered next morning was that this was the day upon which he was to give his final answer to Brice.

What an eternity it seemed since the making of that appointment! It appeared incredible that only five days had passed His mother, always attentive to his wants, was

watchfully studying his manner, and buzzed about him with an inward excitement she tried vainly to conceal; and when he was leaving the cottage, she stepped before him in the doorway, caught him by the arm, peered into his face until he was compelled to look at her, and then, as wistful tears

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started into her anxious eyes, she put her thin arms round his neck, and whispered, ‘Fear not, Abram; I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward.' Sam gulped and groaned in sudden relief; but the light that shone through his hot tears was still in his eyes when he entered the office. His heart sickened, however, when he saw the pile of letters waiting for him, and with a sudden cowardliness he thrust them aside unopened until he came upon one in Frank's handwriting and bearing the Lydmouth postmark. It announced their arrival at the watering-place, the necessity of more money as soon as Sam could raise it, and his mother's consent for the sale of the land to the Methodists as quickly as possible. The epistle was well written, but curt and formal, and contained not the slightest reference to the writer's state of health. It was clear, however, that Mrs. Blandon was the real owner of the land in question, and that the money was required by her, and would not be available for the needs of the firm. Only now did poor Sam realize what a large place at the bottom of his hopes this

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little bit of land had recently filled, and all his new courage seemed to ooze away, the black misery of the day before was once more settling down upon him, and he leaned heavily on the desk with a choking sob mute and motionless in utter discomfiture.

Presently he remembered his interview with the accountant, and the happy escape it offered from all these crushing cares suddenly shone before him the more bright and alluring from the conviction now growing to certainty that Blandon & Co. were irretrievably doomed, and that anything he could do would but precipitate the inevitable collapse. The old lethargy was now heavy upon him, and when the violent little

timekeeper gave warning of the hour appointed, he buttoned up his jacket and allowed his legs to carry him mechanically to the accountant's office.

The interview lasted a full hour, and was terribly trying to the overwrought young builder. 'Punch,' who assumed that he had come with an eager assent, was first jocular, then elaborately explanatory, then amazed, then furious; and Sam finally left, the stormy, willful little man flinging curse-studded

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threats after him, the significance of which he understood only too well.

'Punch' Brice was as willful as he was generous, and would crush what he could not control.

'Fear not, Abram; I am thy shield.' And as the words beat themselves out in his brain, Sam burst into a terrible, hysterical laugh as he went along the street, and had to put his hand to his mouth to keep back curses more bitter than Brice's own.

He was too deep in internal anguish to notice that the office-door stood open as he approached, and he had already passed heedlessly two timber merchants' travellers who stood in the yard; but entering the place which had now become a sort of torture-chamber, he discovered Clara Blandon dressed more daintily even than usual, and seated in the arm-chair evidently waiting for him. That active-minded young person had been thinking to some purpose during the night; self-preservation is the first law of nature, and what she had wrung out of Sam the night before, and what she knew herself, revealed a terrible state of things which she

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was the wrong person to accept without resistance.

'Sara! Sam!' –and she resumed the previous night's conversation, as though it had never been interrupted, almost before he could close the door— 'you haven't told me everything—it is not so bad as that—surely, surely something can be done!'

'I'm trying, miss—I'm trying.' But the tone took all promise out of the assurance.

‘But—but'—and she was on her feet and gazing at him with furrowed brow and wide stretched eyes, in which alarm and protest fought fiercely together' you must do something! We cannot fail! we cannot be disgraced! we cannot! Oh! I'll do anything. I'll work, I'll slave; but we cannot be disgraced!'

Sam's chin was on his breast, and he was fighting with weak sobs and could not risk speech.

‘You're brave, Sam!'—and the little hand was on his arm, and the deep dark eyes were turned beseechingly up to him.

Sam was a man, and such an appeal from such a source would ordinarily have moved

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him deeply; but her words could now add nothing to the stupor that was upon him, and he could only look down at her in dazed and hopeless grief.

'It's not you, Sam—I always stood up for you at home. Ah, what a life I've had of late! Oh, Frank! Frank! how could you!' The deadness began to fade from his eyes, he licked his lips restlessly, soft, pitiful, compassionate light rose into his face, he was a man, and she was a dainty woman to him once more; and as he moved a step back in shy self-consciousness, and the little hand on his arm dropped away, he gasped, 'God help us, miss, it's a sore case!'

‘But you will, Sam?'—and the little fingers were on his sleeve again—'you will help us? Oh! Sam, you're good-you're good. I'll do anything, bear anything if you will try!'

There was silence. The little clock, suddenly inflamed with a mad ambition to obliterate the drone of the sawmills and the distant bleat of the market sheep, tore out its staccato notes in a passion of haste and in ignorance of the fact that Clara could not

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hear it for the loud thump! thump! of her own heart.

Presently Sam turned and bent over towards her. 'Miss Clara, there's a good God above us.'

Clara, intent on the man rather than his Maker, responded with an eager double nod.

'And `right always comes right—if we trust in Him.'

Two more nods, and Clara was wishing he would not stare at her so, but come to the point.

'He can turn enemies into friends, and hindrances into helps.'

'Yes, and you'll try, Sam, you'll—'

'I've been trying, miss; but, God helping me, I'll, I'll—' But the words were choking him, and turning abruptly away and flinging them out with vehemence, he cried, ' I'll try again! try again! try again!'

They talked a little longer, Sam making as clear as he could the complicated peril of the moment; and as she walked home down the back lanes to avoid the market people she was soberer and sadder than she had been before, and wondered now and then,

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when that aspect of the case occurred to her, whether it would not be better to ask herself whether Sam would marry her.

Left to himself the stranded junior partner tried vainly to collect his thoughts and brace himself for some action. He spent a full ten minutes leaning with his head buried in his hands and his elbows on the desk; then he stood up, thrust his hands into his pockets, and stared with frowning, hopeless face through the window. Twice he started to the shop to stop the men and close the concern, and twice he came back to glower again through the dusty panes. Then, still standing at the desk, he tried to pray; but the few sentences he got out were disjointed and incoherent, and he found himself staring open-mouthed at some new phase of the situation that had suddenly thrust itself into the midst of his petitions.

He began to pace up and down the little office, casting about for some one to whom he could open his mind and unburden his unbearable anxieties. His mother knew much, and her sympathy was precious, but she could have nothing to suggest in the

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way of practical expedient. The bank manager was shrewd, and as kind as shrewd, but he would be fettered by his official instructions. More than once he thought of his new acquaintances the Quakers, but remembrance of their strict commercial probity, and the damaging disclosures he would be compelled to make, forbade the hope of help from that quarter; and at last the absolute hopelessness of the situation compelled him to turn to his old friends and associates the humble Methodists. The idea was more distasteful than it ought to have been, for his pride reminded him of the warning Sweetlove had given him when he first severed his connexion with his mother's fellow-religionists. Why, the barber's words, vague though they had been, had more than come true—he could not go there.

Besides, what could they do? With the exception of the Waines, they were all poor working people, and Sweetlove was very conceited, and could be exceedingly aggravating if he chose. No, no!—and yet—they were his mother's friends; through all the poverty and struggling of his early years

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they had helped her, and yes, had put within him those very principles which now made his position so painful. It seemed shameless to appeal to those who had so often helped before, and whose kindness he had repaid by desertion; but every other hope had gone, every door was closed, desperate circumstances demand desperate remedies, and if he gained nothing he was at least sure of genuine sympathy. It was the hardest of the many hard things he had to do in that most terrible crisis; but in the quiet part of that afternoon he dragged reluctant limbs to the barber's, and was soon pouring out his tale to eager ears.

Leaving him thus to get what consolation the experiment might provide, we must return to Hetty Waine, who was busy composing her first letter to Frank Blandon. Much and often she hesitated, two fair epistles had been finished and torn up because they were too sympathetic, and one because it was too hard and formal; and when the

final one was ready, it seemed to have all the faults of the others. But ashamed of her mistrust, and acutely anxious to comfort, she at length

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sealed and posted it, thereby reducing herself to a condition of restlessness that spoilt her night's repose, and produced an effect at Lydmouth which greatly astonished and, of course, delighted the anxious Mrs. Blandon.

Next morning Jemima visited her young mistress's room, and her manner, usually so inscrutable, prepared the younger woman for news. 'Hev you heeard about Edie Plewman, miss?'

Hetty looked up hastily from her needlework with a new shadow on her face. Edie Plewman had already been too much in her thoughts of late. Jemima went on rubbing away at the furniture; when she did condescend to supply information, she intended that it should be received with due respect, and properly appreciated.

`She's greatly upset over young Blandon.'

The tenderest woman has one hard spot in her, and as this had now been touched in H etty, she replied coldly, ' She always was rather forward, you know.'

Jemima, now engaged on some books on the table, dusted them very carefully, and took excessive pains to arrange them exactly

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as she had found them. Then she answered with stern, inflexible face, 'Nobody can marry Blandon, she says, whilst she's single.'

Hetty lifted her head with a startled look, blushed deeply, then went suddenly white, and gasped out, 'Oh, J emima, what are you saying!'

Jemima, cold and imperturbable, went stolidly on with her work.

`They found her at the station waiting for the Lydmouth train. She's glad about his business goin' wrong; she says he'll be glad to have her now.'

'But-but '-and then Hetty recollected herself, and in keenest pain snatched a hat from its hook and escaped breathlessly to the garden. Then it was true, the firm was in

difficulties, and Frank had therefore a double claim upon her. Oh what a cold, empty, heartless letter she had written him! Poor fellow!-poor fellow! And if Frank Blandon had carried out his first impulse when he received that much regretted little note that morning, and returned to Grindell, he would have found, Edie Plewman or no Edie Plewman, the one great chance of his life.

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CHAPTER XIII

PETER WAINE TAKES HIS INNINGS

IF roses could think and snapdragons and asters talk, there would have been much whispered wondering in Jessamine Cottage garden that fateful Saturday morning. The goddess of the garden walked about amongst the flowers without noticing her favourites, and even when she looked at them, and bent down her head to examine them, the least self-conscious flower there was dissatisfied; for though she looked, she saw nothing, whilst her darkened brow and far-away eyes told but too plainly that her thoughts were otherwhere.

'Pity is next to love,' old maid Methodism was whispering; but she heeded not, for all her heart was going out to her suffering, absent lover, whose circumstances had been made more bitter by her own prudish coldness.

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All her nature was up in arms against the narrow Methodist' prejudices of Jemima and Jossy Sweetlove. How could good people be so hard and pitiless? They were allowing their desire for the chapel site to colour all their judgements, and were thinking evil of others out of pure chagrin.

She did not care for Frank Blandon-all that was dead and done with-but she would like to see him happy again. What a hateful thing money was, and what misery it brought one way or other to people! Oh that she were one-tenth as rich as many of the

so-called friends of the Blandons!—and just then she saw her father coming down the path with his long clay pipe, but she was too absorbed to note his Sunday apparel. H e was a dear old man, but worldly, she feared, and prejudiced like the rest. He was not rich, but surely he might have helped in an extremity like this. She supposed it never occurred to him. Oh, how hard the world made people, and how much misery might be averted in this world with a little self-sacrifice and sympathy! She waited for him to overtake her, slid her arm

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into his, just brushed the edge of his shoulder with her cheek, and fell into his step.

'Isn't this dreadful about poor Blandons, father?'

'H'm, h'm, h'um,' and Peter rolled his eyes about and lifted a long sigh.

'So respectable, so well thought of—it's terrible!'

'H-a-a-um!' and Peter wagged his head in sorrowful agreement.

There was silence for a moment, broken only by Peter's sighs, and then she ventured a question disguised in sympathetic assertion.

'I don't think he's to blame: he's tried hard, hasn't he?'

Her attempt to keep her feelings out of her voice frustrated itself, and her *'He's'* had a peculiar emphasis. Peter stopped in the path, looked at her searchingly, and then, as she dropped her eyes and blushed, he said, with earnest conviction, 'My dear, he's a hero! He's fought like a giant!'

They had reached the garden-hedge; and, turning round, Hetty tucked her other arm

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into his, though her heart was fluttering so that she could not trust herself to speak. 'Nobody will ever know what that lad's done and suffered; he's a blessed martyr,' and Peter nodded his head, and waved his pipe in weighty emphasis.

Hetty had decided on a great venture, but her lips refused to part.

`There isn't one son in a thousand 'ud a done what he's done for his women-folk, bless him!' And there were tears in the old man's tones. The word she wanted to say was on her lips, but she blushed and panted, and then said something else.

'It isn't his fault; it's his partner's, isn't it?'

'Partner!'—and old Peter flushed with sudden indignation—'the partner's done it! He's a rogue, my dear!—a villain, Hetty! That young man'll get hisself transported.'

Never had Sam Broome appeared so utterly despicable to Hetty as at that moment. And to think that he had once proposed to her, and appeared to be so humble.

But her anger loosened her tongue, and she

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now found power to say what she had been hesitating with, and so she blurted out, 'It's the poor women I'm thinking about. Can nothing be done, father?'

Peter seemed suddenly to shrink into a smaller man; he pressed her hand close into his side with his elbow, filled her hair and the space about her with a huge volume of smoke, but jogged doggedly on without speaking. Hetty, struggling with her emotions, hugged his arm closer to hers, and then said, almost under her breath, 'Couldn't somebody—is it *very* bad—can't they be saved?'

The smoke was pouring forth in short, thick jets, and she could feel the quickened beat of his heart. ` Hetty, woman, we must! we *must*! Me and Jossy 'ull do it'; and then he looked at her studiously, and went on, `But nothing for t'other!—not a penny not a penny!'

Hetty was perplexed; for, of course, they were thinking of different people. Her father was greatly attached to Mrs. Broome, and they were not to blame for Sam's misdoing; but if she suggested them at this point, it

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might recall difficulties, and so she said lamely, 'I'm sorry for the poor women.'

'Women!' and the tears came at last, hot and indignant. `Hetty, woman, nobody knows but themselves what them poor things has had to put up with. He's a brute! a selfish brute! Confound him! '

Her father's unwonted heat was not quite clear to her; but as they turned once more in the path, she asked, 'Is it very bad? Will it take a great deal to save them?'

'Can't tell, girl; generally does in them cases. We mayn't be able to do anything, but we'll see—we'll see.'

Just then the barber, dressed in his Sabbath clothes, appeared at the front gate, looking very dignified and important, and as her father left her to join his friend, it struck her as being odder still that the barber should be neglecting his shop on a Saturday for the sake of the Blandons. But she suddenly remembered the site question, and smiled at the easy explanation.

Meanwhile, Sam was sitting in his dingy office, apathetically waiting for the impending crash. He had wondered, in a dull way,

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why there had been no dunning letters that morning, and was still vaguely astonished that so far not a single applicant for money had appeared; but, remembering 'Punch' Price's threats, and that gentleman's intimate connexion with all Grindell's commercial affairs, he guessed what was happening, and waited in sullen despair for the coming of the accountant's representative. But in that desolate moment a great temptation came to him, and he was soon sitting up and facing it with what of mental intentness was left to him.

Why not accept 'Punch's' offer, and use it as a means of gradually righting things? 'Punch' had been unjust in insisting on his entire separation from the falling concern, but why should he know? And if he did his duty by the Smailes's estate. It was stronger than he expected, it held possession of him; for a long dreary time he had difficulty in insisting to himself that it was a breach of confidence; and he had not finished with the beguiling idea when there was a shuffle of feet outside, and in walked Peter Waine and the old barber.

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Peter looked flurried, but very red and stern, and Joshua had an injured, protesting look, and held his head at a highly haughty angle. Sam could not speak, never thought of it in fact, but stared glumly at his visitors, and could have laughed in their faces. Was this a time to talk of sites? Peter had taken his hat off, and was rubbing his perspiring face; whilst Joshua, meeting Sam's eye, was starting forward to open the conversation, when the ex-grocer, observing him, shook his fist warningly, and then turned his back to him as though to hide him from the other's view.

`Good mornin', Sam, mornin'—very warm, isn't it?' And the old man shouldered his companion behind him, as though determined to have all the conversation to himself.

Sam, with his elbow still on the desk, turned to stare through the window to hide his eyes from his visitors.

Peter, his elbows extended as a barricade against the impetuous barber, and his glistening eyes fixed on the young builder, drew a hard breath or two, and proceeded, `Nobody saw us come, nobody knows we

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are here'; and then, whisking round, he glanced at his companion and commanded him to close the door, and lock it, and pull down the window-blind.

Sam attended to the window; Jossy, muttering smothered rebellion, turned the key in the lock, and, returning, drew up alongside the grocer; but the old man elbowed him back, and, again setting his eyes on Sam, earnestly asked, `Sam Broome, has thou allus done thy duty by this here firm?'

A look, half dull wonder, half protesting indignation, sprang into Sam's averted face; then he wheeled round, and betrayed something of what he was enduring by bursting out fiercely, as he smote the desk with his clenched hand, `Before God, Mr. Waine, I have!'

Peter, gloating eagerly over him, turned for a moment with shining eyes to his muttering colleague, and then, recollecting himself, twisted round, so as to get the bar-

ber fairly behind him, and continued, 'An' did thou know 'ut this nasty mess was a-coming?'

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Sam's hand was lifted for another savage denial; but in sudden remembrance he dropped it to his side, and cried with a woeful shake of the head, ' Partners are partners, Mr. Waine.'

Peter wheeled round, and beamed on Sweetlove with tear-gemmed eyes, as though Sam had stated the most amazingly delightful of truths, and the barber had the look of a man who protested against even the welcomest intelligence, because of the gross irregularity of the methods by which it was elicited.

Peter turned again to his quarry, took a step nearer, devouring him the while with greedy, glowing eyes. 'An' has thou parted wi' all thou has, an' done everything thou could to come out honest and straight?'

Sam followed each word with a dull nod, paused a moment, stared hard at the drawn window-blind, and then, dropping his head into his hands again, groaned out, 'I've tried! I have!—I have!' and ended with a sob that shook the desk.

There was a pause that was broken only by the young builder's hard breathing, and

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certain mysterious snufflings from Peter; then the heart-broken Sam heard a step, a heavy arm was placed on his shoulder and half round his neck, and a trembling voice bawled into his ear, Sam! Sam! Once have I heard this; yea, twice hath it been told, that power belongeth to the Lord.'

Sam was now shaking with great unburdening sobs, and the old man began to stroke his arm in soft, soothing touches. But the third party to this strange interview now stepped in. The outrageous irregularity of the whole proceedings could no longer be endured, and so, thrusting his friend aside, he seized Sam's arm, compelled him to turn his heavy, sorrowful face towards him, and demanded in sternest tones, ` Did thou think

that when thou left the Methodisses the Methodisses left thee? Look here, now!' and, releasing the builder's arm, he stretched out one hand, and smiting upon it with the inevitable two fingers of the other, he continued, `Will thou chuck that swindling pardner o' thine, or will thou not?'

Peter was stepping forward again with

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plaintive protests, but the now masterful barber elbowed him back, and repeated the question with the same emphatic gestures.

'Mr. Sweetlove'—and Sam lifted a haggard face and cried desperately-' he's a mother and sisters, like me, and he's the old master's son!'

'That's it!—that's it!' and Peter, almost beside himself with contending emotions, began to pace about the office, crying as he did so, 'True blue!—he's true blue We'll do it!—we will! we will! we will!'

But the scandalized barber sprang round at him, and demanded, 'What! will you throw good money after bad? Will you aid an' abet a swindler?'

`We'll do it!—we'll do it!' was all the answer he got, and his old friend was once more tramping the floor.

Joshua looked from one to the other, and then, evidently giving the older man up as utterly hopeless, he turned on the younger, and demanded for the third time, 'Will thou give that there chap up once an' for all an' for ever?'

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Sam seemed to have no answer, and before he could recover himself old Peter was by his side again, and, undertaking his part, turned upon the obstreperous barber, and cried, 'Did thou ever know a lad 'at stood by his mother and sisters like he's done?'

The barber commenced another scornful protest against the ridiculous irrelevancy of the question; but before he could get his words out, the grocer went on, 'An' did thou ever know a steadier, more hard-working, more carefuller lad?'

Again the barber was protesting, but Peter, now on his very highest horse, broke in, ' Did thou hear what "Punch" Brice said about him this very morning?'

"Punch" Brice!' began the disgusted barber; but Peter rushed in again, `An' hasn't all this come by him sticking true blue to his partner? Well, then, wee'st do it!—wee'st do it! 'And the excited old fellow lugged a cheque-book out of his pocket, and banged it triumphantly on the desk, as though by that mere act he had dissipated all Sam's embarrassments for ever.

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Broome was staring at his old friend in dull bewilderment, and the barber, with folded arms, stalked across to the one armchair, and, dropping into it, sat up stiff and grim, as though demonstrating that he washed his hands for ever of proceedings so disgracefully irregular and mad.

But at this point they were interrupted by the advent of Brice's head clerk, accompanied by two bailiffs, who brought writs for sums amounting in all to over four hundred pounds. Peter, after labouring with many a sigh over the cheque he was writing, dismissed them, and then handed Sam ready money for the payment of the men's wages.

'Oh, Mr. Waine!' began the bewildered young builder as soon as they were alone again. But the old grocer stopped him, 'Young man, let alone! It's a bigger job than I reaconed on'—loud groan from the armchair— but we shall go through with it! We'll pay what we must, get the other to wait a bit, and we'll soon be in smooth waters.'

'But, Mr. Waine, you don't know, you've no idea—'

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`Yes, I have! I had my own reasons forgetting to know, and I've found out every. thing. We shall win!—we shall win!'

Sam continued to protest, and to want to explain; but the old man, glowing all over with blessed self-complacency, would have his way, though the barber did not deign to

offer a single word, and went away with his companion, still evidently outraged at the way things had been done.

But Jossy had a splendid time that day, and before it was over he was found chuckling to himself in Little Gungate, and crying, `This is a day!—this *is* a day! Oh! ha! Methodisses is scum, are they? Methodisses is nothin' an' nobody, are they? Ha! ha! We can't do nothin'? Oh no! We've beaten peacock Blandon, we've beaten "Punch" Brice, we've beaten everybody. Ha! ha! ha!'

His greatest triumph, however, was at Jessamine Cottage. Peter Waine was in his own way almost as much afraid of J emima as the barber himself; she played Cerberus between him and the impecunious of Grindell, who, on the strength of old customership or

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nominal attachment to Methodism, found him more amiable than judicious, and, but for her, would have imposed upon him more than they did. This, however, was far away his most serious plunge, and his only hope lay in her devotion to the Proornes, and in the fact that the barber shared, in part, the heavy responsibility. Jemirna held the view that Sweetlove was 'scraping,' and would rather relish the fact that he had been drawn into the affair. Peter, therefore, contrived to saddle the barber with a very considerable share of the burden; but, being divided in mind between a desire to see the barber's long-delayed amatory projects consummated, and a fear of losing J emima's services as housekeeper, he told his tale somewhat lamely. But Mr. Waine might very well have spared himself, for Jemima surprised him exceedingly. As soon as he introduced his subject, the half contemptuous disdain with which she in variably listened to masculine talk, especially where Sweetlove was concerned, dropped away from her, and as soon as the Broomes' name was mentioned she came and stood on

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the hearthrug, and followed every word with encouraging nods, and even smiled appreciatively at his clumsy circumlocution. Whether she understood the situation

rightly or not Peter will never be quite sure, but all doubts about his own success were set at rest by her first actions.

The barber, happening to arrive at that moment, was placed ceremoniously in Jemima's own particular chair, a cushion even was brought for him, and without the slightest hint from either man, two foaming jugs of dandelion and burdock beer were placed before them. Peter pulled at the beverage with a sense that all his labours of the day were now amply compensated, and the barber looked grim in a stern endeavour to keep down a mighty impulse towards triumphant laughter. But the exact proportions of their tremendous victory were only realized later on, for when, after a long and animated talk on the details of their grand coup, Peter invited the barber to have tea in the parlour, and Jemima, lapsing at once into her old manner, peremptorily vetoed the suggestion, and Peter had

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waddled off into the cooler front room, and was waiting the coming meal, young Wess, hand on mouth to suppress uncontrollable laughter, and eyebrows raised in wondering amazement, came into the room with the paralysing intelligence that ' Old Joss is having tea with Jemima.'

And all this time Hetty, too relieved by the unusual preoccupation of her friends to be curious as to the cause, was spending her afternoon in the summer-house with elegant needlework in her fingers, and the troubles of Frank Blandon in entire possession of her thoughts. Never had his good points appeared so interesting, nor his questionable ones so trivial; the things she had resented in him now wore other colours, and the woman in her actually tried to commend them as marks of the impetuosity of love.

Suspicious of Jemima, and hating tittletattle at all times, the tale about Edie Plewman awoke a sort of loyalty within her, and strengthened the feeling of resentment towards Frank's enemies which she now no longer tried to conceal. Pity for Sam Broome became something to be ashamed of,

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and she burned with helpless indignation that mere matters of finance should have the power to spoil people's lives and prospects. Everything and everybody were against him. Oh, how she would love to stand by his side and defy the whole world! Every hour that passed but deepened the feeling. Her father, Jemima, and even young Ness seemed strangely elated about something, but she was not curious; they were presumably rejoicing over her lover's downfall, in mean revenge about that ridiculous site question, and in unholy pride at the justification of their own prognostications. She could not just then endure their society, and the serious concern which she saw in her father's eyes, when she had caught him studying her at the tea-table, made her wary and taciturn. And then it all came out.

Her father, pipe in hand, followed her presently to her refuge, drew her into reluctant conversation, and then, bit by bit, with roundabout deviousness and a tender anxiety that heightened the ultimate effect, told her the whole story. Not knowing how deeply her affections were engaged, but all the

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more concerned because of the uncertainty, the guileless old man, with his most difficult task and little worldly skill to help him, unconsciously employed the cunning of a great affection, and little by little got the hard facts into her mind and all the honest logic of a transparent nature on his side.

She objected, she questioned, she argued; but the very shrinking reluctance with which he advanced his facts gave them sharper point; and when, at last, unable longer to endure his wistful eyes, she swept her work into her arms and fled to her own room, she could not have told whether shame of her interest in Frank or shame of her misjudgement of Sam was the stronger emotion within her. Not that the conflict was over; again and again her whole nature rose in rebellion against the facts, and passionate championship of her lover; but again and again the evidence indicated by her father, and confirmatory facts known only to herself, bore down all resistance; and though in that

bitter hour she almost hated Jemima, Sweetlove, the Broomes, and even her beloved father, yet the image of Frank

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Blandon slipped somehow from its throne in her heart, never to be reinstated. The next day was the dreariest Sabbath she ever spent, and the day following, wet and depressing, gave her opportunity of keeping her own room without exciting particular notice.

Her father, however, was watching her on every opportunity, with an anxiety that annoyed and yet touched her; and on Tuesday evening the news came that Mrs. Blandon, a broken, shamed woman, had returned home, and that Frank and Edie Plewman had been missing since Monday, and had presumably gone off to be married. Her father brought her the sad tidings himself, for fear that ruder lips should break it to her, and for a whole hour he sat with his hand in hers, mutely succouring her with a sympathy that words would have marred; and when he left her there were soft tears on her face, but strength to face the world again in her heart.

A fortnight passed away; Grindell was growing a little weary of its sudden glorification of honest merit, as exemplified in the case of Sam Broome, and Hetty was begin-

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ning to admit to herself that she had been unjust to him. She wanted to be fair to him, but could not endure the thought of him as the head of the once honoured firm of Blandon, and resented hotly the malicious gossip of the town against the fallen family. One day she heard that Sam, after a double refusal to manage Widow Smailes's business, had been induced to accept it on his own terms, and realized, as only an inhabitant of their little town could have done, how fine a certificate of character that was for the young fellow, coming as it did from `Punch' Brice of all persons.

Then came the climax. It was known that the Blandon business was still a matter of grave anxiety to the partner in charge, who went about as though ashamed of the sudden popularity he had achieved, and still wearing his old worried look. It was freely asserted

by those supposed to know that old Waine and those who had acted with him were not yet out of the wood, and might find themselves seriously involved. One evening it was reported that Sam Broome and ' Punch' Brice had quarrelled—at any rate, `Punch'

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had been heard raving about in the wood-yard, and storming until his raspy voice reached the street; and a day later Grindell business was suspended, whilst people discussed the mysterious disappearance of Sam Broome. He had been seen boarding the early train for Gittering Junction a few hours after his quarrel with ' Punch,' and since then all trace of him had been lost. The usual quidnuncs were `not surprised'; the usual number of `Told-you-so's' lifted their heads; confident surmises and predictions of what people would ultimately `see' were expressed; and it was freely promised that Sam Broome would turn out to be the greater rogue of the two.

But just before midnight on Thursday the through express was unexpectedly pulled up at Grindell station, and Frank Blandon, his new wife, and the junior partner of the firm alighted. Then Grindell talked, if you like! It was next morning before the news was generally known; but the barber held a constant levee in his shop, and expatiated without let or hindrance of the stuff that Methodists were made of. Peter Waine had shaken hands with Sam three distinct times

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before ten o'clock that morning, and spent the next hour or so wandering about and basking in a blaze of strangely unfamiliar Methodist popularity. He broke into fits of tender tears as he discussed with sympathetic friends the quiet nobility of Sam's character and the crowning splendour of his last act. How he had come to do it nobody seemed to be able to guess, but the simple truth was that he had, after all that had passed, and all he had suffered for and through his partner, fetched him back, and given him once more his place in the business. Wise men shook their heads, prominent judges of character confessed confusion, shrewd business men frowned portentously; but Peter

Waine was in the seventh heaven, and the barber bragged about the town until he became almost insufferable.

Two days later Jemima Grubb had the best room turned out in the early hours of the day, and for no reason in the world but that Sam Broome and his ex-charwoman mother were coming to tea. To tea they came; the barber was also of the company, the only silent person being the young lady

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who did the honours of the table. But she made up for her silence in good time. When the tea was over, and they all adjourned to the garden, Hetty, without the least shyness or hesitation, sent the elders down the path to the grass plot at the end of the cottage, and then boldly beckoned Sam to follow her into the summerhouse. Then she talked enough; with glowing eyes and flaming cheeks, she tumbled out her thoughts into the young builder's ears until he scarce knew where to look or what to say. 'It was good, sir, to bear with him, good to remember your obligation to his father, good to bear disgrace and dishonour for his sake; but, oh, Sam Broome, to fetch him back, after all that had taken place, that was the splendid thing, that was the best of all!'

Sam listened, frightened and confounded, and when at last, all breathless and tearful, she stopped and dropped into the corner seat, he sat and looked at her, and positively trembled. She was very demure with him for the rest of the evening; but Sam went home that night scarcely touching the earth

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upon which he trod, whilst a dead hope was rapidly booming into beautiful life.

Once more, months after that memorable interview, they were in the summer-house again, though autumn was now stripping the old shed of its glory. And again she did all the talking, at least up to a certain point. But as the soft twilight fell upon them, and the stillness of sweet eventide hushed all nature about them, she sealed a joy, that in him was too deep for words, with a first shy, shrinking kiss.

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CHAPTER XIV
JEMIMA GRUBB'S DISMISSAL

THE person who seemed least able to profit by his partner's handsome loyalty was Frank Blandon himself. He was moody and taciturn, very restive and suspicious under all inquiries after his health, and simply would not face Grindell at all. He came each day to the office, but confined himself to bookkeeping, and referred customers to the now happy but exceedingly busy Sam. From the extreme of dressiness he slipped rapidly to that of slovenliness, and spent his evenings in his old room at his mother's house, smoking and, alas! quietly drinking.

About Christmas, when business affairs were getting straightened out somewhat, Sam offered to retire and leave his partner in sole possession; but to his great astonishment, Mrs. Blandon and—most amazing of

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all—`Punch' Brice, who still represented certain creditors, peremptorily vetoed the suggestion, in spite of the fact that , Sam was being most obviously overworked. But at this juncture another person began to assert herself, and Sam was so disgracefully delighted to be 'hectored' by the aforesaid intruder, that Grindell saw some wonderful things. Hetty interfered in her lover's most private and personal affairs, condemned his beard to instant removal, and his moustache, of which she said some charmingly flattering things, to the also daily attention of the barber. Sam protestingly declared she was trying to turn him into a second Frank Blandon, for his clothing was condemned wholesale, nothing his wardrobe contained, not even his wonderful Sunday best, was spared; and he soon found himself going about in shamefully extravagant attire, including even a signet ring, which his willful ladylove gave him and insisted on his wearing every day. But the most terrible struggle of all came when her vain and capricious ladyship, who affected extreme jealousy of the widow Smailes, insisted that her lover

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should set up a pony and trap to assist him in the constant travelling made necessary in the management of the two businesses. Sam was seriously scandalized, and did his very utmost in the way of evasion, procrastination, and the like; but all the same the New Year found him driving about on his numerous errands behind a smart little mare, and two months' experience wrung from him the reluctant and almost guilty confession that the turn-out was more than paying for itself.

The wood-yard end, meanwhile, had been duly made over to the Methodists, and presently, as soon as the weather made outdoor ceremonies possible, the foundation-stones were laid amid such demonstrations as the poor 'Candle-lofters' never dreamed of seeing.

It was arranged presently that Sam and Hetty were to be the first couple married in the new sanctuary, the barber handsomely waiving his claim to that honour with a generosity for which he was doomed to pay a terrible price. The marriage took place in due course, Frank Blandon and, marvel of

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marvels, `Punch' Price himself being amongst the spectators. But when the ceremony was over, and the honeymoon ended, the barber was plunged into a condition of mind which alternated between long fits of mysterious silence and outbursts of cynical raillery against this wicked world and the deceitful wiles of women; for Jemima pointed out to him, in her most exasperatingly matter-of-fact manner, that, as Hetty had now left Jessamine Cottage, Mr. Waine and Wess must have somebody to look after them.

Joshua's long-tried patience now utterly gave out; for a whole fortnight the proverbial horses and chains could not drag him to the cottage, and when he did at length go he seemed to be holding long, noisy wrangles with Jemima every night, to the entire neglect of his old friend Peter, at the time when that worthy gentleman was most needing company. These lengthy interviews in the back premises always ended the same way, Joshua invariably departing red, excited, and profoundly disgusted, leaving Jemima cool, doggedly logical, and grimly amused. Then dark hints began to reach

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the cottage from one mysterious source or another. Joshua was accepting one of the many offers for his shop, retiring from business, and leaving Grindell for ever! Before confirmation could be obtained, it was told with circumstantial exactitude that the barber was courting a widow with a snug little competency at Gittering; and this was followed by the most terrible tidings of all—Joshua was sending in his preachers' plan, resigning all his local offices, and going over to the Quakers

The barber made himself very scarce in these days, and when he was encountered and cornered he was so evasive, so crafty-looking, and so solemnly mysterious, that the conviction of something seriously wrong settled firmly down on the minds of old Peter and his son Wess. Left thus to themselves, Wess, to the old man's great delight, took to cultivating his father's company, and the extraordinary conduct of the barber, and Jemima's contemptuous indifference to the signs of the times, came in for frequent discussion between them.

Wess was to leave school at the end of

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the term and go as a gentleman apprentice to Blandon & Co., and whenever conversation on this absorbing topic flagged between them, Jossy and his cryptic antics was the easiest alternative. These conversations naturally had their effect upon the boy's habits of observation, and he soon convinced himself that the barber was looking ill, and had a wild glare in his eyes suggestive of incipient insanity. And so, lingering one wet afternoon over his dinner, he suddenly surprised Jemima by demanding, as he propped his chin on his hands, `I say, Jim! What's the matter with old Joss? He looks bad.'

‘Hur-ur-u-m-ph!—worse if he ailed owt!' But there was a relishful smirk on the housekeeper's face which excited her questioner's curiosity.

‘He does though! Has he anything on his mind, think you?'

Jemima laughed; a wicked triumphant sort of laugh that stimulated the boy's thoughts still further. 'You know, I can see, and won't tell me.'

'Nowt ails him but awkerdness.'

'That's it! You won't tell me!' and the

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experienced Wess rose out of his chair to leave, shrewdly calculating upon the result.

'He—he—er—well, he wants to get married,' and Jemima giggled like a school-girl, and then looked very disgusted.

'Well, why shouldn't he—er— Oh, I say, Jim, does he want to marry you?'

'Yes, does he; and what'll become of your father and you if I go?'

This was an entirely new idea. Wess's face went slowly longer and his eyes widened out protestingly, but all he could do was to emit a long, amazed whistle.

Seeing her advantage, and lusting for a tender word from her idol, Jemima continued, 'Would *you* like me to go now? Would you, Master Wess?'

Wess, still staring at her and wrestling with the problem she had suggested, gasped out, 'Oh! I say, Jim, I never— Oh, well, you know, that's up another street, isn't it?'

'Of course it is. It can't be thought on, now, can it?'

Wess was reflecting, and his eyes blinked rapidly.

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'But—er, you know, Jim, you'll have to go some day; I might get married myself, you know, and then—'

Jim's face dropped; many and many a time lately had she thought of this fearful possibility now that marriage was so much in the air amongst them. 'Well, well! we'll wait till then, Master Wess—and there's your father, you know.'

Wess had a real serious problem before him, and gloated over it with all a boy's profound inward delight.

‘But—but— Why Jim, you'll never get married at all at that rate!' and his tone carried all youth's sense of the awfulness of such a possibility.

‘So much the better!'

Wess was getting out of his depth; he knew that Jemima was a very remarkable woman, but the state of mind suggested by her words was utterly unthinkable to himfor a female. What could any woman on earth wish but to be married?

‘Do you mean to tell me, Jim, that you don't want to be married?' and his voice was tremulous with unbelieving amazement.

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But Jemima's love-hunger was still the uppermost feeling in her mind, and so she made another daring bid.

‘I don't want to leave you, at any rate.'

But she was disappointed, she had been a mother in all but name, and he took her affection as a matter of course in youth's eternal way, and gave his mind wholly to the problem in hand. Suddenly he had an inspiration. `Why, Jim, let him come and live here!' This was the very last suggestion she was expecting, and all she could do for the moment was to shake her head.

‘I'll have no flusterous, hulking men in this 'ere kitchen whilst I'm in it.'

Wess was puzzled. He had been angling for a hint of Jemima's real state of mind, and had caught a fish of a very different kind. He sat staring before him with a perplexed frown, sighed a little, leaned his head on his arms to think more quietly and fairly thrash the point out, and when Jemima returned from the scullery a few moments later she found him fast asleep.

When he awoke some twenty minutes

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later he seemed to have forgotten all about their conversation, and as he strolled to the door, yawning and stretching himself, even a palpable hint from Jemima did not arrest his progress or bring him back to the great topic. Out in the back lane, however, his thoughts returned to jossy and his courtship, and as he reflected his hand went up to his hair, and finally, a whole week earlier than he usually did so, he decided to visit the hairdresser.

Wess, as Jemima's idol, was one of the favoured few whom the barber always waited upon himself; but on this occasion the boy had a surly reception, and his tonsorial requirements were attended to in cold silence. Business over, however, Wess took a look round on the pictures, then sauntered to a chair, drew it a little nearer the smouldering fire, stuck his feet on the bars, and, looking across at the barber, demanded, `I say, Joshua, you're a bit queer, aren't you—ill or something?'

There was a genuine chord of sympathy in the inquiry, pert though it sounded, and the barber, a little disarmed, grunted out

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that he was 'all right,' and began to search for his pipe.

Wess put on a look as near like a medical man's at a consultation as he could command, and still searching the uneasy barber's face, remarked, ' Jim and I were talking about you just now—she says nothing ails you.'

The barber had been arrested by the sudden introduction of his ladylove's name, but the finish of the sentence brought back all the old bitterness, and so, peeping here and there behind the ornaments on the mantelpiece for his lost consoler, he cried, apparently unconscious of his companion's presence,

'Oh, woman! woman! Thy name is crewilty!'

Wess, wide awake and absorbingly interested, watched the other's face as on discovering his pipe he fell back into his chair and began to charge, watched him as he took the first long draws, watched him still as he settled himself in his seat, and then asked, ' Is that what you're fretting about ? Why, anybody could persuade old Jim!'

The barber laughed, a hollow bitter laugh of intense irony.

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'It's right! but look here, Joshua, you know, what's father and me to do if you take her?'

This question, which Wess evidently expected would induce the barber to think reasonably, had been so often flung at him in Jessamine Cottage kitchen that it was like rubbing an old wound, and he sprang to his feet to say terrible things. But a second thought struck him, just in time, and so, glancing at the boy's sympathetic face, he merely remarked, ` Well, but Mr. Wess, if she had to die, or—or go off it, you'd have to do without her then.'

Wess was impressed, but more by the appeal to his logical faculty than by the strength of the argument, and so he answered, `Yes, but who could we get, you know? We couldn't stand an ordinary servant-girl, you know.'

The barber's brain was working ; he was not much interested in the lad's logic, but he was remembering that in Wess he might have a very powerful ally, and so, changing his tone, and making a strong appeal to the boy's generous sympathies, he replied, `Ah!

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Mr. Wess, what's the use o' talkin'? She's again it, she's only dodgin'—she's just breikin' my pore 'eart.'

The look and tone he put into the last words brought his young companion over to his side irretrievably, and he leaned forward and began to stare into the dying fire in vain endeavour to think of some feasible plan.

'I could square Jim, you know, Jossy,' he said musingly, and with a wag of the head expressive of seasoned sagacity; 'but then there's father and me, and she wouldn't do it—she wouldn't, I know!'

The barber, still thinking rapidly, puffed away at his pipe and stared like his young friend into the fire, cogitating the while on how he could best employ the other's services in the all-important cause. Then he rose to his feet, held out his hand, and cried

in pathetic tones, 'Bless you, Master Wess!—bless you! I've one true friend in the world, bless you!'

Wess, though astonished and very uncomfortable under the tragic flattery, was still highly complimented; and so, after assuring the barber once more of his

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sympathy and co-operation, he left him, and Joshua Sweetlove, though with momentary lapses into deep despair, entered once more into the enjoyment of hope's sweet seductions.

Two days later Wess, now inspired with the dignity of a great project, called again upon the hairdresser, and sketched the first outlines of a plot. The barber was earnestly exhorted to `Keep on looking bad,' and to `manage to get worse if he could, but to look worse anyway.' A week later Wess laid the project before his father, accompanying his statements with most harrowing descriptions of the barber's secret sufferings. But still the problem of problems was, who was to take Jemima's place? and both realized that nothing could be done until that point was disposed of. Then they decided to consult Hetty; and that versatile young lady, though she entered fully into all their desires, was nonplussed by just the same obstacle as had given pause to the rest. She took two days to consider matters, and then came smiling and triumphant. There was one family Jemima really loved—the Broomes; there was one member of that family of

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whose steadiness and thorough domestication Miss Grubb was never tired of boasting—Sam's elder sister Patty. With a young domestic to assist, Patty was the ideal substitute—at least, from Jemima's standpoint. But just when that difficulty seemed disposed of, another presented itself. Who was to tell Jemima? and what if she refused to go?

Wess undertook to sound the housekeeper as to her possible attitude towards Patty Broome, Hetty was to see the Broomes and get their mind on the subject, and they were

to consult together as soon as the results were known. Hetty came in perfect triumph; Wess, though he thought he had been perfectly successful, gave such details as suggested quite other results to the older members of the conspiracy. Still, there was nothing to do but to go on and bring the venture to an issue. But who was to tackle Jemima? and what if, as was almost certain, she flatly refused? This was a poser; neither Hetty nor the barber—admitted by this time to the great secret—could suggest any way out, and at last Peter Waine, always at his best as we have seen in great emergencies,

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came out with the staggering suggestion that Jemima should be `sacked,' discharged from her situation—in precise terms, `given a month's notice.'

Wess rolled on the floor in an ecstasy of anticipatory fun at the idea. `Father' smiled very sheepishly, and the barber nearly choked with violent inward chuckling.

But the next point was worse. Who would give her the notice? Peter wouldn't, Hetty daren't for the world, the barber groaned, but had nothing to suggest; but all agreed in rejecting Wess's suggestion that it should be sent to her through the post.

Then Hetty undertook the task—and repented the moment she had done so. It took her days to screw up her courage; but finally the grand assault was made, and the notice formally given. But Hetty came away half an hour later, declaring that no power on earth should ever induce her to undertake such a task again. Jemima simply defied them all; she would go when she liked, and not a moment sooner. That night the barber, after a timorous visit to the kitchen, went home with the decided

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conviction that single blessedness was not the worst possible condition of man.

And then the change came. Wess, disappointed, and a little resentful towards Jemima, kept away from the kitchen for one whole week; but one damp evening he wandered back to his old resort for sheer lack of some place to go to. For the moment he had no thought of the recent conspiracy, and quite innocently commenced a

conversation on his apprenticeship. Jemima startled and a little disgusted him by bursting into tears, and dolefully demanded to be informed who would awake him in a morning, prepare his breakfast, and wash his over-alls, and Wess, amazed but now alert, protested that of course *she* would—who else?

This seemed to give the tearful creature the idea that her cherished favourite had had no part in the conspiracy against her, and in a few moments she was telling him all her tale. She spoke so movingly that Wess was touched and shaken, and protested that he wanted her and her only. And that momentary surrender on the part of one of the chief conspirators saved the situation. Wess, dis-

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covering that Jemima, in spite of all that had passed, still regarded her position as insecure and temporary, began to comfort himself by suggesting all the possible advantages of the expected new arrangement. I t would be dreadfully dull in the house with a stranger reigning in the kitchen, but how nice to be able to slip out at nights and have a good time with his old mother - sweet - heart Jemima drank in the words as thirsty men drink precious water.

The barber's was about half-way between Jessamine Cottage and Hetty's. How convenient to have such a handy calling-place!

The barber had promised to teach him to play the 'cello, and he meant to go in for it 'hot and strong,' and practise nearly every night. Jemima was licking her lips and blinking her eyes, whilst her hard face positively glowed.

If the new housekeeper failed or was sick, why he, Wess, would simply go and stay with Jemima until things were right again.

Jemima was leaning over his chair, her eyes dewy and her lips trembling.

'If you were going to marry a stranger

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and live away, I couldn't stand it, Jim, I really could—'But here he was smothered in a big embrace, and lips that had not kissed him for years were pressed to his burning cheeks. 'Ah—um, don't, Jim; hold hard, woman. Why, Jim, I shall be more at your house than our own a fine sight more! Wherever dear old Jim goes, I shall go—to the world's end!' This was not exactly consistent with one of the arguments he had just been using, but Jemima, choking at the seldom-uttered confession of affection, drank it all in with pure delight. Wess stayed the whole evening with his old nurse, dropping every now and again tender little hints, always on the assumption that Jemima was going to leave them; and when, on Wess's report to his fellow conspirators, the barber waited upon the queen of the kitchen, he—well, after much circumlocution and many a perilous quiver on the edge of failure—had his way, and went back to his shop a happy man.