QUINNEYS’

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QUINNEYS'

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TO
CYRIL MAUDE

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CHAPTER I

THE SIGN

I

"Good-evening, Mr. Quinney!"

"Good-evening!" Quinney replied, as he passed a stout red-faced fellow-townsman.

With his back to the man, Quinney smiled. He could remember the day, not

so long ago, when Pinker, the grocer, called him "My lad." Then his whimsical face grew solemn, as he remembered that a smile might be misinterpreted by others whose eyes were fixed upon him with sympathy and interest. He walked more slowly, as befitted a chief mourner returning from his father's funeral, but he was queerly sensible of a desire to run and shout and laugh. He wanted to run from a drab past into a rosy future; he wanted to shout aloud that he was free—free! He wanted to laugh, because it seemed so utterly absurd to pull a long face because a tyrant was dead and buried. The fact that the old man was buried made a vast difference.

Suddenly he was confronted by a burly foot-passenger, who held out a huge hand and spoke in a deep, muffled voice.

"So, Old Joe is dead, and Young Joe reigns in his stead?"

"Right you are," replied Quinney.

Despite his efforts, a note of triumph escaped him.

"Left you everything?" continued the burly man. Quinney nodded, and after a pause the other continued huskily: "Old Joe had something snug to leave—hey?"

"Right again," replied Young Joe.

"More'n you thought for, I'll be bound?"

"Maybe."

"Well, my boy, hold on to it—as he did. It's a damned sight easier to make money than to keep it."

"I made some of it," said Quinney.

"Not much."

Quinney shrugged his shoulders and passed on, slightly exasperated because a butcher had stopped him in Mel Street, Melchester, with the obvious intention of pumping details out of him. The butcher walked on, chuckling to himself.

"Young Joe," he reflected, "is a-goin' to be like Old Joe. Rare old skinflint he was, to be sure!"

Quinney, meantime, had reached the dingy shop known to all Melchester as "Quinney's." The shutters were up—stout oak boards sadly in need of a coat of paint. Quinney opened a side door, and entered his own house—his—his! He could think of nothing else. Quinney's, and all it contained, belonged to him. Immediately after the funeral, when the house was full of people, the young man was dazed. And when the will was opened, and he learned that Old Joe had saved nearly ten thousand pounds, he felt positively giddy, replying vaguely to discreet whispers of congratulation with jerky sentences such as "By Gum, this is a surprise!" or, with nervous twitchings of the mouth and eyes, "Rum go, isn't it, that I should be rich?"

Later, Young Joe had gone for a walk alone, seeking the high downs above the ancient town. The keen air blew the fog out of his brain, and presently he exclaimed aloud:

"Yes; I am Quinney's."

After a pause he burst out again, speaking with such vehemence that a fat sheep who was staring at him ran away.

"Gosh! I'm jolly glad that I gave him a tip-top funeral. He'd have pinched something awful over mine."

After this explosion—silence, broken intermittently by whistling.

II

Upon entering the house, Quinney went into the shop, and disdainfully surveyed the stock-in-trade. Everything lay higgledy-piggledy. The big window was full of faked brass-work which seemed to gleam derisively at a dirty card upon which was inscribed the legend, "Genuine Antiques." Among the brass-work were bits of pottery and some framed mezzo-tints. Inside the shop, upon an unswept floor, old furniture was piled ceiling high. Some of it was really good, for mahogany was just then coming into fashion again, but in such matters Old Joe had always been behind his times. He preferred oak, the more solid the better, buying everything at country sales that happened to go cheap; assorted lots allured him irresistibly. He was incapable of arranging his wares, laughing scornfully at his son's suggestions. In the same spirit he refused to remove dust and dirt, being of the opinion that they lent a tone to antiques which were not quite genuine. He had never bought really good stuff to sell to customers outside the trade.

When, as frequently happened, he came across a valuable piece of furniture or a bit of fine china, he would communicate at once with a dealer, and in particular with a certain Thomas Tomlin, who invariably paid ten per cent advance on the bargain, which might be regarded as a handsome profit. To the visitors, especially Americans, who dropped in to Quinney's on their way to and from the Cathedral, Old Joe would sell at a huge profit what he contemptuously stigmatized as rubbish. A few of his regular customers were well aware that Old Joe knew nothing of the real value of some of his wares. He bought engravings and prints in colour, and these he sold at a price about double of what he had paid, chuckling as he did so.

Porcelain he understood, but not pottery; and even in porcelain he refused obstinately to pay a high price, unless he was quite sure of his turnover. Young Joe had always despised these primitive methods, and nothing pleased him so much as when he was able to rub well into his sire the mortifying fact that ignorance

and funk had prevented him from securing a prize.

As the young man gazed derisively at his possessions, the roustabout boy told him that Mr. Tomlin had called, promising to return after the funeral; and half an hour later the dealer arrived, to find Young Joe staring devoutly at two figures of Bow and a plate of Early Worcester. Tomlin greeted the young man with a certain deference never exhibited before.

"Sorry to disturb you, Joe, on such a sad occasion."

"'Tain't sad!" snapped joe. "You know as well as I do that the old man gave me a hell of a time. Now he's gone, and that's all there is about it."

"I came about them," Tomlin indicated the china. "Last thing your pore father wrote to me about."

"Nice bits, eh?"

Tomlin examined them. As he did so, a keen observer might have noticed that Young Joe's eyes were sparkling with what might have been excitement or resentment, but not gratification.

"How much?" said Tomlin.

"They're not for sale."

"What?"

"I should say that I'm keepin' 'em for a party I know."

"Anything else to show me?" grunted Tomlin, caressing the Bow glaze with a dirty but loving finger. "Your father mentioned a mirror-black jar, K'ang He period."

"Keepin' that too," replied Quinney quietly.

"Sold it?"

"Not yet."

Quinney smiled mysteriously.

"Then what's up? Ain't my money as good as the next man's?"

"If you want a plain answer, Mr. Tomlin, it ain't—to me."

"Ho! What d'ye mean?"

"Just that. It don't pay to deal with the trade. If I pick up a good thing, you get the credit; you claim all the credit. Our name is never mentioned, not a line. In this town we have the reputation of selling rubbish. I'm going to change all that."

"Are you?" Tomlin was visibly impressed and distressed. "Well, look ye here, take my advice, and walk in the old man's footsteps. He done well."

"I shall do better."

Tomlin stared at the speaker, who spoke with an odd air of conviction. Quinney continued in the same quiet drawl, "If you want to buy any of this," he waved a contemptuous hand, "it's yours—cheap!"

"Rubbish!"

"Just so."

Tomlin sat down and wiped his forehead. He was feeling warm, and the sight of young Quinney so exasperatingly cool and smug in his black clothes made him warmer.

"Ho! That's the game, is it?" As Quinney nodded, he continued: "Me and you can do business together."

"Together?"

"I say—together. How would a trip abroad suit you?"

Quinney lifted his eyebrows; the first indication of interest in his visitor.

"A trip—abroad?"

"To France. I've heard of a man in Brittany—a wonder. His line is old oak; mostly copies of famous pieces. He's the greatest faker in the world, and an artist. No blunders! Would you like to go into a deal with me? You know old oak when you see it?"

"I think so."

"You go over there and buy five hundred pounds' worth and put it into this shop, after you've cleared out the rubbish. I'll go halves. It's a dead cert, and this is the right place for the stuff. My pitch wouldn't do, and I haven't the room. I'll send you customers."

"It's a go," said Quinney.

"You mean to make things hum? And I can help you. Never gave you credit for being so sharp."

Details were then discussed, not worth recording; but during this memorable interview, which led to so much, Quinney was sensible of an ever-increasing exaltation and powers of speech which amazed him as much as the older man. He announced curtly his intention of getting rid of the rubbish, repainting and redecorating the premises, and dealing for the future in the best, whether fakes or genuine antiques.

"Never could persuade the old man that the 'Genuine Antiques' card was a dead give-away."

Fired with enthusiasm, he seized the card and tore it up there and then, while Tomlin applauded generously.

"You're yer father without any moss on you," he remarked, as he took his leave, promising to return on the morrow. Upon the threshold he asked, "Doin' anything particular this evening?"

"Yes," said Quinney.

Tomlin went out, but returned immediately.

"You ought to have a sign."

"I mean to."

"Thought of that already?"

"Thousands and thousands o' times. It'll be a hangin' sign of wrought-iron; the best; painted black, with 'Quinney's' in gold. It'll cost twenty pounds."

"That's going it."

"I mean to go it."

III

Quinney supped simply at seven, and then he walked across the Cathedral Close, down a small street, known as Laburnum Row, and knocked at the door of a genteel, semi-detached cottage. The very respectable woman who opened the door drew down the corners of a pleasant mouth when she beheld the visitor. A note of melancholy informed her voice as she greeted him, but her sharp, brown eyes sparkled joyously as she said:

"Never expected to see you this evening, Mr. Quinney."

"I'm tired of doing the things that are expected," was the surprising reply. Then, with a flush, he blurted out, "Susan in?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Biddlecombe, leading the way into the parlour. "The child's upstairs."

Mother and daughter had seen Quinney approaching, whereupon Mrs. Biddlecombe had remarked, "It's all right. You smooth your hair, dear, and slip on your blue gown."

Meanwhile, Quinney took the most comfortable chair, and stared with appraising eye at the furniture. Above the mantelpiece hung the portrait in water-colour of a handsome woman, obviously a lady, as the word was interpreted by the grandmothers of the present generation. This was Mrs. Biddlecombe's mother, the wife of a doctor, who had been bear-leader to a sprig of nobility, accomplishing with him the Grand Tour. In her turn, Mrs. Biddlecombe had married a medical gentleman (her word), who, unhappily, was called from the exercise of his profession in a promising suburb to a place invariably designated by Mrs. Biddlecombe as his last home. Later, the widow, left in very humble circumstances, had married beneath her rightful station in life a certain George Biddlecombe, a small builder and contractor, of Melchester, who, failing in business when Susan was some five years old, had died of disgust. Since this second bereavement, Mrs. Biddlecombe supported herself and her daughter by taking in lodgers, cleaning lace and fancy work. She was a stout, energetic creature, not much the worse for the wear and tear of a never-ending struggle to raise herself to the position which she had adorned before her second disastrous marriage.

"The funeral was well attended," she remarked.

"The old man was hardly what one might call popular," replied Quinney.

"He'll be missed in Melchester."

"Missed, but not regretted," the son replied grimly.

"Ah!" murmured Mrs. Biddlecombe, thinking of the builder and contractor.

Quinney pulled himself together, sitting upright in the arm-chair and speaking firmly.

"I ain't here to talk about him. Less said on that subject the better. I'm my own master now, ma'am, able to please myself. Lord! How he hated my coming here!"

"I know, I know!"

"Never appreciated Susan, neither. Dessay you think I ought to be at home, mourning. Well, he knocked all that out o' me long ago. Plain talk is best. As a matter of business, with an eye on some of our customers in this stoopid old town, I shall do what is expected in the way of a tombstone, and I shall try not to sing and dance in High Street, but between you and me it's a riddance."

Mrs. Biddlecombe smiled uneasily, but she said honestly:

"I've been through it, Mr. Quinney."

"You've had the doose of a time, ma'am—and a born lady, too."

Mrs. Biddlecombe put her handkerchief to her eyes, and dabbed them gently. She did not quite understand her visitor, who was presenting himself in a new and startling light, but she was comfortably aware that his own inclination and nothing else had brought him to Laburnum Row. For a moment her mind was a welter of confused excitements and speculations. Would her Susie rise to this momentous occasion? Would she clasp opportunity to her pretty bosom? And if so, what might not be done with such clay as Quinney, plastic to the hand of an experienced potter. Nevertheless, the young man's too brutal declaration of independence shocked cherished conventions. She beheld him shrinkingly as an iconoclast, a shatterer of the sacred Fifth Commandment.

"Are you thinking of leaving Melchester?" she asked.

"Not yet, although I am goin' abroad."

"Abroad?"

"To France, ma'am.";

Mrs. Biddlecombe frowned. France was a godless country, where tempestuous petticoats abounded. She hoped that Susan was arraying herself in the blue gown. Blue suited the child's milk and roses complexion. In blue she might provoke comparison with the audacious hussies across the Channel. She was clever enough to murmur sympathetically, "You need a holiday, to be sure."

At this Quinney laughed.

"It's business. I'm after old oak. Want to work up a connection—hey?"

"Do you speak French?"

"Me? Do I speak Chocktaw? Do I speak English properly? Do I, now? O'

course you parleyvoo like a native?"

"Not quite, Mr. Quinney."

"And Susie—you learned her French, and the pi-anner?"

"I did my best."

"Angels can do no more," said Quinney admiringly. "Upset yer neighbours, too."

He smiled maliciously, having suffered long and patiently at the hands of neighbours. Mrs. Biddlecombe feigned ignorance of his meaning, when Quinney laughed again, almost indecorously.

"Lord bless you, I know all about that. You pinched to get that piano," he indicated an ancient instrument, "because it was the only one in the row. And French! By Gum! Is there a girl except Susie who parleyvoos in this part of the town? Not one! The whole row gnashes its teeth over that."

His pride in Susan's accomplishments touched the mother's heart. Her voice rang out clearly and triumphantly:

"It's perfectly true."

At this moment Susan Biddlecombe entered the parlour, and Quinney sprang to his feet to greet her. She was just eighteen, and very pretty and refined, with small hands and feet, and delicately-cut features. The mother boasted that she looked a gentlewoman, and for the purposes of this narrative, it is far more important to add that she was innately gentle and womanly, with no tainting tincture of the ogling, smirking, provincial coquette.

Quinney kissed her!

Mrs. Biddlecombe blushed scarlet. Susan smiled, hesitated, and then kissed Quinney.

Mrs. Biddlecombe ejaculated "Gracious!"

"Give us yer blessin'," said Quinney, quite riotously. Then, masterfully, he kissed the girl again, turning to confront the astonished mother.

"Settled between us three months ago," he explained fluently. "We dassen't tell a soul, not even you, because of the old man. He was capable of leavin' every bob to an orsepital for dogs. He said to me once, 'Don't let me hear anything of goings on between you and that there Biddlecombe girl!' By Gum, I obeyed him! He never did hear anything. Me and Susie took jolly good care o' that. I only hope as he knows now."

At this Susan murmured:

"Joe, dear, please don't!"

Then mother and daughter solemnly embraced.

"I hated not to tell you," whispered Susan, "but Joe would have his way."

"The old 'un told me I might look high with my prospects, but he never did know quality. Quantity was what he'd go for. Lord! How he fairly wallowed in

job lots! Well, all that's over."

He began to walk up and down the small room, telling the two women his plans for the future. They listened with shadows of perplexity in their brown eyes, and presently Mrs. Biddlecombe carefully cleaned and put on her spectacles, peering at her future son-in-law with eyes just dimmed by happy tears.

Presently he spoke of the sign, making a rough drawing. Mrs. Biddlecombe laughed slily as she pointed out the apostrophe in "Quinney's."

"Isn't Susie going to help?" she asked. "Why not 'Quinneys'?"

"By Gum, you're right. Of course she's going to help. Make a rare saleswoman, too."

"I should love to help!" said Susan eagerly. "You'd soon teach me, Joe."

"All the tricks in the trade, Susie, and perhaps one or two of our own."

The girl opened wider her honest eyes. "Must there be tricks?" she asked, and a finer ear than Quinney's might have detected a note of anxiety.

"Bless your innocent heart—yes! Dessay I shall learn a bit from you. Course o' Shakespeare now, to improve one's powers o' speech."

He laughed so hilariously that Mrs. Biddlecombe held up a restraining finger.

"We're semi-detached, you know."

"I'm rich enough not to care what Laburnum Row thinks or says," he declared. "What day will suit you to get married, Susie?"

"Oh, Joe—this is sudden."

"Sudden? I was tellin' your mother that I had to go to France on biz, but I want you to come along, too, to do the parleyvooin'. Can you get ready in a month?"

Mrs. Biddlecombe frowned, shaking her head.

"You must wait longer than that."

"Why?"

"It's customary."

"Blow that! I want Susie, and while we're in France the shop can be overhauled. You'll keep an eye on it—hey?"

"I wash my hands of any marriage entered upon in undue haste."

Finally, he agreed to wait two months, not a moment longer.

"But I shall order the sign to-morrow—'Quinneys"—with letters cuddling up against each other. It'll be made in London, quite regardless. Next Sunday and you, Susie, will take a little walk in and about Melchester. I shan't ask you to pig it over the shop."

"I shouldn't mind that a bit."

"But I should. I'm marrying a lady, one of the best, and I'll start the thing in style, just bang up."

"A semi-detached?"

"Lord, no! Wouldn't hurt your mother's feelin's for worlds, but a semi-detached ain't private enough for me. The neighbours might hear me yellin' when Susie pulls my hair."

Mrs. Biddlecombe rose majestically.

"I'm going to open a bottle of my ginger cordial," she said solemnly.

As the door closed behind her, Quinney exclaimed, "Now, Susie, you jump on my knee. I want to tell you that I'm the happiest man on earth."

He spoke in a tone of absolute conviction.

CHAPTER II

THE DREAM COTTAGE

I

Melchester, although urban in the strict sense of the word, was sweetly fragrant of the country. Mel Street, except on Sundays, was always more or less blocked with country wagons and carts loaded with Melshire cheeses and butter and cream and eggs. Melshire bacon is famous the world over. There were no factories; and admittedly the town depended upon the surrounding country, which included wind-swept downs, and pleasant valleys, and many woods full of pheasants, and languid streams full of coarse fish. Essentially a country town which had fallen asleep in the Middle Ages, and went on slumbering, like a hale old man who has dined well. The curates and minor canons struggled against this somnolence. Vice might be found in many of the back streets, vice half-drunk, passive, Laodicean, hardly ever rampageous, save on such rare occasions as when the military were camping just outside the moss-grown walls.

The townfolk, generally, were content with themselves and the conditions under which they strolled from the cradle to the grave. Susan Biddlecombe, for instance, thanked God morning and evening because her lines were cast in pleasant places. Till she met Quinney, her mind had dwelt placidly in the immediate present. He hurled it into the future with a breathless phrase adumbrating incredible possibilities. But that was later, after the death of his father, who might have lived another twenty years. Before that great piece of good fortune Joe indulged in talk that was very small indeed; and the one excitement incidental to her engagement was its secrecy. Being a pretty girl, and half a lady, she had

visualized marriage as a tremendous change, possibly for the better, quite possibly for the worse. But during these dreams she beheld herself as herself, never reckoning that her ideas and ideals might make another woman of her under conditions and conventions other than what she so thoroughly understood.

She was romantic; but who dares to define romance. What does it mean to a girl like Susan Biddlecombe? Adventure? Yes. She was thrilled to the core when Quinney kissed her for the first time behind the parlour door; and her heart beat delightfully fast whenever she approached their trysting-place in a secluded corner of the Close. Romance inspired her with the happy thought of corresponding with her lover in cypher. The engagement ring became a treasure indeed, because she dared not wear it except at night. From the first she had gallantly faced the fact that her Joe did not look romantic, but there was a flavour of the bold buccaneer about his speech, and a sparkle in his eye quite captivating. His firm, masterful grip of a girl's waist was most satisfying, although it provoked protest. She had murmured, "Please—don't!" And to this he replied tempestuously, "Sue, darling, you like it; you know you like it. What's the use of trying to flimflam me?" He was not to be silenced till she whispered blushing that she did like it. Awfully? Yes—awfully. The man pressed the point, asking astounding questions. What ought to be the tale of kisses, for example? Could a maid stand five hundred of 'em? Why not try the experiment at the first opportunity?

In this primitive fashion he captured her.

On the following Sunday the lovers found a cottage which seemed to be the real, right thing. It was set in a small garden, surrounded by a small holly hedge, and flanked on the north-east by a row of tall elms. Behind the cottage was a plot of ground, which included a superb chestnut tree, with low branches, upon which, as Susan observed, hammocks could be swung.

"Hammocks?" repeated Quinney.

"On Sunday," said Susan, "in the summer, we can lie in hammocks and think of how hard we work during the week. It will be heavenly."

"By Gum! You have ideas, Sue."

"Mother always said I was too romantic."

The cottage was roofed with big red tiles encrusted with mosses and lichen; and about its walls in summer-time clambered roses and clematis.

"I love it already," Miss Biddlecombe declared with fervour.

"More than you love me?"

For answer she made a grimace. Quinney, with a broad grin upon his lips, encircled her waist with his arm. But a pin pierced his finger, which began to bleed, whereupon the young woman seized the finger and put her lips to it.

"I've drunk my Joe's blood," she said, with a charming blush.

"Oh, you jolly cannibal!" exclaimed Quinney.

They kissed each other tenderly, and almost forgot the cottage. Presently Quinney said, "I believe this'll do?" and she answered ecstatically, "It's exactly right."

Quinney qualified this.

"There may be others better still; it's only the best we've seen so far."

"I dare say you think there's a better girl than I am somewhere or other?"

"No, I don't!"

"How awful it would be if I caught you looking for her."

"No fear o' that!" he affirmed solemnly.

Next morning early they went together to the agent, derisively scornful of the gossips, who, to do them justice, refrained from unpleasant remarks. Laburnum Row knew by this time that young Joe Quinney had ten thousand pounds, and the rosy-fingered fact that he had found a wife in a semi-detached cottage was tremendously acclaimed.

The agent smiled discreetly when he saw them, and may have wished, poor fellow, that he, too, was young again and shamelessly in love.

"Bird-nestin', we are," said Quinney.

"Just so. Did you like the nest you saw yesterday?"

The sly fellow glanced at the girl, who answered eagerly, "It's too sweet for anything!"

Obviously, she wished to clinch the bargain on the nail, but, much to her exasperation, the more cautious male began to ask questions, listening attentively to the answers, and displaying a shrewd understanding. Susan decided that her Joe was wasting valuable time, because she wanted to discuss wallpapers. She sniffed when Quinney said, "Is there anything else on your books prettier than this cottage?" She shuffled impatiently, when the agent answered impassively, "Oh yes!" While the men had been talking she had decided that an ugly pigsty must be pulled down, that the kitchen must be refloored, and that the big water barrel should be painted apple-green and white.

"Where is this other cottage?"

"On the Mel, five minutes' walk from your place. It belongs to the widow of an artist, and it's a real bargain. You ought to see it."

"We will see it," said Quinney.

Susan shrugged her small shoulders. All this talk was lamentably foolish. Men were great sillies. While they were staring at cottage number two, some enterprising stranger might snap up cottage number one. A nice sell that would be!

"Come on, Sue," said Quinney.

Miss Biddlecombe "came on" reluctantly holding her tongue because she dared not speak her mind before the agent, and very cross by reason of this ab-

stention.

"You ain't tired?" asked Quinney, reading her face wrongly. The tenderness in his voice brought back a brace of dimples.

"Tired? Not a bit, but I'm sure that our cottage is the prettier."

"Please suspend judgment," said the agent formally. How could he divine that the pretty maid, who smiled at him so sweetly, would have suspended him from the nearest tree for being a bore and a nuisance. She smiled upon him with rage in her heart.

And, behold, the second cottage was infinitely prettier than the first. Susan gasped when she beheld it, and she was quite furious with Quinney when he said drawlingly, "This looks all right, but what's wrong with it? Why hasn't it been gobbled up long ago?"

"There is something wrong with it—the price."

"I guessed as much."

The agent explained glibly, for he, too, had learned of young Joe's great inheritance.

"It's not big enough for well-to-do folk; and it's much too expensive for poor people. It cost quite a lot of money. There's a boathouse, and fishing rights and everything is in tip-top order. So it's not surprising that the price is tip-top also. But it's a genuine bargain."

"How much?"

The agent mentioned a sum which made Quinney whistle. Susan groaned. She had quite forgotten cottage number one. It had grown common in her brown eyes, which dwelt with rapture upon a tiny lawn sloping to the sleepy Mel, upon the veranda where in summer-time Joe and she could eat their meals, upon the lilac and laburnum soon to bloom, upon the placid stream so plainly loath to leave such delightful banks. No neighbours other than the owners of big gardens would disturb their peace. Over everything hung a veil of romance and beauty. Furtively, she wiped two tears from her eyes.

"Let us go," she said quietly.

She turned, and the men followed her in silence.

II

Quinney went back to his shop without making any reference to cottage number one. Undoubtedly number two was a bargain, but he remembered a maxim often in his father's mouth, "At a great pennyworth pause awhile; many are ruined by buying bargains." Moreover, the first cottage was to be had at a modest rent. Number two was not offered on lease; the owner wanted spot cash for the

freehold. Before the lovers parted, Susan whispered, "I do wish we had not seen that cottage by the Mel. It's made me hate the other."

Quinney nodded gloomily. Susan continued softly, "It's a dream cottage. I shall think of it as that, and pretend that it doesn't really exist. I may go there sometimes when I'm asleep."

"You must look a little dear when you're asleep!"

"Oh, Joe, you do say such odd things."

"We'll look at some other cottages."

"I shall be perfectly happy with you anywhere—except in that first cottage."

"One of these fine days you'll live in a big house in London."

"What?"

"I mean it. You make a note of what I say. This old town is well enough, but it ain't big enough for me."

"Joe, you do surprise me."

"Bless you, dear heart! I surprise myself. I'm a smallish man, as inches count, but I'm simply bustin' with big ideas. I surprised Tomlin, too."

"I don't like Mr. Tomlin."

"Now, why not?"

"He looks so sly."

"He's foxy, very. Has to be. A London dealer must be sharper than his customers. The big collectors, the chaps that write thumpin' cheques are no fools, and some of them are knaves. I could tell you stories——"

"Please don't, dear."

"Why not?"

"I don't want to listen to unpleasant stories now; and besides, mother is expecting me. It's washing day."

"I hate the thought of my Sue at the wash tub!"

She considered this gravely, with her head a little upon one side. Then she answered soberly, "I like doing things, and getting them done properly."

"By Gum, you seem to forget you're a lady born."

"I'm only half and half, Joe. It will be a real pride to me getting up your shirts."

"There'll be none o' that, my girl."

She laughed gaily, but her face was pensive as she returned to Laburnum Row.

III

Next Sunday happened to be an exceptionally fine day. Quinney accompanied

Susan and her mother to the Cathedral, but after the service Mrs. Biddlecombe returned to Laburnum Row, leaving the lovers in the elm-encircled Close. Quinney, whose eyes were sparkling even more than usual, strolled across the Mel, and presently he paused opposite the Dream Cottage. Susan pinched his arm.

"How horrid of you to bring me here," she whispered. "I hate the sight of it now."

"But why? Queer things girls are, to be sure."

"If it's queer not to stare at what one can't have, I'm queer," said the young lady rather shortly. "I was never one to flatten my nose against the window of a hat-shop when I'd no money to buy hats."

"You're a sensible little dear! But I brought you here because the place is sold. I knew that would cure you. Now oughtn't we to have a squint at the first?"

"It would make me squint to look at it now."

"It's nicer than a tent."

"A tent?"

"You said you would live happily in a tent with me."

"Men don't understand women."

"That's a horrid thought with our two lives to live out together."

He looked so sorry because he couldn't understand women that Susan kissed him, having satisfied herself that nobody was in sight. She said softly:

"Well, Joe, it is really my fault because I did disguise my disappointment very cleverly, didn't I?"

Quinney chuckled.

"Disguise it? Bless your simple heart! I saw two fat tears rolling down your cheeks. I was the one who disguised my disappointment."

Whereat Susan protested stoutly that she had never seen any man look so disgusted as her Joe, when the agent mentioned the price of the Dream Cottage. She concluded on a high note of assurance.

"Desperate diseases require desperate remedies. Now that we're here, we'll go in, and I'll let it soak in that the place is really and truly sold." Quinney nodded, and Miss Biddlecombe continued fluently, "After I've seen it once more I shall never give it another thought."

"Don't be too cocksure about that!"

"I tell you I shan't, and besides, the river is certainly dangerous."

"Dangerous to us?"

She blushed delightfully, pressing his arm, but saying nothing. Quinney, divining her thoughts, fell more in love with her than ever. She went on artlessly, "I expect the house is damp in winter."

"Dry as a bone. I asked about that."

"When did you ask?"

"I suppose when we looked at it."

"I never heard you ask. I'm feeling quite happy about it now. I wonder whether the people who have bought it have moved in?"

He was able to assure her that they hadn't. But she asked immediately how he had come to know of the sale.

"The agent told me."

"When?"

"When I wrote to him."

"Why did you write to him?"

"To make inquiries about other cottages, of course."

They passed through a wicket-gate into a small garden gay in summer with larkspurs, hollyhocks, and what children call "red-hot pokers." A path of flagged stones wandered round the house.

"Cosy, ain't it?" he said. And as he spoke she noticed that his voice trembled. She tried to interpret the expression upon his shrewd whimsical face, and failed.

"Are you so tremendously sorry that this lovely place is sold?"

"I'm tremendously glad," he replied.

"I can't screw myself up to say that, Joe. I wonder who is coming to live here?"

"A childless couple."

"A childless couple!" Her face softened. "I'm sorry they're childless. I can see children running about this garden."

"And tumbling into the river!"

"I was only joking about that. But perhaps——"

"Exactly. They may have a dozen yet."

She sighed as she surveyed the pleasance. Nothing, she decided, could ever be so exactly right again. Then Quinney said abruptly

"We can't keep your poor mother waiting for dinner."

"Bother dinner. I want to have a long, last lingering look."

"But you may come again, because you happen to know the man who has bought it."

The note of triumph in his voice was illuminating.

"Joe!" she exclaimed. "It's you!"

"Yes; it's me. Now ain't I a regular old rag-bag o' surprises?"

IV

The furnishing of the Dream Cottage occupied them very agreeably during the

two pleasant months that elapsed before their marriage, but there were moments when Susan became exasperatingly conscious of immense differences between herself—as she was beginning to know herself—and the man she loved. Mrs. Biddlecombe and she, for instance, had nourished the conviction that the home being the true sphere of woman, it would be their privilege and pleasure to arrange it according to the lights, farthing dips, perhaps, vouchsafed to the middle class in Victorian days. But the Man of Many Surprises, as Susan called him, dealt drastically with this conviction, dispatching it swiftly to the limbo of unrealized ambitions and broken hopes. In those days, it may be remembered, popular fancy strayed wantonly amongst ebonized super-mantels, and cabinets with gilded panels upon which exotic birds and flowers were crudely painted. Aspinall's Enamel entered generously into most schemes of decoration. Fireplaces were filled with Japanese umbrellas. Japanese fans were arranged upon bilious-looking wall-papers, and Japanese bric-à-brac, cheap bronzes, cheap porcelain, everything cheap, became a raging pestilence.

Quinney's taste soared high above this rubbish so dear to the hearts of Susan and her mother. Afterwards he marvelled at the sure instinct which had guided him aright. Where did it come from? Why, without either knowledge or experience, did he swoop unerringly upon what was really beautiful and enduring, and at that time more or less despised?

Mrs. Biddlecombe had bought a book entitled, *How to Furnish the Home with One Hundred Pounds*. She read aloud certain passages to Quinney, who listened patiently for half an hour, and then snorted.

"You've taken cold," said the anxious Susan.

"That rot would make any man choke," said Quinney. "Makes me perfectly sick," he continued, warming to his work, as he encountered the amazed stare of the women, "makes me want to smash things! Silly rot, and written by a woman, I'll be bound."

"It's written by a lady," observed Mrs. Biddlecombe, "an authoress, too."

"It's written by a fool!" snapped Quinney. "We've Solomon's word for it that there's nothing so irksome as a female fool. This particular brand o' fool don't know, and never will know, the very first principles o' furnishing, whether for rich or poor. Buy good solid stuff. Don't touch rubbish! Rubbish is beastly. Rubbish is wicked. I've had enough of rubbish. Me and Susan is going to start right. And as for cost," he paused to deliver a slashing blow, "I'm going to put one thousand pounds' worth of stuff into my house!"

Mother and daughter gasped. Quinney seemed to have swollen to monstrous dimensions. Was he stark mad? Tremblingly they waited for what might follow.

"Perhaps more," he added flamboyantly, "and everything is going to be

good, because I shall choose it. It's become a sort of religion with me. A fine thing like that K'ang He jar of mine makes me feel good. I can kneel down before it."

Mrs. Biddlecombe observed majestically:

"Don't be blasphemous, Joseph!"

"Blasphemous?" he repeated derisively. "It's blasphemy to my notion to prefer ugliness to beauty. Suppose I'd done as father wanted me to do, and got engaged to that ugly laughin' hyena, Arabella Pinker, because she had something in her stocking besides a leg like a bed-post."

"Now you are indelicate, isn't he, Susan?"

"I chose Susan instead of Bella. Blasphemous! Now, tell me, what do you go to the Cathedral for?"

"To worship my Maker."

"Well, I'm going to be honest with you and Sue. I go to the Cathedral to look at the roof, the finest bit of stonework in the kingdom. My thoughts just soar up into that vaulting. I feel like a bird o' Paradise. Our Cathedral is God's House, and no mistake. My mind can't grapple with Him, but it gets to close grips with that fan vaulting, which He must have designed."

"Never heard you talk like this before," murmured Susan.

In her heart, which was beating faster than usual, Miss Biddlecombe was profoundly impressed, because she had wit enough to perceive that her Joe was absolutely sincere. But she trembled at his audacity, because she had been trained to say "Gawd" rather than "God," believing devoutly that the lengthening of the vowel indicated piety.

"I've had to bottle up things," said Quinney grimly. "Now I'm free to speak my mind, and you're free too, my girl. Hooray, for plain speech! Lawsy, how it hurts a poor devil to hold his tongue!"

Mrs. Biddlecombe retired from the parlour feeling quite unable to deal faithfully with a young man who must be, so she decided, slightly under the influence of liquor. Her ideas had been put to headlong flight, but they returned like homing doves to the great and joyous fact that her prospective son-in-law possessed ten thousand pounds. Enough to intoxicate anybody—that! Her own steady head swam at the luck of things. Later, when the first exuberance had passed, Susan and she would have a word or two to say. For the moment there were ten thousand reasons, all of them pure gold, in favour of discreet silence.

V

To Susan alone, under a pledge of secrecy, Quinney became alluringly expansive.

Once, in her flapper days, she had seen Lord George Sanger's famous three-ring circus, and had tried to take in and assimilate three simultaneous shows. Result—a headache! Peering into Quinney's mind was quite as exciting as the three-ring circus, and nearly as confusing. He could soar to the giddy pinnacles of Melchester Cathedral, and thence, with a swallow's flight, wing his way through the open windows of a stately pile of buildings designed by Inigo Jones for the fourth Marquess of Mel.

Indeed, the door had not closed behind the ample rotundities of Mrs. Biddlecombe when he asked abruptly:

"Ever seen the Saloon at Mel Court?"

"Never, Joe."

"It's furnished just right according to my ideas. I want to have furniture of that sort. Georgian—hey? We'll go there together, when the family are in town. In that Saloon I feel as I do in the Cathedral—reg'lar saint! It's spiffin'! And every bit of the period. Not all English—that don't matter. The china will make your mouth fairly water, the finest Oriental! Pictures, too, but of course we can't touch them yet."

Susan gazed anxiously into his face, which was glowing with enthusiasm.

"Joe, dear, shall I fetch you a glass of barley water?"

"Barley water? Not for Joe! I've thought of that, too, my pretty. I'm going to have a cellar. None o' your cheap poisons! Sound port and old brown sherry, in cut-glass decanters!"

Susan opened her mouth, closed it, and burst into tears. At the moment she believed that her clever Joe had gone quite mad. The young man kissed away her tears, and soon brought the ready smile back to her lips, as the sanity which informed so remarkably his powers of speech percolated through her mind. He might say the strangest and most surprising things, but they were convincing, indeed overpoweringly so. He held her hands, as he talked, in his masterful grip, and looked keenly into her soft brown eyes.

"Sue, dear, it's not surprisin' that I surprise you, because, as I told you before, I surprise myself. I lie awake nights wondering at the ideas that come into my head. I suppose the old man was such an example——"

"An example, Joe?"

"Of how not to do things! Lawsy, what a wriggler, to be sure, twisting and turning in the dark, and disliking the light. Wouldn't clean our windows, because he didn't want our customers to see the fakes too plainly. We just pigged it. You know that? Yes. I had to make a flannel shirt last a fortnight. Same way with food. Cheap meat, badly cooked. Stunted my growth, it did, but not my mind. I used to spend my time thinking what I'd do when I got out of Melchester."

"Out of Melchester?"

Susan and her mother were in and of the ancient town. In these days of cheap excursions and motor-cars it is not easy to project the mind back to the time when the middle classes rarely stirred from home. To be in Melchester, according to Susan Biddlecombe, was a pleasure; to be of it, a privilege. Melchester had imposed upon her its inexorable conventions, the more inexorable because they were unformulated, exuding from every pore of the body corporate. Chief amongst them perhaps was veneration for the Bishop, who ruled his diocese with doctrinal severity tempered by gifts of port wine and tea and beef. Nonconformity was ill at ease and slightly out of elbows beneath the shadow of the most beautiful spire in England. The only Radical of importance in the town was Pinker, the rich grocer. And when the Marquess of Mel said to him, chaffingly, "Ah, Pinker, why don't you belong to us?" the honest fellow replied, "It's this way, my lord. The Conservative gentry deal with me because I know my business. The Radicals buy from me because I'm a Radical. They'd sooner deal with the Stores than with a Tory grocer."

Quinney continued:

"I have my eye on London, Paris, and New York."

"Mercy me!"

"Meanwhile, Melchester is good enough. But our house must be a show place—see?"

Susan tried to see, but blinked.

"I shall take some of our customers to our house, to show them the things they can't have. I mean, of course, the things they can't have except at a big price. Nothing bothers a collector so much as that. Your real connoisseur"—Quinney had not yet mastered the pronunciation of this word—"goes dotty when he can't get what he wants. By Gum, he feels as I used to feel when I wanted you, and the old man was alive and everlastingly jawing about Arabella Pinker. I shall have a lot of Arabellas in the shop, but my Susans will be at home."

"But, Joe, mother and I were so looking forward to furnishing the Dream Cottage."

"I know, I know!" He began to skate swiftly over the thin ice. "But your ideas, sweetie, are so—so semi-detached. You haven't got the instinct for the right stuff. I have. You and your mother want to stir up Laburnum Row. I'm a-going to make the whole of Melchester sit up and howl. See?"

Susan nodded. Very dimly she apprehended these incredible ambitions, and yet her instinct, no more at fault than his, whispered to her that Joe could do it. From that moment Laburnum Row appeared in its true proportions. Quinney said quickly:

"I'll leave the kitchen and the bedrooms to you, but, remember, no rubbish."

Accordingly it came to pass that the Dream Cottage was furnished with

charming bits of Chippendale, Hepplewhite, and Sheraton, picked up here and there throughout Wessex. The rubbish in the shop was sold *en bloc*, being taken over by a small dealer. The premises were put into the hands of a London decorator, a friend of the great Tomlin.

Upon the day the painters went in Quinney marched out and married his Susan.

CHAPTER III

THE PLEASANT LAND OF FRANCE

I

They crossed to Saint Malo two days after the wedding. The groom was horribly sea-sick; the bride, a capital sailor, ministered to him faithfully. This experience is recorded, because it opened Joe's eyes to the fact that physical infirmity is a serious disability. He had never been "outed," as he expressed it, before. And it was humiliating to reflect that his small Susan could confront without a qualm wild waves when he lay prostrate, limp in mind and body, capable only of cursing Tomlin, who had dispatched him upon this perilous enterprise. He was not too well pleased when Susan kissed his clammy brow and whispered, "Oh, Joe, I do love to look after you." Somehow he had never contemplated her looking after him. His very gorge rose at the thought of his inferiority. Twenty-four hours afterwards he felt himself again, the better perhaps for the upheaval, but the memory of what he had suffered remained. He told himself (and Susan) that he would be satisfied with establishing himself in London. New York and Paris could go hang!

They wandered about Saint Malo, criticizing with entire candour everything they beheld. Susan aired her French; the true Briton expressed a preference for his own honest tongue. The Cathedral aroused certain enthusiasms tempered by disgust at the tawdry embellishments of the interior. Susan, however, was impressed by the kneeling men and women, who wandered in and out at all hours. She stared at their weather-beaten faces uplifted in supplication to some unknown saint. She became sensible of an emotion passing from them to her, a desire to kneel with them, to share, so to speak, the graces and benedictions obviously bestowed upon them. For the first time in her life she realized that religion may be more than an act of allegiance to God. These simple folk, workers all

of them, could spare five minutes out of a busy morning to pray. Her own prayers never varied. Night and morning she repeated piously the formulas learned at her mother's knee. Upon Sundays she followed more or less attentively the fine liturgy of the Church of England. Naturally intelligent and supremely sympathetic, she could not doubt that prayer meant more to these Papists than to her, something vital, something absolutely necessary. She glanced at her husband's face, wondering whether he shared her thoughts. Joe was worshipping after his own fashion the Gothic architecture of the nave, and favourably contrasting it with the transepts. She touched his arm timidly.

"Would it be wicked, Joe, to kneel down here?"

Joe stared at her whimsically.

"Do you want to?" he asked.

"Ye-es."

"Well, then, do it. You ain't going to pray to that?" He indicated a graven image, atrociously bedizened in crude blue and silver tinsel.

"Oh no!" she answered; then she added, with a blush, "I only want to thank God that we are here—together."

"Right you are!" said Joe heartily, but he did not offer to kneel with her. She moved from him slowly, with a backward glance, which escaped his notice, and knelt behind a pillar, covering her face with her hands, wondering at first what her mother would say if she could see her, and almost tremblingly glad that she couldn't. Oddly enough, when she began to pray it never occurred to her to use the old familiar forms. She thanked God because He had made her happy; she entreated a continuance of that happiness in her own artless words, words she might have used to her mother. When her prayer was ended, she became conscious of the strange intimacy of her invocation. She felt a glow, although a minute previously the lower temperature of the Cathedral after the warm sunshine without had struck her chillingly. When she rose from her knees, her eyes were shining. She returned to her husband, who said: "Regular mix-up we have here. Let's skin out of it."

II

They travelled by easy stages to Treguier, their destination, stopping overnight at Saint Brieux and Guingamp. By the luck of things they happened to reach Treguier at the time of the great Pardon, *le Pardon des Pauvres*, the Pardon of Brittany's greatest and most potent Saint—*Yves de la Vérité*. Everything also combined to make this new experience an imperishable memory. Their hotel in Treguier was charmingly clean and comfortable, an inn of the olden time kept

by two elderly spinsters. It overlooked the river Jaudy flowing placidly to the sea. Beyond, under soft skies, lay the Breton landscape, quietly pastoral, pleasingly undulating, with a thin mist revealing rather than obscuring its beauty. Susan woke early, hearing the sound of sabots upon the quay, and the tinkle of bells upon the horses. She went to the open window and looked out. Already the town was full of pilgrims, peasants in the costume of the country, all chattering and gesticulating. Some had come in boats. Susan marked the whiteness of the women's coifs and the stout cloth of their gowns. When they laughed, she saw rows of white teeth; their faces were superbly tanned by sun and wind; they looked what they were—the sisters, the wives, the mothers of strong men. Amongst them, terribly conspicuous wandered a few beggars, disease-stricken wretches importuning alms of the healthy, pointing shrivelled, dirty hands at their dreadful sores, advertising, almost triumphantly, their poverty and misery. Susan had learned from the two sisters that this was the fête of the ver poor, she had been warned to expect a parade of misery and deformity, and Mademoiselle Yannik had added softly, "Look you, madame, it is good, when one is young and strong and happy, to look sometimes at these *misérables*."

III

The Pardon is not held at Treguier, nor at Minihy, but on the other side of the Jaudy, upon a hill near Porz-Bihan. Here, in former times, stood a chapel, now in ruins; only the ossuary is left, in which may still be found an image of the great Saint, very old, very crudely fashioned, but supremely interesting by reason of the veneration with which it is regarded by the peasants. The Quinneys watched the pilgrims coming and going in a never-ending procession. Each offered prayers and oblations in copper to the Saint, who stared down upon them with that vague, impersonal regard which would seem to indicate indifference or lassitude. Upon an altar were ranged other saints, rude images of painted wood, saints never canonized, and looking as if they resented the unique honour paid to Yves le Véridique. Many of the pilgrims muttered some formula in Breton, which afterwards Mademoiselle Yannik translated for Susan. It ran: "If theirs be the right, condemn us. If ours be the right, condemn them." For this is the patron saint of lawyers, and of the poor oppressed by the law. The procession of *Misérables* followed. An Englishman told the tale of the Miracle of the Soup to Susan. He described vividly a farm hard by filled with outcasts upon the eve of the Pardon. And so bitter had been the weather that the farmer had made small provision for his guests, assured that only a few would demand his hospitality. The *pot-au-feu* hung upon its hook, but there was hardly soup enough in it to

feed half a dozen, and scores were arriving. And then suddenly a stranger appeared, approached the hearth, and affirmed that there would be enough for all. Having said this, he vanished, and, lo, a miracle! The crowds were abundantly fed. The stranger was the Saint himself, the blessed Yves. Susan was thrilled, but Joe whispered to her, "Do you believe that yarn, Sue?" and she whispered back, "Yes." He squeezed her arm as he replied, "Lawsy, you are a blessed little fool!"

But the great impression remained of poverty and pain parading before a comparatively prosperous and healthy crowd, who regarded the unfortunate with kindly and compassionate eyes. Susan was melted to tears, but Joe said emphatically:

"What do you make of this show?"

She replied hesitatingly, "They recognize that the poor must be always with them."

Joe persisted.

"How does this apply to you and me?"

"We must help when we can, dear."

"We have to help, Sue. Rates and taxes. By Gum, I've never seen such a lot of wretched devils in all my life. And the sight o' their misery just hits a particular nail of mine bang on the head. Drives it home, like. Me and you must never be poor. We must pull together against the remotest chance o' poverty."

"They can't help it, Joe."

"Perhaps not, but we can."

They returned in a chastened mood to the excellent dinner provided at the inn.

IV

Next day they paid a visit to the great artist, who reproduced so wonderfully pieces of old furniture. Fortunately for the Quinneys, the Englishman, whom they had met at the Pardon, accompanied them. He happened to be staying at the same inn, and knew *le pays Tregorrois* as well as, indeed much better than, Quinney knew Melshire. Also he spoke French fluently, and could make himself understood in Breton. Lastly, he was something of a collector of Breton *faience* and old oak, a buyer in a small way of chests and panelling. The Quinneys interested him enormously. Joe was evidently an original, and Susan, as evidently, the reverse, and the more attractive on that account in masculine eyes. He swooped upon the immense differences in the characters of bride and groom, having the instinct of the explorer, and promised himself some amusement in studying them. Joe had been as frank with him as he was with Mrs. Biddlecombe.

"I've powers within me," he explained, over a matutinal pipe. "They push me on—see?"

George Le Marchant nodded, smiling pleasantly.

"Pushed you across the Channel?" he suggested.

"Just so. Beastly crossin'—humiliatin'. Felt like a scoured worm!"

Susan interrupted. She saw that Le Marchant, although he wore shabby clothes, was a gentleman.

"That'll do, Joe."

"Nearly did 'do' for me. The wife"—he liked this expression, having heard Pinker use it—"the wife fairly wallered in it. Blue water, wind and waves—ugh!"

"It would have been just lovely," Susan admitted, "if Mr. Quinney——"

"Hadn't 'ad his bloomin' head in a basin. No, I ain't going to say another word. Disgusting about fits it. Well, I was saying it was something stronger than meself drove me out of good old England."

"Mr. Tomlin," put in Susan. She added for the benefit of the stranger, "He's a big London dealer."

Joe snorted.

"Tomlin ain't stronger than me, Susan. He's bigger in the trade, that's all, and come to his full growth, too. I'm sorter speak sproutin'. Do you know Tomlin, of the Fulham Road?"

"Oh yes."

Le Marchant smiled faintly. Quinney, intent upon his own glorification, missed a derisive expression, but Susan was sharper. She decided instantly that there had been "dealings" between the great Tomlin and this nice gentleman, and that they had not been entirely satisfactory. Joe continued, warming to his work:

"Tomlin told me about this faker of old oak."

"But he's not a faker. Really, you must purge your mind of that. He's an artist. Dealers, of course, buy his reproductions and sell them again as authentic antiques, but he sells them at a moderate price for what they are—superb copies. They are so masterly in every detail that you won't know the copy from the original when you see both together."

"Oh, won't I?" said Quinney. "I've a lot to learn, and I'm learning something every day, but old oak is my hobby. I've handled it since I was a baby, and I shall know."

"We'll see," said Le Marchant, smiling. "What did you think of the Pardon yesterday?"

He addressed Susan, but Joe answered, taking it for granted that his opinion was worth something.

"Rum show! Very—French, hey? Praying hard all the morning didn't prevent 'em from getting jolly tight in the afternoon."

Le Marchant laughed.

"These are Bretons, Mr. Quinney. Celts, not Latins."

He began to explain, talking very pleasantly, with a knowledge of his subject which challenged Susan's attention. She liked to hear about people so different from herself; their quaint superstitions, their ardent beliefs, and the primitive simplicity of their lives appealed to her strangely. But she was quick to perceive that Joe was bored. His shrewd face wore an expression gradually becoming familiar to her. Later he would say that there was nothing "in" such talk. It didn't lead anywhere; at any rate not in the directions whither Susan and he were steering. Why couldn't Le Marchant talk about that Quimper pottery, those jolly old figures of the Saints and Saintesses. A man might pick up a wrinkle or two worth something listening to *that*. He knocked the ashes from his pipe and rose to his feet.

"Ain't we wastin' valuable time?" he asked.

V

The establishment of the master copyist much impressed Quinney on account of its size. The visitors were shown everything, and the proprietor said to Mrs. Quinney:

"Vous voyez, madame, je ne cache pas mon jeu, moi."

"What's he sayin'?" asked Joe.

Le Marchant answered.

"He assures us that he's not a faker."

They beheld tanks of acid in which new ironwork was placed. In a few hours or days the corroding acid achieved the work of years. There were piles of wood, new and old, awaiting treatment. Quinney asked if there was a wormholing machine. He had heard that one had been patented. The proprietor laughed.

"The worms themselves do the work here, monsieur."

Then he placed in Joe's hands two wooden candle-sticks.

"One of these," said he, "is genuine, and worth its weight in gold, a fine specimen of the sixteenth century. The other was made here within a year. Which is which?"

"Lawsy!" said Quinney. "I ought to know."

He examined them very carefully, and guessed wrong.

Le Marchant smiled, well pleased, because he had predicted truly. The proprietor pointed to a bureau of oak, exquisitely carved.

"Is that old or new, monsieur?"

Quinney spent five minutes in examining the specimen, feeling the "patine," scraping it with his nail, staring through his glass at the marks of the chisels.

"It's old," said he at last.

"It's quite new, monsieur."

"I'm fairly done," said Joe. "This beats the world, this does."

"That piece," said the proprietor, "is signed by me here," and he showed Quinney two interlaced initials, cleverly concealed. "The original is in the Cluny, and valued by experts at four thousand pounds. I can sell it for sixteen pounds."

"Mark it 'sold,'" said Joe.

He bought chests old and new, panelling, tables and chairs, desks and wardrobes. The proprietor smiled, rubbing his hands together.

"Obviously, monsieur is in the business?"

"I am," replied Quinney, "and, by Gum, I thought I knew my business till I met you."

Le Marchant acted as interpreter. The three returned to Treguier and breakfasted upon the small terrace overlooking the Jaudy. Quinney was in the highest spirits. But to Susan's dismay, he talked of returning to England and finishing their honeymoon in a country where a man could make himself understood. What about Weymouth? What price nice sands? He assured Le Marchant that his Susan liked paddling, because she could show a neat pair of ankles. Also they could nip over to Dorchester. Rare place that for old stuff! Inevitably he returned to his business with an enthusiasm which indicated that he found it more engrossing than ordinary honeymooning. Susan listened with a tiny wrinkle between her smooth brows. When Quinney rushed upstairs to fill his pouch with English tobacco, Le Marchant said thoughtfully:

"Wonderfully keen, isn't he?"

The swiftness of her answer surprised him.

"Do you think he's too keen?"

He evaded the eager question.

"As for that, Mrs. Quinney, one can hardly be too keen in business nowadays."

"I meant—is he too keen for his own happiness?"

He hesitated. On the morrow he would go his way, and, humanly speaking, there was little probability of his meeting this particular couple again. He wondered vaguely what the future held for them. Then he shrugged his shoulders and laughed.

"His keenness might make for his happiness. I divide the people I know into two classes, those who care for things and those who care for persons."

"Surely a man can care for both?"

"One must be the dominant interest."

"You think it's bad to care too much for things?"

"You are very sharp. However, in this case there isn't much cause for serious alarm."

"Why not?"

He stared pensively at her charming face, thinking that Quinney was indeed a lucky fellow to have captured and captivated so sweet a creature.

"Well, you stand between him and false gods."

"False gods! What a good way of describing faked Chelsea figures!"

CHAPTER IV

THE INSTALLATION

I

Mrs. Biddlecombe welcomed the homing couple when they returned to the Dream Cottage, but she positively refused to forsake the semi-detached in Laburnum Row, although Quinney, for his part, was willing to entertain a mother-in-law indefinitely, if Susan wished it. Susan, rather to his surprise, did not wish it. And the obvious fact that her husband considered the matter of small importance slightly distressed her, as indicating an abnormal indifference to *persons* which contrasted oddly with his absorption in *things* of wood and stone, graven images, let us call them, which the almighty Tomlin had set up in the freshly decorated and enlarged premises in Mel Street. Tomlin, indeed, had sent down a lot of stuff, and some of it was very good. Joe could hardly tear himself from the porcelain, and gloated over the blue and white, so Susan affirmed, as if he wished to kiss it.

The London dealer followed his crates.

He expressed unqualified approval of what Joe had bought in Brittany, taking, however, most of the credit to himself, inasmuch as he had dispatched Quinney to Treguier. The younger man grinned, wondering what Tomlin would say when he beheld the Dream Cottage and its furniture. He arranged that Mrs. Biddlecombe should be present upon that memorable occasion, for he was well aware that the good soul did not share his enthusiasm for mahogany, and that she resented his criticism of her burked schemes of decoration.

Need it be recorded that Quinney triumphed? Tomlin was so impressed that he said gaspingly, "I'll take the lot off your hands, Joe, at a twenty-five per cent. advance."

"No, you won't!" replied Joe. "Our furniture is not for sale, old man. Not yet, by Gum!"

"You are a wonder!" said Tomlin generously.

"Isn't he?" exclaimed Susan.

It was a great moment.

Late dinner followed, a *partie carrée*. Joe provided champagne, and port in a cut-glass decanter. Warmed by this splendid hospitality, Tomlin became anecdotal. Perhaps he wanted to astonish the ladies. Unquestionably he succeeded in doing so. One story will suffice to illustrate Tomlin's methods, and it was told, be it remembered, with exuberant chucklings within two hundred yards of the Cathedral Close.

"It's becoming harder every day, ma'am," he addressed Mrs. Biddlecombe, "to get hold of the right stuff—cheap. I have agents everywhere. Old Mr. Quinney was one. And now and again they hear of a real bargain. Often as not the people who 'ave it won't part. They would part, ma'am, if they was offered the right price, but that wouldn't be business. No. Well, only the other day, I got hold of the sweetest table, genuine Adam, and *hand-painted*! Paid a fiver for it!"

"Really, did you now?" murmured Mrs. Biddlecombe For all she knew a "fiver" might be a large or a small price. Tomlin continued:

"Yes, ma'am, a fi' pun note. It was this way. The table belonged to a decayed gentlewoman, who'd seen better days, and needed money."

Mrs. Biddlecombe sighed; the anecdote had become almost personal, and therefore the more interesting.

"That may happen to any of us," she murmured.

"She had inherited this table from her grandma," continued Tomlin, "and my agent heard of it, and saw it. He offered the old lady four pun ten, and she wouldn't deal. Obstinate as a mule she was!"

"Sensible old dear, I call her," said Quinney.

"My agent was fairly boiled, and then inspiration struck him. He never went near the old gal for a couple of months. Then he called with a friend, a stout, red-faced man, bit of an amateur actor. My agent introduced him as a collector of choice bits. Asked if he might show him the little table. Old lady was willing enough, and of course the low comedy feller crabbed it."

"Stale dodge that," remarked Quinney.

"Wait a bit. After crabbin' it, he pretended to be interested in other things; and then he began to act queer. He'd slipped a bit o' soap into his mouth, so as to froth proper."

"Gracious me! Why!" asked Mrs. Biddlecombe.

"Then he went into a regular fit, fell down, and as he fell grabbed the little table, and broke off one of its pretty spindle legs. When he come out of his fit,

my agent said that the least thing a gentleman could do was to buy the table he'd spoiled. The old lady took a fiver as compensation, and jolly glad she was to get it. I sold that table to an American millionaire for one hundred and twenty-five—guineas!"

Mrs. Biddlecombe rose majestically. She saw that her son-in-law was laughing.

"Come, Susan, let us leave these *gentlemen* to their wine."

Susan followed her out of the room. When the door was shut behind them, Quinney said:

"Old man, that yarn was a bit too thick for 'em. See?"

Tomlin laughed boisterously.

"One more glass of port," he replied, "and I'll tell you another."

He told several; and when the men returned to the small drawing-room, Susan said timidly that her mother had gone back to Laburnum Row. Later, when she was alone with her husband, she asked a sharp question:

"Joe, dear, you wouldn't have done what Mr. Tomlin did, would you?"

"About what, Sue?"

"About that table. Mother and I thought it was horrid of him to take advantage of a poor old lady."

Joe evaded the question cleverly:

"Look ye here, my girl, Tomlin is—well, Tomlin. Don't you mix him up with me."

"But, Joe, you are mixed up with him—in business."

"Temporary arrangement, my pretty, nothing more."

He kissed her, murmuring, "Blessed little saint you are!"

II

Melchester was profoundly interested in the new premises, and the other dealers in genuine antiques went about, so Quinney affirmed, chattering with rage, and predicting ruin.

"They'll be ruined," said Quinney, chuckling and rubbing his hands. "Nobody will buy their muck, and they know it."

He had very nice hands, with long slender fingers, manifestly fashioned to pick up egg-shell china. Also in spite of his accent, which time might reasonably be expected to improve, his voice held persuasive inflections, and the resonant *timbre* of the enthusiast, likely to ring in the memories of too timid customers, the collectors who stare at bargains twice a day till they are snapped up by somebody else. Quinney despised these Laodiceans in his heart, but he told Susan that they

did well enough to practise upon.

"You want to get the patter," he told his wife, "and the best and quickest way is to turn loose on the *think it overs*. See?"

It had long been arranged between them that Susan was to help in the shop and acquire at first hand intimate knowledge of a complex business. Quinney summed up the art of selling stuff in a few pregnant words.

"Find out what they want, and don't be too keen to sell to 'em. Most men, my pretty, and nearly all the women go dotty over the things hardest to get. Our best stuff will sell itself, if we go slow. Old silver is getting scarcer every day."

Susan smiled at her Joe's words of wisdom. He continued fluently: "We've a lot to learn; something new every hour. And we shall make bloomin' errors, again and again. All dealers do. Tomlin was had to rights only last week over two Chippendale chairs; and he thinks he knows all about 'em. I've been done proper over that coffee-pot."

He showed her a massive silver coffee-pot with finely defined marks upon it.

"A genuine George II bit, Susie, and worth its weight in gold if it hadn't been tampered with by some fool later on. All that repoussé work is George IV, and I never knew it. The worst fake is the half-genuine ones."

"Gracious!" exclaimed his pupil.

"There are lots o' things I don't know, and don't understand, my girl; all the more reason to hold tight on to what I do know. And what I know I'll try to share with you, and what you know you'll try to share with me."

"I'm stupid about things," said Susan.

Quinney strolled across the room, and selected two jars more or less alike in shape and paste and colour.

"Can you tell t'other from which?" he asked. "Look at 'em, feel 'em inside and out."

Susan obeyed, but after a minute she shook her head.

"Ain't they just alike, Joe?"

"Lord, no! One's the real old blue and white, hand-painted, and worth fifty pound. T'other is a reproduction, printed stuff, with a different glaze. Look again, my pretty!"

"This is the old one, Joe."

"No, it ain't. Slip your hand inside. Which is the smoother and better finished inside?"

"Yes, I feel the difference, but I don't see it. I wish I could see it."

"You will. I'm going to put a little chipped bit of the best on your toilet table. You just squint at it twenty times a day for one year, and you'll know something. That's what I'm doing with the earlier stuff, which is more difficult to be sure of,

because it doesn't look so good. I wouldn't trust my judgment to buy it. That's Tomlin's job."

Susan frowned.

"I don't like Mr. Tomlin, Joe."

"Never asked you to like him, but we can learn a lot from Tomlin. See? He's an expert upon Chinese and Japanese porcelain and lac. We've got to suck his brains."

"Ugh!" said Susan.

During these first few weeks she displayed great aptitude as a saleswoman. Her face, so ingenuous in its expression, her soft voice, her pretty figure attracted customers. The price of every article in the shop was marked in letters which she could turn into figures. But this price was a "fancy one," what Quinney termed a "top-notcher." Susan was instructed to take a third less. Quinney trained her to answer awkward questions, to make a pretty picture of ignorance, to pose effectively as the inexperienced wife keeping the shop during the absence of her husband. He had said upon the morning of the grand opening of *Quinneys'*, "I don't want you to tell lies, Sue."

"I wouldn't for the world," she replied.

He pinched her chin, chuckling derisively. "I know you wouldn't; but I don't want you to tell all the truth neither."

"What do you mean?"

"This oak now. Me and you know it's new, but if a customer tells you it's old, don't contradict him. 'Twouldn't be polite. All you know about it is this—your clever hubby picked it up in France, in Brittany. See?"

She asked anxiously, "It won't be acting a lie, dear?"

"Not a bit of it! By Gum, Sue, I'm as proud of that conscience of yours as I am of that jar. Not a flaw in either."

After this she played her part so artlessly that Joe chuckled half a dozen times a day. She tackled the Bishop—alone. Quinney saw the great man approaching and told Susan. She wished to bolt, but Quinney disappeared instead, listening to the duologue that followed. The Bishop stared at the fine wares from Tomlin's, whipped out his spectacles, and entered, smiling at Susan's blushing face.

"Good-morning, my lord!"

"Good-morning, Mrs. Quinney. May I look at some of these tempting things?"

He looked at what was best amongst the porcelain sent down by Tomlin, displaying knowledge of the different periods. Then he said courteously, "As this is my first visit, I must buy something for luck. What is the price of that small jar with the *prunus* decoration? If it is within my means——"

He paused, gravely expectant, but Susan divined somehow what was flitting through his mind; the outrageous prices exacted by old Quinney. She perceived that this was a test purchase. The price of the jar was marked five pounds. Susan said demurely, "We can sell this to you, my lord, for three pounds ten."

"I'll take it, Mrs. Quinney."

He went away with his purchase in his hand. Quinney came back, not too well pleased.

"He'd have given a fiver for it. Why didn't you ask more than we was prepared to take?"

Susan, knowing her own strength, answered decisively:

"His lordship confirmed me, Joe."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"He knows about china. He passed by the inferior stuff. I wanted him to tell his friends that our prices were very reasonable; and I wanted him to come again. He promised that he would. And I think the clergy, our own clergy, ought to be treated—generously."

"By Gum, you're right!" said Quinney. "They'll tell the old women that our prices touch bottom, reg'lar bargains."

She was equally successful with Mrs. Nish, a widow of ample means and an ardent collector. Mrs. Nish may have seen the Bishop's jar and have learned from him that it had been bought at a modest figure. She came in next day, richly rustling in black silk, a large, imposing woman, with a deportment that indicated opulence and a complexion heightened by good living. Mr. Nish had accumulated a fortune in Australia, sheep-farming, and had died—as so many such men do—when he retired from active business. His widow bought a large house standing in a small garden, just outside Melchester. The Close called upon her (not the County), because she subscribed generously to local charities. Her taste, however, was flamboyantly rococo; and on that account Quinney despised her, although he admitted to Susan that she might be educated. When he beheld her pair of prancing bays, he whispered to Susan, "Have a go at the old girl!" Then he retreated discreetly to his inner room. Mrs. Nish greeted Susan with much affability, and immediately mentioned the Bishop, "my lording" him with unction. The jar with *prunus* decoration was spoken of as a little prune pot.

"I want one just like it."

"I'm afraid," said Susan, "that you will not find another just like it."

"As near as may be," said Mrs. Nish.

"The only other jar with similar decoration, and of the same period, is this."

She displayed the finest jar in their possession, adding, "The price is fifty pounds."

Mrs. Nish was tremendously impressed.

"It can't be worth all that," she protested.

"I think his lordship would tell you that it was. We don't expect to sell it. In fact it belongs to somebody else. We get a small commission if it is sold."

Susan carefully replaced the jar, and picked up its counterfeit.

"This is modern, madam, a very clever production, made by the same factory in China. We ask five pounds for this."

"I don't buy fakes."

"Of course not, madam. My husband says Lord Mel has not a finer piece of blue and white than that."

Mrs. Nish turned aside to examine the oak, but her eyes wandered now and again to the big jar. Susan knew that she was thinking how pleasant it would be to say carelessly, "Oh, yes; I paid fifty pounds for that."

Quinney carried the jar to her house late that afternoon, and he told Susan that she was a clever dear.

"You like the work?" he asked.

She hesitated.

"I like being with you, Joe."

"Good! You can consider yourself permanently engaged, Mrs. Quinney."

"Permanently?"

His quick ear detected an odd inflection. He glanced at her sharply, and saw a faint blush. In silence they stared at each other. Then Quinney kissed her, pinched her cheek, pulled her small ear, as he said boisterously:

"Ho! Another job in view?"

She whispered:

"I—I think so."

CHAPTER V

SUSAN PREPARES

I

When Susan left the shop and returned to her own house to make preparations for a visitor, she went unwillingly, postponing the hour that meant separation from the man she loved, making light of his anxiety, but secretly rejoicing in it. Her faithful heart dwelt with apprehension upon a future spent apart from Joe, apart from the excitements of the shop, a future of small things and small people.

She tried to visualize herself as a mother and the vision was blurred. When she said rather timidly, "What will you do without me?" he had assured her with vain repetitions that he had more than enough to occupy his mind. The dolorous conclusion was inevitable. Joe could get along without a partner in the shop. But she could not conceive of life without him.

During this period of intermittent joys and fears, chasing each other daily and nightly through her brain, Susan was humorously conscious that Joe regarded the coming baby as his rather than hers. He would say, chuckling, "Well, Mrs. Q., how is *my* baby this morning? Any news of him?" The sex of the child was taken for granted. Susan had sufficient obstinacy and spirit to resent this cocksure attitude. From the first she maintained that it would be a girl. Mrs. Biddlecombe was much shocked at the intimate nature of conversations carried on before her. The good woman belonged to a generation which never mentioned babies till they lay in bassinettes, fit to be seen and worshipped by all the world. Quinney trampled upon these genteel sensibilities.

"The kid *is* comin'—ain't it?"

"We hope so," replied his mother-in-law austerely.

"We know it, old dear. Why not talk about it? Joe Quinney, junior! There you are!"

"It sounds so—indelicate."

"That be blowed for a tale! Lawsy, there's no saying what my son may not be. Think o' my brains and his dear little mother's looks." Worse followed. He began to call Susan "mother." Mrs. Biddlecombe protested in vain. Laburnum Row laughed openly. Everybody knew! One terrible morning, a disgusting small boy shouted after her, "Hullo, gran'ma!"

Mrs. Biddlecombe, moreover, had no sympathy with Susan's ardent desire to remain near her husband, intimately connected with the things which interested him so tremendously. She lacked the quickness of wit to perceive what Susan instinctively recognized, the increasing and ever-absorbing love that this queer young man manifested for his business. In that business, in the unwearying quest for beautiful objects, the wife foreshadowed a rival, a rival the more to be feared because it was amorphous, senseless, chaotic. She took little pleasure in the beautiful furniture which filled the Dream Cottage, because she could never feel that it was hers. She would have chosen things which he despised as rubbish, but they would have been very dear to her. In a real sense Joe's furniture stood massively between husband and wife. Again and again when she was hungering for soft words and caresses, he would stand in front of the Chippendale china cabinet, and apostrophize it with ardour, calling upon Susan to share his enthusiasm, slightly irritable with her when she failed to perceive the beauty in what she summed up in her own mind as "sticks and stones." She hated to see

him stroke fine specimens of porcelain. She came within an ace of smashing a small but valuable Ming jar because he kissed it. Her condition must be taken into account, but above and beyond any physical cause soared the conviction, that her Joe's business might become the greatest thing in his life, growing, as he predicted it would, to such enormous proportions that there would be no room for her. Once she prayed that his soaring ambitions might be clipped by a merciful Providence. She rose from her knees trembling at her audacity, telling herself that she was disloyal. And then she laughed, half hysterically, supremely sensible that her Joe would travel far upon the road he had chosen, and that it behoved her to quicken her steps, and not to lag behind, for it was certain that he would expect her to keep up.

She had to pass some lonely hours. Mrs. Biddlecombe neglected no duties connected with her own house, and the work at the Dream Cottage was done meticulously by the competent servant whom Mrs. Biddlecombe had installed there, and over whom she exercised a never-flagging vigilance. Quinney issued orders that the mistress was to be spared. She was quite capable of doing many things which the robust Maria would not allow her to do. Even the delight of sewing upon minute garments was circumscribed. Quinney, after secret "colloguing" with Mrs. Biddlecombe, prepared a surprise. An amazing basket arrived from London, embellished with pale blue ribbon, and filled with a layette fit—so the advertisement said—for "a little lord."

Quinney attached a label inscribed with the following legend:

"To Joseph Quinney, Jr., Esq., care of Mother."

Susan's feelings upon the receipt of this superb and complete outfit—I quote again from the advertisement—were of the bitterest—sweetest. She had set her heart upon making her child's clothes, and she sewed exquisitely. She had to pretend that she was overwhelmed with surprise and gratitude, and Joe's delight in her simulated delight partly compensated her for being so grossly deceitful. Wild plans entered her head for compassing the destruction of the layette. During one awful moment she experienced the monstrous thrills of a Nero, for the thought had come to her, "Why not burn the furniture and the basket together?" The cottage and furniture were handsomely insured! A mild perspiration broke upon her forehead, as she murmured to herself:

"What a wicked, wicked girl I am!"

II

She distracted her mind by reading novels, and was mightily interested in the works of Rosa Nouchette Carey. In the middle of the day Joe would rush in,

kiss her tenderly, inquire after Master Quinney, sit down to dinner, and chatter boisterously of his business. His solicitude for her comfort never failed, but its insistence became enervating. She had excellent health, and was happily free from the minor ills which afflict many women in her condition. But this sort of talk became exasperatingly monotonous:

"Feelin' fine, are you?"

"Oh yes, Joe."

"Any one bloomin' thing you fancy?"

"Nothing."

"Not worriting? No stewin' in your own juice, hey?"

"No, no, no!"

"Good. Everything is going to be all right. Lucky little dear, you are, to have a hubby who looks after you properly, and Joe Quinney, junior, will be looked after also. Make no error about that. He's going to be a very remarkable young man! Chose his parents with rare right judgments he did. By Gum, when I read that little 'ad.' about his kit bein' fit for a lord, I says to myself, 'Why not? Why shouldn't my son be a lord one day?'"

"Joe, you are funny!"

"Funny? I'm dead serious, my girl. This stream," he tapped an inflated chest, "rose higher than its source. It began not far from the gutter, Susie. I'm not ashamed of it. Nothing of the snob about Joe Quinney! I'm a bit of a river. I'm marked on the map. I flow all over the shop; yes, I do. And my son may become a sort of Amazon. Do you know how many square miles the Amazon waters?"

"Gracious, no!"

"Useful bit of knowledge. Nigh upon three million square miles!"

"Mercy!"

"I see Joe Quinney, junior, percolatin' everywhere, bang from one end of the Empire to another."

"She's not born yet, poor little dear!"

"She! There you go again."

"I'm sure it will be a 'she.'"

"Not him. You trust my judgment. It's a gift with me. All great men have it. Bonyparte and Wellington and Julius Cæsar."

"You do go it."

"That's right. Do for a motto, that would. Go it! Keep a-moving! The people in this silly old town are standin' still, up to their knees in their graves already, poor souls!"

Then he would kiss her again, and bolt off to the shop, chuckling and rubbing his hands.

Susan would return to her novel, and bury hopes and fears in the mild adventures of a conventional and highly respectable pair of lovers. She had always liked sweets, but at this period she enjoyed a surfeit of them. The sentiment that exuded from every page of her favourite romances affected her tremendously, and may have affected her unborn child.

III

Upon the eve of the child's birth, nearly a year after her marriage, Susan wrote a letter to her husband. She had spent the day pottering about her bedroom, turning over certain clothes, notably her wedding-gown, and recalling vividly the events succeeding her marriage, the journey to France, all the pleasant incidents of the honeymoon. From a small desk which had belonged to her father, a solid rosewood box clamped with brass, she took certain "treasures," a bit of heather picked by Joe when they took a jaunt together to the New Forest, a trinket or two, a lock of Joe's hair, his letters tied up in pink ribbon and her birth certificate, solemnly thrust into her hand by Mrs. Biddlecombe upon the morning ol the wedding. Inside the desk remained a few sheets of the "fancy" notepaper which she had used as a maid. She selected a new nib, placed it in an ivory penholder, and began to write:

"MY DARLING HUSBAND,

"I want to tell you that the last year has been the happiest of my life. I don't believe that I can ever be quite so happy again. You have been sweet to me. When I have tried to tell you this, you have always laughed, and so I want to write it down.

"**Your loving** "SUSIE.

"P.S.—I hope you will marry again."

She placed the letter in an envelope to match, addressed it, and wrote above it, "To be opened after my death." Then she shed a few tears, feeling lonely and frightened, peering into the gulf which yawned in front of her, knowing that the hour was almost at hand, when she must fall down, down, down into unplumbed abysses of terror and pain.

She locked up the letter in the desk, put on a cloak, and crawled into the Cathedral, whose vastness always impressed her. The great nave was strangely familiar, yet unfamiliar. A soft, silvery light diffused itself. Susan noticed that she was alone, whereas she was accustomed to the Sunday crowd. The silence seemed to enfold her. It struck her suddenly that for many hours during each day and night the great church wherein she had worshipped since she was a child, was empty and silent, a mere sepulchre of the mighty dead, who, lying in their splendid tombs, awaited the Day of Resurrection.

Did they ever come forth at night?

What did it feel like to be dead?

Such questions had never seriously presented themselves to her before, because she was normally healthy in mind and body. Death, indeed, had been acclaimed in Laburnum Row as a not unwelcome excitement for the living, an incident that loosened all tongues, which called for criticism, and a good deal of eating and drinking. Now, alone amongst the dead, Susan considered the inevitable change from the point of view, so to speak, of those who were "taken." She was accustomed to these odd middle-class euphuisms. This particular expression, invariably used by Mrs. Biddlecombe, indicated a certain selection upon the part of the Reaper, who "took" presumably those, whether young or old, who were ripe for the sickle.

Susan shivered, praying fervently that she might be spared, that she might be deemed unripe. Her thoughts flitted hither and thither, not straying far from the austere figure with the sickle, settling now upon this hypothesis and now upon that. For example, the commonest form of condolence in Laburnum Row, leaping smugly from every matronly lip, was, "He (or she) has entered into rest." Or, with tearful conviction, "God's will be done." To doubt the truth of these statements would have seemed to Susan rank blasphemy. Even now, face to face with the awful possibility, her simple mind sucked comfort from them; they fortified her trembling body for the great ordeal. But, at the same time, she was conscious of a feeling of revolt, because life was so sweet, and her enchanting pilgrimage had just begun. It would be cruel to take her!

And how would it affect Joe?

He would have his business; he would absorb himself in that. If he did marry again he would choose some sensible woman, able to look after his house and his child. She could not bear the horrid thought that a second wife might be prettier than the first, that her Joe might forget her kisses upon the lips of another woman. She murmured to herself, "Joe can't do without me. I shall not be taken this time."

She went back to the Dream Cottage, unlocked her desk, opened her letter, and added these words to the postscript:

"Marry a nice sensible woman, not quite so pretty as I am, one who will be kind to my baby."

She stared at this for some time, pursing up her lips. Then she carefully erased the possessive pronoun, and wrote "your" instead of "my."

She was smiling when she locked the desk.

IV

Ten days afterwards the child was born. Quinney was summoned at four in the afternoon by the breathless Maria, who gasped out that he was wanted. Somehow Quinney leapt to the conclusion that all was over.

"Is the baby born?" asked Quinney.

"No, nor likely to be till after midnight."

She whisked off, leaving an astonished man vaguely wondering from what source Maria had received this positive information. He closed the shop, and then ran home. The doctor was leaving the cottage. Again Quinney stammered out:

"Is it over?"

"Just begun," the doctor replied. Quinney hated him because he looked so blandly self-possessed and indifferent.

"Mrs. Biddlecombe is with her," continued the doctor, in the same suavely impassive tone. "They will send for me later. Good-afternoon!"

Quinney wanted to reply, "Oh, you go to blazes! I shall send for somebody else; a man, not a machine," but he merely glared at the doctor, and nodded. Pelting upstairs, two steps at a time, he encountered Mrs. Biddlecombe upon the landing, with her forefinger on her lip.

"Not so much noise, *please*!" she commanded, with the air and deportment of an empress. It struck Quinney that she had expanded enormously. Also she was dressed for the part, wearing an imposing dressing-gown, and felt slippers. Quinney had an odd feeling that she was enjoying herself at Susie's expense. Secretly he was furious, because she seemed to block the entrance to *his* room. He tried to push past her.

"Where are you going, Joseph?"

He was quite confounded, but from long habit he replied in his jerky, whimsical way:

"Into my room o' course. Where did you think I was going? Into the coal cellar?"

Mrs. Biddlecombe answered with majesty, not budging:

"We"—Maria was indicated as an accomplice—"have got another room

ready for you."

Quinney said resolutely, "I'm a-going to stay with Susie till it's over."

"No, you ain't!"

"Yes, I am!"

She gripped his arm. Her voice was coolly contemptuous, but she spoke with authority.

"No, you ain't. 'Tisn't seemly."

"That be damned!"

"Joseph Quinney! And an innocent unborn babe might hear you! Now, listen to me, and do just as I tell you. Men ain't wanted on these occasions. You can go in and see Susan for a few minutes, but, remember, out you go when I say the word. Try to be a help and not an hindrance. I sent for you because you may be wanted to run for the doctor."

"Run from 'im more likely," said Quinney. "Cold-blooded beast."

"He's just what a gentleman should be at such times. You take pattern by him! Now, go in, don't shout, say something cheerful, and leave the room when I nod."

Throughout this speech Quinney was conscious that his will was ebbing from him. The mother-in-law triumphed by virtue of superior knowledge and experience. Quinney respected knowledge.

"But if Susie wants me to stay——?"

"She won't."

He entered the room. Somehow he had expected to find his wife in bed, pale, frightened, passive. She was walking up and down. Her cheeks were red, her eyes were bright. And yet there was something about her, some hunted expression in the tender eyes, some nervous tension which moved the man tremendously. His eyes brimmed with tears, his voice broke, as he called her by name. For a moment they clung to each other, and he wondered at her strength. Mrs. Biddlecombe, frowned portentously. There were moments when she told herself that Susan had married a very common person.

"That'll do," she said. "We don't want any flustrations."

Susan murmured:

"Dear, dear Joe!"

She pulled down his head and kissed the tears from his eyes. It was a moment of pure bliss for her. They sat down, holding each other's hands, oblivious of Mrs. Biddlecombe, who still stared at them, trying to remember how the late Mr. Biddlecombe had behaved when Susan was born, and vaguely mindful of his conspicuous absence, and the discovery later that he had assuaged his anxiety with strong waters.

Meanwhile, Susan's tenderness had aroused in her husband the determina-

tion to vanquish his mother-in-law. The power to cope with her surged within.

"You want me to stay, Susie?"

"Oh yes, till the pain comes."

"And after?"

"No, no!"

"But why, why?"

She looked prettier and sweeter than he had ever seen her when she whispered:

"I couldn't bear for you to see my face. It, it," her voice quivered, "it frightens me. Just now I looked in the glass, and I didn't recognize it as mine."

"There!" exclaimed Mrs. Biddlecombe.

"I shall do as Susan wishes," said Quinney humbly.

"You will leave the room when I nod?"

"Please!" said Susan, with her arms about his neck.

Presently Mrs. Biddlecombe nodded.

CHAPTER VI

THE VISITOR ARRIVES

I

Quinney went downstairs, whistling softly to hide a growing perturbation of spirit. He could not disguise from himself that he was terribly worried. Till now he had bolstered anxiety with the reflection that what was happening had happened before to millions and billions (he loved big figures) of women, but he had never realized that each and all of them had suffered cruel pain. When Susan spoke of her changed face, a spasm of agony twisted him. He resented fiercely the conviction that his wife must suffer, and he divined somehow, partly from Mrs. Biddlecombe and partly from Susan, that the pain was greater than he had supposed. He salved his quivering sensibilities with the balm applied by all husbands at such moments; she was young, healthy, and strong. She would pull through. And yet, the damnable thought that sometimes things did happen grew and grew.

He descended into a modest cellar, and brought up a bottle of port, which he decanted carefully. It was the best wine that could be bought in Melchester, and he had secured a couple of dozen with the intention of drinking his son's health

many times. He tasted it to satisfy himself that the wine was in prime condition. He held it to the light and marked its superb colour. Then he sat down to read the paper, as was his habit when the day's work was done. Pinker, the grocer, and other men of substance in Melchester, were too fond of boasting that they read the morning paper in the morning before attending to the paramount claims of their own business. This attitude of mind towards the affairs of the nation perplexed Quinney, who frankly considered his own affairs first. He belonged to that once immense majority of his fellow-countrymen—a majority much decreased of late years—who believe that certain altruists manage more or less successfully the business of the country. He was quite willing to allow these gentlemen, whose services were unpaid, a comparatively free hand upon the unexpressed condition that they did not bother him or interfere with the conduct of his private affairs. At that time the Tories were in power, coming to the end of a long tenure of office. Quinney passively approved of the Tories, and actively disliked Radicals, whom he stigmatized generally as mischief-makers. Under certain circumstances he would have been a red-hot Radical. During his father's lifetime, for instance, when he groaned in secret beneath the heel of oppression, he would have been eager—had the opportunity presented itself—to join any secret society organized for the overthrow of "tyrants."

He read the paper through, criticizing nothing except the wording of certain advertisements. He meant to advertise his own wares some day, although Tomlin believed in more particular methods. In the early 'nineties, small tradesmen had no faith in Advertisements. They built up a small but solid connection, which they came to regard as unalienably theirs.

Presently Quinney lit his pipe, and his thoughts with the smoke strayed upstairs. Mrs. Biddlecombe appeared.

"Smoking?"

Quinney, conscious of implied censure, replied defiantly:

"Generally called that, ain't it?"

"You can smoke outside."

"I can, but I won't. How's Susie?"

The inevitable answer distressed him terribly.

"Susan will be much worse before she's better. You can fetch the nurse, and finish your pipe while you are fetching her."

He fetched the nurse, who lived not far away in a row of small jerry-built houses. She was a tall, thin woman, with a nice complexion, and hair prematurely white. Her invincible optimism much fortified our hero. And she possessed an immense reserve of small talk, and intimate knowledge of simple, elemental details connected with her profession. She captured Quinney's affection by saying, after the first glance at his face:

"Now, don't you worry, Mr. Quinney, because there's nothing to worry about with Dr. Ransome and me in charge of the case. We never have any trouble with our patients. You'll be the proud father of a big fat baby-boy before you know where you are."

She talked on very agreeably, but she managed to convey to her listener that, temporarily, he was an outsider, at the beck and call of women, and regarded by them as negligible. This impression became so strong that he knocked the ashes and half-consumed tobacco out of a second pipe before he entered the Dream Cottage. The nurse was greeted by Mrs. Biddlecombe with majestic courtesy and taken upstairs.

Once more Quinney found himself alone.

Feeling much more hopeful, he beguiled another hour in examining his furniture and china. It is worth mentioning that already he was able to discern flaws in these precious possessions, indicating an eye becoming more trained in its quest after perfection. None of these household gods were regarded as permanent. They would be sold to make room for finer specimens of craftsmanship. Amongst his china, he discovered a bogus bit. Hitherto he had believed it to be a fine specimen. He was half-distressed, half-pleased at the amazing discovery. He had paid five pounds for it. The paste was all right, but the decoration was unquestionably of a later period. Half of its value, actual and prospective, had vanished. Nevertheless, the gain was enormous. Unaided, he had detected the false decoration, the not quite pure quality of the gilding.

"I'm climbin'!" he muttered to himself.

As he replaced the "fake" in the cabinet, consoling himself with the reflection that he could easily resell it at the price he had paid, he smelt fried fish. Extremely annoyed, he rushed into the kitchen, where Maria was caught, red-handed, in the astounding act of frying mackerel at six o'clock.

"What's the meaning o' this?"

Maria answered tartly:

"Meat tea for you and Mrs. Biddlecombe."

She too, ordinarily the respectful menial, dared to glare at him, as if resenting his appearance in his own kitchen as an unpardonable intrusion. Quinney said violently, not sorry to let off steam:

"What the hell d'ye mean? Meat tea? I eat my supper at seven, and you know it!"

Maria tossed her head.

"You'll eat it at six to-night. Mrs. Biddlecombe's orders. I shall give notice if you swear at me."

He fled—vanquished by another woman. At the door he fired a parting shot:

"Smells all over Melchester. I believe that fish is bad."

"I didn't buy it," replied Maria calmly.

II

The meat tea was served, and Mrs. Biddlecombe joined Quinney at table. He made no protests, but refused to touch the mackerel. When interrogated he said that he disliked stale fish.

"Stale fish, Joseph!"

"Did you buy it?"

"I did."

"Did you choose it?"

Mrs. Biddlecombe's ample cheeks turned a deeper damask.

"I did not. I instructed the fishmonger to send round some fresh fish."

"Thought so!" said Quinney, as he attacked the cold beef.

Unhappily, Mrs. Biddlecombe was beguiled into eating heartily of the mackerel, desiring to assert her faith in its freshness and her confidence in the fishmonger. Conversation languished. Presently, Quinney jumped to his feet and raced upstairs. He tapped at his wife's door. The nurse opened it, and as she did so the husband heard a faint moan.

"You can't come in now," said the nurse.

"I'm not coming in. You tell my wife, with my love, not to eat any mackerel, and don't you touch it yourself, if you want to be fit and well to-night."

He returned to the dining-room feeling, for the first time, that he had been of practical service to omnipotent woman! But the faint moan had destroyed his appetite. He told Mrs. Biddlecombe that he intended to walk up and down the garden.

"You'll be within call?"

"Of course. Any notion when the doctor will be wanted?"

"He may be wanted at any minute."

"You may want him before Susan does!"

He shut the door before the astonished lady could reply.

III

Alone in the garden so dear to Susan, so carefully tended by her, his torment began. The evening was warm, and the windows of Susan's room were thrown wide open. All sounds floated out into the gathering twilight. Quinney sat down

on a bench, and listened, palsied with misery.

The time passed. He would walk about, and then sit down again, lighting his pipe and letting it go out half a dozen times before it was smoked. Once he ventured into the kitchen, where the sight of his face softened Maria. She was a spinster, but at least twenty-five years old. So Quinney blurted out:

"Is it always like this?"

"First time—yes," replied Maria.

Finally, Mrs. Biddlecombe descended, and bade him fetch the doctor. She was not an observant woman, but even she, with her prejudices against all males, could not fail to mark the ravages of suffering.

"My God!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "I didn't know it was like this. I've heard her!"

"I do not regret that!" replied Mrs. Biddlecombe, not unkindly, but with emphasis. "If I had my way all men and all big boys, too, should know what their mothers have suffered. They might be kinder to them."

Dr. Ransome was fetched. He lived near the Close, in a comfortable red-brick house. It seemed to Quinney perfectly extraordinary that this man of vast experience in suffering should be so leisurely in his movements and speech. However, he managed to instil some of his confidence into the unhappy husband, assuring him that the case presented no untoward symptoms, and was likely to end happily in a few hours.

A few hours!

As they passed the wicket gate Dr. Ransome paused.

"Mr. Quinney," he said gravely, "I advise you to go for a brisk walk. You can do nothing more."

"But if my wife should want me?"

"She is not likely to want you. It might make it easier for her, if she knew you were out of the way."

"I'll sit in the dining-room," said Quinney.

He did so, casting longing eyes at the decanter of port, sorely tempted to drink and drink till he became drunk. He was learning much upon this terrible night. Ever afterwards, when he encountered drunkards, he forebore to condemn them, wondering what had first driven them to seek oblivion, and thankful that the temptation to do so had never mastered him.

Presently the nurse joined him, and he was struck by the change in her pleasant, capable face. Upon being pressed, she admitted cautiously that there were slight complications.

Worse followed!

At midnight, Quinney was dispatched for another doctor. And then what he had predicted, half in jest, came to pass. Mrs. Biddlecombe was seized with

violent pains. Quinney had been right about the mackerel; and the nurse was called upon to give undivided attention to the elder woman. Quinney took refuge in the kitchen, where Maria was busy preparing hot poultices and predicting two deaths in the house, if not three, before morning. Never in his short life, not even in the throes of nightmare, had Quinney imagined any concatenation of misery which could compare with the realities of this night.

At three in the morning, once more alone in the dining-room, he went down on his knees. In a wild, unreasoning fashion, dazed by what he had experienced, he proposed to bargain with Omnipotence. Solemnly, he swore that he would sell no more new oak as old, if his precious Susan was spared. He renounced fervently all claim to Joseph Quinney, junior. If choice had to be made, let the child be taken and the mother left!

He rose from his knees somewhat comforted, so true is it that sincere prayer, if it accomplishes nothing else, is of real benefit to those who pray. He remembered the faked specimen of Early Worcester, and his resolution to sell it at the first opportunity. He rushed into the sitting-room, seized the cup and saucer, and smashed them. The violence of the action seemed to bind the bargain between himself and the Ruler of the Universe. Standing erect this time, he swore that faked china as well as faked oak was to be eternally repudiated. Let him perish, instead of Susan, if he failed to keep his word!

By an odd coincidence, he had hardly registered these vows when he realized that there was silence upstairs. Within a few minutes Maria poked her head into the room to report a marked improvement in Mrs. Biddlecombe.

"And your mistress?"

Maria shook her head.

"I know nothing about her, sir."

"Everything seems strangely quiet."

"Yes, sir; terribly so."

She dabbed at her eyes, inflamed already by much weeping, and withdrew. Quinney went to the foot of the stairs, listening. The suspense became excruciating, harder to endure than the anguished moaning of his wife. He never knew afterwards how long he remained there, but presently the door opened and the measured tread of both doctors was heard on the landing. They came slowly downstairs till they perceived Quinney. Dr. Ransome spoke, and his voice seemed to come from an immense distance:

"It's all over! Your child is born."

"Thank God!" exclaimed Quinney. He added tremulously: "And my poor wife?"

"She is very much exhausted. Presently you can go to her for a minute. It has been a complicated case, but we anticipate no further complications."

Quinney burst into tears.

Both doctors consoled him, taking him by the arm, patting his shoulder, telling him that he was the father of a robust infant, that there was no cause whatever for unreasonable anxiety. Not till they were on the point of leaving the cottage did the distracted father remember the decanter of port.

"Come in here, gentlemen, please."

They followed him into the dining-room, and three glasses were duly charged.

"My son!" said Quinney, holding up his glass.

Dr. Ransome stared at him, then he smiled.

"Don't you know? Didn't we tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"You are the father, my dear sir, of a ten-pound daughter!"

CHAPTER VII

JOSEPHINA

I

He stole up to his wife's room as soon as the doctors had gone. The pale silvery light of early dawn seemed to steal up with him, making the silence more impressive and mysterious. Upon a table on the landing the lamp burned low. He had been told to expect the weak wail of the newly-born. The nurse, indeed, as they walked together from her cottage, had spoken of it as the most wonderful sound in all the world when heard by a father for the first time. But he had not heard it.

He turned out the lamp, and noticed that his hand was trembling. Exercising his will, which he knew to be strong, he endeavoured to stop this strange twitching. He could not do so. Suddenly, he became conscious of an immense weariness; hie limbs ached; his head was throbbing; he felt like an overtired child. It even occurred to him that it would be not altogether unpleasant to cry himself to sleep. An odd fear of seeing Susan gripped him. What did she look like after the rigours of this awful night? Was she lying insensible? Would she know him? Would he break down before her, when he beheld the cruel ravages of intense pain? For her sake he must pull himself together.

Thereupon a struggle for the mastery took place between spirit and flesh.

He was not able to analyse his emotions, but he divined somehow that this was his labour, that something was being born out of him, wrenched from his very vitals, a new self with a brighter intelligence, a more vigorous sympathy. The pains of the spirit were upon him. Presently an idea emerged; the conception which must take place in every human soul, the quickening of a transcendent conviction that pain is inevitable and inseparable from growth. It would be absurd to contend that his writhing thoughts could twist themselves into the form to which expression has been given here. He was very young, and, apart from a special knowledge of his business, extremely ignorant; but it was revealed to him at this moment, a babe and suckling in such matters, that something had happened to him, that he could never be the same again. Fatherhood, and, all it implied, had been paid for with tears and agony.

The door of Susan's room opened.

He saw the nurse, who beckoned. Her face had become normal; she smiled gravely, as he passed her, and she closed the door softly, leaving husband and wife together.

His first impression was that the room smelled very sweet, filled with the fragrance of the flowers in the garden. The windows remained wide open. The light was stronger than on the landing, but soft, for the sun had not yet risen. Everything was in order. The habit of swift observation enabled him to grasp all this in a flash, although, so far as he knew, his eyes were fixed upon the bed. Susan lay upon her side of it. Her face was milk-white, with purple lines beneath eyes which seemed unduly sunken. Her pretty hair, done in two plaits, framed her face. To Quinney she looked exactly like a child who had been frightfully ill. It was impossible to think of her as a mother. Nor did he do so. He had forgotten the baby altogether, his mind was concentrated upon the Susan whom he loved, upon the Susan who appeared to have returned from a long journey into an unknown land, a new and strange Susan, for her lips never smiled at him, but in her tender eyes he recognized his wife, his own little woman, his most priceless possession, the soul of her shone steadily out of those eyes acclaiming his soul as he acclaimed hers.

When he kissed her, she sighed. He slipped his hand beneath the bedclothes, and took her hand, murmuring her name again and again. She did not speak, and he did not wish her to speak. Her silence implied far more than speech.

He felt the faint pressure of her hand, so small and weak within his grasp. Then he laid his head upon her bosom. He could just hear her heart, beating slowly and feebly. He lifted his head, putting his cheek against hers. She sighed again—deliciously! He tried to believe that his strength, which seemed to have returned on a spring-tide of irresistible volume, could be infused into her. And it may have been so, for presently she spoke, the words fluttering from her pale

lips.

"You are not very disappointed?"

Disappointed!

He reassured her upon that point, so overmasteringly that she smiled, and the pressure of her hand became stronger.

The nurse appeared, beckoning once more. Quinney followed her obediently into the adjoining room, where an object that looked like a wrinkled orange was affirmed to be his daughter's head! Obviously the nurse expected him to kiss this; and he did so without any uplifting exultation, without a single compensating thrill! It occurred to him vaguely that Susan and he had paid a thumping price for very little. He was shown a hand like the hand of an anæmic doll. Into the tiny palm he slipped, cautiously, his forefinger. To his amazement, the finger was gripped unmistakably.

"Well, I'm damned!" he exclaimed. As the nurse raised her eyebrows in silent protest, he added quickly: "I've been swearing all night; one more little one don't count!"

The nurse glanced professionally at his haggard face and dishevelled hair.

"You go to bed at once!" she commanded.

He did so.

II

Susan's recovery from her confinement was slow but unattended, as the doctor had predicted, by complications. She was able, happily, to nurse her child, but for many months she remained in cotton wool at the Dream Cottage, recruiting her energies in the pleasant garden, and rarely straying beyond it. The question of her returning to the shop was settled drastically.

"Who'll take care of the kid? Wouldn't leave her to a nursemaid, would you?

"N-n-no," faltered Susan, feeling more wife than mother. She qualified the doubtful negative by murmuring: "I did love helping you."

"Lord bless you! You're helping me at home—a woman's right place. It's the biggest help a woman can give to a man. You run things fine! Yes, you do!"—for she had shaken her head. "And the kid has the very best nurse in all the world! Shop, indeed! I don't want my wife demeaning herself in a shop!"

He snorted with indignation, and Susan, with a suppressed sigh, let the subject drop for ever.

Meanwhile he had told her of his solemn oath, which made a profound impression upon a sensitive mind and conscience. The immediate consequence,

however, of a determination to renounce false gods was absolutely unforeseen. Two days after the birth of the baby, when the shattered little mother was still lying between life and death, Quinney distracted his mind by putting on one side every doubtful piece of *vertu* in his possession, repricing faithfully, even at a loss to himself, each particular fake. He was engrossed in this very uncongenial task—for the old Adam was merely dazed and not dead within him—when the Marquess of Mel entered the shop. He had heard from Dr. Ransome a racy and humorous account of Quinney under stress, and had been much moved thereby. As a grand seigneur of the old school he deemed it a duty to call upon so remarkable a tenant, and if necessary, hearten him up by the purchase of a bit of furniture or china. Heretofore, the Quinneys, father and son, had dealt with the magnate's agent. Lord Mel, so far as he knew, had never exchanged a single word with the son of a man whom he accounted an old rascal.

Quinney received him without betraying any awe of his rank, listening respectfully to his landlord's felicitations. He loved a lord, as all true Britons do and must, but he had not yet recovered from a tremendous shock, and his thoughts were entirely centred upon Susan. When Lord Mel paused, Quinney replied:

"She's not out of the wood yet, my lord."

"I know how you feel—I have been through it. And now show me over your premises. The Bishop tells me that you have some fine porcelain."

"I've a lot of poor stuff, too!" grumbled Quinney.

Lord Mel smiled. He enjoyed what he called "browsing" in curiosity shops, but he had never heard so candid an admission before. He was still more surprised at what followed. His own taste strayed pleasantly in the eighteenth century, and he was not aware, of course, that this was Quinney's beloved period. Nor did he know that the saloon at Mel Court was nearly as familiar to Quinney as to himself. At first his attention was challenged by the faked oak. The panels were really beautiful, and inasmuch as they had deceived Quinney himself, it is not very remarkable that they imposed themselves upon an amateur.

"Have you much of this oak?" he asked.

"Any amount of it!"

"Enough to panel a room?"

"Yes, I think so."

"What will you take for the lot? It happens that I can use it at Mel Court. I am building a new billiard room, and my lady is rather tired of mahogany."

Quinney's keen eyes sparkled. Lord Mel was too big a swell to bargain, and he was obviously not a "think-it-over fellow." He would pay, cheerfully, a big price for these panels and, as likely as not, ask no questions about them. Then he thought of Susan, white and helpless in the big bed. With a tremendous effort,

and speaking abruptly, as man to man, he said:

"It's all faked stuff."

"What! Impossible!"

"I can sell the lot, my lord, at a price that will surprise you." He named the price, which included a modest profit to himself, wondering what Tomlin would say when he heard the story. Tomlin, of course, owned an undivided half-interest in the panels. Lord Mel was astounded. He bought the panels, and stared at Quinney's whimsical face.

"The price does surprise me," he admitted.

"Perfectly wonderful!" said Quinney. "The real stuff—if you could have found such a quantity—would have run into a couple of thousand."

"But, pardon me, aren't you doing business upon rather a novel plan?"

"That's as may be, my lord. I propose to keep the very best fakes and to label 'em as such. I have the genuine stuff, too. Take Oriental china. Look at those jars!"

He was fairly started, aglow with excitement and enthusiasm, oblivious of himself and his visitor, pouring out a flow of intimate information, unconsciously displaying himself rather than his wares, forcing his queer personality upon a man of the world, a connoisseur of men as well as porcelain. Inevitably, his genius—long afterwards recognized as such—for beauty challenged the attention of his listener—himself a lover of beauty. They met as equals upon the common ground of similar tastes. Quinney let himself go. In his perfervid excitement he gestured as he did before Susan; the floor was strewn with aitches; grammar halted feebly behind his impassioned sentences. There were things, lots o' things, that were just right—perfection; and one of 'em—one bloomin' bit o' real stuff, one tiny cup, potted by a master, painted by an artist, gilded by an honest man who used the purest gold, twenty-two carat, by Gum!—was worth all the beastly rubbish in the world. He ended upon the familiar note.

"I hate rubbish! Rubbish is wicked, rubbish is cruel, rubbish poisons the world. I was brought up amongst it, and that's why I loathe it and fear it."

When he finished Lord Mel held out his hand.

"Mr. Quinney," he said simply, "I am happy to make your acquaintance; you are building even better than you know."

It is quite impossible to exaggerate the results that flowed directly and indirectly from this memorable interview. In the first place, Quinney secured a patron and friend who was all-powerful in a large county. Lord Mel kept open house; he entertained the greatest men in the kingdom. He sent his guests to the man whom he affirmed positively to be the only honest dealer that he knew; he brought experts to whom Quinney listened feverishly, sucking their special knowledge from them, as a greedy child sucks an orange. He allowed our hero

access to his own collections, permitted him to make an inventory of them, and later discarded upon his advice certain questionable specimens. In a word, this oddly-assorted couple became friends, comrades, in their indefatigable quest for beautiful objects. It was Lord Mel who dispatched Quinney to Ireland—one of his richest hunting grounds. In Ireland Quinney fell passionately in love with old cut-glass, at a time when the commercial demand for it was almost negligible. In fine, Lord Mel discovered Quinney and trained him to discover himself.

III

Picture to yourself Tomlin's amazement and disgust when he paid his next visit to the ancient town some three weeks after the sale of the panels. And it must be admitted that he had reason for complaint, and that his first comment upon Quinney's astounding proceedings was justified.

"You don't seem to have thought of me!"

"I didn't," said Quinney, with admirable simplicity.

"I told you about that fellow in Brittany; I sent you to him; I provided half the cash, and I was counting upon big profits. You've let me down badly."

"Looks like it, to be sure!"

"Damned outrage, I call it!"

"So it is; but I was desperate. Susan was dying. I never thought of you at all. Now, look here! Don't overheat yourself! You was counting upon a fifty per cent. profit."

"Perhaps more."

"You do like to get your fore-feet into the trough. Any Jew blood in your family? Keep cool! At first we got our big profit, and how much stuff did we sell? Very little. Now I've orders coming in faster than I can fill 'em, and your profit, small and quick, will knock endways the big and slow. See?"

Eventually he made Tomlin see, and the London dealer had to admit that Lord Mel, played by Quinney as a trump card, introduced a new element into the game. The orders were coming in.

"It's silly to be dishonest," said Quinney, "because sooner or later a feller is found out."

"Honest fakes," murmured Tomlin. The contradiction in terms upset him.

"That's it. And my fakes are goin' to be advertised as the best in the world—really fine stuff, at a price which'll defy competition."

"You're an extraordinary man, Joe. There is something in it. Honest fakes!"

"Rub this in as vaseline, old man. If we can sell honest fakes cheap, we can sell the real Simon pure stuff at the top notch. Rich people don't haggle over a

few extra pounds if they know that they're not being imposed upon. I'm going to offer to take back any bit I sell as genuine which may be pronounced doubtful by the experts."

Tomlin shook his head mournfully, having no exalted faith in experts. Also, he, was beginning to realize that Quinneys' as a sort of dumping-ground for his surplus and inferior wares was now under a high protective tariff. He growled out:

"If you think you know your own business——"

"Cocksure of it, old man!"

"I can only hope that Pride won't have a fall."

"You come with me and drink my daughter's health. Never saw such a kid in all my life—and not a month old!"

Tomlin grinned, perceiving an opportunity of "landing" heavily.

"Daughter? Rather muddled things, haven't you? Thought you'd arranged with your missis that it was to be a boy?"

"Did you? Well, being a better husband than you are, I let her 'ave her own way in that."

IV

The daughter was duly christened Josephina Biddlecombe, and, for the purposes of this narrative, we may skip a number of pet names, beginning with Baby and ending with Josie-posie. Ultimately she was called Posy and nothing else—a rechristening that took place in the distinguished presence of the Bishop of Melchester. The child was nearly three years old when that courtly prelate happened to drift into the shop. Susan and the child had entered a few minutes before.

"And what is your name, my dear?" he asked.

"Josie-posie," she replied demurely. Even at that early age Quinney's daughter was absolutely devoid of fear or shyness. She added confidingly: "And I wear a macheese."

"What does she wear?" asked the Bishop of Susan.

Susan blushed.

"She means a—chemise, my lord."

The Bishop laughed heartily, inferring that hitherto she had worn some other garment. Then he said in his pleasant voice: "Josie-posie is too big a name for so tiny a maid. I like the second half of it better than the first."

"So do I," said Susan.

"Yes, yes; Posy is a sweet, old-fashioned name, and it describes the child

admirably."

When he had taken leave of them, Quinney said with conviction:

"He's right. Posy she is, the little dear! And his lordship didn't fail to notice, I'll be bound, that she smells as sweet as she looks."

After this incident the child was always called Posy.

It is not easy to describe the sprite, because she presented a baffling combination of father and mother. Her native grace, her pretty colouring and delicate features, were a sweet inheritance from Susan; her quickness of wit, her powers of observation, her unmistakable sense of beauty—for she shrank tremblingly from what was mean or ugly—came from Quinney. Essentially she was a child of love, adored by both her parents, and, up to a certain point, spoiled by them. Mrs. Biddlecombe was fondly of the opinion that the child had taken from her parents what was best in each, buttressing the assertion by calling attention to the dash of red in the golden locks, and the peculiar alertness of the mite's glance flashing hither and thither, searching for the things which delighted her, and acclaiming them when found with joyous chirruping and gestures.

"Reg'lar butterfly!" said Quinney. "Dotty about flowers! Picks out the best, by Gum!"

The first three years passed without incident. The business prospered. Quinney engaged a capable assistant, and began his travels. His restlessness affected Susan, but she accepted it resignedly. He was different from other men and not to be judged by ordinary standards. Argument was wasted upon him. She expostulated vainly when he began to change the furniture. The knowledge that each bit was more valuable and beautiful than its predecessor did not appeal to her at all. She beguiled him into talking about his business, feigning interest in its growth, but became increasingly conscious that the details bored her. The Dream Cottage, as she had pictured it, faded from memory. It had become a sort of small pantechnicon, a storehouse of precious objects which came and went, an annexe to the shop, to be kept swept and garnished for the entertainment and instruction of collectors.

The garden, however, was her peculiar domain, diffusing its own satisfactions and graces. The kitchen and nursery were hers also. She was an excellent housewife, and made Posy's frocks, and some of her own, despite the protests of Quinney, who babbled foolishly of satins and brocades.

Undaunted by her awful experience, she hoped for another child. Upon this point Mrs. Biddlecombe had something to say.

"I was an only child, you was an only child, your grandfather was an only child. It's in the family. After what you went through——"

"Joe would like a son, mother."

"Has he hinted that to you?"

"No."

"You take it from me that he doesn't."

To Susan's astonishment, Joe confirmed what had seemed a ridiculous assumption. After Josephina was weaned, Susan whispered to him one night:

"I do miss my baby."

"Enjoyed bein' woke up—hey?"

"Yes."

"Like another, perhaps?" She detected the scorn in his voice.

"If—if you wanted it, Joe. A little son this time."

He caught hold of her, speaking vehemently, crushing her to him, as if to remind her how nearly she had slipped from his keeping.

"Now look here, Susie, I ain't going to have another."

She laughed faintly, as she replied:

"It isn't you who will have it. Mother says she wishes that the men could take turn and turn about."

"Ho! Said that, did she? You tell her from me that I suffered quite enough with my first. Enough to last me all my life, and yours, too!"

Susan shook with laughter.

"Oh, Joe, you are a darling!"

"Silly name to call me! Red-headed and freckled! But no more nonsense about little sons. When my daughter marries, her husband can take my name. See?"

"I see," said Susan; "but I'm afraid baby's husband may not."

At the end of three years, a small cloud arose in their clear sky. Mrs. Biddlecombe announced solemnly that she was seriously ill, and about to meet her Maker.

CHAPTER VIII

LIGHT OUT OF THE DARKNESS

I

When Mrs. Biddlecombe made this solemn declaration it never occurred to either Quinney or Susan to dispute the infallibility of such a statement. The worthy lady belonged to a type rapidly becoming extinct in this country, a type which has provoked the astonishment and humorous criticism of foreigners. She had

never questioned what she devoutly held to be certain divinely-revealed truths. Persons who presumed to differ from her, or perhaps it would be fairer to say, from the indiscriminate mass of public opinion which she represented, were accounted beyond the pale of Christian charity and toleration, *tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner* being an arrow which glances harmlessly against prejudice and predilection. There was no joint in her armour of righteousness through which it could penetrate. The type is still so common that comment upon it would be tedious. Amongst other cherished beliefs was a conviction that illness came direct from God. Had Susan, as a child, been struck down with typhoid fever, Mrs. Biddlecombe would have accepted the blow with resignation and tended the sufferer, under the direction of a medical attendant, with exemplary tenderness and fortitude. She would not have overhauled the system of drainage. Accordingly, when the Hand of Providence—as she put it—was laid heavily upon her massive body, she accepted the infirmity with pious resignation, and informed Laburnum Row that it was the beginning of the end. Dr. Ransome diagnosed the case, accurately enough, as cardiac weakness arising from chronic dyspepsia. His patient was of a full habit, and took no exercise beyond the common round of duties connected with her small house. A competent servant "did" for her, perhaps in more senses than one. Ransome, of course, reassured her again and again in regard to her symptoms. They were such as could not be ignored at her age—fifty-five—but with care and a less generous diet she might reasonably hope to live happily for many years. Mrs. Biddlecombe refused to believe this. She made her will, leaving everything she possessed to Susan, selected her last resting-place in the Melchester cemetery, not too near the grave of her second husband, the contractor and builder, and announced calmly that she was "ready." Quinney, of course, had a private word with Dr. Ransome, but that cautious diplomat had to admit that his patient might go suddenly. Quinney told Susan what had passed between them, using his own vernacular.

"Old Pomposity is hedgin'—see? Just like him! Comes to this, Susie. You was at death's door, seemin'ly, but, by Gum! you pulled through because you wouldn't leave me!"

Susan nodded, pressing his arm.

"Works t'other way round with your mother. She's made up her mind to die, and the doctor can't argue her out of the notion. Her heart is weak, and if it begins flutterin' it may stop for ever just because the pore old dear won't will it to go on wigglin'. There y'are!"

Susan was much upset. She loved her mother, although the two women had little in common, and the feminine instinct of ministration, root-pruned by her husband, began to sprout vigorously. She paid long daily visits to Laburnum Row, and Quinney soon noticed a falling off in the quality of his food. Twice

they were summoned in the middle of the night to say good-bye to a woman who believed herself to be dying.

"A bit thick!" said Quinney.

"Joe!"

"But, isn't it? Let's face the facts. You spend a lot o' time away from home, away from Posy. Losin' your nice fresh colour, you are! And I'm losin' my appetite for the good meals I used to have."

"But mother wants me. And any moment——"

"So she thinks. Quite likely to make old bones yet. Now, look here, I've a plan—the only plan. I simply won't have you trapesin' round to Laburnum Row at all hours of the day and night. Tell your mother to pack up and come to us."

Alas! poor Susan!

She was hoist with her own petard. Protest died on her lips. She submitted, not daring to confess that a dying mother could be regarded by a dutiful daughter as an unwelcome visitor.

Mrs. Biddlecombe, however, refused, at first, to budge. "Let me die here, Joseph." Quinney used the clinching argument.

"You are not going to die, Mrs. B., but, if you did, just think of the sad job we'd have gettin' you down them narrow stairs. And we never could receive all your friends in such a small parlour."

"That's true," sighed Mrs. Biddlecombe. "There's a lot in what you say, Joseph."

"There is, old dear! I'm uneducated, and I know it, but my talk is full o' meat and gravy. It's nourishing!"

Accordingly, Mrs. Biddlecombe came to the Dream Cottage, and was installed comfortably in the guest chamber. As time passed, the good lady grew to like her room so well that she refused to leave it. She became, in short, bedridden, and increasingly dependent upon Susan, who never failed her. Quinney began to spend his evenings away from home. He joined a club which met bi-weekly in a snug room at the Mitre. Susan encouraged him to join his friends, because she was terrified lest he should be bored at home. Also, his wanderings in search of furniture and china became more extended, and when he returned triumphant, exulting in wonderful bargains, she found it increasingly difficult to share his enthusiasm, and to rejoice with him over a prosperity which seemed to be driving them farther apart.

She told herself, on her knees, that she was a wicked, ungrateful woman. Indeed, she was amazed at her own emotions, unable to analyse them, conscious only that she was torn in two by circumstance and consequence. Her Joe loved her faithfully; he grudged her nothing; he worked hard for her and his child; he had none of the vices common to the husbands of many women she knew; he

was almost always in high health and spirits. And Posy? What a darling! No cause for anxiety there. A sweet sprite, budding rapidly into a pretty, intelligent girl. And she herself? Healthy, the mistress of a charming little house filled with beautiful things, but not happy.

Why—why—why?

Civil war raged beneath her placid bosom. War to the knife between conjugal and maternal instincts. Her duty to child and mother stood between what she desired more passionately than anything else—a renewal of intimate intercourse with a husband who was drifting out of her life, leaving her stranded upon barren rocks. She found herself wondering whether his feeling for her was waxing lukewarm. She would cheerfully have undergone the cruellest pangs to experience once more the ineffable bliss of kissing tears from his eyes, of hearing his voice break when he whispered her name, of knowing that he suffered abominably because she suffered.

She began to pray for something to break the deadly monotony of her life.

And her prayers were answered.

II

Quinney was returning one night from the club soberly conscious that he had slightly exceeded his usual allowance of port wine. He was in that mellow frame of mind, far removed from intoxication, which dwells complacently upon the present without any qualms as to the future. For instance, despite the extra glass or two, he knew that he would awaken the next morning with a clear brain and a body fit to cope with any imposed task. In fine, he was sober enough to congratulate himself upon the self-control which had refused further indulgence, and at the same time righteously glad that he had not drunk less. The colour of the good wine encarmined his thoughts, the bottled sunshine irradiated his soul.

He passed slowly through the Cathedral Close, pausing to admire the spire soaring into a starlit sky, black against violet. He had left the Mitre at half-past eleven, but few lights twinkled from the windows of the houses encircling the Close. The good canons retired early and rose rather late, thereby, perhaps, securing health without being encumbered with the burden of wisdom. With rare exception all Melchester slumbered.

Quinney, out of native obstinacy, felt astoundingly awake. He began to compute the hours wasted in sleep. He had quaint theories on this subject, which he aired at the club. It has been said that party politics left him cold, although he grew warm and excited over his own ideas. The Tories assured him that England was going behind, but their reasons, taken from pamphlets and newspapers, were

unconvincing, if you happened to read—as Quinney did—the Radical counter-blasts. Ever since his memorable trip to France Quinney posed as the travelled man. The French, he contended, were prosperous because they saved money and time. They rose earlier, worked harder for more hours out of the twenty-four. Also, he had been much impressed by the French Sunday as a day of recreation as well as rest. The French did not need a half-holiday on Saturday, because they made a whole holiday of Sunday. Susan was appalled at this view, but Quinney used the argument with telling effect at the club. Pinker, the Radical grocer, was immensely taken with it. If cricket and football could be played on Sunday the British workman would earn another half-day's pay. Multiply that by millions, and there you are!

He strolled on to the Mel, and paused again, staring at that placid stream rolling so leisurely to the sea. He was rolling as leisurely to—what? The question caught at him, insistently demanding an answer. He realized, almost with a shock, that nearly seven years had passed since he married Susan. During that seven years he had doubled his capital. He was worth twenty thousand pounds at least, probably more, and his best years were yet to come. Mrs. Biddlecombe, it is true, was not so sanguine. According to her, prosperity in the present indicated adversity in the near future.

"Joseph's luck will turn," she would say to Susan in her husband's presence. Finally, Quinney retorted with some heat:

"Now, Granny, don't you go on barkin' your old knuckles over that. I ain't superstitious, but long ago I had 'arf-a-crown's worth o' fortune-tellin' from the Queen o' the Gipsies herself. I'm to live to be seventy-six, and to bend the knee to my Sovereign."

"What did the foolish woman mean by that?"

"A queen, I tell you. She meant knighthood. Sir Joseph and Lady Quinney! What ho!"

"Sir Humpty and Lady Dumpty more like!"

Perhaps the tart answer had spurred him to greater endeavour. He was extremely sensitive under a skin toughened by paternal thwackings, and well aware that his mother-in-law was inclined to sniff whenever his name was mentioned. The poor old dear was a bit jealous! She had fallen in the social scale; he was rising, soaring into the blue, like the great spire of Melchester Cathedral.

During the past seven years he had hugged close his intention of leaving Melchester for the wider sphere of London. The fact that Tomlin, Susan, and Mrs. Biddlecombe were obstinately opposed to such a leap into the unknown merely fortified his resolution. Tomlin, of course, nosed a rival, for some of his customers knew Quinney. Susan hinted that Posy would lose her bloom in London streets. Mrs. Biddlecombe pointed out, with businesslike acumen, that he and his father

had built up a big and increasing country connection which would be greedily snapped up by some Melchester dealer. And, lastly, the mighty Marquess of Mel had uttered a word of warning:

"It would mean a big fight. You are not in the ring, my dear fellow."

Whenever his kind patron addressed him as a dear fellow Quinney's blood warmed within him. And his keen eyes sparkled at the prospect of a fight. He liked fights. As a boy he had fought to a finish other boys bigger than himself; and the victory had not invariably been with them. He remembered his victories, as he answered Lord Mel:

"I should get into the ring, my lord."

"Um! Would you! And"—his landlord laughed pleasantly—"I should lose a good tenant."

"London's the best market for knowledge," said Quinney.

"Quite, quite! Can you attempt to compete with the experts?"

The question rankled, biting deep into his soul, inciting him to further study of the things he loved. But such study grew more and more difficult. He had become the expert of Melchester. On and about his own "pitch" it was impossible to find a man with more technical knowledge than his own. In London, he would be rubbing shoulders with world-famous collectors and connoisseurs. They would "down" him at first, rub his nose in the dust of the big auction rooms; but in the end he would learn what they had learned, and triumph where they had triumphed.

III

These thoughts were trickling through his mind as he gazed at the placid Mel trickling also to troublous seas, where its clear waters would be merged and lost. Quinney squirmed at the remote possibility of being merged and lost. He muttered uneasily: "It fair furs my tongue to think o' that." The extra glass of wine had not excited him to the consideration of perilous enterprises. An extra pint might have done so. No; the old port which had ripened in the Melchester cellars exercised a benignant and restful influence. Its spirit, released at last, seemed to hover about the ancient town, loath to leave it. We may hazard the conjecture that the wine in the cellars of our universities may be potent to lull the ambitions of restless scholars, and to keep them willing prisoners in drowsy quadrangles.

Quinney lighted his pipe. He felt ripe for an important decision. For some months the necessity of enlarging his present premises had bulked large in his thoughts. A successful country dealer must carry an immense amount of stock, because he dare not specialize. His hatred for rubbish had become an obses-

sion. More, his love of the finest specimens of furniture and porcelain interfered with the sale of them. He placed a price on these which eventually he got, but often he was constrained to wait so long for the right customer that his profit was seriously diminished. He sold quickly immense lines of moderately-priced "stuff"—chairs, tables, chests of drawers, bureaux, bookcases, bedsteads, and mantel-pieces. The "gems," as he called them, were taken to the Dream Cottage, and only shown to the worthy few.

To enlarge his premises was no ha'penny affair. Lord Mel, it is true, had offered to do so, but only on the condition that his tenant should sign a long lease; and a long lease meant remaining in Melchester. Ten, twenty years hence, he would be too old to begin again in London.

He smoked his pipe much too quickly.

To be candid, he was struggling desperately with the twin brethren, who, whether good or bad, accompany each of us from the cradle to the grave. He was at grips with heredity and environment. Afterwards he admitted to himself and to Susan that two would have prevailed over one. He made up his mind to write to Lord Mel's agent on the morrow, and he consoled himself with the sound reflection that he was grasping substance, not shadow. London might ruin him—he knew that, being no fool—and yet he was in the mood to shed tears upon the grave of ambition. Never, never, would he bend the knee before his Sovereign if he remained in Melchester!

He sighed profoundly as he slipped his pipe into his pocket. By this time he was lucidly himself. The decision to enlarge his premises, and all that meant, would not be weakened, but strengthened, by a night's sleep. Sleep! He smiled derisively. Sleep! Everybody in Melchester was asleep. He beheld himself and Susan growing fat in this sleepy town. Susan was already plumper. She would develop into just such a fleshly tabernacle as her mother.

He exclaimed loudly and virulently:

"Damn!"

This was his acknowledgment of defeat. His "Vae victis." He writhed impotently in the toils of circumstance, although the struggle was over. The night seemed to have turned darker, the stars paled in the violet sky, as he walked slowly towards the Dream Cottage, wherein his wonderful dream would never come true. One would like to record that thoughts of his pretty, loving wife, and thoughts of his Posy—admittedly the gem of gems—stirred within him, pouring spikenard upon his lacerated sensibilities. It was not so. They stood for poppy, and mandragora, or, as he might have put it, old port and brown sherry in cut-glass decanters. And every fibre of his small, sturdy body clamoured for a fight in the London ring, a fight to a finish with the experts of his trade.

At that dark moment he beheld light.

IV

The light came from Dream Cottage—a faint luminous glow, so strange, so mysterious, that he stood still, straining his eyes to determine the meaning of it till that meaning flared full upon him.

One of the chimneys was ablaze!

Instantly his dormant energies awoke to liveliest activity. He raced back to a corner of the Close, where he had passed a policeman. The man had wandered farther on his beat. He overtook him, gasping.

"My house is afire!"

The policeman recognized Quinney, and nodded owlishly.

"Your house afire?" he repeated.

"You bolt for the engine—see?"

He twirled round the massive figure, and pushed it vigorously. The guardian of the night broke into a slow trot. Quinney shouted:

"Get a move on!" and sped back to the cottage. The light was no longer faintly luminous. Flames—hungry tongues of destruction—were licking the darkness.

CHAPTER IX

SALVAGE

I

Quinney found Susan asleep. In the small dressing room next to their bedroom, Posy also slumbered sweetly, although acrid smoke was filling the house. When Susan understood that she was not the victim of some hideous nightmare, Quinney imposed his commands.

"You've time to slip on warm clothes. Bolt on to the lawn with Posy. Don't try to save any of your rags. I'll wake Maria—and then I've a lot to do. The best stuff downstairs is not insured. The engine will be here in two jiffs. You scoot out o' this! Hear me?"

She nodded breathlessly, swept off her feet by his excitement. He vanished, before she could answer him or remind him of a bedridden mother-in-law.

Maria also was asleep. Quinney hauled her out of bed, and pointed to the attic window.

"Look at that," he said grimly, "and scoot!"

Maria scooted.

Quinney leapt downstairs, cursing himself for a fool inasmuch as he had neglected to increase his insurance. The "gems" had slowly accumulated month after month. He breathed more easily when he reached the ground floor, but he was well aware that the old house would burn like tinder. The roof of thatch had begun to blaze; he could hear the crackle of the flames overhead.

With profound regret it must be set down that he had quite forgotten Mrs. Biddlecombe.

He worked methodically, beginning with the uninsured porcelain, the Worcester, Chelsea, and Bow, which he carried tenderly into the garden. He had removed the most valuable specimens before the engine arrived. Maria, stout creature, half-dressed, bare-legged and bare-footed, joined him. Together they hauled out the Chippendale chairs and china cupboard.

"Seen your missus?" asked Quinney, when she first appeared.

"On the lawn," replied Maria.

Presently they heard the welcome rattle of the engine, and the Chief strode in, followed by two firemen.

"Women all out?" he asked.

"You bet!" replied Quinney. At that moment he remembered Mrs. Biddlecombe. "My God!" he exclaimed, gripping the Chief. "There's Mrs. Biddlecombe! Bedridden, by Gum!"

Maria burst into the riotous laughter of a Bacchante.

"The old lady," she spluttered, "was the first to scoot. She just ran out like I did."

"Ran?" repeated Quinney.

"Like a rabbit!" said Maria, more calmly.

"We've about five more minutes," remarked the Chief.

During that brief period wonders were accomplished; but at the very last Quinney narrowly escaped death in his determination to save a print in colour which he had overlooked. A fireman grabbed him and held him as the roof fell.

II

Kindly neighbours sheltered the women for that night, while Quinney mounted guard over his furniture and porcelain. He never left his precious things till they were safely stored in a warehouse. When his fellow-townsmen condoled with him he laughed in their solemn faces. The sense of freedom which had so expanded his spirit upon the never-to-be-forgotten occasion of his sire's funeral

once more possessed him. The fire had burnt to cinders the resolution to remain in Melchester. He found himself wishing that the shop had burned too. What a glorious clearance that would have been, to be sure! Nevertheless, the sight of Susan's face dampened his rejoicings. Obviously, she had swooped upon the truth. Mrs. Biddlecombe had been forgotten, left to frizzle, while a madman, at the risk of his life, was rescuing sticks and stones!

"You never thought of mother," said Susan. The small woman looked rather pale, and Quinney marked for the first time the wrinkle between her eyes. Mrs. Biddlecombe had the same vertical line, deeply cut. Also there was an inflection in Susan's voice which he recognized regretfully as an inheritance from the old lady. He was tempted to lie boldly, to affirm with loud authority that he had left the care of the invalid mother to a devoted daughter. Fortunately, he remembered the Bacchanalian laughter of Maria. The baggage had peached. He replied simply:

"I didn't."

Susan compressed her pretty lips, and the likeness to her mother became startlingly strong.

Quinney tried a disarming smile as he murmured:

"She legged it out on to the lawn. Maria says she ran like a bloomin' rabbit."

"If Maria said that I shall have to speak to her seriously."

"She didn't say 'blooming.' I'm sorry, Susie. It's awful, I know, but you needn't glare at me as if I'd left the old lady to burn on purpose. And out of evil comes good—hey? We know now that she's as spry as ever. Almost looks as if firin' had cured her."

"If you mean to make a joke of it——"

He saw that she was deeply offended, and foolishly attempted to kiss her. Susan repulsed him.

"What! Refuse to kiss your own hubby!"

"Mother might be lying dead; and you thinking only of sticks and stones."

"Come off it!" said Quinney irritably.

Susan turned her back on him, and he returned to the shop. It was their first serious trouble.

III

When they met again two hours afterwards the wrinkle had vanished; and no allusion was made to this unhappy incident, either then or later. Susan was busy moving into temporary lodgings and buying necessary articles of clothing for herself and her mother. Quinney was thinking of London, and fairly spoiling for

the fight ahead. It would begin when he tackled Susan and her mother, and he knew that this first encounter would be no bloodless victory. Posy would be used as a weapon, an Excalibur in the hands of a devoted mother.

After much pondering, he did an unwise thing—what might have been expected from a man engrossed in his own business, and fully sensible that he understood that business better than anyone else. He had always despised futile argument. Mrs. Biddlecombe and Susan would argue for hours, repeating themselves like silly parrots, and evading, like most women, the real issues. He told himself that he would be quite unable to listen patiently to their prattle about country air and old friends, and rolling stones denuded of nice comfortable moss. Why not make his arrangements without consulting them? Whatever they might say, he intended to move from Melchester. He had nailed his flag to the mast when the roof of Dream Cottage fell in. It streamed over his future, a Blue Peter.

Accordingly, he slipped away to London some two days later, leaving two women and an intelligent child in blissful ignorance of what was waving above them. He told Susan that an interview with the fire insurance people was imperative. She was quite ready to believe that, and speeded him on his journey with smiles and kisses.

"While you are away," she said cheerfully, "I shall be looking out for another Dream Cottage."

"You won't find it in Melchester," he replied curtly.

Upon arrival in London he set forth gallantly in search of a "pitch." He wandered in and out of curiosity shops big and small. Some of the dealers knew him slightly. Many of the older men used to deal with his father. They were well aware that the son refused on principle to sell to the trade. Tomlin had passed round that word long ago. Quinney inspected their wares, and chuckled to himself whenever he encountered a fake labelled as a genuine antique. The biggest men displayed stuff not above suspicion. Indeed, the chuckling became audible when he discovered a Minihy cabinet in a famous establishment in St. James's Street.

"Guarantee that?" he asked of the rather supercilious young gentleman in a frock coat who was doing the honours.

"Certainly."

It was then that Quinney chuckled. The young gentleman, quite unaware that he was entertaining a provincial dealer, said loftily:

"It's French. Came out of a French château in Touraine."

"Signed?"

"I think not. It's signed all over as a bit of the finest Renaissance craftsmanship."

Quinney bent down, still chuckling.

"It is signed," he said, with conviction.

"Really? Where, may I ask?"

Quinney indicated a small, much-battered piece of oak.

"Remove that," he observed quietly, "and you will find the signature under it."

"Whose signature?"

"The signature of a great artist who lives near Treguier in Brittany."

"Lives? What do you mean?"

Quinney met the young gentleman's scornful eyes and held them.

"I mean, my lad, that your master has here a very clever copy, signed where I say by the man who copied it, whom I know. I've not asked the price, but I'll tell you this: if it's genuine, it's cheap at two thousand; if it's a copy I can buy a dozen just like it at sixteen pounds apiece. Good-morning."

After three days' hard walking, Quinney summed up results as follows: There were three classes of dealers in London. The tip-toppers, with establishments in fashionable thoroughfares, who sold the best stuff at a fancy price; the men, whose name was Legion, who lived here, there, and everywhere, selling wares good, bad, and indifferent at a small profit; and the middle-men, who sold almost exclusively to the big dealers.

"There is a place for me," said Quinney, with absolute conviction.

He said as much to Tomlin next day. They were lunching together in an old-fashioned eating-house just off Fleet Street, sitting bolt upright upon wooden benches, and inhaling an atmosphere which advertised insistently cheese, onions, chump chops, and tobacco. Tomlin was the host, and he had ordered steak-and-kidney pudding, a Welsh rarebit to follow, and a bottle of port. He attacked these viands with such gusto that Quinney said to himself:

"Never did see a man with a more unhealthy appetite!"

Warmed into candid speech by this fine old English food and drink, Tomlin said thickly:

"A place for you, my tulip? Hope it won't be in the Bankruptcy Court!"—and he chuckled grossly.

Tomlin's place, be it mentioned, was at the wrong end of the Fulham Road, but he was talking of moving to Bond Street. Tomlin reckoned himself to be one of the big dealers, and he talked in a full, throaty voice:

"You're a fool to leave Melchester, Joe. I say it as a friend."

"There's a place for me in London," repeated Quinney.

"Where?"

"Well, somewhere between the Fulham Road and Long Acre."

"'Ow about rent?"

"'Tisn't the rent that worries me."

"Customers?"

"That's right—customers. The business will have to be built up slowly, because I mean to specialize."

"In what?"

"Old English porcelain, glass, and the finest furniture."

"You'll starve."

"I mean to have one other department which may keep the pot boiling."

"Give it a name, Joe."

"Not yet."

"My first and last word to you is: Go back to Melchester and stay there."

Tomlin repeated this till Quinney sickened of his company. But he wanted the London man to predict disaster in his raucous tones. Success would taste the sweeter when it came. Moreover, Susan hated Tomlin, to such an extent, indeed, that she would flout his judgment. She had never forgiven his tale of a table with a broken leg.

The men separated after smoking two cigars. Quinney walked to Soho Square, lit a better cigar than Tomlin had given to him, and stared at an ancient house with a pediment over the door, and a signboard upon which were inscribed the exciting words, "To Let."

The mansion—for it was thus styled—had challenged his attention and interest two days before. Tomlin would have ridiculed the idea of taking such a house, and turning it into a shop, but Tomlin was a tradesman, whereas Quinney believed himself to be an artist. The house was of the right period—early Georgian from garret to cellar.

Quinney went over it.

It seemed to be the real right thing, so right that the little man, who had unconsciously absorbed some of the Melchester sermons, told himself that the guiding finger of Providence could be plainly discerned. There were dry cellars for storing valuable woods, a back-yard, and a big drawing-room, finely decorated in the Adam style, possibly by the hand of the Master, which occupied the first floor, and looked out upon the Square through three nobly-proportioned windows. Quinney decided instantly to make this splendid room his "sanctuary," the treasure-house, wherein his "gems" would be fittingly enshrined. The ground floor would serve admirably as a shop. There were several bedrooms and excellent offices.

In regard to the situation he came to this conclusion. The shops of the groundlings in the trade were invariably small and ill-lighted; the establishments of the big dealers commanded a rent beyond his means. In any case, he would have to work up a clientele, and his customers, when they did find their way to this ancient square, would behold his beautiful wares under the happiest condi-

tions of space and light.

The rent, including rates and taxes, came to less than three hundred a year! A big rent, it is true, for a dealer with his capital, but much less than Tomlin paid for large and inconvenient premises in the Fulham Road.

He signed a long lease within twenty-four hours, and returned, exulting in his strength, to Melchester and Susan.

IV

He did not tell her his wonderful news at once. A habit of secretiveness concerning his business was forming itself. It must be recorded on his behalf that Susan's indifference to "sticks and stones" exasperated him. By this time he had recognized her inability to appreciate fine "stuff!" As a saleswoman she had enchanted him, but even then, when she trotted about the shop smiling sweetly at his customers, he knew that she would never acquire a sense of values, that nice discrimination which detects unerringly the good from the very good, and acclaims the genius of the artist so subtly differentiated from the handicraft of the artisan.

Susan, artless soul! had news of her own to impart. She had found a house just outside Melchester—a house with a bathroom, with hot and cold water laid on, a labour-saving house quite up to date—a bargain!

The expression of his shrewd face, as he listened, warned Susan that he was keeping something from her. Human paste she understood better than he did. The animation died out of her voice as she faltered:

"You look so queer, Joe."

Then he told her.

To his surprise and satisfaction she acquiesced meekly. She was thinking that her prayers had been answered; but she could not bring herself to say so. Also she was cruelly hurt at his lack of confidence, afraid to speak lest she should say too much, too proud to break down, pathetically silent. Quinney went on floundering amongst the broken ice.

"I'm out for a big thing. I know that I can pull it off single-handed. Results will justify this move, Susie. It's no use my hidin' from you that I'm in for a fight. They'll down me if they can, but in the end I shall come out on top, my girl. On top!"

"On top of what, Joe?"

He caught hold of her cold hands, gripping them tightly. He never noticed how faintly the pressure was returned.

"Atop o' the heap. A big dealer. It's in me. Always knew it. Not a dog's

chance here. Why, even Primmer of Bath had to go to London. I was in his Piccadilly place yesterday. And I can remember what his old shop at Bath used to be."

"What does Mr. Tomlin say?"

"He's nasty, is Tom Tomlin. I wanted him to be nasty. By Gum! I egged him on to call me a fool and an idiot."

"How I dislike that man!"

"He fairly wallowed in prophecies. It will be the same here. I can hear Pinker goin' it."

"Have you asked Lord Mel's advice?"

Quinney glanced at her sharply.

"His lordship was very kind, but he's my landlord, and I'm a good tenant. He may be offended. I must risk that."

Susan sighed as she said with finality:

"It's done?"

"Thank the Lord—yes!"

He suffered at the hands of Mrs. Biddlecombe, who, since the fire, had become livelier in mind and body. She believed that a miracle had been wrought upon her aged and infirm body, and regarded it as sanctified by a Divine touch. Laburnum Row repeated with awe the old lady's solemn words:

"When I woke to hear the roaring of the flames, I heard a Voice. It seemed to say: 'Martha Biddlecombe, arise and walk.'"

A select party of friends was listening, but—weed your acquaintance how you may—nettles will spring up unexpectedly. A thin, acidulous spinster remarked drily:

"We heard you—ran."

"It is perfectly true," replied Mrs. Biddlecombe, with austere dignity. "The hand of the Lord was upon me, and I ran."

According to her lights, she dealt faithfully with Joseph Quinney. As his guest, helpless beneath his roof, she had curbed too sharp a tongue. In her own lodgings, and mentally as well as physically "on her legs again," she deemed it a duty to let that tongue wag freely. She received her son-in-law seated upon a sofa, the hard, old-fashioned sofa covered with black horse-hair. Above the mantelpiece was a framed print in crude colour, a portrait of the Great White Queen, in all her Imperial splendour handing a cheap edition of the Bible to a naked savage. Underneath this work of art was inscribed: "This is the secret of England's greatness." Upon a small marble-topped table near the sofa was another Bible.

"Be seated, Joseph."

She had allowed him to kiss her cheek; and he guessed, as he saluted her,

that she was in happy ignorance of his monstrous offence. At her request Susan was not present.

"You are going to London?"

"That's right."

"It is not right, Joseph. It is very far indeed from being right. It would seem that right and wrong, as I interpret such plain words, have no definite meaning to you."

"Pop away!"

"What?"

"I said 'Pop away.' I meant, go on firing."

"I beg to be allowed to finish without flippant interruption on your part. Personally, the affairs of this world do not concern me any longer. I am interested in them so far as they concern others, my own flesh and blood. Susan was born in Melchester, and so were you."

"We couldn't help it. You might have chosen a livelier spot. Me and Susan wasn't consulted. Children in a better managed world would be consulted, but there you are."

"Do you think, Joseph, in your arrogance, that you could manage this world better than it is managed?"

"Lord bless you, yes!"

"I trust that the Lord will bless me, young man. but He will assuredly not bless you, unless you mend your ways and your manners."

"Keep it up!"

It enraged her to perceive that he was enjoying himself. She wondered vaguely how the Bishop would deal with such a hardened offender.

"I, for one, refuse to accompany you to London."

"Sorry."

"Are you sorry? I doubt it. Susan will miss me"—she wiped away two tears invisible to Quinney, and her voice trembled querulously as she continued—"and Posy will be deprived of a grandmother at a time when her mind and character are being made or marred. I understand, also, that you are risking a fortune which is more than ample for a man in your station of life. It would appear also that you have taken this step in defiance of advice from the Marquess of Mel."

"I took it"—he drew in his breath sharply, speaking almost as solemnly as his very upright judge—"because I had to take it. Melchester is too small for me, too sleepy, too stoopid, too hide-bound. The most wonderful thing in the whole town is just like me."

"To what do you allude?"

"To the spire of the Cathedral. It soars, don't it? Can you see it laying flat on the ground? Can you fancy it asleep? It taught me to soar. When I was a

boy, crawlin' at the old man's heel, I used to say to it: 'Gosh, you're well out of it!' And now"—he smiled triumphantly—"I'm well out of it, for ever and ever, Amen!"

Mrs. Biddlecombe rallied her failing energies for a last charge. Somehow she was impressed by this queer son-in-law. He confounded her. She remarked slowly:

"It seems a strange thing to say, but I have heard of spires struck by God's lightning."

"Maybe," said Quinney, rising; "but you can take it from me that this spire won't be struck because it's fitted with a lightnin' conductor."

He retired, chuckling. Mrs. Biddlecombe shook her head. She was utterly at a loss to determine whether Quinney was alluding to the Cathedral spire or to himself. If to himself, who or what was his lightning conductor?

BOOK II

CHAPTER X

BLUDGEONINGS

I

London exercised the influence that might be expected upon such a character as Quinney's. The soot, so to speak, brought out the chlorophyl. As he put it to Susan, with grim humour:

"Makes us feel a bit green, hey?"

He had supposed that the big dealers would ignore him; he had not expected what he found—active hostility. His first fight, for example, opened his eyes by closing one of them. A brief account of it must be chronicled. He had kept out of the auction rooms, like Christopher's, but he frequented small sales, and became a menace to a ring of Hebrew dealers, who, hitherto, had managed such affairs with great executive ability entirely in their own interests. Quinney was well aware of their methods. At the sale proper prices were kept at the lowest possible level. The real buying and selling took place afterwards in a private room at some neighbouring tavern. Quinney, who was invited to join the "ring," knew all about "knock-outs," and decided that he would not identify himself with such an unsavoury crowd. Tomlin warned him.

"Leave those swine alone, Joe."

"I mean to, old man."

"But remember this, they won't leave you alone, the dirty dogs!"

They didn't.

Upon the eve of a small sale in the suburbs, held at the house of a bankrupt merchant, who had bought, in the days of his prosperity, some good bits of furniture, Quinney was "nosing round," as he called it, by himself, jotting down in a notebook the prices he was prepared to pay on the morrow. Suddenly there entered a truculent-looking young man of the type that may be seen boxing at Wonderland, which is just off the Whitechapel Road. He swaggered up to Quinney and said drawlingly:

"Buyin' against my crowd, you was, las' week?"

Quinney eyed him nervously, as he answered with spirit:

"Your crowd, hey?"

"I said my crowd. Want to join us?"

"No, my lad, I don't."

"Why not?"

"I'm rather careful about the company I keep, see?"

The young man glanced round. They were quite alone. Then he hit Quinney hard. Our hero ducked ineffectively, and caught the blow on his left eye. Instantly he realized that his antagonist was what is called a "workman." Nevertheless he "set about him." In less than a minute the fine old adage which sets forth that right is greater than might was lamentably perverted. Quinney was left half senseless on a Turkey carpet which bore stains of the encounter, and his aggressor fled. Next day, Quinney remained at home, tended by Susan, who admitted that she felt like Jael, the wife of Heber, the Kenite.

"Can't you prosecute?" she asked indignantly.

"Never saw the fellow before, never likely to see him again. Hired for the job, he was—earned his money, too."

After this experience he kept out of third-class London sales, buying as before from provincial dealers, making it worth their while to come to him first. Your provincial man is not omniscient, and is prepared to accept a small profit upon every article that passes through his hands. Quinney secured some bargains, but he could not sell them, because he had no customers.

His next experience was more serious. He had gone to Melshire to buy a certain satin-wood commode with panels painted by Angelica Kauffman. The owner of the commode, a fox-hunting squire, knew nothing of its value, but he happened to know Quinney, and he offered the commode to Quinney for fifty pounds. This incident illustrates nicely the sense of honour which prevails among dealers in antiques. The commode had been advertised as part of the contents of an ancient manor house. Other Melshire dealers, many of them Quin-

ney's friends, were attending the sale. Immensely to the fox-hunting squire's surprise, Quinney pointed out that it would not be fair to the other dealers to buy before-hand a valuable bit of furniture already advertised in a printed catalogue. He concluded:

"It'll fetch more than fifty pounds."

At the sale it fetched ninety-seven pounds. At the "knock-out" afterwards, bidding against the other dealers, Quinney paid nine hundred pounds for this "gem," and told himself, with many chucklings, that he would double his money within a few weeks. He returned to London with his prize, and recited the facts to Susan, whose sympathy ranged itself upon the side of the Melchester squire.

"Seems to me that poor man was robbed. Ninety-seven pounds for a thing that you say is worth two thousand. It's awful."

"Is it? Now, look ye here, Susie, I'm going to put you right on this for ever and ever, see? I'm not in this business for my health. Like every other merchant, I buy in the cheapest market, and sell in the dearest. It's not my business to educate country gentlemen, who've had twice my advantages. If the owners of good stuff don't take the trouble to find out the value of what they've got, so much the worse for them, the blooming idiots! I play the game, my girl. I might have bought that commode for a level fifty. Think of it! Why didn't I? Because I'm an honourable man. Because it wouldn't have been straight with the others who were after that commode. Has it soaked in? I'll just add this: It's we dealers who create values. Never thought o' that, did you? Nor anyone else outside the profession. But it's gospel truth. Dealers create the big prices, not the silly owners, who don't know enough to keep their pictures in decent condition. I remember a country parson who kept his umbrella in a big *famille verte* jar. Tomlin bought that jar for a few pounds, and sold it at Christopher's for fifteen hundred. The parson made a fine hullabaloo, but it served him jolly well right. We do the work, and we're entitled to the big profits."

Susan felt crushed, but a leaven of her mother in her constrained her to reply:

"I hope that commode is worth nine hundred pounds."

"It's worth a damn sight more than that, Susie!"

Tomlin came to see it next day. He examined it carefully, with his sharp nose cocked at a critical angle. Finally, he said hesitatingly:

"Are you quite sure, Joe, that Angelica Kauffman painted them panels?"

"Just as sure, old man, as if I'd seen her at it."

Nevertheless, Tomlin's question rankled.

II

With many apologies, we present the reader to Messrs. Lark and Bundy, of Oxford Street. Gustavus Lark is probably the best known of the London art dealers. He is now an old man, and his sons and Bundy's sons manage an immense business. Ten years ago he had not retired. Criticism of him or his methods are irrelevant to this chronicle, but a side-light is thrown upon them when we consider how he treated Joe Quinney, a young man against whom he had no grudge whatever. Gustavus Lark heard, of course, that a Melchester dealer, newly settled in Soho Square, had bought a commode said to be painted by Angelica Kauffman for nine hundred pounds. Immediately he sent for his eldest son, a true chip of the old block.

"Why did we not hear of this?"

The son answered curtly:

"Because we can't hear of everything. There wasn't one big London dealer at the sale; and the only thing worth having was this commode."

"Is it the goods?"

"I believe so."

"Do you know?"

"Well, yes—I know."

"I must send for Pressland."

Pressland deserves some little attention. England honours him as a connoisseur of Old Masters. Upon pictures his word is often the first and the last. We know that he "boomed" certain painters, long dead. To quote Quinney, he "created" values. And he worked hand in hand with just such men as Gustavus Lark. In appearance he might have been a successful dentist. He wore a frock-coat and small side-whiskers. He said "Please" in an ingratiating tone. His hands were scrupulously clean, as if he had washed them often after dirty jobs. Out of a pale, sallow face shone two small grey eyes, set too close together. He contradicted other experts with an inimitable effrontery. "What is this?" he would say, laying a lean forefinger upon a doubtful signature. "A Velasquez? I think not. Why? Because, my dear sir, I know!"

Admittedly, he did know about Velasquez; and this knowledge was, so to speak, on tap, at the service of anybody willing to pay a reasonable fee. But his knowledge of furniture and porcelain was placed with reserve at the disposition of dealers. He told many persons that he made mistakes, and the public never guessed that such mistakes were paid for munificently.

Gustavus Lark sent for Pressland. The men met in Lark's sanctum, an austere little room, simply furnished. There is another room next to it, and when Gustavus sends for a very particular visitor nobody enters that ante-chamber except a member of the firm.

"Do you know this Soho Square man, Quinney?"

"I have met him."

"Has he come to stay?"

"Um! I think so."

Gustavus Lark stroked his beard. He looked very handsome and prosperous, not unlike a genial monarch whom he was said by his clerks to understudy.

"I want you," he said slowly, "to go to Soho Square this morning, and if by any chance Quinney should ask your opinion of the commode, why"—he laughed pleasantly—"in that case I shouldn't mind betting quite a considerable sum that you would discover it to be—er—a clever reproduction."

Pressland smiled.

"Probably."

"I mean to have a look at it myself later."

Pressland went his way. Part of his success in life may be assigned to a praiseworthy habit of executing small and big commissions with becoming promptitude. He strolled into Quinney's shop as if he were the most idle man in town.

"Anything to show me?" he asked languidly.

Quinney was delighted to see him. He recognized Pressland at once.

"Happy and honoured to see you, sir."

Presently, he took him upstairs into the drawing-room, already spoken of as the "sanctuary." In it were all his beloved treasures. He had done up the room "regardless." Here stood his Chippendale cabinet, filled with Early Worcester and Chelsea; here were his cherished prints in colour, his finest specimens of Waterford glass, two or three beautiful miniatures, and many other things. Pressland was astonished, but he said little, nodding his head from time to time, and listening attentively to Quinney. As soon as he entered the room he perceived the satin-wood commode standing in the place of honour.

Pressland praised the Chippendale cabinet, and ignored the commode. Quinney frowned. Finally he jerked out:

"What do you think of that, sir?"

"What?"

"That commode. Pedigree bit, out of an old Melshire manor house. Good stuff, hey?"

Pressland adjusted his pince-nez, and stared hard and long at the panels. Quinney began to fidget.

"Bit of all right—um?"

Pressland said slowly:

"I hope you didn't pay very much for it, Mr. Quinney."

"I paid a thumping big cheque for it. Never paid so much before for a single bit."

Pressland murmured pensively:

"I thought you knew your furniture."

"Ain't it all right? There's no secret about what I paid. It's been paragraphed—nine hundred pounds."

A soft whistle escaped from Pressland's thin lips. He said depressingly:

"I dare say you know more about those panels than I do."

Quinney protested vigorously:

"Don't play that on me, Mr. Pressland. If I knew one quarter of what you know about pictures I'd be a proud man."

"A pedigree bit? What do you mean by that?"

"Owner said it had been in his family for more than a hundred years. He said that the panels were painted by Angelica Kauffman."

"Are you quite sure he didn't say after Angelica Kauffman?"

Quinney shook his head. From every pore in his skin confidence was oozing.

"Did he know the value of it?"

"No, he didn't."

"Ah! He must have been pleased with your cheque."

Quinney explained matters. Pressland's expression became acutely melancholy; and his silence, as he turned away, was eloquent of a commiseration too deep for words.

"Isn't it right, Mr. Pressland?"

"My opinion is worth little, Mr. Quinney."

"I'm prepared to pay for it if necessary."

"No, no, no! Not from you. Well, then, I am afraid you have been had. Did the dealers at the 'knock-out' suspect that you wanted it badly?"

"Perhaps they did. I kept on bidding."

"Just so. It's a little way they have. Very, very jealous, some of them. You have been successful. Success makes enemies. I have enemies. There are men in London who accuse me of abominable, unmentionable things." He smiled modestly, spreading out his hands.

"You can afford to laugh at 'em, Mr. Pressland."

"I do."

"Am I to take it from you, sir, that Angelica did not paint those panels?"

Pressland shrugged his shoulders.

"I am of opinion, and I may well be mistaken, that those panels were painted after Angelica Kauffman's death, probably by a clever pupil. But please ask somebody else."

He drifted away, promising to call again, assuring Quinney that he would send him customers.

III

Susan had the story red-hot from his trembling lips about ten minutes later.

"I've been done—cooked to a crisp!" he wailed.

She kissed and consoled him tenderly, but he refused to be comforted. She had applied raw steak to his injured eye. What balm could she pour upon a bruised and bleeding heart?

"That man knows. He felt sorry for me. He hated to tell me. He promised that he would tell nobody else—a good sort! What did your mother say—Sir Humpty and Lady Dumpty. There you are!"

She kissed him again and stroked his face.

"I was so sure of my own judgment, Susie. The loss of the money is bad enough, but everybody will find out that I've been had. That's what tears me!"

"He may be mistaken."

"Not he. He knows. I've a mind to go outside and hire a strong man to kick me."

Next morning there was a wholesome reaction. Susan and he stood in front of the commode. The sun streamed upon it.

"By Gum! I do believe it's all right. If it isn't, I'd better go back to Melchester and stay there." He caressed the lovely wood so tenderly that Susan felt jealous. "Oh, you beauty!" he exclaimed passionately. "I believe in you; yes, I do. An artist created you. An artist painted those panels."

He recovered his cheerfulness, and assured Susan that he was prepared to back his opinion against Tomlin, Pressland, and all other pessimists.

Upon the following Monday Gustavus presented himself. For a dizzy moment our hero believed that the most illustrious male in the kingdom had dropped in incognito. Gustavus wore a grey cut-away coat, with an orchid in the lapel of it, and he was smoking an imposing cigar.

"I am Gustavus Lark," he said.

"Pleased to see you, Mr. Lark."

No man in England could make himself more agreeable than the great dealer. Gossip had it that he had begun life as a "rapper." A rapper, as the name signifies, is one who raps at all doors, seeking what he may find behind them—a bit of porcelain, a valuable print, an old chair—anything. A successful rapper must combine in one ingratiating personality the qualities of a diplomat, a leader of forlorn hopes, a high-class burglar, and an American book agent. When the door upon which he has rapped opens, he must enter, and refuse to budge till he has satisfied himself that there is nothing in his line worth the buying.

Tomlin had the following story to tell of Gustavus, as a rapper. You must take it for what it's worth. Tomlin, we know, was a bit of a rascal, and a liar of

the first magnitude, but he affirmed solemnly that the tale is true.

Behold Gustavus in the good old days of long ago, when prints in colours were still to be found in cottages, rapping at the door of some humble house. A widow opens it, and asks a good-looking young man what his business may be. He enters audaciously, and states it. He is seeking board and lodging. He is seeking, also, a set of the London "Cries." But he does not mention that. He has heard—it is his business to hear such gossip—that the widow possesses the complete set in colour, the full baker's dozen. He arranges for a week's board and lodging, and he satisfies himself that the prints are genuine specimens. In his satchel he carries thirteen bogus prints, excellent reproductions. At dead of night he takes from the frames the genuine prints and substitutes the false ones. Three days afterwards he goes to London, and, later, sells the prints for a sum sufficient to start him in business. But he does not rest there, as a lesser man might well do. A rapper's hands, be it noted, are against all men. He robs cheerfully the men of his own trade—the small dealers. Gustavus, then, proceeds to pile Pelion upon Ossa. He next visits a dealer of his acquaintance and tells him that he has discovered a genuine set of "Cries," which can be bought cheap in their original frames. The dealer, who is not an expert in colour prints, is deceived by the frames and by the authentic yarn which the widow spins. He does buy the prints cheap, and sells them as genuine to one of the innumerable collectors with more money than brains. Gustavus gets his commission and nets a double profit!

Quinney had heard this story from Tomlin and others, but the benevolent appearance of his visitor put suspicion to flight, as it had done scores of times before. It was quite impossible to believe that an old gentleman, who bore such an amazing resemblance to one venerated as the Lord's anointed, could have begun his career as a rapper!

"Anything of interest to show me?" asked Gustavus blandly. He treated everybody, except his own understrappers, with distinguished courtesy. He spoke to Quinney, whom he despised, exactly as he would have spoken to a Grand Duke.

"Glad to take you round, Mr. Lark."

"I am told that you do not sell to dealers."

"That's as may be. I want to build up a business with private customers."

"Quite right. My own methods."

He glanced round the shop, which was divided roughly into sections. In the first were genuine bits; in the second were the best reproductions conspicuously labelled as such. The reproductions were so superlatively good that Lark recognized at once the character of the man who had so audaciously exposed them. Then and there he made up his mind that Quinney was to be reckoned with.

He smiled as he waved a white hand protestingly at a piece of tapestry which might have challenged the interest of an expert. He had sold such tapestry as old Gobelins, and he knew that the maker of it only dealt with a chosen few.

"Wonderful, isn't it?" said Quinney.

"You mean to sell first-class copies as such?"

"Yes. I guarantee what I sell, Mr. Lark, as—as you do."

"I don't sell fakes."

"Not necessary in your case. Will you come upstairs?"

"With pleasure."

Quinney was trembling with excitement. Gustavus noticed this, and went on smiling. Pressland had prepared him. He praised and appraised many things in the sanctuary, but he merely glanced at the commode.

"I want you to look at this, Mr. Lark."

"Bless me! Is that the commode which you bought in Melshire?"

"It is. What do you think of it?"

Gustavus protruded a large lower lip; his eyebrows, strongly marked, expressed surprise, a twinkle in his left eye indicated discreet amusement.

"Why isn't it downstairs with the others?"

"The others?"

"By the side of that piece of tapestry."

"It's the best bit I have," said Quinney defiantly.

"Surely not. I have bought such tapestry as yours before. I will admit that I paid a big figure for it. We dealers are sadly done sometimes. This commode is quite as good in its way as the Gobelins, but it ought not to be next that cabinet."

"Do you mean to tell me, Mr. Lark, that you call it a fake?"

"A fake—no. A copy admirably executed—yes."

"Oh, Lord!"

He made no attempt to conceal his distress. Gustavus patted his shoulder encouragingly.

"I may be mistaken. I am often mistaken."

"You?"

"Even I. Come, come, I see that I have upset you. But, as a friend, as a brother dealer, I say this: Get rid of it. You are taking up a line of your own. You mean to sell honest copies as such, and to guarantee the genuine bits. A capital idea. Only don't mix up the two. To succeed in London it is necessary to establish a reputation. My eldest son tells me that you built up a substantial business in Melchester—that your reputation there was above reproach. Excellent! I rejoiced to hear it. In our business we want men like you. But, no compromise! Sell that commode for what it is, a fine copy executed at the end of the eighteenth century. As such it has a considerable value. I have a customer, an American gentleman,

who would buy it to-morrow for what it is, and pay a handsome figure."

The unhappy Quinney moistened his lips with a feverish tongue.

"What do you call a handsome figure, Mr. Lark?"

"Five or six hundred."

"And I paid nine!"

"Well, well!"

Gustavus turned his broad back upon the commode, and examined the Early Worcester in the Chippendale cabinet. There was a tea-set of the Dr. Wall period, bearing the much-prized square mark, some thirty pieces of scale-blue with flowers delicately painted in richly-gilded panels.

"Is that scale-blue for sale?"

"At a price, Mr. Lark. I have had it for three years. I'm waiting for a customer who will give me two hundred pounds, not a penny less."

"Two hundred pounds? And you won't sell to the dealers who have customers who write such big cheques. Now, look here, Mr. Quinney, I am sorry for you. I know how you feel, because I have made, I repeat, sad and costly blunders myself. You don't ask enough for that scale-blue."

"Not enough?"

"I could sell that set for three hundred this afternoon. To prove that I am not boasting I will offer you two hundred guineas, cash on the nail."

"Done!" said Quinney. He added excitedly: "I'm much obliged, Mr. Lark. I wish you could send me the American gentleman."

Gustavus laughed. He looked at Quinney with quite a paternal air.

"Come, come, isn't that asking too much?"

"I beg pardon, of course it is, but what am I to do about that commode?"

"I repeat—sell it."

"You know that I haven't a dog's chance of selling it now. Don't flimflam me, Mr. Lark! You're too big a man, too good a sort. You've treated me handsomely over that scale-blue. Now help me out of this hole, if you can."

Lark nodded impressively. He went back to the commode, and examined it meticulously, opening and shutting the doors, looking at the back, scraping the paint of the panels with the point of a penknife. Then the oracle spoke portentously:

"I never haggle with dealers, Mr. Quinney, and I don't want that commode; but, to oblige you, I'll give you five hundred for it, and chance making a hundred profit."

"Make it six hundred, Mr. Lark."

"I repeat—I never haggle."

"Damn it! I must cut a loss."

"Always the wise thing to do. My offer holds good for twenty-four hours.

Isn't Tomlin a friend of yours?"

"We've had many dealings together."

"He might pay more."

"Not he. I'll accept your offer, Mr. Lark, with many thanks. I'll not forget this."

Gustavus returned to Oxford Street. He sold the commode to an American millionaire for two thousand five hundred pounds, but Quinney, fortunately for his peace of mind, never discovered this till some years had passed.

He told Tom Tomlin that Lark was a perfect gentleman, and that the story of the Rapper and the London "Cries" was a malicious lie on the face of it.

Tomlin sniffed.

CHAPTER XI

MORE BLUDGEONINGS

I

The loss of four hundred pounds stimulated our hero to greater efforts. Deep down in his heart, moreover, lay the desire to rehabilitate himself. Susan had spared him exasperating reproaches, but he perceived, so he fancied, pity in her faithful eyes. Her ministrations recalled that humiliating Channel crossing, when his superiority as a male had been buried in a basin! Let us admit that he wanted to play the god with Susan, to shake the sphere of home with his Olympian nod, to hear her soft ejaculation: "Joe, dear, you are wonderful!"

At this crisis in his fortunes he found himself, for the first time in his life, with time on his hands. His premises were overstocked to such an extent that he dared not run the temptation of attending sales. To succeed greatly, he only needed customers, and they shunned him as if Soho Square were an infected district.

It began to strike him that he had embarked upon a highly speculative business. Tomlin was clear upon this point.

"It's a gamble if you go for big things. Buying that commode was a gamble. You can't escape from it. That's what makes it interesting. Win a tidy bit here, lose a tidy bit there, and it's all the same a hundred years hence."

This familiar philosophy percolated through Quinney's mind. It never occurred to him that he could be called a gambler, and yet something in him thrilled

at the name. He heard Tomlin's platitudes, and wondered why he had never thought of them before.

"Farming's gambling—a mug's game! Sooner put my money on to a horse than into the ground! Marriage! The biggest gamble of all! You struck a winner, my lad—I didn't."

"I suppose," said Quinney, staring hard at Tomlin, "that you don't gamble outside your business?"

"Yes, I do, when I get a gilt-edged tip."

"Race-horses?"

"Stock Exchange. Customers tell me things. I'm fairly in the know, I am. Make a little bit, lose a little bit! It binges me up when I feel blue."

"I'd like to get back a slice o' that lost four hundred quid."

"Maybe I can help you to do it. A customer of mine is in the Kaffir Market."

"Kaffir Market! What's that?"

It has been said that Quinney was grossly ignorant of things outside his own business.

"If you ain't as innocent as Moses in the bulrushes! African Mines, you greenhorn! He tells me of things. Never let me down—not once. He says a boom is just due."

"Do you risk much, Tom?"

"Lord bless you, no! I buy a few likely shares on margin, and carry 'em over. A man must have some excitement."

"Yes," said Quinney thoughtfully, "he must."

He did not mention this talk to Susan, but as he kicked his heels waiting for customers, the necessity of excitement—any excitement—gripped at his vitals. Meanwhile, let it be placed to his credit that he resisted the daily temptation to sell stuff to dealers. He could have sold his treasures to Lark at a fine profit, but he remained true to the principle: keep your best things to attract private customers. He hoped that his kind patron, Lord Mel, would come to see him. Possibly his lordship was offended, because his advice had been spurned. Then he heard that Lord Mel was abroad, and not likely to return to England for several months. He missed the bi-weekly meetings at the Mitre, and he did not dare to tell his Susan that he was depressed and dull, because he dreaded the inevitable "I told you so." Susan missed her few friends, and Quinney strained his powers of deception in the attempt to cheer her up by affirming that he had bettered his position by leaving Melchester.

Many wise persons contend that if you want anything inordinately, you get it. Excitement came to Quinney when he least expected it.

II

Hitherto adventurers of the first flight had left him alone. Small imposters are easily detected. Nobody could deal with the baser sort of trickster more drastically than Quinney. Rappers, for example, rapped in vain at his door. If he opened it, they never crossed the threshold. But when a provincial pigeon, preening his wings, is discovered within a stone's throw of the Greek quarter in London, some fancier is likely to make an attempt to bag the bird. Such a one entered Quinney's establishment some three months after the lamentable sale of the commode. He appeared to be a quiet, well-dressed man, and he wore a single pearl in his cravat, which inspired confidence. He asked Quinney if he ever attended sales as an agent, to buy things on the usual commission. Quinney had acted as agent for Lord Mel upon several occasions, and we may pardon him for mentioning the fact to the stranger, who seemed mildly impressed. He remarked casually that he knew Lord Mel, and had shot some high pheasants at Mel Court. Quinney, in his turn, was impressed by this information, for he knew that Lord Mel was nice in his selection of guests. Eventually Quinney consented to attend a certain sale, and to bid for two Dutch pictures which the stranger had marked in a catalogue.

"This is my card," said the stranger. "I shall be happy to give you a banker's reference." He named a well-known bank, but Quinney was quite satisfied with the name and address on the card. His visitor was an army officer, a Major Fraser, and he belonged to a famous Service Club.

Somewhat to his disappointment, the two Dutch pictures fetched a price beyond the limit imposed by the Major, who dropped in next day and expressed his regrets. He was so civil and genial that Quinney hoped to have the honour of serving him on some future occasion. The Major glanced at the sanctuary and before leaving paid ten pounds for a small Bow figure, and ordered it to be sent to the Savoy Hotel. After he had gone, Quinney found a letter addressed to Major Archibald Fraser, of Loch Tarvie, Inverness, N.B. He sent back the letter with the Bow figure, and he was curious enough to look up Major Archibald Fraser in Kelly's *Handbook to the Titled, Landed, and Official Classes.* He discovered, to his satisfaction, that the Major owned two properties in Scotland, and was a Justice of the Peace. He had married the daughter of a well-known Scotch magnate. Quinney chuckled and rubbed his hands. The right sort were finding their way to Soho Square at last. After this the Major dropped in again and again, always in search of knowledge, which Quinney supplied with increasing pleasure. In a word, the pigeon was ready for plucking.

During his next visit the Major spoke with enthusiasm of a picture he had discovered in Dorset. He assured Quinney that the picture was a genuine Murillo. Then he pulled a bundle of notes out of his pocket, handed twenty pounds to

Quinney, and delivered the following speech:

"I must go to Inverness to-night," he said regretfully. "My factor has wired for me about the letting of a forest of mine. Take this money on account of expenses, go to Dorchester, do yourself well—there is an excellent inn there, and a few bottles left of some '68 port. To-morrow there will be a sale at a small auction mart in the town. This picture will be offered. Here's a photograph of it. Buy it for me. In three days I shall be back in town."

He was hurrying away when Quinney stopped him. Queer notions of business these army gentlemen had, to be sure!

"What am I to bid for the picture, Major?"

"I'll go to fifteen hundred. I shouldn't be furious if you paid a hundred more. Wire to Loch Tarvie! Bye-bye!"

He was away before Quinney could get in another word.

"Thruster, and no error!" murmured Quinney to himself.

He travelled to Dorchester that afternoon and paid a visit to the auction mart before dinner. The auctioneer knew him, and expressed surprise at seeing him, for he was selling only job lots.

"Nothing to interest you, Mr. Quinney."

"Perhaps not. I'll have a squint round as I am here."

The auctioneer accompanied him, and Quinney soon found his picture, which was very dirty and inconspicuous. Old masters were not in his line, but he recognized the frame at once as being genuine—a fine specimen of carved wood, although much battered. The auctioneer said carelessly:

"I had a gentleman staring at that picture this morning. You're after the frame, I dare say."

Quinney made no reply. He saw that a small portion of the dirty canvas had been rubbed.

"Might look quite different if it was cleaned," said the auctioneer. "The other fellow did that with his handkerchief and a small bottle of stuff he carried in his pocket. I didn't like to object. Colour comes out nicely!"

"Who does it belong to?"

"A stranger to me. I take everything as it comes. I'm in a small way of business, as you know, Mr. Quinney; but some nice stuff has passed through my hands."

He plunged into an ocean of reminiscences, punctuating his remarks with lamentations of ignorance.

"If I really knew. Suppose it's a gift. You have it, Mr. Quinney. I have a sort of general knowledge of values, but it's the special knowledge that picks up the big bargains."

Quinney returned to his hotel.

At the auction next day two or three country dealers, small men, with whom he had a nodding acquaintance, were bidding. The gentleman who was interested in the picture was present also, languidly indifferent to the proceedings. However, he became animated when the picture was put up as "a valuable Madonna and Child, the work of an old master." The gentleman bid a hundred for it, apparently to the surprise of the small dealers.

"One hundred and twenty-five," said Quinney.

The gentleman bent down to whisper a word to a man who stood next him, and then he stared hard at Quinney, with a slight frown upon his smooth forehead.

"One hundred and fifty," he said quietly.

Finally Quinney secured the picture for eleven hundred pounds, well pleased at having secured it so cheap. The rival bidder led him aside.

"You are the famous dealer, Joseph Quinney?"

Quinney smiled complacently. The gentleman continued in a whisper:

"I expected to get that picture for a hundred pounds. You have fairly outbidden me, and I could not bid a farthing more to-day; but will you kindly tell me what you will take for your bargain?"

"Sorry," said Quinney; "but I bought it on a commission for a well-known collector."

"There is no more to be said," replied the other.

He nodded pleasantly and vanished. Quinney never saw him again. Nor did he see Major Archibald Fraser. Quinney paid the auctioneer with a cheque, and returned to London, after wiring the Major that the treasure was his. Three days later, not hearing a word from his client, he became slightly uneasy. His cheque had been cashed; the picture was in his possession. The abominable truth leaked out slowly. Major Archibald Fraser, of Loch Tarvie, had been impersonated by a *chevalier d'industrie*. The picture was worth, perhaps, forty pounds, and the frame another five-and-twenty!

The pigeon from the country had been plucked.

III

The poor fellow sobbed out the facts to his Susan in a passion of self-abasement. The loss of the money was serious enough, but what ground him to powder was the fact that he had become the laughing-stock of the London dealers. Every man jack of them knew. He could not show his face in an auction room without provoking spasms of raucous laughter. The Dorchester auctioneer, called upon to prove his innocence (which he did), made the tale public. It was acclaimed as

"copy" by scores of newspapers. And salt was rubbed into his wounds by the reporters whose sympathy seemed to lie with the two scoundrels who had devised so clever a scheme, and escaped with the swag! There was a cruel headline: "A Biter Bit."

"Whom have I bit?" he demanded of Susan.

The little woman mingled her tears with his, but no words of hers could assuage his misery or stem the torrent of self-accusation.

"Nice sort of fool you've married! A mug of mugs! You was right. Ought to have remained in Melchester! Ought to have remained in swaddling clothes! Ought never to have been born!"

He apostrophized Posy, now a child of ten.

"Nice sort of father you've got! Look at him! Why didn't you choose somebody else, hey? Picked a wrong'un, you did!"

Posy lifted her young voice and wept with her parents. And then Susan, almost hysterical, said with unconscious humour:

"Gracious! Isn't this a rainy afternoon!"

IV

After a few days the sun shone again. Lord Mel, who had returned to England, called upon his former tenant, and listened with sympathy to the tale of thwackings. Quinney added details which he had kept from Susan. Fired by Tomlin, he had ventured into the Kaffir Market, where the bears had mauled him. His losses, fortunately, were inconsiderable; but once again he had been "downed" by Londoners. He was too proud to whine before Lord Mel, and from long habit he expressed himself whimsically.

"Not fit to cross the road without a policeman. Time I advertised for a nurse or a keeper!"

"Are you thinking of going back to Melchester?"

At this Quinney exploded.

"My lord, I couldn't face Pinker, and Mrs. Biddlecombe would cackle and nag at me till I wrung her neck. She wrote to Susan to say that she was sorry to hear that the Lord had seen fit to afflict me grievously. In her heart she's glad."

"You don't blame the Lord?"

"I blame myself. I've been a silly daw, strutting about like a peacock. I wanted a fight, and I've had it; but I can't go back to Melchester. I must stick it out here, win or lose, customers or no customers. If the worst comes to the worst, I can sell to dealers. It means slavery."

"But you have some customers?"

"Very few—the wrong sort. Mostly women, who don't value their own time or mine. They look at my stuff, and call it 'rather nice'; they try to pick up a few wrinkles about glass and porcelain, and then they drift out, promising to call again."

"We must try to alter this."

"It does me good to see your lordship's face again."

Lord Mel bought a table and some Irish glass. He shook Quinney's hand at parting genially.

"You've had a dose. Perhaps your system needed it. Pay my respects to Mrs. Quinney, and tell her not to worry."

Quinney ran upstairs to Susan.

"Lord Mel's been in. Sent his respects to you. You're not to worry—see?"

"I am not worrying much, Joe. Nobody escapes hard times."

"His lordship has faith in me. He ain't offended. Just the same as ever. I told him everything—more than I told you."

"More than you told me?"

"I lost a few hundreds dabbling in mines. All that foolishness is over and done with. I mean to stick to what I know, and the people I know who'll stick to me. I shall give my undivided attention to business. I mean to work harder than ever, so as to win back what I've lost."

"How much have you lost, dear?"

"I'm not speakin' of money, Susie. I've lost my self-respect, and I don't stand with you just where I did."

"You do—you know you do!"

He shook his head obstinately.

"I know I don't. You ain't suffering from a crick in the neck along of lookin' up at me. I ain't been soaring lately. Wriggling like a crushed worm about fits me."

"Joe, dear, you've never quite understood me."

"Hey?"

"I married you for better or worse."

He stared at her amazedly.

"Lawsy! It never entered into your pretty head that it could be for worse?"

"I should love you just the same if it were."

"No, no, that ain't sense, Susie. It won't wash. You loved me because I was Joe Quinney—a feller with ambitions, a worker, a man with brains in his head. If I failed you, I should expect you to despise me. I should feel that I'd had you under false pretences."

Susan smiled very faintly. Her voice was curiously incisive:

"You have a lot to learn yet, Joe, about persons."

CHAPTER XII

POSY

I

Lord Mel sent many customers to Soho Square. He felt sincerely sorry for the little man, and told everybody that he was a fighter and a striver, and "straight." Within a few months Quinney became the Quinney of old, full of enthusiasm and swagger, exuding energy, quite confident that he was soaring and likely to become a spire! An American millionaire one morning made a clean sweep of half the treasures in the sanctuary. Orders to furnish rooms in a given style with first-class reproductions came joyously to hand, and were executed promptly and at a reasonable price.

In due time, also, he became a member of the inner ring of big dealers. They tried to "freeze him out" by inflating prices, often at a serious loss to themselves, but eventually they were constrained to admit that the Melchester man was too shrewd for them, with a knowledge of values which seemed to have fallen upon him like the dew from heaven. At any moment he might stop bidding with an abruptness very disconcerting to the older men, leaving them with the *lapin* which they were trying to impose upon him.

In those early days he found the Caledonian market a happy hunting-ground, securing immense quantities of Georgian steel fire-irons, fenders, and dog-grates, at that time in no demand. He stored them in his immense cellars, covering them with a villainous preparation of his own which defied rust.

"Good stuff to lay down," he remarked.

Afterwards the big dealers asked him how he had contrived to foresee the coming demand for old cut glass. Of this he had bought immense quantities also. He answered them in his own fashion.

"Can you tell me why one breed of dog noses out truffles?"

He bought innumerable spinets, good, bad, and indifferent, with reckless confidence. Even Tomlin remonstrated.

"What are you going to do with them?"

"You'll see," said Quinney.

One more blunder—and the use to which he turned it—must be chronicled.

By this time he was recognized as an expert on eighteenth-century furniture. But he admitted that there were one or two who knew more than he. Tomlin, for example, who would drop in at least once a week for a chat and a glass of brown sherry. Upon one of these visits he found Quinney in a state of enthusiasm over a Chippendale armchair, unearthed in a small provincial town. Tomlin examined it carefully, and pronounced it a fake.

Quinney refused to believe this; but ultimately conviction that he had been "had" once more was forced upon him.

"Bar none, it's the best copy I ever saw," remarked Tomlin.

Quinney accepted his old friend's chaff with some chucklings. Next day, he returned to the provincial town, and discovered the young cabinet-maker who had made the fake. He returned to Soho in triumph, bringing the cabinet-maker with him. His name was James Miggott, and he entered into a contract to serve Quinney for three years at a salary of two pounds a week.

"Seems a lot," said Susan.

"He was earning twenty-five bob. I shall turn him loose on those spinets."

Most people know something about Quinney's spinets transformed by the hand of the skilful James into writing-desks, sideboards, and dressing-tables. The spinets brought many customers to Soho Square.

"Stock booming?" said Tomlin.

"It is," said Quinney. He added reflectively: "I sold a spinet to-day, for which I gave fifteen shillings, for just the same number o' pounds. James put in just one week on it. That's all, by Gum!"

Some dealers maintain that Quinney made his reputation with spinets, inasmuch as he sold more of them for a couple of years than the trade put together. But he himself believes that his Waterford glass brought the right customers—the famous collectors who buy little, but talk and write much. They liked Quinney because he was so keen; and he never grudged the time spent in showing his wares to non-buyers.

"They tell others," he observed to Susan. "No 'ad.' can beat that."

He had other dodges to capture trade. It became known that he charged nothing for giving his opinion upon specimens submitted to him. And he had an endearing habit of writing to purchasers of the spinets within a few months or weeks of the deal, offering an advance on the price paid, a "nice little profit," invariably refused.

"Bless 'em! It warms their hearts to think they've made a sound investment."

"How surprised and disappointed you'd be, Joe, if they accepted your offer!"

"Right you are, Susie; but there's little fear of that, my girl."

When a new customer entered the shop, Quinney would adopt an air of

guileless indifference, which was likely to provoke the remark:

"Where is Mr. Quinney?"

"I'm Quinney. Like to have a look round? You may see something you fancy."

"That's a nice pie-crust table."

"It's a gem. Cheap, too."

Then he would give a low whistle, a clear, flute-like note. James would appear from below.

"Where's the receipted bill for this table?"

The bill was produced and shown to the stranger.

"See? Paid four pounds seventeen for it, just five weeks ago. Look at the date. You shall have it for six pounds, and, by Gum! I'll make you this offer. You can return it to me any day you like within a year, and I'll give you five pound ten for it. How's that, as between man and man?"

These seemingly artless methods captivated the "think-it-overs" and the "rather-nicers," who frequent curiosity shops in ever-increasing numbers. Mothers brought daughters to Soho Square to acquire historical information. Quinney refused to sell a Jacobean armchair because it was so useful an object-lesson to young and inquiring minds.

"Look at that, madam," he would say. Perhaps the lady would murmur softly: "It is rather nice, isn't it?" And the flapper would exclaim enthusiastically: "Mumsie, it's perfectly lovely!"

"Much more than that!" Quinney would add, with mysterious chucklings. "See that rose? It's a Stuart rose. And that crown on the front splat is an emblem of loyalty to the Merry Monarch."

"Dear me! You hear that, Kitty!"

"Pay particular attention to the legs, ladies. Ball and paw, the lion's paw, with hair above them, indicatin' the strength of the Constitootion after the Restoration. Chapter of English history, that chair."

He could embellish such simple themes according to fancy, and with due regard for the patience of his listener. To Susan he spoke of these intellectual exercises as "my little song and dance."

II

Meanwhile, Posy was growing up, becoming a tall, slender, pretty girl. She attended a day-school in Orchard Street—a select seminary for young ladies. Susan accompanied her to and from Orchard Street. By this time she had accepted, with a serenity largely temperamental, the fate allotted to her. Once more Quinney

was absorbed in his business. Adversity had brought husband and wife together, prosperity sundered them. Very rarely does it happen that a successful man can spare time to spend on his wife. The charming slackers make the most congenial mates. Compensation has thus ordained it, wherein lie tragedy and comedy. Many women, to the end of their lives, are incapable of realizing this elementary fact. They want their husbands to climb high—the higher the better; they understand, perhaps more clearly than men, what can be seen and enjoyed from the tops; they pluck, often as a matter of course, and gobble up the grapes of Eschol, but they refuse to accept the inevitable penalties of supreme endeavour. Their husbands return to them almost foundered, fit only to eat and sleep. In the strenuous competition of to-day what else is possible?

Susan did not complain, but then she belonged to the generation who accepted with pious resignation life as it is. Indeed, she accounted herself singularly fortunate, and whenever the present seemed dreary she fortified herself by thinking of a rosy past, or projected herself into an enchanted future, when he and she, Darby and Joan, would wander hand in hand to some garden of sleep, some drowsy country churchyard, where they would lie down together to await an ampler and happier intercourse in the life beyond.

Her interest in persons as opposed to things quickened with the growth of her child. Posy became to her what a Chelsea shepherdess modelled by Roubillac was to Quinney—a bit of wonderful porcelain to be enshrined, a museum piece! The maternal instincts budded and bloomed the more bravely because conjugal emotion was denied full expression. She faced unflinchingly the conviction that Posy must marry and leave her. By that time Joe might be more ready to enjoy the fruits of labour. For the moment, then, her husband was pigeon-holed. He remained at the back of her mind, at the bottom of her heart, masked by that sprightly creature, his daughter.

Posy accepted Susan's love as a matter of course.

III

For her years—she was just fifteen—the girl exhibited a precocious intelligence and an essentially masculine shrewdness which distinguished her sire. In the girl's presence Quinney observed no reticences. Invariably he discussed, with boyish zest and volubility, the day's trafficking. Posy was not allowed to potter about the shop, but she ran at will in and out of the sanctuary, and she knew the value of every "gem" in it, and its history. Susan dared not interfere, but she prayed that Joe's child might not be tempted to worship false gods. In an artless fashion she attempted to inculcate a taste for high romance. She read aloud

Ivanhoe, and was much distressed by Posy's comments upon certain aspects of the tale.

"The men had a good time, but the women's lives must have been deadly. I'm jolly glad that I'm a twen-center!" She continued fluently: "You have a rotten time, mummie."

"My dear!"

"But you do. I couldn't stick your life!"

She used slang freely, protesting, when rebuked, that she picked it up from the lips of her chum, Ethel Honeybun, who was exalted as the daughter of a Member of Parliament. Susan's silence encouraged her to go on:

"I want all the fun I can get. What fun have you had? You sew a lot, you read aloud to me, you take me to school—although I'm quite able to go alone—you order the meals, you are father's slave."

"I won't have you say that!"

"But it's true."

"I love your father. I married for love. I am happy and contented in my own home. I have no patience with these new-fangled notions about women's rights and women's wrongs."

"Ethel says——"

"I don't wish to hear what Ethel says. Fun, indeed! Why, child, I've had you."

"Was that fun?" She spoke seriously, fixing her mother with a pair of clear, grey eyes. "Some girls love dolls. Dolls rather bored me. Is it fun to mess about with a baby, wash it and dress it, and take it out in a pram? I call hockey fun."

"You'll lose a front tooth some fine day. That will be great fun."

"Let's be perfectly calm. I love talking things out. You don't. I mean to say you try to hide your real self from me. Didn't you think and talk as I do when you were a girl?"

"Most certainly not!"

"You are an old-fashioned darling, and I love you for it! I shouldn't like you to talk as Mrs. Honeybun does. She says you and father spoil me. I wonder if that's true. She gives Ethel beans sometimes, and Ethel answers back as if they were equals. It would give Granny a fit to hear her!"

Twice a year Posy paid a ceremonial visit to Mrs. Biddlecombe. The old lady was very fond of her, although she sniffed at her upbringing. Posy, indeed, had won a moral victory during her first visit, shortly after the Quinneys moved to London. At the end of three days Mrs. Biddlecombe had said majestically to the child:

"I hope you're enjoying yourself, my dear!"

"I'm not," said Posy, with shocking candour.

"Why not?" demanded the astonished grandmother.

"Because you've been so wonnerful peevish."

"Bless my soul, what next! Well, well, you are a pert little maid, but I must try to be more agreeable."

Posy eyed her reflectively.

"I dare say," she murmured, "that I should be wonnerful peevish too, if I was very, very old."

Quinney, against Susan's wishes and protests, insisted that the child should be brought up "as a little princess." She was given many so-called advantages. She was taught to play the piano indifferently well; she danced beautifully; she could chatter French, and was now struggling with German.

"Spare no expense," said Quinney magnificently.

IV

His intimate relations with the growing girl remained constant. He would make the same remarks, pinch her blooming cheeks, pat her head, and kiss her smooth forehead.

"How's my pet this morning?"

"Quite all right, daddy, thank you."

"Gettin' on nicely with your lessons?"

"Oh yes."

Once, when she was five years old, he had soundly smacked her. The sprite had discovered the efficacy of tears as a solvent of difficulties. Whenever her little will was crossed she howled. She howled as if she enjoyed it, and her father was shrewd enough to know this. One morning he caught her up, laid her across his knee, and spanked her till his hand ached. Next day Posy smiled very sweetly at him, and said reproachfully:

"Daddy pank a Posy too hard."

But she stopped howling.

He was well pleased when she began to make friends with people like the Honeybuns. Honeybun was an ubiquitous Socialist who slept at Clapham. Like Quinney, he had soared. The two men had nothing in common except this, but it was a bond between them. Mrs. Honeybun had been a governess in the family of a nobleman. She, too, had soared into an empyrean of advanced thinkers and workers. Familiarity with the titled classes had bred contempt for them. In and out of season she denounced the luxury and indolence of an effete aristocracy. Her own household was managed abominably. She preached and practised the virtues of an Edenic diet. Butcher's meat was spoken of scathingly as the

source of most physical and moral infirmities. Apart from this prejudice against flesh-pots and aristocrats, she was a kindly woman, over-zealous as a reformer, displaying a too tempestuous petticoat, but burning with ardour to ameliorate the condition of the poor and oppressed.

She exercised an enormous influence over Posy.

And it is not easy to analyse this influence, which, however well meant, was not entirely for good. Mrs. Honeybun was clever enough to admit that there can be no great gain without an appreciable loss. The only thing that mattered was the satisfaction of being able to affirm that the gain outweighed the loss. Her favourite hobby, which she rode mercilessly, was the necessity of Self-expression, the revealing of the Ego, the essential Spirit loosed from the bondage of the flesh.

Unhappily, to understand the Honeybun philosophy, a mosaic of all creeds, it became necessary to master the "patter." The word is perhaps offensive, but it describes exactly the amazing jargon habitually in the mouths of the exponents of the New Revelation. It is rather dangerous, for example, to tell a young girl adored by her parents that she must begin by loving Herself. Properly assimilated, the injunction is Socratic. Posy accepted it literally. Mrs. Honeybun, of course, explained what she meant, but at such length, with such divagations and irrelevancies, that Posy soon became bored. She told herself that Ethel's mother was a dear, an understanding person, tremendously clever and modern, a twencenter! She could obey this kind and fluent teacher with hearty goodwill. It was so delightfully easy to begin with loving one's Ego.

Susan, it may be imagined, heard too much and too often of the Honeybuns; and she smiled when she discovered that the meals were "skimpy." Posy had a healthy appetite not to be satisfied with nut cutlets or vegetable pie badly cooked and served at odd hours. No servant stayed long with the Honeybuns, because the remains of cold "vegy" pie were expected to be consumed at "elevenses." Susan commented slily on this.

"Your friend, Mrs. Honeybun, seemingly, manages everything and everybody except her own house and her own servants."

To this Posy fervently replied:

"The spiritual food in that house is simply wonderful!"

Before many weeks had passed Susan was given an opportunity of testing the truth of this statement. Mrs. Biddlecombe invited Posy to spend a fortnight in Melchester—a precious fortnight out of the mid-summer holidays. Ethel, some twenty-four hours later, entreated her friend to join the Honeybun family at Ramsgate. Much to Susan's dismay Posy announced her intention of going to Ramsgate.

"It's deadly dull at Melchester, mummie, and just think what a privilege it is, what an opportunity to spend a fortnight with Ethel's mother."

To her astonishment, Ethel's mother placed a different interpretation upon the opportunity.

"Of course, you will go to your grandmother, and I shall expect you to be charming to the old lady. In the nature of things, you can't pay her many more visits. Make this one a fragrant and imperishable memory. Express what is your true self by your devotion to an aged and apparently irritable grandmother."

Posy obeyed, with a result which had special bearing on events duly to be chronicled. Mrs. Biddlecombe, captivated by the sweetness and dutifulness of one whom she had hitherto regarded as a spoiled child, altered her will, leaving everything she possessed to Posy. Susan, she was aware, would be adequately provided for. Perhaps it tickled an elementary sense of humour to make Posy independent of a too autocratic father.

CHAPTER XIII

RUCTIONS

I

If this veracious chronicle were to be considered as a novel written for a purpose, or even what critics term "a serious contribution to contemporary literature," it might be necessary to write at greater length concerning the Honeybun philosophy. Enough, however, has been said to indicate the startling—startling, that is to say, to a young mind—contrast between the Quinney practices and the Honeybun precepts. Substantial meals, admirably cooked, were eaten at regular hours in Soho Square, and the table talk was as material as the roast and boiled. Quinney, before his young daughter, exulted honestly in his hard-won success. The gospel of work was preached in both houses—too insistently, perhaps—but an Atlantic roared between them.

For some months Posy was shrewd enough to digest the Honeybun teaching in silence. She prattled away to her mother, well aware that her girlish confidence would not be repeated to her father. Susan, indeed, served as a lay figure upon which she could drape new ideas and confections. Susan was a born listener. In Lavender Gardens the art of talking was practised by every member of the family simultaneously. Nobody listened, except Posy, who hoped that the day would soon come when she might be considered worthy to join the magnificent chorus. For the moment her mind was expanding. Under her father's tutelage,

she was acquiring a knowledge of beautiful things, masterpieces of handicraft; in Lavender Gardens, where no lavender grew, beautiful ideas, Utopian schemes for the regeneration of all woman-kind, were poured unstintingly into her brain-cells.

So far, so good!

Those of us who clamour for results, who yearn to tabulate and classify inevitable consequences, will have prepared themselves for ructions. Quinney was a fighter, a fighter for his own hand. The Honeybuns fought quite as aggressively on behalf of others. It is a nice point for moralists to consider whether or not a woman like Mrs. Honeybun is justified in filling the mind of a young girl with more or less disturbing theories, thinly disguised as cardinal principles, which must sooner or later clash seriously with home teaching. Mrs. Honeybun had no qualms on the subject, being too ardent a propagandist to consider effects when causes were so dear to her. In her small hall, thick with dust from the feet of many pilgrims, hung a brilliantly illuminated text, purple and gold upon vellum:

"LET THERE BE LIGHT!"

She appropriated enthusiastically any text out of the New Testament which could serve her purpose. Texts from the same source, which might be used against that purpose, were triumphantly capped by convincing quotations from the Veda, or the Koran, or the writings of Confucius. The accomplished lady was armed *cap-à-pie* with the coagulated wisdom of the ages.

Posy's first encounter with her father took place, by the luck of things, at a moment when the little man had just concluded a more than usually successful deal with a millionaire who collected things he did not understand. All big dealers have exceptional days and weeks when Fortune comes to them with both hands full. A clean sweep of many "gems" had been accomplished—what Quinney called a "mop up." His mind naturally was concentrated upon filling the gaps in the sanctuary with other gems of even purer ray serene. Posy confided to Ethel that at such moments her daddy "swanked." The temptation to make a swanker "sit up" under the process described in Lavender Gardens as "seeing things in their true proportion" was irresistible to a young and ardent acolyte. Posy conceived it to be her duty, her mission, to lead her parents to the light. Admittedly, they wallowed in outer darkness.

She tackled her father at breakfast, which, as a rule, he gobbled up in silence, thinking of the day's work ahead. A wiser than she would have selected the postprandial hour, when Nicotina clouds the air of controversy with beneficent and soothing vapours. Quinney had mentioned curtly that he was going to attend a sale at Christopher's. Whereupon Posy threw this bomb:

"Daddy, dear, when are you going to retire from active business?"

Quinney stared at his daughter. Her intelligent eyes were sparkling; in her delicately-cut nostrils titillated the dust of battle.

"Retire from—business?"

"Haven't you made enough?"

Susan looked frightened, but she had anticipated a conflict between two strong wills, and was acutely sensible of her own impotence to prevent it.

"Ho! Now, what do you call enough, my girl?"

Posy was prepared to answer this. She riposted swiftly:

"Haven't we enough to live on decently, and something to spare for others?"

"We?" His voice took a sharper inflection. "How much have you laid by, missie?"

The sharpness and veiled impatience of her tone matched his as she answered:

"You know what I mean."

"I don't. What I've made is mine—my very own. I can do what I like with it."

"Oh, father!"

"Oh, father!" He mimicked her cleverly. "Do you have the sauce to sit there and tell me, your father, that what I've made isn't mine?"

Posy quoted Mrs. Honeybun with overwhelming effect.

"You are a trustee for what you hold, accountable for every penny."

"Accountable—to you?"

He leaned forward, forgetting his bacon, which he liked frizzlingly hot.

"Accountable to Society and God."

"Ho! Then suppose you leave me, my young chick, to account in my own way to Society and God?"

Posy blushed. Let us not label her rashly as a prig. The nymph Echo must have repeated silly remarks in her time. Posy said slowly, speaking with conviction:

"I am part of Society, and I am part of what we call, for want of a better word, God."

Susan murmured warningly:

"That will do, Posy."

"No, it won't!" shouted Quinney. "We'll have this out here and now. What d'ye mean? What the devil d'ye mean? Are you dotty? Why do you spring this on me? What's the game? 'Ave you been a-listening to blasphemous agitators a-spoutin' rubbish in 'Yde Park?"

"No."

"Then where does she get it from?" He appealed to Susan with frantic gestures. "You hear her, mother. Where does she get this from? Answer me!"

"Such talk is in the air, Joe," Susan replied feebly. Explosions lacerated her ears. She had come to place an inordinate value upon peace and quiet.

"In the air! By Gum! she's been breathing the wrong air." Inspiration gripped and shook him. "Gosh! You got this from that dirty Socialist, Honeybun. Don't deny it! These are his notions. But I never thought he'd poison your young mind with 'em."

Posy said with dignity:

"Mr. Honeybun is the best man I know. He practises what he preaches; he lives in and for others. He uses his talents, regardless of his own comfort and worldly prosperity, to ameliorate the lot of the poor and oppressed."

Echo again.

"Poor and oppressed! Ameliorate! What a talker! Now, look ye here, young Posy, I'm going to deal squarely by you. I'm square to the four winds of Heaven, I am! You and I have got to understand each other—see? You're as green as the grass, but you do 'ave some of my brains. I ain't a-goin' to argue with you for one minute. Don't think it! I've forgotten more than you ever knew. Talk is the cheapest thing in London, but knaves like Honeybun buy fools with it. Don't you toss your head! You've made your pore dear mother cry, and you've taken away father's appetite. A nice morning's work. Now, listen! No more Honeybunning! You hear me?"

"Everybody in the house can hear you."

"More sauce! You stand up, miss!"

They rose together, confronting each other. Quinney's scrubby red hair was on end with rage; Posy's small bosom heaved tumultuously. Of late the girl had taken to the wearing of cheap beads and blouses cut low in the neck. Ethel had lamentable taste, but, according to her mother, it was expedient that maidens should work out their own salvation in such matters without parental interference. Quinney scowled at the beads and the white, rounded neck.

"Take off that rubbish!"

"Ethel gave them to me."

"Take 'em off quick! Mother, you see to it that she wears respectable collars!"

Posy removed two strings of large amethystine beads. Quinney took them and hurled them into the fireplace. Tears rolled down Posy's blooming cheeks. She was unaccustomed to violence—a primitive weapon not to be despised by modern man.

"Them beads," said Quinney, who reverted to the diction of his youth when excited, "is beastly—sinfully beastly! They stand for all that I despise; they stand

for the cheap, trashy talk which you've been defilin' your mind with. What you need is a good spankin'. Now, mother, I leave Miss Impudence with you. Mark well what I say. No more Honeybunning!"

II

It is significant that Quinney neglected his business that memorable morning in the interests of a child who was beginning to believe that she occupied a back seat in her father's mind. After leaving the dining-room, he clapped on his hat, and betook himself straightway to St. James's Square. There was only one man in all London to whom he could go for honest advice, and fortunately he happened to be in town for the season.

Lord Mel received him graciously.

Quinney stated his case quietly. During the course of the narrative Lord Mel smiled more than once, but his sympathies were entirely with the father, for he had endured, not too patiently, somewhat similar scenes with his own daughters. Moreover, he hated Honeybun, whom he had denounced in the Upper Chamber as a mischievous and unscrupulous demagogue.

Quinney ended upon a high note of interrogation:

"What shall I do with her, my lord?"

Lord Mel considered the question, trying to stand upright in the shoes of his former tenant. It is a hopeful sign of the times that such magnates do descend from their pedestals, and attempt, with a certain measure of success, to see eye to eye with the groundlings.

"I prescribe a change of diet, my dear fellow. We must both face the disconcerting fact that girls to-day need special treatment. Mrs. Honeybun is one of the Shrieking Sisterhood. I have heard her shriek—she does it effectively. Noise appeals to the very young. I suggest removing Posy from Orchard Street, and sending her to a carefully conducted boarding school, where plenty of fresh air and exercise will soon blow these ideas out of her pretty head. There are dozens of such schools scattered along our south coast."

"Send her away from me and her mother?"

"Drastic, I admit, but you have put it admirably. 'No more Honeybunning!' Keep her in London, and she may Honeybun on the sly. Will you entrust this little matter of finding a suitable school to me?"

"Your lordship is a real friend."

"I will speak to my lady."

"Expense don't matter," said Quinney earnestly. "I want my daughter to have the best, because, my lord, as a young feller, I had the worst. No education

at all! Posy's a wonderful talker! She'd have downed me this morning if I'd let her. She talks like—like——"

"Like Honeybun, eh?"

"If I wasn't sittin' in your lordship's library, I should damn that dirty dog!"

"Such fellows thrive on abuse. That is their weapon. We must use others—ridicule, for example. How old is your girl?"

"Nearly sixteen."

"Good! You have nipped a cankered bud in time. You shall hear from me within twenty-four hours, Let me show you an interesting bit of Crown Derby *bisque*." He paused, and added derisively: "You know, Quinney, there are moments when my things appeal to me tremendously. Persons are disappointing, but every day I discover fresh beauties in my china cabinets."

"Same here," said Quinney, with enthusiasm.

III

Accordingly, Posy was dispatched to a boarding school at Bexhill-on-Sea, kept by two gentlewomen of the right sort, sensible, up-to-date, highly-trained teachers, who ruled well and wisely over some twenty girls, the daughters, for the most part, of hard-working, professional men. Here we will leave Posy in good company. She was feeling sore and humiliated after an unconditional surrender; but her sense of impotence soon passed away. She loved her whimsical father and desired to please him, although she writhed—as he had writhed—under the heel of parental discipline. She began to study with assiduity, and was highly commended.

IV

Meanwhile, Susan and Quinney were left alone for the first time since Posy's birth. Susan rejoiced in secret. She had her Joe to herself. Posy was in the habit of dusting the more valuable bits of china in the sanctuary, and cleaning the old glass. Susan undertook these small duties, and pottered in and out of the sanctuary at all hours. Quinney threw crumbs of talk to her, but he refused emphatically her timid request to serve him once more as a saleswoman. At his wish, she rarely entered the shop below. James Miggott was in charge of that. Quinney was engrossed with the buying and selling of "stuff"; he attended to an immense correspondence, writing all his letters in the sanctuary, where he could pause from his labours to suck fresh energy from the contemplation of

his treasures. The prices he paid for some of them terrified Susan, although she knew that he made few mistakes and immense profits. She remarked that his reluctance to part with the finest specimens had become almost a monomania. There was a lacquer cabinet; in particular, standing upon a richly gilded Charles the Second stand. Quinney had paid eight hundred pounds for it, and he had been offered a thousand guineas within six months. He confessed to Susan that he couldn't live without it. The cabinet was flanked by an incised lacquer screen, a miracle of Chinese workmanship. He refused a handsome profit on that. Susan asked herself:

"Does he worship these false gods? Would he miss that cabinet more than he would miss me?"

She noticed, too, that he was overworked. During his many absences from home letters would accumulate. To answer them he rose earlier and went to bed later, deaf to her remonstrance. He promised to engage a typist and stenographer—some day.

Nevertheless, this was a pleasant time, but it lasted only a few months. Mrs. Biddlecombe took to her bed again. Susan was summoned to Melchester. The old lady was really dying, but she took her time about it. Susan ministered to her till the end.

After the funeral, when she returned to Soho Square, a surprise awaited her. Quinney had fulfilled his promise. In the sanctuary, at a beautiful Carlton desk, sat Miss Mabel Dredge, a young and attractive woman, the typist and stenographer. Poor Susan experienced tearing pangs of jealousy when she beheld her, but Quinney's treatment of the stranger was reassuring. Obviously, he regarded Miss Dredge as a machine.

And his unaffected delight over Susan's return home was positively rejuvenating.

CHAPTER XIV

JAMES MIGGOTT

I

In common with other great men who have achieved success, Quinney was endowed with a Napoleonic faculty of picking the right men to serve him. Having done so, he treated them generously, so that they remained in his service, loath

to risk a change for the worse. He paid good wages, and was complaisant in the matter of holidays.

James Miggott had been his most fortunate discovery. James was "brainy" (we quote Quinney), ambitious, healthy, and an artist in his line: the repairing of valuable old furniture. Also he was good-looking, which counted with his employer. A few weeks after joining the establishment it had been arranged that he should sleep in a comfortable room in the basement, and take his meals at a restaurant in Old Compton Street. During his provincial circuits Quinney liked to know that a man was in charge of the house at night. James's habits, apparently, were as regular as his features.

By this time he had come to be regarded as foreman. Bit by bit he had won Quinney's entire confidence. The master talked to the man more freely than he talked to Susan about everything connected with his business. James listened attentively, made occasionally some happy suggestion, and betrayed no signs of a swollen head. A natural inflation might have been expected. Quinney's eyes failed to detect it. Moreover, Susan liked him, and respected him. He attended Divine service on Sundays; he ate and drank in moderation; he was scrupulously neat in appearance; he had received a sound education, and expressed himself well in good English. Truly a paragon!

Quinney had secured Miss Mabel Dredge after his own fashion. Hitherto his typewriting had been done by a firm which employed a score of typists. The head of that firm happened to be a lady of great intelligence and energy, the widow of a stockbroker who had died bankrupt. Quinney knew about her, liked and admired her, and told her so in his whimsical way. She liked and respected Quinney. Also, by an odd coincidence, Mrs. Frankland had begun her struggle for existence in London at the time when Quinney left Melchester. They had compared notes; each had undergone thwackings. When Mrs. Frankland began to make money she spent most of it at Quinneys'. Amongst other bits, she had bought a spinet—cheap. Accordingly, when Quinney entreated her to find a competent young woman, she generously offered him the pick of her establishment.

Mabel Dredge went with alacrity, glad to escape from a small table in a large room, not too well ventilated. She intended, from the first, to give satisfaction, to "hold down" the new job. She was tall and dark, with a clear, colourless skin, and a rather full-lipped mouth, which indicated appreciation of the good things in life. Mrs. Frankland had said to her:

"You will earn a bigger salary, Mabel, and Mr. Quinney won't make love to you."

Mabel Dredge smiled pensively. She could take care of herself, and she had no reason to suppose that she was susceptible. Men had made love to her, but they were the wrong men. She had refused kind invitations to lunch or dine at

smart restaurants. When she walked home after the day's work she encountered smiles upon the faces of well-dressed loafers. No answering smile on her lips encouraged these dear-stalkers to address her. But, deep down in her heart, was a joyous and thrilling conviction that she was desirable. The male passers-by who did not smile aroused unhappy qualms. Was she losing her looks? Was she growing old? Could it be possible that she might die an old maid?

Upon the morning when she appeared in Soho Square Quinney sent for James. He said abruptly:

"James Miggott will show you round. If you want to know anything, go to him. Don't ask me foolish questions, because that makes me lose my hair; and I ain't got any to lose that way. See?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Dessay he'll tell you where you can get a plate of roast beef in the middle of the day, between one and two. You have an hour off then. What did Mrs. Frankland allow you?"

"Forty minutes."

"Just so. You'll find me easy to get along with, if you do your duty. James will tell you that I'm a remarkable man. I call him James, and I shall call you Mabel. It saves time, and time's money. You can scoot off with James."

The pair disappeared. Quinney's eyes twinkled. He was thinking of Susan, and recalling that memorable afternoon when he kissed her for the first time behind the parlour-door in Laburnum Row.

II

We have mentioned James Miggott's almost magical powers of transforming eighteenth-century spinets into desks and dressing-tables. These useful and ornamental pieces of furniture were sold as converted spinets, and they commanded a handsome price because the transformation was achieved with such consummate art. Even experts were at a loss to point out the difference between what was originally old and what had been added. James had access to Quinney's collection of mahogany—the broken chairs, tables, beds, doors, and bureaux which the little man had bought for a song of sixpence before mahogany leapt again into fashion. The collection had begun in Melchester, and Quinney was always adding to it. In it might be found exquisitely carved splats and rails and ball-and-claw legs, many of them by the hand of the great craftsmen—Chippendale, Sheraton, Hepplewhite, and Adam. One cellar and two attics were full of these interesting relics.

Shortly after James's appearance in Soho Square Quinney succumbed to the

temptation of doctoring "cripples," which besets most honest dealers in antique furniture. He had, as we know, pledged himself not to sell faked specimens of china or faked old oak, except as such. And he had stuck to the strict letter of this promise, thereby securing many customers, and winning their confidence. It had paid him to be honest. With sorrowful reluctance we must give some account of his divagations from the straight and narrow way.

The temptation assailed Quinney with especial virulence, because "cripples" of high degree appealed to him quite as strongly as, let us say, a desperately injured sprig of nobility, battered to bits in a motor accident, may appeal to the skill and patience of a famous surgeon. When Quinney found a genuine Chippendale chair *in articulo mortis*, he could sit down and weep beside it. To restore it to health and beauty became a labour of love, almost a duty. He had not, of course, the technical skill for such work; and he had not found any cabinetmaker who was absolutely the equal of the Minihy man till he discovered James Miggott. The first important task assigned to James was the mending of an elaborately carved Chippendale settee, a museum piece. James threw his heart and his head into the job; and, within the year, that settee was sold at Christopher's, after examination by experts, as an untouched and perfect specimen. Quinney was no party to this fraud, for the settee had never belonged to him, but it opened his eyes to the possibilities of patching "cripples." And every week he was being offered these "cripples." The finest specimens, by the best craftsmen, are rare; the full sets of eight incomparable chairs, for instance, come but seldom into the open market. But the "cripples" may be found in any cottage in the kingdom, fallen from the high estate of some stately saloon to the attic of a servant.

Tom Tomlin was one of the very few who saw the Chippendale settee after James had restored it. Within a few days he attempted to lure the young man from Soho Square, but James refused an offer of a larger salary, and elected to stay with Quinney. Possibly he mistrusted Tomlin, whose general appearance was far from prepossessing. Tomlin, however, was not easily baffled. He seized an early opportunity of speaking privately to Quinney.

"Joe," he said, "this young feller is the goods. He can do the trick."

"Do what trick?"

Tomlin winked.

"Any trick, I take it, known to our trade. The very finest faker of old furniture I ever came across. Now, as between man and man, are you going to make a right and proper use of him?"

"What d'ye mean, Tom?"

"Tchah! You know well enough what I mean. Why beat about the bush with an old friend? Are you going to turn this young man loose amongst that old stuff you've collected?"

Quinney laughed, shaking his head.

"Am I going to let James Miggott fake up all that old stuff? No, by Gum! No!"

"But, damn it! Why not?"

"Several reasons. One'll do. I've sworn solemn not to sell fakes unless they're labelled as such."

"Of all the silly rot——"

"There it is."

Tomlin went away, but he returned next day, and asked for a glass of brown sherry. Quinney had one, too.

"I've a proposition to make," said Tomlin. "You've got a small gold mine in this Miggott, but you don't mean to work him properly. Well, let me do it."

"How?"

"Suppose I send you 'cripples' to be mended. Any objections to that?"

"None."

"This young Miggott mends 'em, and puts in his best licks on 'em too. Then you send 'em back to me."

"That all?"

Tomlin winked.

"Do you want to know any more? Is it your business to inquire what becomes of the stuff after you've doctored it? And, mind you, I shall pay high for the doctorin'. You leave that to me. You won't be disappointed with my cheques."

Let it be remembered, although we hold no brief for Quinney, that this subtle temptation assailed him shortly after his bludgeonings, when he was tingling with impatience to "get even" with the Londoners who had "downed" him.

In fine, he accepted Tomlin's offer.

Quinney has since confessed that at first he was very uneasy, honesty having become a pleasant and profitable habit. There were moments when he envied moral idiots like Tomlin, stout, smiling, red-faced sinners, who positively wallowed and gloried in sinfulness. Tomlin pursued pleasure upon any and every path. He went racing, attended football matches, was a patron of the Drama and the Ring, ate and drank immoderately, made no pretence of being faithful to Mrs. Tomlin, or honest with the majority of his customers. His amazing knowledge of Oriental porcelain had given him an international reputation. He never attempted to deceive the experts, and, in consequence, was quoted as a high authority in such papers as *The Collector* and *Curios*. He knew exactly what his customers needed, and was the cleverest salesman in the kingdom. Less successful dealers affirmed that the devil took especial care of Tom Tomlin.

III

Quinney had no reason to complain of Tomlin's cheques. He knew that his old friend was being scrupulously square, and sharing big profits with him. Tomlin had customers from the Argentine, from the Brazils, from all parts of the earth where fortunes are made and spent swiftly. The "cripples" disappeared mysteriously, and were never heard of again. By this time Tomlin had moved to his famous premises in Bond Street. He had not achieved the position of Mr. Lark, because he lacked that great man's education and polish, but he was quite the equal of Mr. Bundy.

It is important to mention that Tomlin sent very few cripples to Soho Square. Nor were they delivered by his vans. They arrived unexpectedly from provincial towns; they were invariably authentic specimens, the finest "stuff." No understrapper beheld them. James carried them tenderly to his operating theatre, whence they emerged pale of complexion, but sound in limb. Daily massage followed, innumerable rubbings. Then Tomlin would drop in, and nudge Quinney, and chuckle. The two dealers would pull out their glasses and examine the patient with meticulous zeal. James would watch them with a slightly derisive smile upon his handsome face. At the end of his three years' engagement Quinney raised his salary to three pounds a week. The little man expected an extravagant expression of gratitude, but he didn't get it. At times James's smile puzzled him.

IV

Posy remained at Bexhill-on-Sea till she was eighteen. Her friendship for the Honeybuns had been slowly extinguished. Mrs. Honeybun, who mortified everything in her thin body except pride, refused peremptorily to see Posy against the expressed wish of her father. Posy wrote to Ethel long screeds answered with enthusiasm at first and then perfunctorily. At the end of the year the girls drifted apart.

Posy, however, made other friends. When she came home for her first holidays, Quinney and Susan conspired together to make things pleasant for her. She had plenty of pocket money. Susan and she went to many plays, many concerts, all the good shows. Quinney rubbed his hands and chuckled, but he declined to accompany them.

The two years of school passed with astonishing swiftness; and the improvement to Posy quickened a lively gratitude in Quinney to Lord Mel. She developed into a charming young woman, irresponsible as yet, but a joyous crea-

ture, easy to please and be pleased. Quinney was delighted with her. He told her solemnly:

"My poppet, you're a perfect lady; yes, you are."

Posy went into peals of laughter.

"Daddy, how funny you are!"

This talk took place upon the day that Posy said good-bye to her schoolfellows, and returned home as a more or less finished product of the boarding-school system.

"Funny? Me? I don't feel funny, my pretty, when I look at you. I feel proud. One way and t'other I suppose you've cost me nigh upon four thousand pounds!"

"Daddy, dear! Not as much as that, surely?"

Quinney cocked his head at a sharp angle, while he computed certain sums.

"I figure it out in this way," he said slowly. "In hard cash you stand me in about fifteen hundred spread over the last ten years. Now, if I'd stuffed that amount into Waterford glass, I could have cleaned up five thousand at least. See?"

"I see," said Posy, and laughed again.

"The question now is," continued Quinney, absorbed in admiration of her delicate colouring, "what the 'ell am I going to do with such a fancy piece?"

"Father!" exclaimed Susan. "Do please try to remember that you're not talking to Mr. Tomlin."

"When I feel strongly," replied Quinney simply, "I just have to use strong language. Posy has come home to what?"

"She's come home, Joe. That's enough. Why bother about anything else?"

"Because I'm the bothering sort, old dear—that's why. I look ahead. I count my chickens before they're hatched."

Susan said slily:

"Yes, you made sure that this chicken was going to be hatched a boy."

The three laughed. It was a pleasant moment of compensation for long years of anxiety and toil. Each had worked for it. Posy had submitted, not without kickings and prickings, to strict discipline; Quinney, from the child's birth, had determined that the stream must rise higher than its source; Susan, serenely hopeful about the future, had worried unceasingly over the present, concerned about petty ailments, the putting on and off of suitable under-linen, and so forth.

"Don't bother about me, daddy; I'm all right."

"By Gum, you are! That's why I bother. In my experience it's the right bits that get smashed!"

V

Perhaps nobody was more surprised at the change in Posy than James Miggott. Hitherto the young lady, home for the holidays, had ignored him, not purposely—she was too kindhearted for that—but with a genuine unconsciousness of giving offence. He was part and parcel of what she least liked in her father's house, the shop. Not for an instant was she ashamed of being the daughter of a dealer in antiques, who owned a shop; what exasperated her was the conviction that the shop owned him, that he had become the slave of his business. The Honeybuns had rubbed into her plastic mind that the unpardonable sin, the sin against the Holy Ghost, the root-cause of ruin to nations and individuals, began and ended with the lust of accumulating material things. Nothing moved Mrs. Honeybun to more fervent and eloquent speech than the text: "Lay not up treasures upon earth!" At Bexhill-on-Sea Posy had heard this same injunction upon the lips of a local Chrysostom, to whom she listened enthusiastically every Sunday morning. The text had a personal application, because she never heard it, or a variant on it, without thinking of the sanctuary and her father's "gems," apostrophized by Susan as "sticks and stones." Posy admired beautiful things, but if they were very costly she seemed to have a curious fear of them. Before she was born, Susan had experienced strongly the same fear of her Joe's idols.

She was, however, discreet enough to conceal this from her father. He took her to Christopher's, where a miraculous piece of reticulated K'ang He was on exhibition, prior to sale. It was an incense-box decorated with figures of the eight Immortals in brilliant enamels. Metaphorically, Quinney went down on his knees before it. Next day he told Posy that it had fetched seven thousand guineas! He stared at her sharply, because she showed no enthusiasm.

James Miggott beheld her as Aphrodite fresh from the sea. Poor Mabel Dredge appeared sallow beside her, tired and spent after a hot July. Posy glowed. She was not insensible to the homage of admiring glances, and James, by the luck of things, happened to be the first good-looking man with whom she was thrown into intimate contact. Propinquity! What follies are committed in thy company!

She wondered why James's handsome face and manly figure had never impressed her before. She spoke to Susan about him with nonchalant vivacity:

"James is a power in this house."

"Yes, dear; your father thinks the world of him. He is a very good young man."

"Good? Now what do you mean by that?"

"Gracious! I hope you haven't inherited father's trick of asking questions."

"Is James pious?"

"Pious? He goes to church; he does his duty; he is to be trusted; he's a hard worker, and from what your father tells me, a real artist."

"An artist? Does he work for the love of his work?"

"I think he does."

Then and there Posy decided to cultivate James Miggott. He had excited the curiosity of an intelligent maiden. She found herself wondering what he did with himself when his work was done. Did he read? Had he any real friends? Was Miss Dredge a friend of his? What were his ambitions? The more she thought of him, the sorrier she became for him. Possibly he perceived this. Upon the rare occasions when they met, he was careful to assume a captivating air of melancholy, preserving conscientiously the right distance between them, scrupulously polite but somewhat indifferent to her advances, thereby piquing her to bolder efforts to bridge the distance. A woman of experience might have been justified in assuming that a man who could play so careful a game was no tyro at it.

This preliminary sparring lasted nearly two months.

CHAPTER XV

AT WEYMOUTH

I

Only lookers-on at the human comedy can be consistently philosophical. The drama is too exciting, too distracting to the players. When a man is chasing his hat along a gusty thoroughfare, he takes little heed of the headgear of others. Till now Posy's outlook had been girlishly critical. Her ideas and ideals were coloured or discoloured by the persons with whom she came in contact, but she was modest and sensible enough to realize that her experience of the big things of life was negligible. She had never suffered sharp pain either of mind or body. The death of her grandmother affected her subjectively. A familiar figure had been removed from her small circle. A landmark had vanished for ever. It was awful to reflect that her own mother might have been taken. She remembered an incident at school, the summoning of a girl about her own age, a chum, to the presence of the headmistress. The girl, to the wonder of all, had not returned to the class-room, but Posy saw her an hour later putting her things together for a long journey. The girl's face had changed terribly. In answer to the first eager question, she had said, drearily: "My mother is dead."

Posy burst into tears; the girl's eyes were dry. Then Posy stammered out: "Did you love her very much?" and the other laughed, actually laughed, as she replied: "Love her? She was all I had in the world!" This glimpse of a grief beyond

tears was a unique experience, something which transcended imagination, and something, therefore, not fully absorbed. For many nights Posy was haunted by the vision of that white, drawn face, with its hungry, despairing expression; then it slowly faded away. By this time, also, she had almost forgotten the Honeybun stories of the submerged tenth. Bexhill breezes had blown them out of her mind. Somewhere in festering slums and alleys, men and women and children were fighting desperately against disease, poverty, and vice. Teachers had pointed out, with kindly common sense, that it would be morbid and futile to allow the mind to dwell upon conditions which, for the moment, a schoolgirl was powerless to ameliorate. With relief, Posy had purged her thoughts of such horrors.

And now her father raised the question—What was to be done with this fancy piece?

Posy answered that question after her own fashion. The Chrysostom aforesaid—excellent, practical parson!—had indicated a task. Under his teaching and preaching Posy had returned gladly enough to the fold of the Church of England. She no longer thought of Omnipotence as a vague essence permeating the universe. The Deity had become personal. Chrysostom, however, was too sensible a man to fill the minds of schoolgirls with doctrinal problems. He preached practical Christianity with sincerity and eloquence. The nail he hammered home into youthful pates was this: "Make the world a pleasanter place for others, and you will find it more pleasant for yourselves." The girls at Posy's school indulged in mild chaff over this dictum. Sweet seventeen admonished blushing sixteen to "Be a sunbeam!" Another catchword in frequent use was: "Save a smile for mother!"

Fired by the conviction that the sunbeam business paid handsome dividends, Posy returned to Soho Square. She intended to brighten the lives of everybody in the house, including the tweenie. That, for the moment, was to be her "job." She described the process as "binging 'em up."

And the member of her father's household who seemed to be most in need of "binging" happened to be James Miggott.

II

In August—she had left school for good at the end of the summer term—Posy and her mother went to Weymouth. Quinney did not accompany them. He said, jocularly, that he got all the change he needed travelling about the kingdom in search of "stuff." Business being at a low ebb in August, he selected that month for a general stocktaking, balancing of accounts, and the planning of an active autumn campaign. Mabel Dredge remained with him, a most capable assistant;

James Miggott was told that he might spend three weeks wherever he pleased.

It will never be known whether or not James knew that Susan and Posy were going to Weymouth. We do know that Posy met James on the pier, and was much struck by his gentlemanly appearance. It is possible that the young man planned this meeting; it is quite impossible to infer as much from what passed between them. James raised a neat straw hat, and was strolling on, when Posy waved her parasol.

"Are you thinking of cutting me?" she asked, holding out her hand. "What an extraordinary coincidence your being here?"

"Is it?" asked James quietly. "I have been to Weymouth before, have you?"

"No; this is our first visit. Did father tell you we were coming?"

"No." He laughed derisively, as he continued, "Mr. Quinney does not talk to me about you. I can imagine that he might—er—object——"

He paused significantly.

"Object to what?"

"To this. I know my place, Miss Quinney."

He was as humble as Uriah Heep, but more prepossessing in appearance. The sun and wind had tanned his cheeks, his brown hair curled crisply beneath the brim of his smart hat. He wore white shoes and quiet grey "flannels.

"Now that you are here," said Posy, "let us sit down and listen to the band. Mother is writing to father. She writes every day, dear thing! She will turn up presently."

Once more James hesitated, but he obeyed. The band played a popular waltz; upon the beach below people were bathing; the sea displayed the many twinkling smile as the breeze kissed the lips of the wavelets.

"Jolly, isn't it?" said Posy.

"Very."

"But you don't look jolly, Mr. Miggott. You never do look very jolly. And I have wondered—why."

She looked straight into his eyes, smiling pleasantly, anxious to put him at ease, anxious also to peer beneath an impassive surface, to find out "things" concerning a good young man, whose goodness, apparently, had not brought with it a very delirious happiness.

"Shall I tell you?" he asked, in a voice that trembled oddly. "Shall I let myself go for once? Ought I?"

Posy glanced the length of the pier. Her mother was not in sight. She might not appear for half an hour.

"Yes; please tell me."

He told his tale so fluently that the uncharitable might hazard the conjecture that he had told it before, perhaps to Mabel Dredge. By hinting at this we

have somewhat prejudiced the effect on the reader, who must bear in mind that Posy was too innocent and young to entertain such suspicions.

"I don't look jolly, Miss Quinney, because I don't feel jolly. Perhaps you think that a man ought to disguise his feelings when he's with a charming young lady. Well, I can't. I'm too honest. It was a shock just now meeting you, because you stand for everything I want and can't get."

The inflections of his voice far more than the actual words challenged her interest. Obviously, he was capable of feeling, and she had deemed him cold. He continued more calmly, subtly conveying to her the impression that he was suppressing his emotions on her account.

"I am your father's foreman, and I earn three pounds a week. Lark and Bundy, Tomlin, any of the big dealers would pay me five pounds a week, but I can't leave Soho Square."

Posy said hastily:

"I'm sure father couldn't spare you."

"I am useful to him. I'm not such a fool as to underrate my services. He is generous. He will raise my salary, but I shall remain downstairs. I repeat, I know my place. I am fully aware that I ought not to be talking to you like this. Mr. Quinney would be angry."

"Really, that is absurd."

"Do you know your father as well as I know him?"

She evaded his eyes.

"Perhaps not, but there's nothing of the snob about daddy; he never pretends to be better than he is. He rose from the ranks, and he's proud of it. I'm proud of it. I admire men who rise. I have no use for slackers who owe everything to others. Why shouldn't you rise higher than father? You are better educated and a greater artist."

"What! You have thought of me as an artist?"

"I have been told that you are an artist. Father says so, and Mr. Tomlin. It interested me enormously. You love your work for your work's sake. That is fine. And yet you tell me that you are unhappy, that it gives you a shock to meet me, because I stand for everything you want and can't get. What do you want?"

"Freedom for one thing."

"Mustn't freedom be earned? I have been taught so. You are serving, I suppose, your apprenticeship. The work you love may be a small part of that, and the rest drudgery. I used to loathe playing scales, but I tried to be jolly."

"Your position is assured."

"If you're the right sort, yours will be."

"I shall be jolly when it is. You ought to know all the truth, Miss Quinney, if my stupid affairs don't bore you too utterly?

"Can't you see how interested I am?"

"You are divinely kind. I can't express what your sympathy means to me. Well, you spoke of my rising. That's just where the shoe pinches. I have not risen; I have fallen."

"Fallen from—what?"

"My people were gentlepeople."

"Oh!"

She drew in her breath sharply. James could see that his last shaft had transfixed her. He was very clever, and he guessed exactly how she felt about gentlepeople, using the word in its widest sense. Quinney's money had made her a gentlewoman.

"My father was an officer in the Army." (It was true that James's father had once held a second lieutenant's commission in the Militia.) "My mother was the daughter of a West Country parson. They died when I was a boy. There was practically nothing for me. I was educated at a charitable institution. Charity apprenticed me to a cabinet-maker at Exeter. Charity nearly buried me—twice. I have known what it is, Miss Quinney, to be without food, and without money, and to wake morning after morning wishing that I had died in the night!"

III

This was the part of the tale which James told so fluently. Admittedly, that last long sentence smacked of rhetorical effect. It could hardly have been entirely impromptu. Nevertheless, it rolled Posy in the dust. She became horribly conscious of rushing in where angels might fear to tread. Indeed, that hackneyed quotation occurred to her. She ejaculated, "Oh!" for the second time, and blushed piteously. James rose to his feet. He spoke politely:

"I see that I have distressed you, and I am very sorry; but you asked me."

"I, too, am sorry," said Posy earnestly. "I am most awfully sorry. I wish I could say the right thing, but I feel rather a fool."

"The right thing for me to say, Miss Quinney, is good-bye. I shall go to Lulworth this afternoon."

"But why should you go? I don't understand. Are you going on our account?"

"On my own."

Another transfixing shaft. Posy was too honest to misinterpret this calm statement. Secretly she was thrilled by it; delicious shivers crept up and down her spine. For the first time she became supremely conscious of her power over a man. At that moment she turned from a jolly girl into a woman. It touched her

to fine issues. In a low, tremulous voice she faltered:

"You know best."

James raised his hat and went.

IV

Half an hour later Susan had the story, with reserves, from Posy's lips. Are we to blame the girl because she left out the climax? At any rate, her conscience remained clear. She could not betray a sacred confidence.

Susan was not vastly interested, as a wiser mother might have been. She accepted James's departure with a certain smug satisfaction which exasperated her daughter. She was sure that father would approve. Posy said sharply:

"But, mummie, daddy couldn't object to our being decently civil to Mr. Miggott?"

"He might."

"But why—why?"

"Father is so ambitious for you, child. Any gallivanting about with his foreman——"

"Gallivanting! Who spoke of gallivanting? Mr. Miggott is a gentleman. You like him and respect him. So do I. The word 'gallivanting' sounds so housemaidy, so merry-go-roundy."

"Oh, well, my dear, I'm glad the young man has gone, that's all."

The subject remained closed for the rest of the Weymouth visit. Mother and daughter returned to London a month later. James was at work downstairs. When Posy and he met, she could hardly believe that he was the same James who had sat beside her on the pier. His dignified salutation, "Good-afternoon, Miss Quinney!" seemed ludicrously inadequate, but what else could the poor fellow have said? Posy could find no answer to this insistent question, and yet she had expected a different greeting. He had not offered to shake hands, nor had she. Ought she to have held out her hand first? Was he offended because she hadn't? When she woke next morning she wondered whether James was wishing that he had died in the night. The determination to brighten his life, within reasonable limits, imposed itself upon her while she was dressing. More, it inspired her to choose a clean, lilac-coloured frock, which became her admirably. Putting up her hair she was careful to arrange it artistically, because an artist might look at it with deep-set, melancholy eyes. If you had told her that she was romantic she would have been furious.

At breakfast Quinney said briskly:

"I've a job for you, my girl."

"Certainly, daddy."

"I'm going to turn over to you the dusting of my china, and the cleaning of the Waterford glass. You used to do it nicely before you went to boarding-school."

"I shall just love it."

Quinney was much gratified. Posy, he reflected, was his own dear daughter; no nonsense about her, no highfalutin airs and graces, first and last a perfect lady. He smacked his lips with satisfaction.

"You must teach me values, daddy."

"By Gum, I will. You'll learn, too, mighty quick. Did the girls at your school ever throw it up to you that you was a tradesman's daughter?"

"No, I told them that you were the honestest dealer in England."

"So I am, my pretty, the honestest in the world. It pays to be honest."

"That's not why you're honest?"

"No, missie, it ain't. I swore solemn never to sell fakes except as such the night you was born."

"What a funny time to choose!"

Susan made a sign to him, but he went on:

"Funny? Never could make out why people use that word in such a silly way. Funny? Your dear mother nearly died the night you came to us."

Susan interfered nervously.

"Now, Joe, you ain't going into that, are you?"

"Yes, I am. Why not? It's high time, speakin' of values, that young Posy should know just what she cost us. I say it's part of her education, the part she couldn't learn at school. She's eighteen. She knows, I take it, that she didn't drop from heaven into the middle of a gooseberry bush?"

At this Susan, not Posy, blushed. It was the girl who said, calmly:

"You are quite right, father. I ought to know what I've cost both of you." She looked at her mother tenderly, and spoke in a softer voice: "Is it true that you nearly died?"

"Yes."

"And so did I," said Quinney.

Posy's eyes filled with tears.

"I shall always remember that," she murmured.

CHAPTER XVI

A BUSINESS PROPOSITION

I

"The covers are perfectly beautiful," said Quinney, "the very finest needlework, all of 'em worked by the same hand, and all of 'em different in pattern."

He was staring at a set of eight chairs which had arrived that morning from a town in Essex. James had just unpacked them, and was regarding them gloomily, for he cared nothing about needlework covers, and the chairs themselves were of walnut, very old, very worm-eaten, and carved by a prentice hand. He said so presently. Quinney snorted.

"Do you think, my lad, I'd ask you to waste your time and talents tinkering with those? Rip off the covers carefully, and put them aside. Save the nails and the backing. Don't show 'em to anybody. They need cleaning, but I shan't send 'em to a reg'lar cleaner's. You can try your hand on 'em."

"Not much in my line," said James.

"Liver out o' whack this morning?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

"Well, try to look more cheerful. It pays."

He scuttled off, chuckling to himself, and thinking what fools other dealers were, for these chairs had been bought cheap from a dealer who, like James Miggott, knew nothing of the value of eighteenth-century needlework.

By the luck of things, that same morning Tom Tomlin telephoned from Bond Street, asking him to drop in at his earliest convenience. Quinney went at once, well aware that procrastination loses many a bit of business. He found his friend in much excitement.

"Got something to show you," said Tomlin.

"Got something to show *you*," retorted Quinney.

"What?"

"The finest set of old needlework chair-covers I've seen for many a long day."

Tomlin exhibited enthusiasm.

"That beats the band!" he exclaimed. "Looks as if it was fairly meant."

"What d'ye mean, Tom?"

"You come along with me, and see."

Quinney followed him, conscious of a rising excitement, for Tomlin reserved enthusiasm for memorable occasions. The pair walked together down Bond Street and into Oxford Street. In a few minutes they were passing Lark and Bundy's establishment. Tomlin paused at the great plate-glass window.

"Look at them chairs, Joe."

Quinney flattened his nose against the glass, being slightly short-sighted.

The chairs were magnificent.

"Nice lot—hey?"

"And a nice price Bundy paid for 'em. You wasn't at Christopher's the day before yesterday?"

"By Gum! Tom, you don't mean to say that those are the Pevensey chairs?"

"Yes, bang out of Pevensey Court, sold with Chippendale's receipt for 'em. Sixteen hundred guineas, my tulip!"

They went on in silence. Presently Quinney growled out: "It's a cruel price."

"They're the goods, Joe. Hall-marked! Bundy can place 'em at a big profit with Dupont Jordan. Did you notice the carving?"

"Did I? Never saw a finer set, never!"

They walked on towards the Circus, and presently turned sharp to the right. By this time they were approaching Soho Square.

"Come out of our way a bit, haven't we?"

Tomlin replied solemnly. "I wanted you to have a squint at those chairs first. Here we are."

They paused opposite a mean house, entered an open door, and ascended a rickety, evil-smelling staircase. Tomlin pulled a key from his pocket, unlocked a door upon the second floor, and ushered Quinney into a biggish room filled with odds and ends of furniture. Quinney had been here before. It was one of Tomlin's many small warehouses. The centre of the floor had been cleared, and in this cleared space stood four chairs.

"Thunder and Mars!"

"Thought you'd be surprised," muttered Tomlin, pulling up a dirty blind.

The four chairs were carved like the chairs from Pevensey Court. They had horsehair seats much dilapidated, and the mahogany had been mercilessly treated, but to a connoisseur such as Quinney there was not a scintilla of doubt that they were carved by the same master hand which had designed and executed the set in Lark and Bundy's window.

"Where are the other four?" asked Quinney, on his knees before the chairs, running his hands over them, caressing them with tender touches.

"Where? Oh, where?" said Tomlin. Then he spoke curtly and to the point:

"Them four came out of Ireland. I paid fifty pound for 'em."

"You do have the devil's own luck, Tom."

"Not so fast. I can't find out anything about them. If I tried to sell 'em, as they are, Lark would see to it that fellows like Pressland crabbed 'em, as he did that commode o' yours."

Quinney gnashed his teeth. The history of that unhappy transaction was now known to him. He knew where the commode was, and what price had been paid for it.

"With luck," continued Tomlin thoughtfully, "I might sell these chairs for fifty apiece. One is an armchair. Your covers would go nicely on 'em, eh?"

"By Gum, the very thing."

"And you've eight covers?"

"Eight of the best."

Tomlin stared hard at the little man.

"Let's have a look at the covers," he said slowly.

They returned to Soho Square. Somewhat to Quinney's astonishment he found Posy in James's room. Her presence, however, was easily and glibly explained. James, obeying orders, had asked his employer's daughter for some cleaning fluid. She had just brought him some. That was all. Quinney frowned, and signified with a gesture that Posy could "scoot." She did so, after exchanging greetings with Tomlin.

"Dev'lish fine gal!" said Tomlin. "Glad to see she's not above helpin' in the business."

"Don't want her help!" growled Quinney. He turned savagely to James:

"Didn't I tell you not to show them covers to nobody?"

"Sorry," replied James carelessly. "I supposed Miss Quinney would be considered an exception." He added, with mild derision, "She took no interest in the covers at all."

"She saw them?" snapped Quinney.

"Possibly," said James.

Tomlin examined them carefully, nodding his big head, getting redder than usual as he bent down. James had removed one cover.

"They're a bit of all right," pronounced Tomlin.

Quinney led the way upstairs into the sanctuary. Posy was there, cleaning some beautiful glass lustres. Her father addressed her snappishly:

"Look ye here, young woman, I don't want you nosin' about downstairs. See?"

Posy tossed her head, furious with her father because he rebuked her before Tomlin. She replied coldly:

"I thought I could go where I liked in our own house."

"It's my house. See? You run along to mother like a good girl."

With immense dignity Posy moved to the door. If she wanted to impress upon her father that she was now a woman grown, she succeeded admirably. As the door closed behind her, Tomlin said:

"Bit short with her, wasn't you?"

"Do her good. I won't have no *tête-à-têtin'* between her and James Miggott."

I

They sat down. Quinney pushed a box of cigars across his desk. It annoyed him slightly that Tomlin selected one with unflattering suspicion, smelling it, and putting it to his ear.

"It's all right, Tom: I only smoke the best in this room."

Tomlin lit the cigar, inhaled the smoke, and nodded approvingly:

"Must admit, Joe, that you know a bit about most things. Come on surprisingly, you have."

At this Quinney smiled complacently. Tomlin continued, eyeing his companion shrewdly and genially:

"I've a proposition to lay before you, Joe."

"Go ahead."

Tomlin rose, walked to the door, and opened it. He closed it softly and came back.

"Whatever are you up to, old man?"

Tomlin grinned.

"My women," he remarked pensively, "listen at doors."

Quinney exploded.

"And you dare to think that——?"

"Tch! Tch! Nothing like making cocksure. What I have to say is not for other ears. Now, ain't it a pity that we haven't eight o' them Chippendale chairs on which we could fit them eight fine covers?"

"Pity? It's a sinful shame."

"Almost a dooty we owe to society to turn them four into eight?"

"Hey?"

"James could do it."

"Are you mad, Tom? We know what James can do. I ain't denyin' that he's a wonder, but he can't copy them chairs so that you and I, not to mention the rest of 'em, wouldn't know the difference if the new four was shoved alongside o' the old four."

"Right!"

"Then what the 'ell are you at?"

Sinking his voice to a hoarse whisper, and leaning forward across the desk, the great Tomlin unfolded his scheme.

"I propose this," he said deliberately. "James can make eight chairs out of them four by breaking up the four, half and half, half of the old in each."

"Um!" said Quinney.

"If the worst came to the worst," continued Tomlin, "if any of 'em did drop on to the fact that the set of eight had been very considerably restored, what of

it?"

"Um!" repeated Quinney.

"A set of eight chairs, slightly restored, with your covers on 'em, the dead spit of the Pevensey chairs, would excite attention?"

"More than we might want. I don't see Bundy a biddin' for our set without askin' a lot of questions. He'd spot the repairs."

"Right again. I put these questions, Joe, to have the pleasure of hearin' you answer them as I would myself. In a sort o' friendly fashion I look upon you, my boy, as my pupil."

"Go on!"

Tomlin's large face brightened till it shone like a harvest moon. He had feared that his pupil would withhold those cheering progressive words.

"Do you want to get back some o' your hard-earned savings which you lost over that commode?"

"Yes, I do."

"Follow me close. James goes to work on the quiet with my chairs; he works alone in my room back o' Wardour Street; he puts your covers on; and then we pass judgment on the completed set. If we're satisfied, really satisfied, I don't think we need to worry much about Bundy and Pressland. Lark—thank the Lord!—is losin' his eyesight. When the chairs have passed our examination, they'll go to Christopher's. You can leave all that to me. Nobody will know that you and I have ever seen the chairs."

"Nobody? How about James?"

"Exactly. James must be squared. It's time you raised his salary. I shall make him a handsome present. Remember, you'll lend James to me for this little job. It don't concern you."

"You take James for a fool?"

"Not me. James is a bit of a knave, but he knows which side his bread is buttered. If he was a fool I wouldn't touch him with a bargepole. I'm afraid o' fools. Now, we've got the chairs to Christopher's, and we'll choose a small day for the sale, some day when the big men are elsewhere."

"Then who'll bid for 'em?"

"Me and you, my lad."

He lay back in his chair, winked triumphantly, and laughed. Quinney was still puzzled.

"Bid for our own chairs? Pay a thumpin' commission to find 'em on our hands? Funny business!"

"Joe, you ain't quite as sharp as I thought you was. We two, and anybody else as likes, bid for the chairs. We bid up to nine hundred pounds. Christopher's commission would be ninety o' that. The chairs cost me fifty. What do you value

them covers at?"

"Five-and-twenty—thirty."

"Call it thirty. Put James's work at another thirty. That makes a round two hundred quid. What have we got to show for that? A set of eight chairs which have fetched nine hundred pounds at Christopher's, with Christopher's receipt to prove that the money was paid down for 'em. Christopher returns that nine hundred, less their com., to my agent, that is to us. You see to it that the buyin' of the chairs by you is properly paragraphed. You have them on exhibition in this very room, and I bring a customer to whom you show Christopher's receipt. Everything square and simple. My customer offers you eleven hundred. We share and share alike just nine hundred pounds. Four hundred and fifty each. No risks!"

"Um!" said Quinney, for the third time. Tomlin rose with alacrity considering his weight.

"You think it over. Take your time."

"Don't like it!" growled the little man.

"I call it a perfectly legitimate transaction."

"Come off it, Tom!"

"Are you thinkin' o' your inside or your outside? Yer skin or yer conscience? If it's conscience——"

"Well——?"

"I'll make this remark. One way and t'other I've paid you more than a thousand pounds for 'restoration' work done by James Miggott during the past four years or more. Don't forget that! So long!"

Quinney heard him chuckling as he made his way downstairs.

III

He became a party to the projected fraud, but not without perturbations of spirit and rumblings of conscience. Ultimately he salved the latter with the soothing reflection that he was much more honest than Tomlin or Lark or Bundy. It is affirmed, with what truth I know not, that gluttons who happen to be total abstainers are peculiarly virulent against drunkards. Quinney, poor fellow, son of a dishonest father, dishonest himself during his earlier manhood, reflected joyously that he was an admirable husband and father. He said to Susan, who was in blissful ignorance of his dealings with Tom Tomlin:

"Old Tomlin, hoary-headed sinner, went to Blackpool for the last week-end, and he didn't go alone, nor with Mrs. T., neither. He's a moral idiot is Tom. What would you say, Susie, if I went larkin' off to Brighton with Mabel Dredge—hey?"

He pinched her still blooming cheek, staring into her faithful eyes.

Susan replied artlessly:

"Joe, dear, it would break my heart."

"Gosh, I believe it would. Well, mother, your loving heart won't be broken that way."

Susan knew that this was true, and smiled delightfully.

"I'm a good hubby," said Quinney complacently, "and the very best of fathers, by Gum!"

Whenever he "swanked" (we quote Posy) like this, Susan regarded him anxiously.

James Miggott undertook his new job without protest, but there was an expression upon his handsome face which puzzled his employer. He summed up James as "downy." When he raised the young man's salary to four pounds a week, that derisive smile of which mention has been made, played about James's too thin lips. Quinney said sharply:

"You don't seem bustin' with joy and gladness. Four quid a week ain't to be sneezed at."

"Don't I earn it, sir?"

His tone was perfectly respectful, with a faint sub-acid inflection.

When the four chairs were turned into eight, and duly covered with the precious needlework, Tomlin and Quinney inspected them with huge satisfaction. Certainly James had done himself justice. The restorations were subjected to microscopic scrutiny. Tomlin smacked his gross lips.

"You leave the rest to me," he said.

IV

The time has come to explain James's smile. We must attempt what French dramatic critics term the "*scène obligatoire*."

He had captured Posy.

He achieved this easily, because he happened to be the first good-looking man to make love to a healthy young woman of lively sensibilities and affections. Here again the uncharitable may be justified in hinting at that practice which makes the game of love perfect. If Youth but knew! This youth did know many things which he kept to himself discreetly; saliently amongst them may be reckoned the art of striking hard when the iron is hot. Posy grew very hot, when her sire rebuked her for wandering downstairs into James's room. James perceived this. Let us say this for him in partial excuse of what follows. He had fallen in love with a blooming girl, whose bloom contrasted so agreeably with the

too-white cheeks of Miss Mabel Dredge, whose high spirits were strong enough to raise to their level his somewhat gloomy thoughts. Truth being the essence of this chronicle, we are constrained to add that the hope of being admitted to partnership with a prospective father-in-law had been another lever towards this mental exaltation. Nor did James forget that Posy was possessed, under Mrs. Biddlecombe's will, of some three thousand pounds which became hers absolutely when she attained her majority.

The pair talked together very seldom after Quinney's injunction, but they passed each other half a dozen times a day, preserving a silence which is perhaps the most barbed dart in Dan Cupid's quiver! Each began to study facial expression, and the finer shades of common salutation. The mere words, "Good-morning," admit infinite variety of inflection. The pronouncing of a name, even such a name as Quinney, may be made lyrical, almost hymeneal. James showed himself to be a master of these simple arts. His appearance at such moments indicated suffering nobly controlled. Posy began to lie awake at night wondering if James also was a martyr to insomnia. You may be sure that she encountered James in those pleasant suburbs of slumber frequented by lovers, the *vias tenebrosas* where Dante and Beatrice, Petrarch and Laura, Francesca and Paolo, must have wandered hand in hand. Here, in sequestered peace Posy talked to James without any exasperating restrictions save those which maidenly modesty imposed. Imaginary conversations have won many hearts.

And then one day occurred the *coup de foudre*.

Quinney and Susan happened to be out. Posy, as usual, was dusting the china in the sanctuary. James entered the room.

"Good-morning, Mr. Miggott!"

"Good-morning, Miss—Posy!"

He had never called her Posy before. But she divined from the tenderness of his tone that her name must have passed his lips a thousand times.

They looked at each other diffidently. Posy stretched out her hand. She felt that this was due to an artist who might reasonably infer that he was not held in the highest esteem by his master's daughter. James hesitated for one moment only. Then he kissed her hand. She quivered. He ran his hungry lips along her slender wrist. She thrilled and sighed. He took her into his arms and kissed her masterfully, feeling her heart throbbing beneath his own.

Presently they discussed the future, although loath indeed to leave the present.

"What will father say?"

"Darling, you must let me deal with your father."

"Can you?"

"I think so. I am sure of it. We must be patient and very, very careful."

"I should like to tell mother."

"No, no! Believe me that would be a blunder. She would tell him. For the moment we must love secretly."

She sighed deliciously.

"It does sound exciting and romantic. Of course you know best."

"I do!" he replied grimly. "I know that I shall have to fight for you. I mean to fight. You'll see. But we must be extra careful. A look——! We can write to each other."

Her smooth forehead puckered.

"Can we? Father always deals out the letters. He would think nothing of opening mine if he suspected."

"I have a plan."

"What! You have made plans? You were sure of me?"

"No, no! Never sure. Torn in two, I was, between hope and fear, but I made plans all the same. Look here, we can use that lac cabinet as a pillar-box."

"Father's precious cabinet?"

"He never opens it; the drawers are empty; the key is in the lock."

Together they approached the cabinet, one of the "gems." Upon the top of it stood the K'ang He mirror-black jar much beloved by Quinney. James opened the cabinet, almost more beautiful within than without. He indicated a drawer.

"Pop your letters into that. Then lock the cabinet and hide the key in the mirror-black bottle."

"What a splendid idea!"

"Isn't it? If he misses the key, you will be asked to find it, and you will find it. Then we can choose another pillar-box. You will post your letters, dearest, in the morning, when you are dusting here. In the middle of the day, while you are lunching, I shall get your letter and post one of my own. That way we run no risks at all."

"You are quite wonderful!"

Susan had used the same words to her Joe twenty years before.

CHAPTER XVII

INTRODUCES CYRUS P. HUNSAKER

I

Some three weeks later the "restored" Chippendale chairs were sold on a by-day at Christopher's famous auction rooms, and, as the public prints set forth, were secured after spirited competition for nine hundred pounds by Mr. Joseph Quinney, of Soho Square. There had been, according to the reporters, a duel *à outrance* between Quinney and Tomlin for the possession of these magnificent chairs.

Upon the following morning Posy was alone in the sanctuary. Her father had installed recently a speaking-tube, communicating with James Miggott's room, which was just behind the shop. Posy used this whenever the chance presented itself to exchange a few whispered words with her lover. She had just informed him that a billet had been popped into the lac cabinet. Also she had exchanged kisses through the tube, and perhaps on that account her eyes were sparkling more brightly than usual. She was hanging up the tube when Susan entered.

"Thought I heard you talking just before I came in," said Susan.

Posy, the hardened young sinner, never blushed as she answered lightly:

"I was asking Jim through the tube where father was."

Susan stared at her pensively.

"Your dear father would be very much displeased if he heard you speaking of James Miggott as Jim. It's too familiar."

"Why?"

"I'm not going to bandy words with you, Posy, because you do get the best of me, thanks to your fine schooling."

Posy frowned. She was hearing too often of her "advantages." She said protestingly:

"Mumsie, dear, don't rub that in. I'm fed up with such vain repetitions from father. I didn't ask him to send me to an expensive boarding-school. I believe he did it to annoy the Tomlins."

This, we know, was not the reason, but there was some truth in it. Tom Tomlin had considered a governess at forty-five pounds per annum quite good enough to educate his three daughters. Susan laughed. Posy amused her when she talked with entire frankness.

"Dear heart, what things you do say, to be sure! You were sent to Bexhill because there was too much Honeybunning. But it did annoy the Tomlins. I remember when your grandmother bought a small piano for me. We lived in a semi-detached. How the neighbours did tear their hair with envy and jealousy."

Posy, clad in a neat pinafore, was rubbing the lacquer cabinet. Mrs. Quinney watched her fondly, thinking how young and vigorous the girl was.

"Rub the lacquer gently, child. Coax the polish back."

"Right O," said Posy.

"Your poor father thinks the world of that cabinet."

"So do I," said Posy demurely.

Susan opened her eyes wider than usual, detecting real warmth in her daughter's voice.

"Do you? That's your father cropping out in you. I'm beginning to believe that he prefers things to persons; so you'd better be warned in time. The beauty of this world ain't to be found in sticks or stones."

"Cheer up, mumsie! I shan't devote my young life to either a stick or a stone."

She laughed softly as Mabel Dredge came quietly in. Susan looked at her husband's typist not too pleasantly. She was not jealous of the young woman, but it exasperated her to reflect that Mabel spent two hours at least every day with Quinney. She said crisply:

"Mr. Quinney is out, Miss Dredge."

"I know. The chairs from Christopher's have just come."

Posy exclaimed excitedly: "I'm dying to see them." Susan sighed. Nine hundred pounds would have bought another Dream Cottage, with a small garden. Miss Dredge continued in her monotonous voice:

"Mr. Quinney left orders that they were to be brought up here."

"Very good," said Susan. "Tell Mr. Miggott to bring them up."

"Yes, madam."

The typist moved slowly towards the door. Susan glanced at her keenly, contrasting her with Posy. In her usual kind voice she murmured:

"You don't look very well, Miss Dredge."

"I am perfectly well, thank you, madam."

She went out, closing the door. Susan said reflectively:

"Crossed in love, I dare say."

"Poor dear, I hope not."

"Six months ago I did think that she and James Miggott might make a match of it."

"What?"

"Why shouldn't they? Very suitable, I'm sure."

"Oh yes," Posy murmured hastily. Changing the subject briskly, she went on: "If the Christopher chairs are to be placed in this room, I suppose that father means to keep them."

"Till he gets a big price."

Presently James appeared, followed by two men carrying the chairs. They were arranged side by side in a double row. Posy examined them with the keenest interest. Susan glanced at them and sniffed:

"Fancy paying nine hundred pounds for those!"

"They're simply lovely,"' said Posy. She stroked the needlework and glanced at James's impassive face. "It's funny, but there's something familiar about them to me. I must have seen them before."

"Quite impossible," said James. "They came out of an old house in Ireland. They're almost replicas of the famous Pevensey set, which Lark and Bundy bought."

Susan had moved to one of the windows overlooking the dingy square. She never beheld the trees and grass without thinking of her beloved flower-garden in Melchester. The sight of the chairs annoyed her tremendously. More false gods! Would the day ever conic when her Joe, with his keen love of beauty, would turn his eyes and heart to what grew, to what was alive? She heard Posy saying:

"It's the needlework I seem to recognize."

"Bother the needlework!" exclaimed Susan.

"Why, mumsie, what is it?"

"It worries me to see you kneeling and gloating over stupid old furniture, that's all. Here's your father coming. Good-looking young fellow with him, too. Much better worth looking at than them chairs."

James retired. Posy joined her mother at the window. Just below stood her father and a tall stranger. Quinney was pointing out the pediment, and expatiating volubly upon the solid qualities of Georgian houses.

"Father is swanking," said Posy.

The two men entered the shop below.

II

Presently, Quinney came upstairs, betraying some excitement, easily accounted for by Susan. A big buyer was below, the sort of customer who might spend hundreds without turning a hair. Quinney was rubbing his hands together and chuckling. He informed the ladies that a rich American was in the shop, and wanted to see the chairs.

"They're here," said Susan.

Quinney frowned very slightly. It annoyed him when his wife made futile remarks, a habit which she seemed to have acquired recently, or was he becoming more critical?

"Where did you think I thought they was?" he inquired, hovering about them, but not gloating over them, somewhat to Susan's surprise.

"Want us out of the way?" asked Susan.

"Certainly not. Isn't this your drawing-room, old dear?"

"Fiddle!" said Susan tartly.

She could not have explained why she was feeling irritable, but of late, since Posy's return from school, she had lost something of her normal serenity. Possibly she resented being made a fool of before her daughter. The sanctuary was not her room, and never had been or could be anything but Quinney's room, filled to overflowing with his things. Also, she was aware that her husband used her as a stalking horse. No doubt he had just said to this young American: "I'll ask my wife if I can show you her room." What nonsense!

Quinney, however, was not disturbed by her exclamation. He glanced at Posy, and told her to take off a brown holland pinafore. Then he scuttled off, still chuckling. He reappeared, ushering in the stranger, presenting him as Mr. Cyrus P. Hunsaker, of Hunsaker.

Mr. Hunsaker bowed politely. Posy perceived that he was very nice-looking, an out-of-doors man, bronzed by wind and sun, a typical Westerner, probably a rider of bucking bronchos, a man of flocks and herds. He was quite at his ease with the two women, and—unlike young Englishmen of his age (he looked about thirty)—able to appreciate what he saw in words culled from a copious vocabulary. Quinney was delighted with him. He liked most Americans because they were strivers and pushers, and free with their dollars. He saw, too, that Posy had made an immense impression. Hunsaker stared at her with flattering intensity. Posy, equally at ease, asked him if the town of Hunsaker was called after him. This mightily pleased her father, because it established the right atmosphere at once. The "shop" was downstairs. From beginning to end the little comedy about to be played had been rehearsed between Tomlin and Quinney. Tomlin had found Hunsaker and introduced Quinney to him, as the proud owner of the chairs which he, Tomlin, had wanted to secure. Tomlin had said sorrowfully: "They're just what you're after, Mr. Hunsaker, but this Quinney, queer little cuss!—bought 'em, I do believe, for himself. He won't part with his very best things. He's quite potty about it!" This had challenged Hunsaker's interest. Quinney, seemingly, was a man after his own heart. He, too, hated to part with certain possessions. He did not as yet know much about articles of *vertu*, but he wanted to know. An unslakable thirst for such knowledge consumed many dollars. He answered Posy breezily—one had a whiff of the prairie, of the Wild West.

"Shall I tell you, Miss Quinney, how that great and growing town came to be called by my name?"

"Please."

"Well, most of the towns and villages in New Mexico used to be called after the names of saints and saintesses. When it came to christening this particular village the boys wanted to name it San Clement, but my father was of opinion that we were fed up with saints, so he said: 'Hold hard, why not call this little

burg by the name of a sinner!' And, the drinks were on the old man, for then and there they called it Hunsaker."

"Was your father a sinner?" asked Posy demurely.

Hunsaker laughed.

"He was a tough old nut when up against the wrong crowd. Ah! the chairs!"

"Yes," said Quinney carelessly.

"Elegant!" He glanced at the beautiful room with enthusiasm. It made inordinate demands upon his vocabulary. He racked his brains for the right words which came. Very solemnly, he observed:

"You have here, Mr. Quinney, an incomparable reservation."

"Yes," Quinney replied, with equal gravity, "this is my private collection, Mr. Hunsaker; everything I value most in the world, including my wife and daughter. Lordy! How I hate rubbish! Rubbish is beastly!" He pointed to the lacquer cabinet, purposely distracting the young man's attention from the chairs. "Now a cabinet like that makes me think of heaven. I can say my prayers to it!"

Susan said, with a touch of her mother's majesty:

"Joe, how you do go on!"

"Yes, my dear, I go on and *up*! We'd be stewin' in our own juice in a silly old sleepy town if it hadn't been for me. On and—up! What a motter for a Christmas cracker! Married the right woman, too, a perfect lady!"

"Joe—please!"

Hunsaker was much amused. He had liked the little man at first sight; he was quite as delighted with his family. Quinney continued in high good humour:

"I chose her"—he pointed at Susan, who blushed. "And the result," he pointed at Posy, who did not blush, "justifies my choice—hey?"

"You bet it does," said Hunsaker. "Miss Quinney is by all odds the most precious object in this wonderful room—the gem, if I may say so, of your remarkable collection."

Quinney gazed fondly at his daughter. He had almost forgotten the chairs.

"Just like a bit of Chelsea, Mr. Hunsaker. The real soft paste, and as good as she's pretty; the apple of her father's eye. Plays the pianner and the mandoline! Sings like a canary!"

Posy expostulated.

"Father! Please!" She put her finger to her pretty lips.

Hunsaker, feeling that he had known these pleasant people all his life, said significantly:

"You won't keep her long, sir."

"What?"

"Not if there are any spry young men about."

Quinney betrayed real uneasiness. It flashed upon him suddenly that this

abominable loss was inevitable. He consoled himself with the reflection that no spry young men had been about. Then he said with unction:

"I'm going to hang on tight to my little girl. She is the gem of my collection. Cost me more than money, too." He sank his voice confidentially. "Nearly cost me her pore dear mother. By Gum! I remember swearing that I'd give up selling imitation oak as the real stuff, if my old Dutch pulled through."

"And did you?" Hunsaker asked.

"I did. More, I tore up a big card that used to live in our front window—'*Genuine Antiques!*' Yes; never sold faked stuff after that, unless labelled as such. Lordy! I'm wastin' your valuable time."

"Not at all."

"Posy, show Mr. Hunsaker that case o' miniatures. I've a Samuel Cooper, two Englehearts, a Plimer, and half a dozen Cosways."

Hunsaker shook his head.

"I know nothing about miniatures. There's a daisy of a china cabinet!"

"It is. Delighted to show you stuff, Mr. Hunsaker. You've the collector's eye. Take a squint at those blue and white jars on the mantelpiece."

"I'd sooner look at your chairs."

Quinney said lightly:

"You can look, at anything you like, Mr. Hunsaker, but I understood from Mr. Tomlin that you had all the mahogany you wanted."

"More than I want," replied Hunsaker grimly. "I've been much imposed upon, Mr. Quinney, with mahogany."

Susan flitted quietly from the room. Posy began to rub the lacquer of the Chinese cabinet. She heard her father saying:

"Dear, dear! I've been done, too—crisp as a biscuit! Everybody's done, hey?"

"I'm never done twice by the same man." He bent down to examine the carving of the chairs. "These are immense—the finest I've ever seen."

"By Gum! I wish you could have seen the settee which I sold to the Grand Duke of Roosia."

Hunsaker hardly heard him. He was becoming absorbed in the chairs.

"The papers report you as having paid nine hundred pounds for the set."

Quinney chuckled, nodding his head.

"That's right! I'd had two glasses of old brown sherry after lunch. My tip to all and sundry is: Buy before lunch, unless you're a blooming vegetarian and teetotaler."

Hunsaker prided himself upon the directness of his business methods. He said tentatively:

"Would you take a handsome profit on these chairs?"

"You look at that lac cabinet, and you won't want to buy chairs."

Hunsaker did look at the lac cabinet, and the girl beside it, softly rubbing its polished surface. He crossed to her, smiling.

"On a Charles the Second stand," added Quinney. "The inside is as beautiful as the outside—more so. I'll show it to you. Where's the key?"

He addressed Posy, but she pretended not to hear him.

"Where's the key?" he repeated.

"I saw it yesterday," said Posy quietly. Her heart began to beat uncomfortably, as she thought of her letter in the middle drawer.

"Can you see it now, missie? Is it on the floor?"

Hunsaker interrupted:

"Please don't trouble. Is that screen Chinese?"

"Yes; incised lacquer. They wanted that for the South Kensington Museum. Hits you bang in the eye, don't it?"

Hunsaker examined it as Quinney expatiated upon the enamelling and colour. His enthusiasm, his accurate knowledge, his love of precious objects for their beauty of design and craftsmanship, impressed the young man tremendously. He remembered what Tomlin had said: "You'll find Quinney a character. What he tells you is right is right! That's how he's built up a thumping big business." Hunsaker had not been vastly impressed by Tomlin, but he was quite certain that he had spoken the truth about Quinney. His heart warmed to the little man. When Quinney paused he said gratefully:

"I'm much obliged; it's an education to see such treasures."

"The only education I've had, Mr. Hunsaker."

"I only wish that I could tempt you to part with one of them—this cabinet, for instance."

"It's not for sale. I'd like to oblige you. Is there anything else you particularly fancy?"

Hunsaker's roving eye was captivated by the K'ang He mirror-black bottle, standing alone in its glory upon the top of the cabinet.

"I like that black and gold jar."

"Um! It's not bad, but there ought to be two of 'em."

Posy wiped her pretty forehead. At the mention of the K'ang He jar, in which lay snug the key of the cabinet, she had trembled with apprehension. Hunsaker said quickly:

"I'd like the chairs best of all. You bought them yesterday for nine hundred. Will you take eleven hundred?"

"Yes," said Quinney, "I will."

He pulled out a pocket-book and extracted a slip of paper from it.

"You can have this, Mr. Hunsaker. Don't destroy it! Keep it in your safe."

Hunsaker took it.

"Christopher's receipt for my cheque. It proves that the chairs fetched the price named at public auction."

"Thank you."

"And now, to sweeten our first deal, I'll make you a little present. You fancied that K'ang He bottle. It's yours."

He advanced towards the bottle. Posy said hurriedly:

"Shall I go and clean it, father?"

"Clean it? It's as clean as you are, my pretty."

"You are very generous," said Hunsaker.

Quinney winked and chuckled joyously.

"Biz! There are other things downstairs, Mr. Hunsaker. Are you buying these chairs for yourself?"

As he spoke he held the bottle in both his hands, caressing it softly.

"Why, certainly. Have them cased, please, and consigned to my agents in New York, who will see them through the Custom House. Any marks on that jar, Mr. Quinney?"

Quinney handed to him the bottle.

"I don't think so; they never marked them bottles. It's marked all over."

Hunsaker turned it upside down, and the key of the cabinet fell out.

"The missing key," said Quinney. "Now what fool stuffed it in there?"

He replaced it in the lock of the cabinet.

"Like to see the inside?" he asked.

Posy was in torment. In desperation she blurted out:

"Father, dear, Mr. Hunsaker may have other engagements."

"I have," said Hunsaker. "Important ones, too. Thank you, Miss Quinney." He turned to her father. "May I call to-morrow at eleven, and have another look round?"

"Glad to see you any time."

As he was speaking, Susan drifted back. Hunsaker went up to her, speaking cordially:

"This has been a very pleasant and informal visit, Mrs. Quinney. Do you ever go to the play?"

"Sometimes," said Susan.

"Often," added Posy. Her face was sparkling with smiles. Her cheeks were delicately flushed. Hunsaker said gaily:

"Will you three nice people dine and do a play with me?"

"You must leave me out," said Quinney.

Posy answered for her mother and herself:

"We shall be delighted, Mr. Hunsaker."

The young man shook hands. He seemed to hold Posy's hand a thought longer than was necessary. Quinney chuckled, because he was thinking that if his Posy were to be taken away by some enterprising young man she might well be captured by Cyrus P. Hunsaker, of Hunsaker. Inspired by this thought he enjoined his daughter to accompany the visitor as far as the shop. Characteristically, he blurted out what was in his mind, as soon as he found himself alone with Susan.

"He's taken a shine to our girl, Susie."

"Fiddle!" said Susan, for the second time.

"Stoopid expression! You must break yourself of that. I tell you it's true. Couldn't ask for nothing better. Fine upstanding young chap."

"A foreigner!"

"Nonsense. They could spend half their time over here. You might give the child a hint. Tell her to play up."

"What an idea!"

"I have ideas, Susie. We can't expect to keep her; and the best in this country won't marry a tradesman's daughter. He's as good as any in his country. See?"

"I see a large mare's nest," replied Susan.

Posy returned, brimming with the determination to retrieve her letter. Quinney beckoned to her.

"Come you here, my girl." He took her head between his hands, and gazed at her proudly. "Did that young fellow squeeze your hand just now?"

"Father!"

"None o' your sauce! Did he?"

"Well, yes, he did."

Quinney winked triumphantly at Susan. He kissed Posy, and said superbly:

"You've got a daddy with ambitions, a kind, loving, clever old daddy! Lordy! Sometimes I fair wonder at myself, I do. Because I've climbed so high. But you're a-going higher—bang up! Good looks, I'll admit you got them from mother, and good brains, same as mine. Quick wits, God bless you! You made a hit with young Hunsaker! A bull's-eye! Now scoot, both of you! I've a lot of business."

"I haven't finished dusting, daddy."

"Yes, you have, when I say so. Scoot!"

Unhappily, there was nothing else to do.

CHAPTER XVIII
EXPLOSIONS
I

"I've sold the chairs, James. Take 'em away. Pack 'em up at once! Nail down the cases. See?"

"Yes, sir. I congratulate you, sir."

"Pack up extra carefully that K'ang He bottle."

"The K'ang He bottle?"

Something in his tone arrested Quinney's attention. It brought to mind what, for the moment, he had forgotten—the loss of the key and its tumbling out of the bottle. James, perhaps unconsciously, had glanced at the cabinet, and Quinney's alert eyes had intercepted the somewhat furtive, shifting glance. He said sharply:

"The key of the cabinet was in that bottle. Did you put it there?"

James hesitated and was lost. Had he replied promptly, either in the affirmative or negative, his employer doubtless would have dismissed the incident from his mind. James, unhappily, was constrained to determine swiftly the expediency of saying "Yes."

"I may have done so," he replied. He went on fluently: "The key fits badly, tumbles out of the lock sometimes. I meant to tell you."

Quinney blinked at him, wondering why he answered evasively. How did he know that the key fitted loosely? It was not his business to touch the cabinet. At the same time he was conscious that James, as the restorer of the chairs, had been very prompt with his congratulations. Of course he knew everything; he had to know; and equally of course the secret of the fake bidding was perfectly safe with him, inasmuch as he had received a share of the plunder. Quinney had raised his salary; Tomlin had tipped him handsomely.

"Nice profit for you, sir," continued James blandly.

"Not bad," Quinney admitted.

"Splendid idea, sir, buying in your own stuff."

Quinney rather winced at this, but he covered a slight confusion by his bluff manner and candid speech. He could not flimflam James. It would be fatuous to

play the hypocrite with an accomplice. He said confidentially:

"Christopher's receipt just clinched matters. You ought to have been here, my lad. An object lesson for you, by Gum!"

James's voice was very silky as he murmured:

"Nobody like you, sir, to sell stuff."

"Right you are, James, even if I do say it. There ain't my superior in London—that means the world."

It was then that James led trumps for the first time. He continued in the same ingratiating tone:

"Oh yes, sir. And such a father, too."

Quinney swallowed this easily, smacked his lips over it, much to James's satisfaction.

"Always done my duty, my lad. That's a thought to stick to one's ribs—hey? Never can remember the day when I couldn't say that. And the fam'ly, as I read only t'other day, is the unit o' national life. Square, too, I've been, within reasonable limits, although I do make ignorance pay a profit to knowledge. I know a lot, more'n you think for. And you owe a lot to me, James."

"Yes, sir."

"You're very useful to me, my lad, and your future will be my special care."

James smiled.

"Thank you, sir."

Afterwards, Quinney admitted to Susan that at this particular moment James's good looks had hit him, so to speak, in the eye. But he did not consider them in relation to Posy. We know that the little man was amazingly shrewd whenever his own interests were imperilled. And it had occurred to him, not for the first time, that there might be "something" between his handsome foreman and his quite attractive typist. He could trust James. Could he trust Mabel Dredge? Some men babbled indiscreetly to the girls.

"You'll be thinking of gettin' married one of these fine days?"

"I have thought of it, sir."

The young man spoke so pleasantly that Quinney's heart warmed to him. Moreover, he liked and respected Mabel.

"Good! What you want is a helpmate, a worker like yourself, strong, healthy, and comely."

"Strong, healthy, and comely," repeated James.

"One who'll work hard in your house, while you're working hard in mine. There are young fellows in your position, my lad, who make fools o' theirselves by falling in love with young ladies. Useless creatures! It would hurt me to see you doin' that, James."

"I'm sure it would. Much obliged, sir."

"Not at all. Never so happy as when I'm thinking for others."

James removed the chairs.

II

Once more alone, Quinney thought of sending for Mabel Dredge, but he lit a cigar instead, and took stock of his treasures, wondering whether he could screw himself up to part with the lacquer cabinet. Hunsaker would buy it. He would pay gladly a thumping price. Quinney approached it, puffing leisurely at his excellent cigar. As he did so the mysterious hiding of the key recurred to him. He stared at the cabinet, frowning.

Then he opened it.

Always, on such occasions, the hidden beauties of this miracle of craftsmanship appealed to him with ever-increasing strength. The lacquer inside was as softly fresh as upon the day when the last coat was lovingly applied. So soft, and yet so hard, that it could not be scratched with the nail.

He gloated over it.

At this moment he was absolutely at peace with himself and the world. He would not willingly have changed places with the mighty Marquess of Mel. If there was a fly in his precious ointment, it might be considered so tiny as to be negligible. The most illustrious of the Chinese craftsmen, artists to their finger tips, lacked one small knack common to the English artisan. The drawers in these seventeenth-century cabinets did not, alas, slide in and out with the beautiful smoothness characteristic of the best English specimens. Quinney pulled out two or three of them.

In one he perceived a letter. He examined it. It was addressed:

"To my own Blue Bird."

III

The writing was Posy's.

Quinney stared at it, palsied with amazement. Then he read it, and re-read it, till the full meaning of what it meant had percolated through and through his mind. His cigar went out. He sat at his desk with the letter in his hand, dazed for the moment, breathing hard, very red in the face. The fingers which held the sheet of notepaper twitched. He noticed a faint fragrance of lavender, a perfume much affected by Posy, and he remembered vividly a certain afternoon, long ago, when Susan had sat in the garden of the Dream Cottage filling small muslin bags

with lavender to place between the baby linen of their tiny daughter.

Slowly, a dull anger and rancour grew in him. What did this shameless baggage mean by deceiving him and Susan? He included Susan. Physically he was overwhelmed, eviscerated, almost faint with impotent rage, but he found himself wondering what Susan would say. Suppose—his heart grew cold—suppose she knew! What! His faithful wife a party to this abominable fraud on him? Impossible!

He rose up wearily, and walked with unsteady steps to the door.

"Susan!" he cried querulously.

Posy appeared, wreathed in smiles. With a terrific effort her father smiled frozenly at her.

"Send your mother to me!" he said stiffly. "I want to see her at once on a small matter of business."

"Right O!" replied Posy.

He returned to his desk. When Susan, came in she perceived at once the change in him.

"Gracious, Joe, is this house afire?"

"No. I am. Shut the door."

She did so, and then approached him.

"Whatever is the matter?"

He held up the billet and said hoarsely, "Listen. I found this in the lacquer cabinet five minutes ago. It's in Posy's writin'. And it's addressed 'To my own Blue Bird.'"

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear!"

The sight of her weakness strengthened him, but he exclaimed testily: "Don't make them stoopid noises. They sound like a mind out of whack. Sit tight! I'm a-going to read this precious letter bang through, a letter written by your daughter."

Susan, wriggling on the edge of a chair, protested feebly:

"My daughter? Ain't she yours, too?"

"I'm beginning to doubt it." He read aloud, "'My own Blue Bird——'"

"Who is her Blue Bird, Joe?"

"We'll come to that soon enough. I may mention that there was a play called 'The Blue Bird'! to which you took Posy twice, and you jawed for three days of nothing else. A damn blue bird, accordin' to you, stands for happiness—hey?"

"Yes."

He went on reading, "'It was splendidly clever of you to think of using that silly old cabinet——' Silly old cabinet! Hear that? And I've refused a thousand guineas for it!"

"Go on, dear!"

"I'm going on if you'll kindly stop wigglin' your leg. I'm going bang to the outside edge of this. Pay partic'lar attention. 'It was splendidly clever of you to think of using that silly old cabinet as a pillar box, and the fact that we are corresponding under the nose of father makes the whole affair deliriously exciting and romantic. I should like to see his funny face——' Is my face funny? Is it?"

"Not now, Joe. Is there any more?"

"Is there any more, Mrs. Ask-Another? D'ye think a girl educated at no expense spared ends a sentence in the middle of it? Keep that leg still, and I'll finish. 'I should like to see his funny face if he could read this.'"

"My!"

"She shall see it, by Gum! 'We've got to be most awfully careful, because if he caught me talking to you except about his dull old business he would simply chatter with rage. But we must have a long talk together, and as soon as possible. Why not to-night? Father and mother are always fast asleep by eleven. At half-past eleven to the minute I shall slip down to the sanctuary. You be ready downstairs. I'll whistle softly through the tube; then you nip up, and we'll have a perfectly lovely talk. Your own POSY.'"

"But, Joe, who is her Blue Bird?"

"He'll be black and blue when I've man-handled him. It's that dog, James Miggott."

Susan grew pale and trembled. She had never seen her Joe so moved to fury, not even when he had been "downed" by the pseudo Major Archibald Fraser. She faltered out:

"Joe, dear, James is much bigger than you."

To this Quinney replied ironically:

"After all these years o' church goin' I thought you believed that Right was stronger than Might. Has it all soaked in? Did you mark that word 'dull' applied to my business? Do you know what the contents o' this room would fetch at Christopher's, if the right men were biddin'?"

"Indeed, indeed, I don't."

"Nobody knows what my collection would fetch. The Quinney Collection! S'pose I leave everything to the nation—hey?"

Susan sat bowed and silent before the storm.

IV

Quinney did not look at her. Her attitude, her troubled face were sufficient alone to acquit her of any possible complicity in this abominable affair. The more he

considered it as a tremendous fact in their lives, the more incredible, the more irrational it became to him. His Posy, the Wonder Child, the gem of the Quinney Collection, writing love-letters to an obscure faker of furniture, a "downy" cove, a rather sullen hireling, who earned four quid a week! Had his child been born and educated "regardless" for—this? Had Susan and he suffered pangs unforgettable in order that their child should forsake them for this maggot of a Miggott?

Never!

Slowly, his fighting instinct asserted itself. Catastrophe of any kind overwhelmed him at first, and then his vitality, his recuperative qualities, would come to the rescue. He must fight this issue to the end. His dull anger and rancour passed. His active wits began to work. He felt oddly sensible of a certain exhilaration, the conviction that he would soar, like the Melchester spire, above these ignominies and disasters.

He stood up, inhaling deep breaths, smiling grimly.

"What are you going to do, Joe?"

"Watch on, and see."

He replaced the billet in its envelope, which had been left open. Then he crossed to the cabinet, and put the letter into the drawer where he had found it. He closed the doors of the cabinet, and came back to his desk. About all these actions there was an automatic precision, as if the man had been transformed into a machine.

Susan murmured:

"Joe, you frighten me."

"Wouldn't do that for the world, Susie." His voice was slightly less hard. "I'm going to frighten them. See?"

"How?"

"I'm going to catch 'em together in this room to-night."

"Gracious!"

"And you've got to stand shoulder to shoulder with me, behind that screen. At the right moment, when least expected, we'll pop out."

"And what will you say?"

"Ho! What will I say? Between now and then, my dear, I shall think over what I'm going to say. Words won't fail me. I shall down the pair of them, rub their noses in their insolence and folly."

"Oh, dear!" exclaimed Susan.

CHAPTER XIX
THINGS AND PERSONS
I

That night, as usual, the Quinneys retired to bed at half-past ten. At eleven, the door of Joe's bedroom opened noiselessly, and the little man's head, crowned with a ridiculous smoking-cap appeared. His body followed arrayed in a flowered silk dressing-gown. Posy's room was upstairs.

Susan joined her husband. She was wearing what may be described as a compromise kit. Her pretty hair, still long and abundant, hung down her back in two braids. She had put on a peignoir of wadded silk, a garment not likely to rustle as she walked. Upon her small feet were thick felt slippers. In this costume she looked ten years younger, and she was pleasurably aware of this for reasons that will appear presently.

Quinney closed his bedroom door. They listened for a moment, but no sound came from above. Probably Posy was in bed, counting the minutes till the big clock on the stairs summoned her to meet her lover.

Quinney and Susan tip-toed down to the first floor. In the sanctuary a fire was burning in the dog-grate. Quinney smiled grimly, as he realized that Posy had replenished it with logs which burned brightly enough to illuminate the room with a soft amber glow.

"Sit down, mother."

Susan sat down in an armchair just opposite the fire. As a rule, this chair occupied its own particular corner. Posy, therefore, must have placed it in front of the hearth. Evidently Posy considered that one chair would suffice for two persons.

Meanwhile, Quinney made his dispositions behind the screen. Presently he appeared, rubbing his hands and chuckling quietly. The walls in these fine old houses were so comfortably sound-proof, that he had no hesitation in speaking in his usual voice.

"There! Couched in the ambush, as Shakespeare says. Do you remember, old dear, when me and you took a course o' the Bard to improve our powers o' speech?"

Susan sighed. In the tender light she looked almost the Susan whom he

had courted long ago.

"Yes; we were young then, Joe."

"We're young still, dearie. Young and spry! Full o' beans."

He stood on the hearth, facing her, with his back to the glowing logs, looking down upon her delicate features. She raised her eyes to his, speaking in a soft voice, with a faint smile flickering about her mouth. Quinney had fallen in love with her dimples. He thought he could see the ghost of one in the cheek slightly turned from the fire. His attitude, erect and sturdy, her attitude, the firelight, the lateness of the hour—these recalled insistently the sweet past, when Mrs. Biddlecombe used to leave the lovers to talk over the present and the future. Susan remembered, with an odd little pang at her heart, how satisfied she had been with that present, although Joe insisted upon forecasting their future. And his predictions, those ambitions which she had regarded as vaulting high above human probability, had come to pass. He was famous and rich!

"Joe dear!"

"What is it?"

"You became engaged to me, didn't you, against your father's wish, and unbeknown to mother? Yes, you did."

"And what of it?"

"I never told mother that day you kissed me for the first time behind our parlour door."

"Now, Susie, what are you gettin' at? Circumstances alter cases. My father made a white nigger o' me. But, by Gum! I wasn't disobedient."

"You were, and you know it."

"What do you mean?"

"You took up with me against his wish."

"Ho! I honoured him by marrying the best girl in Melchester."

Susan said solemnly:

"You did deceive him, Joe."

"Serve him right, too."

"I say you deceived him."

"Well, for the Lord's sake, don't go on sayin' it, repeatin' yourself like an old poll parrot. Father never did do you justice. He never did know quality. Quantity was what he'd go for. Lordy! how he used to waller in cheap job lots!"

Susan ignored this. With slow pertinacity, working steadily to her point, she continued:

"And I deceived my pore mother. Used to wear my engagement ring at night."

She lifted her hand and looked at it. What a wonderful present it had been reckoned. Three turquoises with small brilliants, paid for out of the savings of a

"white nigger"!

Joe stared at the ring. It seemed to shine out of the past. He remembered everything. For instance, he had not haggled about the price demanded—six pounds! He had felt that haggling would be indecent. He said pensively:

"I used to envy that ring, Susie. I used to think of you asleep, and wonder what you looked like." He sighed. "Great times them was, to be sure!"

Susan met his glance.

"Because of those times," she whispered, "go a bit easy, Joe, with these young people."

But his face hardened immediately.

"You leave that to me, my dear. I'll fix 'em to rights. I'll sweep the cobwebs out o' their silly noddles."

"If you'll try not to forget that we was just as silly once."

"Silly? Us? That won't wash, Susie. Like mated like."

Susan remained silent.

II

When Posy entered the room, her parents were sitting snug behind the incised lacquer screen. The girl added a fresh log to the fire, and smiled as she looked at the big empty chair. She was wearing a very becoming pale blue dressing-gown. Her hair, like Susan's, hung down her back in two thick pigtails tied with pale blue ribbon. Her bare feet were thrust into pale blue slippers. She might have been sixteen instead of eighteen, and about her there breathed a virginal air, deliriously fresh and fragrant. She smelled of lavender.

She went to the speaking-tube, and whistled down it. When her signal was answered, she said joyously:

"It's all right, Jim. Father fast asleep and snoring! Come up! Take your shoes off! The fourth stair from the top creaks horribly. Skip that!"

She hung up the tube, and spread her hands before the fire, warming them. Upon the third finger of her right hand sparkled a ring. Upon her charming face a smile sparkled also, as she listened for the step of her lover.

James came in, carrying his slippers in his hand. He was dressed as usual in a well-cut blue serge suit. He closed the door noiselessly, and held out his arms. Posy flew into them, with a sigh of satisfaction, but when he hugged her too masterfully, she protested, blushing, slipping from his embrace with a low laugh.

"You must promise to behave reasonably."

"Reasonably? Don't you like being kissed by me?"

"Of course I—er—like it."

"Awfully?"

"If you sit in that chair, I'll sit on the arm of it. Please! Be good!"

He obeyed. She fussed over him, arranging the cushion behind his back, touching him almost furtively, but laughingly, evading his touches, obviously the elusive nymph, captivated but not yet captured. James turned to look at her, slipping his arm round her waist.

"You are a sweet!" he said fervently.

"Am I much prettier than Mabel Dredge?"

"Rather! What made you mention her?"

"Oh, nothing. But mother was saying only this morning that six months ago, when I was at school, she thought that Mabel Dredge and you might make a match of it."

"What rubbish!"

He spoke irritably, too irritably a finer ear might have decided.

"I expect you flirted with her a teeny-weeny bit?"

"As if any man with eyes in his head would look at Miss Dredge when you were about."

"But I wasn't about then."

It was so evident that she was merely teasing him in the most innocent, girlish way, that he smiled and pressed her closer to him, whispering:

"Don't let's jaw about Miss Dredge. I say, isn't this cosy?"

"Isn't it? Fancy if father could see us now. Jim, dear, I simply adore the excitement of this—our meeting here in the sanctuary. By the way, are you as mad as daddy about things?"

"Things?"

"Things as opposed to persons. Could you fall down and worship figures?"

"I could worship your figure."

"You know what I mean, I'm simply wondering what effect this particular business has had upon your character. Don't frown! We must admit that his business hasn't improved poor father. And as for Mr. Tomlin——"

Jim said slowly:

"What do you mean exactly by business affecting character?"

She paused to consider. Jim kissed her. Perhaps it was significant that she did not return his kiss, being absorbed in her quest for the right word. She continued slowly:

"I hoped you would guess what I meant. Of course, poor father is honest. I have always been so proud of that. It would break my heart if he were like that horrid Mr. Tomlin, but he does care too much for what mother calls sticks and stones. They have come between him and her; and they have come between

him and me. I have never really known how much he loved me. And now this is going to be a test, because if he does love me really and truly he will put my happiness before his ambition, won't he?"

He kissed her again, and once more she let him do it, passively, gazing, so to speak, into his mind rather than his heart.

Jim spoke curtly.

"Make up your mind to this, Posy. There will be a big row. It's inevitable."

Posy laughed.

"How like a man! Big rows are never inevitable. And daddy is an awful old fuss-pot, but his bark is much worse than his bite. When he barks at me I laugh inside. Now, Jim, are you necessary to father?"

"Necessary? Perhaps I am more necessary than he thinks, because I know too much to be treated badly. He would hardly dare to sack me."

"Not dare!"

"I mean that I have a sort of 'pull' with him. And I'm a hard worker, and a first-class cabinet-maker. When the time comes for him to take a partner he couldn't find a better man than I am."

Posy laughed.

"Jim, I declare you have caught father's habit of swanking."

"Swank, or no swank, I think I can make terms with your father, and the time has come to do it."

"I'd sooner things went on as they are for the present."

"Why?"

"Well, we haven't seen very much of each other as yet. Why, we hardly know each other."

"I have reasons, dearest, for wishing to tackle your father as soon as possible."

"What reasons?"

She spoke coaxingly, laying her cheek close to his.

"I must keep them to myself for the present. You trust me?"

"Oh, yes, but I'm horribly curious! Are you cross?"

"No, darling, I'm impatient. I want you to be wholly mine."

He laid his lips upon hers, and felt a slight pressure in return. When he pressed her to him, she thrilled. He kissed her ear, as he whispered:

"Do you ever think of what it will be like when you are mine?"

"Ye-es."

"Sit on my lap, you darling!"

He half-pushed her off the arm of the chair. She stood up, hesitating, the colour ebbing and flowing in her cheeks.

"I have never done that."

He held out both hands.

"Isn't it time to begin? Is your dear little heart beating?"

"Yes, it is. Almost loud enough for father to hear. But I feel—I feel——" Her voice died away in an attenuated whisper.

"What do you feel?"

"As if—as if we were playing hide-and-seek in the dark. I'm rather frightened. I suppose it's stupid. I——"

James stood up, facing her. Passion quivered in his voice as he exclaimed:

"I'm going to kiss the fear of me out of you—now!"

"No, you ain't!" said Quinney.

III

The lovers sprang apart as Quinney emerged from behind the screen. He addressed the trembling Posy first.

"Thought it likely you might make a fool of yourself, and I've not been disappointed. Come on, mother!"

Susan appeared, looking very confused and miserable.

"Look at her," continued Quinney. "She's blushin' to the roots of her hair for you."

At this Posy pulled herself together, and remarked defiantly:

"I'm not the least little bit ashamed of myself!"

"Sorry to hear that, my girl; it fair furs my tongue to find you here. Now then, like to take it sittin' or standin'?"

"Take what?"

"The dose I'm goin' to deal out to a deceitful, disobedient, ungrateful daughter. Sharper than a serpent's tooth, you are!"

So far, he had ignored James, who was standing back, not far from the door.

"I'll take it standing," replied Posy, "beside Jim."

Then, to Quinney's rage, she tripped across the room, and flung her arms round the young man's neck. Susan, ever mindful, like a true Biddlecombe, of the proprieties, murmured gaspingly:

"Posy! Please remember what you've not got on!"

"This beats the band," said Quinney. "I call this rank mutiny."

"It's—it's Nature," faltered Susan.

"You hold your tongue, mother! A nice couple, I do declare! Can you cook, Miss Independence?"

Posy removed her arms from James's neck, but she remained standing beside him.

"Cook? Not me. You know I can't cook. Why?"

"Thought not. Anything of a hand with your needle?

"No."

Quinney turned to Susan, who had sunk into a chair. The youth had faded out of her comely face. Every time that Quinney spoke she winced. A couple of tears were trickling down her cheeks.

"Why didn't you teach this young lady to use a broom, mother? Can she wash anything more useful than her own hands?"

Susan shook her head helplessly. The situation was far beyond her. She faltered out:

"Your orders, Joe. The child, you said, was to be brought up like a little princess."

He stared at her, dimly perceiving that his Susan could not be described truthfully as standing shoulder to shoulder with him.

"They tell me," he observed derisively, "that our royal Princesses have to learn such things as cookin' and washin', because revolutions do happen sometimes."

Susan shrugged her shoulders.

For the first time Quinney turned directly to James. The young man confronted his employer with a certain dignity not wasted upon Posy. He seemed to be quite ready to vindicate himself, when the opportunity came.

"Intentions honourable?" demanded the infuriated father.

"They are, sir."

"Arranged the weddin'-day yet?"

"Not yet."

"Waitin', maybe, for father's blessing and a snug settlement?"

James only smiled deprecatingly, but Posy exclaimed:

"And why not? Isn't it your duty to provide for me? It's your fault, not mine, that I can't cook, or wash, or sew."

"What a sauce!" said Quinney, lifting his congested eyes to heaven. "Mother, you go and stand between 'em."

Susan obeyed, muttering to herself and shaking her head. She placed a trembling hand upon Posy's sleeve. Posy saw the tears and kissed her. Quinney continued more fluently, speaking with deliberation, for he had rehearsed carefully this part of the scene.

"Now, Miss Impudence, ain't I been a good father to you? No quibblin'! Ain't I been a tip-top parent to you?"

"I don't quite know."

"What you say?"

"I said I didn't quite know."

"Well, I'm fairly jiggered! Ain't I given' you everything a girl wants?"

Posy remained silent. Can we describe Quinney's astonishment and dismay, when Susan said curtly and clearly:

"Indeed you haven't."

Posy added, hesitatingly:

"I have wanted things you didn't give me."

"Of all the shameless hussies! Now, you answer straight. It'd take a month o' Sundays to tell you what I have given you, but you tell me what I've not given."

Susan answered with a promptitude indicating previous consideration of the question.

"Be fair, Joe! You've not given the child your confidence or your sympathy. You don't know what books she reads; you don't know anything about her except what's on the surface."

"Hark to this!"

"You heard her say just now, when we was behind the screen, that she didn't know whether you loved her. That's something a girl ought to know, isn't it?"

"Go it! Love her? Love my daughter? You know that I love her."

"As she said, this is going to be a test of that."

"See here, Susan! Are you on my side or on hers?"

"I'm trying to stand between you, Joe—trying hard to keep the peace, and—and to be just."

"Just? You dare to hint that I don't love my child?"

Very slowly, Susan answered him. What it cost the faithful soul to speak the truth, as she conceived it to be, no male scribe can set forth. To her his question embodied the hopes and fears of all her married life, what she had suppressed so valiantly, so successfully, that he had never been vouchsafed a glimpse of her tormented sensibilities. To her this was the supreme moment when she must speak plainly, or for ever hold her peace.

"You love old furniture, Joe, old china, tapestries, and lacquer cabinets. You love them too well, dear. They have crept between you and Posy, between you—and me."

The dreariness of her voice smote her husband. Had they been alone, he would have melted; but James was present—James, whom he despised, James, whom he knew to be unworthy. Unable to deal adequately with Susan's pathetic indictment, he turned savagely on the young man.

"And you—don't you love old furniture, old china?" He made a passionate gesture, including within a sweep of his arm all the treasures about him. He continued: "Answer me! Don't you love things worth their weight in gold?"

"They interest me, of course. I don't love them."

"Never entered your overcrowded mind, did it, that when closing-time came for me these things would belong to my only child—hey?"

"It may have entered my mind, sir, but I didn't fall in love with Posy because she was your daughter."

"Ho! Tell me, how do you propose to support this young lady after I've given you the sack?"

"For that matter, Mr. Tomlin wants me. You pay me four pounds a week. I'm worth ten to any big dealer."

"'Ark to Mister Pride-before-the-Fall!"

Rage now possessed him. He had promised himself that he would keep his temper, and deal drastically but calmly with a clever knave and a pretty noodle. But Susan's attitude had blown to the wind such excellent resolutions. Perhaps the dominant idea in his mind was to get Susan alone, to vindicate himself in her eyes. He believed honestly that this abominable affair had distracted her poor wits. Obviously, the first step towards an understanding with Susan was the settlement of this preposterous James Miggott. He nerved himself for a knock-out blow. In James's eyes, set a thought too close together, he fancied that he read derision and defiance. He heard James's quiet voice:

"I am quite able to support a wife."

"Are you? Does that mean, my lad, that you're ready to marry her against my wish, without my consent?"

"I counted on your consent, sir."

"You answer my question. You're in love with Posy for herself—hey? You'd take her as she stands?"

James answered firmly but respectfully:

"Yes."

Poor Quinney! He had expected hesitation, a craven retreat from a false position, glib expostulation—any reply except this stark "Yes." The blow stunned him. He heard Posy's joyful voice:

"Oh, Jim, you are a darling! I was never quite—quite sure till this blessed minute!"

The little man boiled over. He was almost ripe for personal violence. Fortunately, the sense that a man must not fight with his fists in the presence of ladies made him thrust his hands into his pockets. The other convention concerning the use of strong language was honoured in the breach!

"Damn you!" he spluttered. "If you want her, take her—now."

CHAPTER XX

BLACKMAIL

I

The bolt fell from the blue with shattering effect upon Posy and James. Susan, however, with that instinct which makes a woman grab at her petticoats when she is tumbling over a precipice, exclaimed shrilly:

"Joe! He can't take her without her stockings!"

"That's his affair," said Quinney.

His shrewd eye had marked a collapse on the part of James. He felt reasonably assured that the young man was bluffing; he knew that this "downy cove" wanted a wife with more than stockings, no matter how pretty her bare feet might be. Fortified by this conclusion, he, so to speak, fixed bayonets and charged. Unfortunately, he did not take Susan's character into account, which a husband so acute should have done. He was well aware that his wife, with all her shining qualities, was obstinate and emotional. More, he had never regarded her as a mother, although that significant name crossed his lips a hundred times each day. Susan was his wife.

When he charged, head down, seeing "red," intent only upon "downing" the clever knave and the foolish virgin, Susan interposed, metaphorically, her soft body.

"Joe, you ain't serious? You ain't turning our child out of our house at midnight?"

We must admit that Quinney was not serious, but for the moment he was in no condition to think soberly. He replied fiercely:

"I'm turning out a—adder!"

Susan faced him. He had lost his head; she lost hers.

"If you do this——" she gasped.

"Go on!"

"If you do this unnatural, cruel, wicked——"

"That's right. Hit a man when he's down!"

"Down!" she retorted, as fiercely as he; "it's up you are, Joe Quinney, tens o' thousands o' feet above all common sense and common decency. It is things you

care for—things—things—things! And our Posy—my Posy, bless her!—is right to prefer persons to the graven images, the false gods, which you've set up and worshipped—yes, worshipped! There's only one person in all the world you care for, and that's yourself—yourself!"

She flung herself into a chair in a paroxysm of grief and distress, covering her face with the hands which had worked so faithfully for a husband changed beyond recognition. Posy flew to her.

"Darling mother!"

Quinney pushed the girl aside.

"All your fault, you baggage! Susan! Susan!"

Susan sobbed inarticulately. Quinney shook her, speaking loudly, but not unkindly, confounded in his turn by an indictment which he hardly understood.

"Stop it, old dear, stop it! I care about you. Susie—I do, indeed! Worked for you, I have, made a perfect lady of yer! Couldn't get along without you, no how! And you know it! Darby and Joan—what? Oh, bung it! Gawd bless me soul! you'll melt away like, if you ain't careful. Sue, s'elp me, you come first."

She lifted her head with disconcerting suddenness.

"Do I? Sure?"

He seized her hand, and pressed it.

"Why, of course. Nice old cup of tea, you are, to doubt that!"

"You'd miss me if I went?"

The sharp interrogation ought to have given him pause.

Perhaps he had always underrated Susan's subtlety. The most foolish mothers can be subtle as the serpent when the happiness of their children is at stake.

"Miss you? Haven't I said time and again that I hoped as I'd be taken first?"

She sat up alert, strangely composed after this tempest of emotion.

"Oh yes, you've said so——"

He was far too excited to perceive that she was leading him into a trap cunningly contrived.

"Meant it, too! Man o' my word, I am!"

Susan stood up.

"Man of your word," she repeated ironically. "Tell me you was joking when you threatened to turn young Posy into the street?"

His mouth opened, his eyes protruded, as if he were a victim of that rare malady known as Graves's disease. Had his Susan plotted and planned to trip him up? Was she a superlative actress? He moistened his parched lips with his tongue, measuring his will against hers, sorry for her, but sorrier still for himself. Then he said more calmly:

"Young Posy needn't leave us unless she wants to. I'll keep on James. I'll

sweeten his salary again to please you, but our child ain't for the likes of him. He's no class."

Posy interrupted, with a toss of her head.

"James is good enough class for a child of yours."

Quinney curbed an angry retort. His temper was at last under control. He said quietly:

"It comes to this, Posy. You've got to choose between James Miggott and us. Now, not another word. You scoot off to bed. We'll talk of this again to-morrow."

"I shall choose Jim to-morrow."

Then Susan fired the decisive shot. Nobody will ever know whether she meant it. She had been tried too high. Doubtless the spirit of bluff was hovering in the sanctuary, playing pranks now with this victim, and now with that.

"If you drive Posy out of this house, Joe, I shall go with her. If she never returns to it, I shall never return to it."

Quinney wiped his forehead, as he ejaculated:

"The pore soul's gone potty!"

Susan continued:

"I was ever so happy when we went to live in the Dream Cottage; I have been very unhappy in this big house filled with things which you love more than me."

"Unhappy—here? Lordy! You'll complain of the Better Land when you get there!"

James spoke. So far he had kept his powder dry and his head cool.

"May I suggest——"

"What?"

"A compromise, sir. You have always impressed me with the wisdom of doing nothing rashly."

"Pity you couldn't profit by such advice, Mr. Marry-in-Haste."

"I've been courting Posy for more than three months."

"You've the rest of your life to regret it."

James hesitated, trying to determine the right policy to pursue. Then he said firmly:

"There are one or two matters to talk over, sir, before we part company."

"Meaning, my lad?"

"Matters we had better discuss quietly, and—alone."

"Ho! Hear that, Susan? He's not quite in such a hurry to take the young lady without her stockin's. Very good! You pop off to bed, my girl. Susan, you go with her. I'll see you later."

Posy glanced at James, who nodded.

"Good-night, Jim!"

"Good-night, my darling!"

"Tchah!" muttered Quinney. For the third time in his life the remembrance of the Channel crossing vividly presented itself. He felt deadly sick!

II

As mother and daughter retired, Quinney exclaimed, more to himself than to James:

"When I think of what I've done for them two thankless females!"

"What have you done?" asked James.

"Slaved for 'em for twenty years! Sweated blood, I have! Thanks to me, they've lived in cotton-wool, able to take it easy all the time. Enough o' that! What you got to say to me—alone? Hey?"

"Can't you guess? Didn't you overhear just now what I said to Posy? I told her that I thought I could deal with you, and that the time had come to do it."

"Deal away, my lad. Pull the cards out o' yer sleeve. Lay 'em on the table."

"My cards, sir, are chairs."

"Chairs? You gone potty, too?"

"Chairs. The chairs which Mr. Tomlin bought for fifty pounds; the chairs which I 'restored'; the chairs which were done up with old needlework covers taken from other chairs; the chairs which you put up at Christopher's and bought in after spirited bidding—faked bidding—for nine hundred pounds; the chairs which you sold to Mr. Hunsaker this morning for eleven hundred; the chairs which you ordered me to pack at once. Nice little tale to tell Mr. Hunsaker, when he calls to-morrow! Nice little bit of 'copy' for the newspapers."

We know that this young fellow rehearsed his speeches. He had rehearsed this. It flowed smoothly from his lips.

"Blackmail!" gasped Quinney.

"I prefer to call it a weapon, sir, which you are forcing me, sorely against my will, to use."

"This puts the lid on."

"Yes, it does."

"I understand. It's my daughter against your silence, hey? Hold hard! Does she know of this?"

"No. Don't you remember? She asked for information, which I withheld out of respect for you and her. Posy believes you to be scrupulously honest."

"I'm damned!"

"I fear that you will be, if this story becomes public."

"My Posy against your silence. My Posy against my reputation. My Posy

against my wife!"

He was profoundly moved. James perceived this, and proceeded to follow up his advantage. His tactics, admittedly, were intelligently conceived and carried out. His error—a fundamental one—lay in his ignorance of Quinney's character. Like Susan, who had been carried away by her maternal emotions; like Posy, who was still in her salad days, he had taken for granted that Quinney did prefer things to persons.

"May I put my case this way, sir? As your prospective son-in-law, working hard in and for your interest, do I not present serious claims upon your attention?"

Quinney stared at him. This was, indeed, a "plant," skilfully prepared by a rascal and fortune-hunter. He said roughly:

"Cut that prospective son-in-law cackle! As yourself, my lad, you do present very serious claims indeed upon my attention."

"Have it as you please, Mr. Quinney."

"That's exactly how I mean to have it."

"What have you against me, sir?"

Quinney had been pacing the room restlessly. He stopped suddenly, opposite James, within two feet of his pale face.

"You ain't honest; you ain't straight; you ain't fit to marry an honest girl!"

James raised his eyebrows.

"Isn't this a case of the pot calling the kettle black?"

"Yes, it is. We're both pots—dirty pots. How dirty I someway never saw till to-night. But my Posy is porcelain—clean, dainty porcelain. You can't touch her without defilin' her. Now—scoot!"

"Without settling anything?"

"You shall be settled to-morrow. Don't worry."

The young man smiled.

"You are wise, sir, to take a night to sleep over it."

"Done talkin'?"

"For to-night, yes."

"Good! Because with every extra word you're givin' yourself dead away. Easier to marry money than to make it, hey? Kennel up, you puppy!"

The puppy snarled at this, but withdrew.

III

Alone, Quinney opened the cupboard beneath the china cabinet, taking from it a cut-glass decanter half-filled with brown sherry, and two glasses, which he

placed upon his desk. Then he summoned Susan. She drifted in rather helplessly, somewhat of a wreck after the storm. Quinney ensconced her in a chair, filled the two glasses with wine, and pushed one across the desk to Susan. She shook her head.

"Drink it, you old spoof-sticks! Lordy, Sue, I didn't know you had it in yer! What a spirit! What a little tigress!"

He tossed off his glass, smacking his lips.

"I meant it, Joe."

"Tch! tch! In two sticks you'll have my pore leg pulled out of shape."

"I meant it, every word of it."

"What? You'd leave the best and kindest hubby in the world?"

"I'd leave a crool, heartless father."

For answer, Quinney seized his empty glass and slammed it down upon the desk, smashing it riotously. Susan said in the same weak, obstinate tone: "Do that to her dear heart, you would." He snatched at the full glass, and hurled that to the floor. Susan merely observed: "Another two shillings gone!"

"Two shillings? Ten! Old Bristol! Lovely stuff!"

"There you go again."

"Ho! You really think I care about money?"

"Yes, I do."

"Well, I don't. You say I care about things. So I do. But things have been a means to an end with me. Never mind that now. If you don't know yer luck in havin' Joe Quinney for a husband, he's too busy a man to learn ye. I want to talk about something else. This James Miggott's a bad lad. He's threatening me."

The word challenged Susan's attention.

"Threatening you, Joe? What about?"

Quinney's high colour deepened. Susan had cornered him. His voice became less masterful.

"Never you mind what about! He ain't goin' to down me that way."

Susan glanced sharply at her husband. He tried to meet her honest eyes, but failed. The impulse surged within him to confess, to ask forgiveness, to promise to run straight for the future. The horns of the dilemma pierced his vitals. How could he expose James without revealing himself stark naked to the wife whose good opinion was dearer to him than all the treasures in his sanctuary? She beheld him squirming, and hastened to draw the wrong conclusion. James, of course—gallant youth—had threatened to take Posy without her stockings. She said tartly:

"James is fighting for our Posy."

"No, he ain't. He's fighting—and hittin' below the belt, too—for things. These things."

"I don't believe it."

"Right! You can believe this, I shall fight to a finish. No quarter—see?"

"Very well. Good-night!"

She rose, whey-faced, but resolute.

"What d'ye mean by 'good-night'?"

"I'm going to sleep with Posy."

"You ain't?"

"Yes, I am!"

She went out slowly, not closing the door. Quinney listened to her familiar steps as she mounted the oak stairs. She ascended higher and higher till she reached Posy's room. Quinney heard the door shut, and then—significant sound—the click of a turning key.

He appeared confounded.

CHAPTER XXI

MABEL DREDGE

I

Quinney telephoned early the next morning to Tom Tomlin, asking him to come to Soho Square before ten. Posy did not descend to breakfast, and during that meal Susan preserved an obstinate silence. Quinney gobbled up his bacon, drank three cups of tea, and hurried to the sanctuary, where a pile of letters left unanswered the day before awaited him. Mabel Dredge, notebook in hand, greeted him perfunctorily. Quinney, lacerated by his own anxieties, noted a dreary tone in the girl's voice. Many excellent persons never recognize trouble in others till they are suffering from trouble of their own. Of such was our hero. He had passed a wretched night, and, as he shaved, was constrained to perceive its ravages upon his face. Upon Mabel's face, also, he seemed to catch a glimpse of faint lines and shadows, as if the spider Insomnia had woven a web across it.

"Anything wrong?" he inquired.

"Nothing," replied Mabel tartly.

He sat down at his desk, glancing at the morning's letters, arranged by Mabel in a neat little pile. The topmost letter contained Hunsaker's cheque for eleven hundred pounds, and a few cordial lines reminding his dear sir that he hoped to call at eleven, and that he might bring a friend with him, an expert of

Chippendale furniture. Quinney frowned, resenting the introduction of an expert. But he reflected comfortably that the chairs were already cased. He opened the other letters, and then began to deal faithfully with each correspondent in turn. He dictated these letters after his own fashion. It was Mabel's task to adjust grammatical errors and to eliminate slang. He had grown fond of Mabel because she was competent and tactful.

"I think that will do, my dear."

Mabel rose quietly, shutting her notebook. She used a small room, where she kept her machine and a copying-press and other paraphernalia appertaining to secretarial duties. Unconsciously, she sighed.

"Lookin' peaky, you are," said her employer.

Mabel retorted indifferently:

"Weather affects me. Seems even to have affected you, sir."

"Ho! Observant young miss! But you're wrong. Weather don't affect me; and it oughtn't to affect a healthy young woman like you. Sleep badly?"

"Ye-es."

"Same here."

The need of sympathy gripped him. He was so sorry for himself that he felt sorry for this white-faced typist, whom hitherto he had regarded as a machine.

"Beastly, ain't it?" She nodded, and he continued, speaking rather to himself than to her: "To toss about, tinglin' all over, with one's thoughts in a ferment! Perfectly disgustin'!"

Mabel smiled faintly.

"I've a lot on my mind just now," he went on, "a bigger load than I care to carry—immense responsibilities, see?"

She opened her eyes, wondering what had evoked this amazing confidence, little guessing that the habit of years was behind it. He had always talked to Susan about his affairs, poured them into ears now deaf in the hour of sorest need.

"Sit down," he commanded. "There's no hurry. I'm expecting Mr. Tomlin."

"I beg your pardon; I forgot to mention it. I have a message from Mr. Miggott. His respects, and he wants to see you if you can spare a few minutes."

"Ho! Well, I can't see him yet. He must wait my convenience. Sit you down!"

Mabel obeyed, blushing slightly, because Quinney's eyes were so piercing. She was quite unaware that she had betrayed herself in the pronunciation of a name. At no other time, probably, would Quinney have leapt to the conclusion that James was behind her trouble as certainly as he was behind his own. He hated James. It hurt him to hear his name softly murmured.

"Any of your people ill, my dear?"

"No."

"Not in debt, are you?"

"Certainly not."

"Not sufferin' from neuralgia, or toothache, or anything of that sort?"

"I am in excellent health, sir."

"Then, my girl, you're in love."

Her confusion answered him. She was angry, indignant, scornful; but she could not prevent the red blood rushing into her cheeks. She retorted sharply:

"That's none of your business, sir!"

Quinney chuckled. A ray of light flashed across his dark horizon.

"Don't be too sure o' that, my dear. Perhaps it is my business; anyway, I'm going to make it my business, because I take a fatherly interest in you."

"I can manage my own affairs, Mr. Quinney."

"No, you can't. Look ye here. I'm a wonderful guesser—always was. You like James Miggott. Nothing to be ashamed of in that. I'll be bound he likes you!"

Mabel fidgeted. Quinney's voice was kind. It rang true. The desire to confide in this odd little man, so masterful, so persuasive when he chose, grew as swiftly as Jack the Giant Killer's beanstalk.

"Doesn't he like you?" he asked insistently.

"He used to like me," she answered mournfully.

"Ah! Now, Mabel, there are just as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it."

"And what time have I to catch fish?"

"S'pose you was my daughter, I shouldn't like you to marry James. This is on the strict Q.T., just between me and you, James was a faker of old furniture till he came to me."

"He's no better, I dare say, and no worse, than other men in his trade!"

"Tch! tch! He's lucky to have a nice girl to stick up for him. Now, my dear"—his voice became very soft and confidential—"you say that James used to like you. Why has he cooled off, hey?"

She answered miserably:

"I don't know."

"Cheer up! Maybe I can help you. Lordy! Don't cry! Answer me this—straight. Do you still want him?"

"Ye-es."

It was a doleful, long-drawn-out monosyllable, eloquent of much left unsaid. Quinney nodded sympathetically, although his small eyes were sparkling.

"At one time, I take it, you thought he was yours?"

She was too overcome to utter a word.

"Do you believe that he likes somebody else?" He paused, waiting for an answer. She twisted her fingers, refused to meet his eyes, moved restlessly. He

went on, playing upon her emotions:

"Do you know who that somebody is? Come, be square with me, my dear. Is it a young lady who shall remain nameless—a young lady lately returned from school; a young lady whom James Miggott will never marry—never?"

His suppressed excitement communicated itself to her. She was clever enough to understand exactly what he wished to convey. She glanced up and nodded. Quinney drew in his breath sharply; his manner changed.

"And you still want him?"

"Yes."

"Queer creatures you women are, to be sure!"

"We can't pick and choose like men."

"If you want him, you shall have him."

She shook her head dubiously.

"You don't know James, sir."

"Ho! Don't I? Better than you know him, better than he knows himself. I'll help you, my girl, but you must help me."

"How?"

He got up and stood beside her. She watched him with a certain fascination, curiously sensible of his power over her and others. The native confidence that he had in himself percolated slowly through her.

"Tell me truly what has passed between you and this young man."

She was expecting any question except this. The audacity of it overwhelmed her, as he had foreseen that it would. She broke down, sobbing bitterly, hiding her face from the keen eyes looking down into her very soul. Quinney laid his hand upon her head tenderly. For the moment this strangely-assorted pair, linked together by an interest common to each, yet antagonistic to each, stood together upon a plane high above that on which they moved habitually.

"I ain't no saint," said Quinney solemnly. "And I tell you this, Mabel Dredge, I've been through hell during the past twelve hours; and I'm not out of it yet. Stand up, you poor dear! Look me in the face, for then you'll know that you can trust me. Give me your hand—so! It's a nice little hand. Ought there to be a wedding-ring on it?"

"Yes," she whispered.

II

Susan came in shortly after Mabel had gone. Her face was very troubled, but obstinacy sat enthroned upon a head carried at a higher angle than usual. Quinney said facetiously:

"Come to throw yourself at my feet and ask forgiveness?"

"Certainly not."

"Meant all you said last night?"

"Every word of it."

"What is Posy doing?"

"Crying her eyes out, I dare say."

"Sounds sloppy."

"Mr. Tomlin is here. Hateful man! I suppose he'll side with you!"

"That remains to be seen. I doubt it. Ask Tom to step up."

Susan went out with dignity.

Tomlin had been to a banquet the night before, and bore the signs of intemperance in eating and drinking upon his large mottled face. He greeted Quinney sulkily, unable to purge his mind of the conviction that Soho Square ought to come to Bond Street. He asked thickly:

"Ever suffer from indigestion?"

"Never."

"I do," said Tomlin gloomily. He added with finality: "Port, even the best, atop o' bubbly wine is a mistake after fifty. What you want me for, young Joe?"

"Glad I look young, Tom. I don't feel it this morning."

Tomlin stared at him.

"Blest if you ain't made a night of it, too."

"Here's something to cheer us up."

He pushed across the desk Hunsaker's cheque for eleven hundred pounds. Tomlin's heavy features relaxed into a smile. Quinney scribbled some figures on a memorandum pad, and invited his colleague to verify them. The sum represented the exact amount due to Tomlin as his share of the plunder.

"Quite O.K., Joe."

"Like your bit o' ready now?"

"Never refuse cash, my lad."

Quinney wrote out a cheque, and a receipt. Tomlin accepted the cheque, placing it in a bulky pocket-book. He glared askance at the receipt, which set forth that the sum just paid was a commission upon the sale of eight chairs to Cyrus P. Hunsaker, of Hunsaker.

"Why this receipt, Joe? Ain't a cheque a receipt?"

Quinney answered curtly:

"A cheque don't show what money is paid for. My way of doin' business."

"No complaints."

He chuckled fatly, raising his thick eyebrows when Quinney observed lightly:

"What we done the day before yesterday was a leetle bit dangerous, old

man. Sailin' too near the reefs—um?"

Tomlin replied pompously:

"Skilled navigators, my lad, do sail near the reefs. I wouldn't assume such risks with another man."

"But you did!"

"What do you mean, Joe?"

"James Miggott is in the know."

"Of course, but he's had his little bit."

"Yes; but he wants more!"

"The swine!" He stared at Quinney, beholding upon the whimsical face of his pupil writing which he could not read. "What's up?" he spluttered.

"I am," said Quinney, rising; "and stripped for the fight of my life."

Tomlin stirred uneasily.

"A fight, Joe? Who with?"

Quinney answered fiercely:

"That dirty dog, James Miggott. He wants more than what we gave him. See? He wants my Posy."

Tomlin exhibited marked relief.

"Your Posy? Don't blame him for wanting her."

"You hold hard! Young Posy wants him."

"Gawd bless my soul! She's not the judge o' quality he is."

"And Susan backs 'em up. That fairly tears it."

Tomlin looked puzzled, unable to account for the younger man's excitement. He considered that Joe, unlike himself, was incapable of managing his womenfolk.

"Between 'em, Tom, they've got a strangle hold on us."

"Us? What have I to do with your fam'ly matters?"

"I sent for you to tell you. Now, first and last, they'll never have my consent, never! But, by thunder! I refuse my consent, not because the dog's my servant, but because he isn't straight. He's no better than you and me."

Tomlin glared at his former pupil, who stood over him, waving a denunciatory hand.

"You speak for yourself, young man."

"I ain't young. We're both of us old enough to know better and do better, but we've had to make our way. Maybe I've been honester than you, maybe I haven't. I ain't whining, least of all to you. We're in a deep hole of our own making. And we must get out of it. I told this James Miggott last night that we was pots, just common pots, sailin' down the stream with other pots. But my little Posy's porcelain, the finest paste, the gem o' my collection. Susan accuses me of caring for things, these things. So I do; so do you; that's why we've struggled

to the front. And this son of a gun loves things, and what they stand for. He's after my things, but he's clever enough to have bluffed two innercent females into believin' that he wants my Posy without 'em."

Tomlin blinked and nodded, stupefied by the terrific feeling displayed by Quinney. His headache had come back, that humiliating sense of "unfitness" which clouded his judgment, leaving him dazed and irritable. Nor, as yet, had he grasped the situation, or measured the depth of the hole to which Quinney alluded. The little man went on:

"I've called his bluff, if it is bluff. I've told him that he can take Posy, march her out of this house as she is."

"What did he say to that?"

"I should have downed him, but, by Gum, the old lady butted in. Swore solemn she'd leave my house, if I turned Posy out. She means it, too!"

"A good riddance," snarled Tomlin.

Quinney exploded, shaking his clenched fist in front of the huge, red face.

"What? I'd have you to know, Tom Tomlin, that my Susan and me have stuck together through thick and thin. I think the world of her, but she's without guile, bless her, and as obstinate as Balaam's ass!"

"S'pose you tell me where I come in?"

"Here and now, by the back-door! This dirty dog threatens to down me with the true story of them chairs. And he'll do it, too. Now, let this soak in together with all that port and champagne you swallered last night. If he downs me, he downs you! Got it?"

Assuredly Tomlin had "got it." He began to shake with impotent rage, growling out:

"Threatens to split? I'd like to tell that young man exactly what I think of him."

"You can," said Quinney derisively; "but it will do you more good than him, I reckon. We'll send for him in a jiffy. Ever notice my typist and stenographer, Miss Dredge?"

"Yes, many a time. Nice-lookin' gal."

"This maggot of a Miggott has been eatin' into her young affections, see?"

"Has he? The young man has taste, Joe. Reg'lar lady-killer!"

Quinney lowered his voice:

"It's a weapon, but I don't rely on it. I can't use it, in fairness to Mabel, till we stand in the last ditch."

"Why not? Got to think of ourselves, ain't we?"

Tomlin pulled out an immense silk bandana, and mopped a heated brow.

"It's two-edged, Tom. You ain't yourself this morning, or you'd see, with your knowledge of the fair sex, that Posy might be keener on gettin' this scamp,

if she learned that another woman was after him. We'll try to handle Master Miggott first."

He crossed to the speaking-tube, and summoned James to the sanctuary. Then he sat down, very erect and austere, at his desk.

III

Presently James entered, carrying his head at the angle affected by Susan, looking very bland and self-confident.

"Good-morning, Mr. Tomlin! Good-morning, Mr. Quinney!"

Quinney acknowledged this salutation with a derisive grin.

"Mornin', Mr. Chesty! Bin usin' a Sandow's exerciser?"

"No, sir; Indian clubs. Am I to state my case before Mr. Tomlin?"

"Yes. Go ahead and state it. Don't waste my time, or his, or your own."

James addressed himself suavely to Tomlin, selecting his words carefully, speaking slowly, with the utmost respect.

"Last night, Mr. Quinney threatened to turn his daughter into the street, because she's engaged to be married to me."

"My hand was forced, my lad. Go on."

"I can support a wife, and Miss Quinney is ready to marry me by special licence this afternoon."

"Quite sure o' that?"

"Ab—solutely. Unhappily, I'm not yet in a financial position to support two ladies."

"Two ladies?" echoed Quinney, thinking of Mabel Dredge.

"I allude, sir, to Mrs. Quinney. She insists upon leaving you, if her child is turned out. That rather complicates matters."

"It does," said Quinney grimly.

"Under these circumstances, gentlemen, I feel justified in bringing pressure to bear. Mr. Hunsaker, who bought certain chairs yesterday, will call again this morning. He is naturally interested in the history of the chairs; and he might make trouble if he knew all the facts about them as known to you, Mr. Tomlin, to Mr. Quinney, and to me. I may add that my responsibility in the affair is negligible."

"Slick talker," muttered Quinney. He could see that Tomlin was much impressed by James's manner. The big fellow grunted uneasily:

"What do you propose?"

"A compromise, Mr. Tomlin."

Quinney lost something of his dignity, when he jerked out:

"He's compromised my Posy, and many another pore girl, I'll be bound!"

"Pardon me, sir. That sort of talk before a witness is libellous."

The last rag of Quinney's dignity fluttered away.

"I'll down you, my lad; yes, I will!"

"Self-preservation being the first law, sir, I must—sorely against the grain—down you first. Excuse plain speaking."

Quinney jumped up.

"I like plain speaking! I was weaned on it, short-coated on it! By Gum! my father damned me before I was born!"

"Easy all," murmured Tomlin nervously. He addressed James with a civility which the young man acknowledged with a faint smile. "Do I understand that you threaten to down your master because he refuses to sanction an engagement between you and his daughter?"

James shrugged his shoulders.

"It's a case of 'pull, devil—pull, baker!' I mean to pull for all I'm worth."

Quinney interrupted furiously:

"And what are you worth, Lord Rothschild?"

Tomlin held up a large hand, not too clean, upon which sparkled a diamond ring.

"You spoke of compromise, James?"

"Yes, sir. I suggest that my engagement to Miss Quinney should be sanctioned and recognized. I will stay on here, and demonstrate to Mr. Quinney my claims to be taken on later as a junior partner. Unless Miss Quinney of her own will cancels the engagement, the marriage will take place——"

"Never!" shouted Quinney.

James smiled deprecatingly.

"Shall I retire, gentlemen? You have time to talk things over. Mr. Hunsaker will not be here for another hour yet."

Tomlin nodded portentously:

"Yes, yes; leave us."

IV

Tomlin was the first to break an ominous silence:

"The long and short of it is, Joe, that this young feller can ruin us, rob us of our hard-earned reputations. We must square him."

"Money? He wants money and Posy!"

Tomlin stroked his chin pensively. It occurred to him that so sharp a practitioner as James Miggott would never come to grief. As a suitor for one of his

three daughters, he would not consider him too rashly as ineligible.

"Posy might do worse," he muttered.

"Ho! That's it. Sidin' with them? Thought you might!"

"Face the music, Joe! We're hanged, high as Haman, unless the ladies come to the rescue. It's a bit thick his threatenin' you. How does Posy take that—um?"

"How can I tell her what he's threatening to do? James knows that, the dog!"

"You can hint at unpleasantness. Posy ought to know that her young man is buckin' about ruining you."

"Maybe you'd like to talk to Susan and Posy?"

"I should. I understand women; you don't."

"You shall talk to 'em."

He hurried to the door, and through it on to the landing.

"Susan!—Su—san!"

Susan's voice was heard descending from above:

"Is that you calling, Joe?"

"Who did yer think it was? The Archbishop o' Canterbury or the First Lord of the Admiralty? Come you down quick, and bring Posy with you."

He stumped back into the sanctuary to confront Tomlin's scornful face.

"That the way you talk to an angry woman? Had any words with Mrs. Quinney this morning?"

"I've been talking to her and at her, off and on, ever since breakfast."

"Pore, dear soul!" ejaculated Tomlin.

CHAPTER XXII

A TEST

I

Posy may have been crying, but the colour and sparkle remained in her eyes; and she had arrayed herself in a smart and becoming costume, which Quinney recognized as "Sunday best." Let women decide what motive animated this preening. If she were to be turned out of Soho Square, Posy, not unreasonably, may have decided to take her prettiest frock with her. On the other hand, with equal wisdom, she may have thought that the sight of a charming young woman in all her bravery is likely to melt the heart of the sternest man. Because she appeared

on this momentous morning fresh and alluring, let us not accuse her of heartlessness. If destined by Fate to lose a father, she would gain a husband. Poor Susan, limp and bedraggled, was miserably sensible that victory for her would inflict consequences more crushing than defeat.

"Goin' to church?" Quinney inquired of his daughter.

Posy replied respectfully:

"Only if driven there by you."

Tomlin, rumbling and grumbling after his dietical indiscretions, greeted the young lady with a phrase often on his lips:

"Seasonable weather for the time of year?"

Susan glanced at him scornfully, and said audibly:

"Fiddle!"

Quinney apologized for this breach of politeness after his own fashion:

"Be'ind the door, she was, Tom, when they collected threepence a head for manners. Now, sit you down!"

Tomlin waved a half-consumed cigar, addressing Susan:

"Any objections to my smoking, ma'am?"

"Not she," replied her husband, "neither in this world nor the next. You go on and talk to her. You understand women. Open fire on 'em!"

"May I say a few words, ma'am?"

"Provided they are few, you may, Mr. Tomlin."

Driven to the wall, she made no effort to conceal her dislike of this big fat man, whom she had ever regarded as an evil influence in her Joe's life. Quinney exclaimed:

"'Ark to Mrs. Don't-care-a-damn!"

Tomlin raised a protesting finger.

"Tut, tut, Joe. You leave this to me."

He continued majestically, picking his words:

"I don't think you can be aware, ma'am, that James Miggott is threatening your husband, and"—he turned to Posy—"your dear father."

Susan snapped out:

"Joe told me as much last night. I know well what James is threatening. He's not the only man of his word in this house. He's threatening to take the girl he loves as she is. He's not thinking of anything else. He's made it plain that he's only to hold up his finger, and Posy'll go to him gladly."

"Just what I told you, Tom," remarked Quinney.

"You're under a misapprehension, ma'am. Miggott is threatening us—me and Joe."

At this Posy became more alert, listening attentively to Tomlin, but keeping her clear eyes upon her sire. Susan betrayed astonishment.

"Threatening you, Mr. Tomlin? Why should he threaten you, and why should you care tuppence whether he threatens you or not?"

Very deprecatingly, Tomlin spread out his large hands, palm uppermost, as if he wished the ladies to infer that he came empty-handed into a fight not of his seeking.

"I repeat, ma'am, he's threatening us. He's talking of trying to ruin us."

"Talkin' through his hat," murmured Quinney.

Susan tossed her head impatiently.

"You'll have to speak more plainly, Mr. Tomlin, if you wish me to understand what you're driving at."

Tomlin, cornered by Susan's direct methods in striking opposition to his own, fetched a compass, and began again more warily:

"Is it possible that you contemplate leaving the most faithful husband in the world, ma'am?"

Quinney chuckled, rubbing his hands.

"That's better. Now, Susie, you listen to Tom, if you won't listen to me."

"I've listened patiently to you, Joe, for just twenty years. It's about time I did a bit of talking, and that you did the listening."

"Ho! Been bottling things up, have you?" She nodded. "Then you uncork yourself, old dear! But, before you begin, I'll try to impress this on your female mind. This dirty dog of a James Miggott is threatening me and Tom. He believes that he can injure our reputations in the trade. See? Tom, here, thinks that he'll do it, if I refuse to surrender. Well, I don't. That's where he and me differ. But, just as sure as the Lord made little apples and small, mean souls, it's the solid truth that this young man is tryin' to blackmail me! Now you have the text, dearie. Get you up and preach a sermon on it. Posy, in her Sunday clothes, will listen, and so will I. But bear in mind that you took me for better or worse."

Tomlin added unctuously:

"And please remember, ma'am, that you have to consider me."

Susan eyed Tomlin with chill indifference. Her voice was almost vitriolic, as she remarked:

"If I'm driven from house and home, Mr. Tomlin, 'tain't likely I shall waste much time considering you!"

"Who's driving you, ma'am, from house and home?"

"My husband is, more shame to him!"

She collected her energies for a supreme effort, turning in her chair to look at the tyrant.

"Blaze away!" said the tyrant.

"Joe"—her voice trembled in spite of a gallant effort to control it—"you are forcing me to do the cruellest thing in all the world—to choose between my own

child and you. I ain't got your brains, but I've something much better—a heart. Posy wants me, and you don't. Let me finish. It's bitter aloes to me, but I swallow the gall of it for my dear child's sake. You used to love me!"

"Used?"

"Between you and me, that's over and done with."

She spoke very mournfully, brushing a tear from her cheek.

"No, it ain't, Susie. Seemin'ly, what I've done to show my love for you ain't enough. S'pose you tell me what more I might do?"

She answered swiftly:

"Give your consent to Posy marrying, as I did—marrying the man of her choice. Have you anything against his moral character?"

"He's a wrong 'un; take that from me!"

"Not without proof. What's he done that's wrong? He don't muddle his wits with food and drink. He don't use filthy tobacco. He attends Divine Service."

"Ho! Poor in this world's goods, but a moral millionaire, hey?"

"It's hateful to hear you sneer at him!"

"You ask me to give my daughter to a dog that's trying to bite the hand that fed him?"

"Posy might do worse," said Tomlin hoarsely.

"Now you've torn it!" said Quinney viciously. "I'm alone against the lot of you. Good! I'll down the lot of you, I'll——"

Posy interrupted:

"Father!"

"Well, my girl?"

She spoke incisively, with something of his manner:

"You won't answer one important question. What is James threatening to do to you and Mr. Tomlin?"

Poor Quinney! He had only to speak with entire frankness to win his Susan back. But at what a cost! Could he roll in the dust of a humiliating confession? Unconsciously he clenched his fists, setting his firm jaw at an even more aggressive angle. In desperation he clutched at a straw. If he must be dragged down from his high estate as the honestest dealer in the world, let that iconoclastic deed be done by another hand.

"Look ye here, my girl, suppose you ask James that question."

"I want to ask him," she replied calmly.

"Fine!" muttered Tomlin. "Yes, my dear, you ask him why he dares to threaten your dear father."

"And you," said Posy.

"That's right. And me. More than one good tip he's had from me."

"Tips? Why should you tip him?"

"You can ask him. There's no time to waste."

"No time to waste?"

The situation had become tenser. Quinney perceived with a certain pride that Posy was demonstrating the quality of brains inherited from him.

"Go to him," said Quinney. "He's in his room. We'll wait here."

She obeyed.

II

As soon as James saw Posy coming alone to him, he leapt triumphantly to the conclusion that her father had hauled down his flag. With a joyous exclamation he hastened to embrace her, but she turned a cool cheek to ardent lips.

"Father sent me to you, Jim."

"I knew he'd climb down!"

"But he hasn't. Jim, dear, what do you mean by threatening father and—and Mr. Tomlin?"

The eager smile faded out of his face. He remained silent, marshalling his wits.

"Have you received tips from Mr. Tomlin?"

"He's paid me for work done."

"What sort of work?"

"Restoring old bits of stuff. What has that got to do with us?"

She followed her thoughts, not his questions.

"And why is there all this hurry? Mr. Tomlin said just now that there was no time to waste."

"He's right; there isn't!"

"But why?"

Her voice was gently insistent. She laid her hand softly upon the sleeve of his coat, as if entreating him to trust her, as she trusted him.

"It's like this, Posy. I told you last night that I could deal with your father, that the right moment had come to deal with him. Now, give me a free hand!"

"Mr. Tomlin spoke, not very clearly, about your being able to ruin father and him. Father denies that!"

"Does he?"

Posy grew nervous, the colour ebbed from her cheeks; into her eyes flitted a shadow of fear. Her sharp wits were at work adding and subtracting, fitting together this jig-saw puzzle.

At this moment, her memory answered oddly to the strain imposed upon it. In this room, before the *coup de foudre*, her father had spoken roughly to

her, ordering her out of it with a peremptoriness apparently quite unjustifiable, because she was on an errand connected with his business. This tiny fact had rankled. James had asked her for a bottle of cleaning fluid.

Suddenly, out of the pigeon-holes of her mind, tumbled the covers of the chairs which James wanted to clean. The very pattern of the exquisite needlework presented itself.

"Oh!" she exclaimed.

"What's the matter, dearest? This excitement has been too much for you. Do let me handle your father. Believe me, I can do it in our joint interest."

She gazed at him queerly, a tiny, vertical line between her dark eyebrows.

"Has father done something dishonest?"

The colour rushed back into her cheeks as she spoke, but her eyes remained upon his. When he made no reply, she continued:

"Are you threatening to expose some fraud, a fraud connected with—chairs?"

"God! You are clever!" said James, unable to hide his admiration, or to believe that she had swooped upon the truth.

She sighed.

"Then it is true."

There was no interrogation in those four words.

"Well, yes; it is true." He hurried on, fearing that she might interrupt him. "I wanted to spare you knowledge of that. Fortune has placed in my hands a weapon. I am using it for both our sakes. Between our two selves, my dearest, I can admit to you that I should not really ruin your father. What an idea!"

"Then you are bluffing?"

"I am. I want you so desperately."

He attempted to kiss her, but she repulsed him gently.

"If mother knew——"

"She need not know. Your father will climb down at the last moment. He knows, and Tomlin knows, that I can ruin both of them."

"It's as bad as that?"

"Yes. He must surrender!"

"But if he shouldn't? Jim, dear, you said last night that you would take me as I am; and I loved you for saying that. Now, you want to bargain for me."

"To bargain for you, darling; not for myself."

She nodded, accepting his explanation, able to put herself in his place. Beholding the situation from his point of view, panoramically, she tried, in turn, to see the same situation from the point of view of her father. She exclaimed softly:

"Gracious!"

The expression upon her face puzzled James. Men, even the cleverest, can

follow women's bodies easier than their thoughts.

"Try to be sensible about this," he murmured.

"It's so exciting. Don't you see that this is a test of father, a wonderful test!"

"Of what?"

"Of his love for me, of his love for mother."

"Eh?"

"Don't be dense, Jim! Mother has accused father of not caring much for us; but, if he risks ruin for our sake, he does care."

"Pooh! He's bluffing, too!"

"I am not certain of that. Anyway"—her face cleared; she beamed at him delightfully—"I should like you to make good, Jim, without horrid threats, without bluffing. Take me as I am, if you want me. You can earn a good living anywhere. I'm not afraid of a little poverty with you."

"You don't know what poverty is, Posy. I do. I'm afraid of poverty for the woman I care about."

"Do you mean that you refuse to take me as I am?"

Bathos and pathos are twins. James passed, with an unconsidered bound, from climax to anticlimax. He said irritably:

"Hang it all! I shall have to take your mother, too. Posy, we haven't time to argue this. Hunsaker will be here directly. Luck has thrust into my hands a tremendous lever; and I mean to use it."

"Is that your last word?"

"Yes, it is. I'm fighting for you, fighting to a finish. And ever since the world began, women have had to look on at such a fight——"

"And take the winner?"

She laughed derisively.

"I shall be the winner!"

"Come up and tell father so."

"Right!"

"Mother and I will look on."

III

They went upstairs in silence, to find Tomlin reading the paper, and Susan engaged in dusting the china.

"Where's father?" asked Posy.

"Busy with Mabel Dredge. I'll fetch him."

Posy sat down. From her face it was impossible to divine what was passing through her brain. She folded her hands upon her lap and waited.

Quinney appeared, followed by Susan. He glared at James, and then fixed his gaze upon Posy.

"Well, my girl?"

She said demurely:

"It's to be a fight to a finish for me."

"Damn!" said Tomlin.

Susan wandered to the window, staring aimlessly into the square. She heard Tomlin saying hoarsely:

"Joe, you take my advice; let the girl have the man she wants. S'elp me, if one o' my daughters took a shine to him, she should have him! You're fairly downed, old man, and you know it. This Hunsaker will be here before we can turn round!"

"He is here," said Susan, turning from the window.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE RESULT

I

Susan was somewhat astonished at the effect of her announcement upon those present. She added, after a pause:

"A middle-aged gentleman is with him."

"Ho!" ejaculated Quinney. Evidently Hunsaker had brought the expert to Soho Square. He said sharply to James:

"Go downstairs, and bring these gentlemen up here!"

James glanced at Posy, and then at Quinney.

"You mean that, sir?"

"Of course I mean it! Scoot!"

Tomlin's mottled countenance deepened in tint. He rose from his chair and approached Quinney. James moved slowly towards the door, but he heard Tomlin's hoarse whisper:

"Better give in, Joe."

Quinney answered loudly:

"Never!"

"We can't face the music, if he squeals."

"I can." He addressed the company generally, in a fierce voice: "You mark

what I say—all of you. I'd sooner be ruined, lock, stock, and barrel, than give my daughter to that man!"

He pointed at James, whose self-possession was beginning to fail him. "What are you waiting for?" he demanded. "Do as I tell you. Ask Mr. Hunsaker and his friend, with my compliments, to come here!"

James vanished silently, as Tomlin muttered:

"I'll retire."

Instantly Quinney interposed his small, sturdy figure between the big dealer and the door.

"No, you don't, Tom Tomlin! Shoulder to shoulder with me, old man, till the last shot is fired!"

"I wish I knew what it is all about," said Susan to Posy. In a louder voice she addressed her husband:

"Maybe Posy and I had better leave you?"

"Please yourselves," said Quinney. His eyes were sparkling, and his short, red hair bristled with excitement and the lust of battle.

"As they are fighting for me," said Posy, "I'll stay."

Susan observed in utter bewilderment:

"I've looked on all my life, and I can do it a little longer."

She turned to Posy, with the intention of asking for some sort of explanation; but Posy had gone up to her father.

"Daddy!"

Quinney replied roughly:

"Too late to say you're sorry now, my girl!"

"But I'm not sorry. I'm ever so glad. Whether you are right or wrong about Jim, it is everything—yes, everything—to me to know that you really meant what you said just now."

She went back to her mother as Hunsaker's genial voice was heard coming up the stairs:

"Yes, sir, a sanctuary; and not a thing in it for sale!"

II

The two visitors entered, followed by James. Tomlin gasped when he beheld Hunsaker's companion, a celebrity known to all the great dealers in two hemispheres. He was short, rather stout, and very quietly dressed, with a fine head set upon rounded shoulders. The face was heavy-featured and saturnine, the face of a man who had lived a strenuous life, a fighter and a conqueror. Hunsaker pronounced his name with pride:

"Mr. Quinney, this is Mr. Dupont Jordan."

"Glad to see you, Mr. Jordan," said Quinney. He waved his hand. "My wife and daughter."

The famous collector bowed to the ladies, and nodded to Tomlin, who murmured obsequiously:

"Mr. Jordan has honoured me with his patronage."

Hunsaker's voice rose jovially above the murmurs:

"Mr. Jordan is interested in my chairs. He wants to see 'em. What he doesn't know about Chippendale furniture you could put into a mustard-seed and hear it rattle."

"Dear me!" said Susan. "That's a pity. The chairs are cased, I believe."

"Not all of them," said James. "One chair is still unpacked."

He stared boldly at Quinney, asking for a sign. Quinney rubbed his hands.

"Good," said he. "Go and fetch the chair, James."

"Fetch it here, sir?"

"At once, my lad."

Tomlin began to shake. Of all men in the world, Dupont Jordan was least to be desired at such a moment. Tomlin grew painfully moist and hot. James left the room, slightly slamming the door, a slam that sounded to Tomlin like the crack of doom. Hunsaker, meanwhile, had engaged the ladies in talk. Jordan stood beside Quinney, silent, but looking with interest at the incised lacquer screen. Quinney said to him quietly:

"Is it true, Mr. Jordan, that you bought the Pevensey chairs from Lark and Bundy?"

"Quite true, Mr. Quinney. That is why I wish so particularly to see Mr. Hunsaker's set, which I understand are like mine."

Quinney said in a loud tone: "I'm sorry."

The tone rather than the words challenged attention. Hunsaker stopped talking, staring at Quinney.

"Sorry?" repeated Jordan.

"Sorry, sir, that so busy a man should have come here. The chairs are like the Pevensey chairs, but they are not authentic specimens. I told Mr. Hunsaker that we dealers was done sometimes."

"Often," murmured Tomlin mournfully.

"Yesterday afternoon, Mr. Tomlin and I discovered that these chairs are not what they appear to be." He moved to his desk. "Here is your cheque, Mr. Hunsaker. I return it."

"Suffering Moses!" exclaimed Hunsaker.

"I am sorry," said Quinney, "that Mr. Jordan should be disappointed, but his verdict, no doubt, will coincide with mine and Thomas Tomlin's."

"Finest fakes I ever saw in all my life," murmured Tomlin.

Hunsaker stared at his cheque, and then held out his hand to Quinney.

"By the Lord, sir, I'm proud to know you. You're the straight goods."

"Give us time," said Tomlin, "and we'll find you a genuine set."

The big fellow was almost, but not quite, at his ease. He admitted to himself that his former pupil had risen to heights above his master. Nevertheless, the victory was not yet assured. He continued grandiloquently:

"We dealers are prepared to pay for our mistakes, but we don't want 'em made public."

Hunsaker exclaimed with enthusiasm:

"You can bet your boots, Mr. Tomlin, that this mistake won't be made public by me."

"Nor by me," said Jordan. His heavy face had brightened, his keen glance rested pleasantly upon Quinney. He had been told that this odd little man never sold fakes except as such, and here was confirmation strong of the astounding statement. Tomlin he knew to be a plausible rogue, who was honest only in his dealings with men like himself, recognized experts. Lark and Bundy he knew also as gentlemen of the same kidney. Quinney soared above his experience of dealers—a unique specimen.

These thoughts were diverted by the entrance of James, carrying the chair. He set it down with a flourish. He believed that Quinney had such faith in his powers as a faker of Chippendale furniture that he dared to invite the inspection of an expert. In a sense it was a proud moment for him, when he heard Quinney say:

"Now, Mr. Jordan, will you kindly pass judgment on this chair?"

Jordan adjusted his pince-nez, and bent over it. Quinney glanced at James.

"Stay you here, my lad."

James smiled triumphantly, interpreting these words to mean surrender. He collapsed like a pricked bladder, when he heard Quinney say to Jordan:

"Wonderful bit of fake work, Mr. Jordan, isn't it?"

"Half-and-half, I call it," observed Tomlin, noting the effect on James.

"Yes," said Jordan slowly. "This leg is genuine, I should say, and that isn't. Under a strong glass one would perceive the difference."

He looked up to behold James quite unable to control his emotions. The lever in which he had trusted was elevating Posy's father to sublime heights. By a stroke of genius Quinney had challenged the attention of a millionaire collector, who might entrust so honest a man with commissions involving tens of thousands of pounds. His bluff had been called in Posy's presence, Posy who was staring at her father with wonder in her eyes. For one moment he was tempted to throw prudence to the winds, and proclaim the fraud. But—would he be believed

now?

"Is this young man ill?" asked Jordan.

"Oh no," said Quinney. "He's upset, that's what he is, and no wonder! I'll say this for him, he's a clever lad; and he always had his doubts about them chairs, didn't you, James?"

"Yes," replied the unhappy James, "but——"

"That'll do, my boy. Take away that chair. I feel ill when I look at it. Case it up. We'll send the lot back to Ireland this afternoon."

James picked up the chair and retreated in disorder, outplayed at all points.

"The needlework is beautiful," said Jordan.

"Nothing more to be said," remarked Quinney genially.

He chuckled, rubbing his hands together, glancing slyly at Posy and Susan. Jordan was tremendously impressed. Here was a little man, obviously without much education, who had achieved a distinctive position as a dealer in the world's greatest mart. And he was plucky enough to face a heavy monetary loss and a still heavier blow to his *amour propre* as a connoisseur with—chucklings. Jordan loved a good loser.

Hunsaker put into vivid words the thoughts passing through Jordan's mind:

"Nothing more to be said!" he repeated. "I've something to say, and I want to get it off my chest quick. You're a dead square man, Mr. Quinney, and, by thunder, I'll make it my business that you don't lose by this. My friends are going to hear of you, sir. And some of 'em will weigh in downstairs with cheques as big as this." He waved the slip of paper excitedly. "I ain't sure that I ought to take this. I bought the chairs after careful examination. I wanted to buy them, and you were not over keen about selling. I remember that."

"I couldn't let you have those chairs, Mr. Hunsaker. Tear up that cheque!"

"I'm hanged if I will! I want to take back to Hunsaker a souvenir of a great morning. Can't you let me have something else for this?"

Then Quinney added the last touch.

"Yes, by Gum! I can. And I'll leave it to Mr. Jordan. You can have anything in this room you fancy at a price to be set on it by him."

Hunsaker threw back his broad shoulders and laughed. There was a whiff of the New Mexico plains in his general air, a breezy freshness captivating to see. At that moment Quinney regretted nothing. He beheld an honest man, and was warmed to the core.

"Anything?" repeated Hunsaker. He glanced about him, and for one moment his eyes rested upon Posy.

"Anything," Quinney reaffirmed.

"I'll remember that, sir. Now, Mr. Jordan, do me the favour to select some object in this sanctuary for which you would pay eleven hundred pounds or

more."

"You insist?"

"I shall be under the greatest obligations to you and Mr. Quinney."

Jordan walked to the cabinet. At his request Quinney opened it, displaying the beautiful interior.

"I would gladly give eleven hundred pounds for this," he said quietly.

"Will you accept that, Mr. Quinney?"

Quinney chuckled, looking at Posy.

"Um! There are memories connected with that cabinet, Mr. Hunsaker, which make me willing to part with it. It's yours."

"It's mine."

Solemnly he handed the cheque back to Quinney, who as solemnly received it, laying it upon his desk. Jordan held out his hand.

"Good-day, Mr. Quinney. I hope to become one of your customers, and to send you some of my friends."

Hunsaker turned to take leave of the ladies.

"I'm fixing up that dinner and play, Miss Posy, so it won't be good-bye. *Au revoir*?"

"*Au revoir*," said Posy.

III

Quinney accompanied them downstairs. When he returned to the sanctuary, Tomlin was the first to greet him.

"Joe," he said, "I've always wondered how a man without education could win your position in the trade. Now I know."

"Honesty pays, Tom, sometimes. Which reminds me of that cheque I gave you. Hand it over, old man!"

Tomlin did so reluctantly.

"Am I entitled to a com. on the sale of that lac cabinet?"

"As between man and man you are not, but when it comes to furnishin' the great and growin' town of Hunsaker with fancy bits, why you shan't be left out in the cold."

"So long," said Tomlin. He saluted the ladies politely, pausing at the door to address Susan:

"You hang on to Joe, ma'am. He'll make you Lady Quinney yet."

Tomlin had heard of the prediction made long ago by the Queen of the Gipsies.

"Send up James Miggott," said Quinney.

He was left alone with Susan and Posy. The girl broke the silence:

"Father!"

"Wait! James is coming."

The hardness had gone from his voice. Susan, far too dazed to realize what had taken place, but knowing vaguely that her husband seemed to have triumphed greatly, exclaimed joyously:

"Ah, Joe, you're going to forgive them."

"Forgive—him? I ain't settled with James yet."

"He was only bluffing," faltered Posy. "He told me so."

"Did he?" said her father.

James entered. He had recovered his self-possession, and something of his native impudence. Quinney, it was true, had outwitted him, but the great fact remained—Posy loved him.

"Stand you there, my lad!"

James remained near the door, thinking of Posy's three thousand pounds, which, unhappily, could not be touched till she was twenty-one. Men have, however, waited longer for less.

"So you was bluffing—hey?"

"Posy knew that I wouldn't injure you, sir."

"And you thought I was bluffing, but I wasn't. I'd sooner go to gaol—yes, I would—than see you married to my daughter. And why? Because you're after things."

"I want Posy."

"I see no margin of profit for Posy if you want her, and nothing else."

"Posy wants me."

"No, you're wrong, my lad. Posy wants the man she thinks you to be, not the man you are."

He approached Posy, looking her over, appraising her points.

"You ain't a judge of quality yet," he said to her. "This young feller is a fake. Don't shake your pretty head! He's not good enough for you, and that's why I forbid the banns. Your pore mother thinks it's a matter of pounds, shillings, and pence with me. Well, I know the value of money, because I've made it. Money can buy nearly everything and everybody. Money can buy you, Posy."

"It can't."

"It can buy you from him."

He turned sharply, staring contemptuously at James, appraising him also as the young man stood before him, erect and defiant.

"James Miggott——"

"Sir?"

"You have stolen something which is mine. I'll buy it back at my own price."

"You can't buy Posy from me?"

"Have you settled yet with Mabel Dredge?"

"What do you mean, sir?"

His voice remained impudently firm, but into his eyes crept a furtive expression.

"It seems, my lad, that Mabel Dredge wants you, and you wanted her before Posy came back from school. Took all she had to give, too."

"Oh!" exclaimed Posy.

Quinney continued scathingly: "You were mean enough to break with her, when my girl appeared, but she didn't break with you. As a moral millionaire, James Miggott, you're—bust!"

Susan saw James's face, evidence damning to any woman of intuitions. She cried aloud dolorously:

"He stole the roses from her pore cheeks! Oh, the everlasting wickedness of some men!"

Quinney smiled derisively.

"And, oh! the everlasting foolishness of some women! Mabel Dredge still wants him."

James, floundering in quicksands, attempted to lie his way out of them.

"It isn't true."

"Pah!" said Quinney. "You're nicely decorated, and there's a smooth buttery glaze to you, but your paste is rotten! Now, let's get to business. Posy and her mother think that I value things more than persons. Here"—he snatched up Hunsaker's cheque—"is a *thing* worth eleven hundred pounds. I offer you this, James Miggott, and with it Mabel Dredge, who prefers flashy stuff. You must choose, and choose quick, between Mabel, *plus* this cheque, and Posy in her go-to-meetin' clothes, *plus* her mother, who's right, by Gum, not to trust her alone with you."

Personality can be irresistible. This little man, with all his disabilities, held these three persons spellbound under the magic of his voice and manner. Posy's bosom was heaving with emotion; Susan stared, open-eyed and open-mouthed, at the lover of Laburnum Row, her Joe, miraculously restored to her. James glared at his master, recognizing him as such, defiant still, but stricken dumb. Quinney chuckled.

"The cheque won't be on offer long, my lad. Better take it! Better take it! It's—endorsed."

James hesitated, casting a furtive glance at Posy. She met his eyes bravely; and he knew that she saw him unmistakably as he was. Quinney flipped the cheque with his finger.

"Better take it—quick!"

James took it, and fled.

IV

Posy fell weeping into a chair. It is significant, perhaps, that Susan for the moment disregarded her daughter. Joe seemed to fill her eyes and the room. She fluttered towards him, stretching out her hands, calling him by name.

"You are—wonderful!"

The old phrase fell inevitably from her lips. He was acclaimed as the senior partner, rehabilitated. She did not entreat forgiveness, because she divined proudly that he would not wish his wife to humble herself.

Quinney kissed her joyously.

But Posy's bitter sobbing spoilt the sweetness of that kiss. Husband and wife remembered guiltily their child.

"Come you here, Posy," said Quinney. "Come to your old dad, my pretty!"

She obeyed him, hiding her head upon his shoulder, feeling the pressure of his arms, and then hearing his voice:

"I've paid more for you, Posy, than any thing I've got. And I shall hold tight on to you till Mr. Right comes along. You'll know him when you see him, missy, because of this nasty little experience with Mr. Wrong."

He stroked her hair, caressed her cheek, touching her lovingly with the tips of his fingers. Posy looked up.

"You do love me, don't you?"

"By God," he answered, "I do."

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