

GEORGE GISSING

THE ODD
WOMEN

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CHAPTER I

THE FOLD AND THE SHEPHERD

'So to-morrow, Alice,' said Dr. Madden, as he walked with his eldest daughter on the coast-downs by Clevedon, 'I shall take steps for insuring my life for a thousand pounds.'

It was the outcome of a long and intimate conversation. Alice Madden, aged nineteen, a plain, shy, gentle-mannered girl, short of stature, and in movement something less than graceful, wore a pleased look as she glanced at her father's face and then turned her eyes across the blue channel to the Welsh hills. She was flattered by the confidence reposed in her, for Dr. Madden, reticent by nature, had never been known to speak in the domestic circle about his pecuniary affairs. He seemed to be the kind of man who would inspire his children with affection: grave but benign, amiably diffident, with a hint of lurking mirthfulness about his eyes and lips. And to-day he was in the best of humours; professional prospects, as he had just explained to Alice, were more encouraging than hitherto; for twenty years he had practised medicine at Clevedon, but with such trifling emolument that the needs of his large family left him scarce a margin over expenditure; now, at the age of forty-nine—it was 1872—he looked forward with a larger hope. Might he not reasonably count on ten or fifteen more years of activity? Clevedon was growing in repute as a seaside resort; new houses were rising; assuredly his practice would continue to extend.

'I don't think girls ought to be troubled about this kind of thing,' he added apologetically. 'Let men grapple with the world; for, as the old hymn says, "'tis their nature to." I should grieve indeed if I thought my girls would ever have to distress themselves about money matters. But I find I have got into the habit, Alice, of talking to you very much as I should talk with your dear mother if she were with us.'

Mrs. Madden, having given birth to six daughters, had fulfilled her function in this wonderful world; for two years she had been resting in the old churchyard that looks upon the Severn sea. Father and daughter sighed as they recalled her memory. A sweet, calm, unpretending woman; admirable in the domesticities; in speech and thought distinguished by a native refinement, which in the most fastidious eyes would have established her claim to the title of lady. She had known but little repose, and secret anxieties told upon her countenance long before the final collapse of health.

'And yet,' pursued the doctor—doctor only by courtesy—when he had stooped to pluck and examine a flower, 'I made a point of never discussing these matters with her. As no doubt you guess, life has been rather an uphill journey with us. But the home must be guarded against sordid cares to the last possible moment; nothing upsets me more than the sight of those poor homes where wife and children are obliged to talk from morning to night of how the sorry earnings shall be laid out. No, no; women, old or young, should never have to think about money.'

The magnificent summer sunshine, and the western breeze that tasted of ocean, heightened his natural cheeriness. Dr. Madden fell into a familiar strain of prescience.

'There will come a day, Alice, when neither man nor woman is troubled with such sordid care. Not yet awhile; no, no; but the day will come. Human beings are not destined to struggle for ever like beasts of prey. Give them time; let civilization grow. You know what our poet says: "There the common sense of most shall hold a fretful realm in awe—"'

He quoted the couplet with a subdued fervour which characterized the man and explained his worldly lot. Elkanah Madden should never have entered the medical profession; mere

humanitarianism had prompted the choice in his dreamy youth; he became an empiric, nothing more. 'Our poet,' said the doctor; Clevedon was chiefly interesting to him for its literary associations. Tennyson he worshipped; he never passed Coleridge's cottage without bowing in spirit. From the contact of coarse actualities his nature shrank.

When he and Alice returned from their walk it was the hour of family tea. A guest was present this afternoon; the eight persons who sat down to table were as many as the little parlour could comfortably contain. Of the sisters, next in age to Alice came Virginia, a pretty but delicate girl of seventeen. Gertrude, Martha, and Isabel, ranging from fourteen to ten, had no physical charm but that of youthfulness; Isabel surpassed her eldest sister in downright plainness of feature. The youngest, Monica, was a bonny little maiden only just five years old, dark and bright-eyed.

The parents had omitted no care in shepherding their fold. Partly at home, and partly in local schools, the young ladies had received instruction suitable to their breeding, and the elder ones were disposed to better this education by private study. The atmosphere of the house was intellectual; books, especially the poets, lay in every room. But it never occurred to Dr. Madden that his daughters would do well to study with a professional object. In hours of melancholy he had of course dreaded the risks of life, and resolved, always with postponement, to make some practical provision for his family; in educating them as well as circumstances allowed, he conceived that he was doing the next best thing to saving money, for, if a fatality befell, teaching would always be their resource. The thought, however, of his girls having to work for money was so utterly repulsive to him that he could never seriously dwell upon it. A vague piety supported his courage. Providence would not deal harshly with him and his dear ones. He enjoyed excellent health; his practice decidedly improved. The one duty clearly before him was to set an example of righteous life, and to develop the girls' minds—in every proper direction. For, as to training them for any path save those trodden by English ladies of the familiar type, he could not have dreamt of any such thing. Dr. Madden's hopes for the race were inseparable from a maintenance of morals and conventions such as the average man assumes in his estimate of women.

The guest at table was a young girl named Rhoda Nunn. Tall, thin, eager-looking, but with promise of bodily vigour, she was singled at a glance as no member of the Madden family. Her immaturity (but fifteen, she looked two years older) appeared in nervous restlessness, and in her manner of speaking, childish at times in the hustling of inconsequent thoughts, yet striving to imitate the talk of her seniors. She had a good head, in both senses of the phrase; might or might not develop a certain beauty, but would assuredly put forth the fruits of intellect. Her mother, an invalid, was spending the summer months at Clevedon, with Dr. Madden for medical adviser, and in this way the girl became friendly with the Madden household. Its younger members she treated rather condescendingly; childish things she had long ago put away, and her sole pleasure was in intellectual talk. With a frankness peculiar to her, indicative of pride, Miss Nunn let it be known that she would have to earn her living, probably as a school teacher; study for examinations occupied most of her day, and her hours of leisure were frequently spent either at the Maddens or with a family named Smithson—people, these latter, for whom she had a profound and somewhat mysterious admiration. Mr. Smithson, a widower with a consumptive daughter, was a harsh-featured, rough-voiced man of about five-and-thirty, secretly much disliked by Dr. Madden because of his aggressive radicalism; if women's observation could be trusted, Rhoda Nunn had simply fallen in love with him, had made him, perhaps unconsciously, the object of her earliest passion. Alice and Virginia commented on the fact in their private colloquy with a shamefaced amusement; they feared that it spoke ill for the young lady's breeding. None the less they thought Rhoda a remarkable person, and listened to her utterances respectfully.

'And what is your latest paradox, Miss Nunn?' inquired the doctor, with grave facetiousness, when he had looked round the young faces at his board.

'Really, I forget, doctor. Oh, but I wanted to ask you, Do you think women ought to sit in Parliament?'

'Why, no,' was the response, as if after due consideration. 'If they are there at all they ought to stand.'

'Oh, I can't get you to talk seriously,' rejoined Rhoda, with an air of vexation, whilst the others were good-naturedly laughing. 'Mr. Smithson thinks there ought to be female members of Parliament.'

'Does he? Have the girls told you that there's a nightingale in Mr. Williams's orchard?'

It was always thus. Dr. Madden did not care to discuss even playfully the radical notions which Rhoda got from her objectionable friend. His daughters would not have ventured to express an opinion on such topics when he was present; apart with Miss Nunn, they betrayed a timid interest in whatever proposition she advanced, but no gleam of originality distinguished their arguments.

After tea the little company fell into groups—some out of doors beneath the apple-trees, others near the piano at which Virginia was playing Mendelssohn. Monica ran about among them with her five-year-old prattle, ever watched by her father, who lounged in a canvas chair against the sunny ivied wall, pipe in mouth. Dr. Madden was thinking how happy they made him, these kind, gentle girls; how his love for them seemed to ripen with every summer; what a delightful old age his would be, when some were married and had children of their own, and the others tended him—they whom he had tended. Virginia would probably be sought in marriage; she had good looks, a graceful demeanour, a bright understanding. Gertrude also, perhaps. And little Monica—ah, little Monica! she would be the beauty of the family. When Monica had grown up it would be time for him to retire from practice; by then he would doubtless have saved money.

He must find more society for them; they had always been too much alone, whence their shyness among strangers. If their mother had but lived!

'Rhoda wishes you to read us something, father,' said his eldest girl, who had approached whilst he was lost in dream.

He often read aloud to them from the poets; Coleridge and Tennyson by preference. Little persuasion was needed. Alice brought the volume, and he selected 'The Lotus-Eaters.' The girls grouped themselves about him, delighted to listen. Many an hour of summer evening had they thus spent, none more peaceful than the present. The reader's cadenced voice blended with the song of a thrush.

"'Let us alone. Time driveth onward fast, And in a little while our lips are dumb. Let us alone. What is it that will last? All thing' are taken from us—'"

There came an interruption, hurried, peremptory. A farmer over at Kingston Seymour had been seized with alarming illness; the doctor must come at once.

'Very sorry, girls. Tell James to put the horse in, sharp as he can.'

In ten minutes Dr. Madden was driving at full speed, alone in his dog-cart, towards the scene of duty.

About seven o'clock Rhoda Nunn took leave, remarking with her usual directness, that before going home she would walk along the sea-front in the hope of a meeting with Mr. Smithson and his daughter. Mrs. Nunn was not well enough to leave the house to-day; but, said Rhoda, the invalid preferred being left alone at such times.

'Are you sure she prefers it?' Alice ventured to ask. The girl gave her a look of surprise.

'Why should mother say what she doesn't mean?'

It was uttered with an ingenuousness which threw some light on Rhoda's character.

By nine o'clock the younger trio of sisters had gone to bed; Alice, Virginia, and Gertrude sat in the parlour, occupied with books, from time to time exchanging a quiet remark. A tap at the door scarcely drew their attention, for they supposed it was the maid-servant coming to lay supper. But when the door opened there was a mysterious silence; Alice looked up and saw the expected face, wearing, however, so strange an expression that she rose with sudden fear.

'Can I speak to you, please, miss?'

The dialogue out in the passage was brief. A messenger had just arrived with the tidings that Dr. Madden, driving back from Kingston Seymour, had been thrown from his vehicle and lay insensible at a roadside cottage.

* * *

For some time the doctor had been intending to buy a new horse; his faithful old roadster was very weak in the knees. As in other matters, so in this, postponement became fatality; the horse stumbled and fell, and its driver was flung head forward into the road. Some hours later they brought him to his home, and for a day or two there were hopes that he might rally. But the sufferer's respite only permitted him to dictate and sign a brief will; this duty performed, Dr. Madden closed his lips for ever.

CHAPTER II

ADRIFT

Just before Christmas of 1887, a lady past her twenties, and with a look of discouraged weariness on her thin face, knocked at a house-door in a little street by Lavender Hill. A card in the window gave notice that a bedroom was here to let. When the door opened, and a clean, grave, elderly woman presented herself, the visitor, regarding her anxiously, made known that she was in search of a lodging.

'It may be for a few weeks only, or it may be for a longer period,' she said in a low, tired voice, with an accent of good breeding. 'I have a difficulty in finding precisely what I want. One room would be sufficient, and I ask for very little attendance.'

She had but one room to let, replied the other. It might be inspected.

They went upstairs. The room was at the back of the house, small, but neatly furnished. Its appearance seemed to gratify the visitor, for she smiled timidly.

'What rent should you ask?'

'That would depend, mum, on what attendance was required.'

'Yes—of course. I think—will you permit me to sit down? I am really very tired. Thank you. I require very little attendance indeed. My ways are very simple. I should make the bed myself, and—and, do the other little things that are necessary from day to day. Perhaps I might ask you to sweep the room out—once a week or so.'

The landlady grew meditative. Possibly she had had experience of lodgers who were anxious to give as little trouble as possible. She glanced furtively at the stranger.

'And what,' was her question at length, 'would you be thinking of paying?'

'Perhaps I had better explain my position. For several years I have been companion to a lady in Hampshire. Her death has thrown me on my own resources—I hope only for a short time. I have come to London because a younger sister of mine is employed here in a house of business; she recommended me to seek for lodgings in this part; I might as well be near her whilst I am endeavouring to find another post; perhaps I may be fortunate enough to find one in London. Quietness and economy are necessary to me. A house like yours would suit me very well—very well indeed. Could we not agree upon terms within my—within my power?'

Again the landlady pondered.

'Would you be willing to pay five and sixpence?'

'Yes, I would pay five and sixpence—if you are quite sure that you could let me live in my own way with satisfaction to yourself. I—in fact, I am a vegetarian, and as the meals I take are so very simple, I feel that I might just as well prepare them myself. Would you object to my doing so in this room? A kettle and a saucepan are really all—absolutely all—that I should need to use. As I shall be much at home, it will be of course necessary for me to have a fire.'

In the course of half an hour an agreement had been devised which seemed fairly satisfactory to both parties.

'I'm not one of the graspin' ones,' remarked the landlady. 'I think I may say that of myself. If I make five or six shillings a week out of my spare room, I don't grumble. But the party as takes it must do their duty on *their* side. You haven't told me your name yet, mum.'

'Miss Madden. My luggage is at the railway station; it shall be brought here this evening. And, as I am quite unknown to you, I shall be glad to pay my rent in advance.'

'Well, I don't ask for that; but it's just as you like.'

'Then I will pay you five and sixpence at once. Be so kind as to let me have a receipt.'

So Miss Madden established herself at Lavender Hill, and dwelt there alone for three months.

She received letters frequently, but only one person called upon her. This was her sister Monica, now serving at a draper's in Walworth Road. The young lady came every Sunday, and in bad weather spent the whole day up in the little bedroom. Lodger and landlady were on remarkably good terms; the one paid her dues with exactness, and the other did many a little kindness not bargained for in the original contract.

Time went on to the spring of '88. Then, one afternoon, Miss Madden descended to the kitchen and tapped in her usual timid way at the door.

'Are you at leisure, Mrs. Conisbee? Could I have a little conversation with you?'

The landlady was alone, and with no more engrossing occupation than the ironing of some linen she had recently washed.

'I have mentioned my elder sister now and then. I am sorry to say she is leaving her post with the family at Hereford. The children are going to school, so that her services are no longer needed.'

'Indeed, mum?'

'Yes. For a shorter or longer time she will be in need of a home. Now it has occurred to me, Mrs. Conisbee, that—that I would ask you whether you would have any objection to her sharing my room with me? Of course there must be an extra payment. The room is small for two persons, but then the arrangement would only be temporary. My sister is a good and experienced teacher, and I am sure she will have no difficulty in obtaining another engagement.'

Mrs. Conisbee reflected, but without a shade of discontent. By this time she knew that her lodger was thoroughly to be trusted.

'Well, it's if *you* can manage, mum,' she replied. 'I don't see as I could have any fault to find, if you thought you could both live in that little room. And as for the rent, *I* should be quite satisfied if we said seven shillings instead of five and six.'

'Thank you, Mrs. Conisbee; thank you very much indeed. I will write to my sister at once; the news will be a great relief to her. We shall have quite an enjoyable little holiday together.'

A week later the eldest of the three Miss Maddens arrived. As it was quite impossible to find space for her boxes in the bedroom, Mrs. Conisbee allowed them to be deposited in the room occupied by her daughter, which was on the same floor. In a day or two the sisters had begun a life of orderly tenor. When weather permitted they were out either in the morning or afternoon. Alice Madden was in London for the first time; she desired to see the sights, but suffered the restrictions of poverty and ill-health. After nightfall, neither she nor Virginia ever left home.

There was not much personal likeness between them.

The elder (now five-and-thirty) tended to corpulence, the result of sedentary life; she had round shoulders and very short legs. Her face would not have been disagreeable but for its spoilt complexion; the homely features, if health had but rounded and coloured them, would have expressed pleasantly enough the gentleness and sincerity of her character. Her cheeks were loose, puffy, and permanently of the hue which is produced by cold; her forehead generally had a few pimples; her shapeless chin lost itself in two or three fleshy fissures. Scarcely less shy than in girlhood, she walked with a quick, ungainly movement as if seeking to escape from some one, her head bent forward.

Virginia (about thirty-three) had also an unhealthy look, but the poverty, or vitiation, of her blood manifested itself in less unsightly forms. One saw that she had been comely, and from certain points of view her countenance still had a grace, a sweetness, all the more noticeable because of its threatened extinction. For she was rapidly ageing; her lax lips grew laxer, with emphasis of a characteristic one would rather not have perceived there; her eyes sank into deeper hollows; wrinkles extended their network; the flesh of her neck wore away. Her tall meagre body did not seem strong enough to hold itself upright.

Alice had brown hair, but very little of it. Virginia's was inclined to be ruddy; it surmounted her small head in coils and plaits not without beauty. The voice of the elder sister had contracted an unpleasant hoarseness, but she spoke with good enunciation; a slight stiffness and pedantry of phrase

came, no doubt, of her scholastic habits. Virginia was much more natural in manner and fluent in speech, even as she moved far more gracefully.

It was now sixteen years since the death of Dr. Madden of Clevedon. The story of his daughters' lives in the interval may be told with brevity suitable to so unexciting a narrative.

When the doctor's affairs were set in order, it was found that the patrimony of his six girls amounted, as nearly as possible, to eight hundred pounds.

Eight hundred pounds is, to be sure, a sum of money; but how, in these circumstances, was it to be applied?

There came over from Cheltenham a bachelor uncle, aged about sixty. This gentleman lived on an annuity of seventy pounds, which would terminate when *he* did. It might be reckoned to him for righteousness that he spent the railway fare between Cheltenham and Clevedon to attend his brother's funeral, and to speak a kind word to his nieces. Influence he had none; initiative, very little. There was no reckoning upon him for aid of any kind.

From Richmond in Yorkshire, in reply to a letter from Alice, wrote an old, old aunt of the late Mrs. Madden, who had occasionally sent the girls presents. Her communication was barely legible; it seemed to contain fortifying texts of Scripture, but nothing in the way of worldly counsel. This old lady had no possessions to bequeath. And, as far as the girls knew, she was their mother's only surviving relative.

The executor of the will was a Clevedon tradesman, a kind and capable friend of the family for many years, a man of parts and attainments superior to his station. In council with certain other well-disposed persons, who regarded the Maddens' circumstances with friendly anxiety, Mr. Hungerford (testamentary instruction allowing him much freedom of action) decided that the three elder girls must forthwith become self-supporting, and that the three younger should live together in the care of a lady of small means, who offered to house and keep them for the bare outlay necessitated. A prudent investment of the eight hundred pounds might, by this arrangement, feed, clothe, and in some sort educate Martha, Isabel, and Monica. To see thus far ahead sufficed for the present; fresh circumstances could be dealt with as they arose.

Alice obtained a situation as nursery-governess at sixteen pounds a year. Virginia was fortunate enough to be accepted as companion by a gentlewoman at Weston-super-Mare; her payment, twelve pounds. Gertrude, fourteen years old, also went to Weston, where she was offered employment in a fancy-goods shop—her payment nothing at all, but lodging, board, and dress assured to her.

Ten years went by, and saw many changes.

Gertrude and Martha were dead; the former of consumption, the other drowned by the overturning of a pleasure-boat. Mr. Hungerford also was dead, and a new guardian administered the fund which was still a common property of the four surviving daughters. Alice plied her domestic teaching; Virginia remained a 'companion.' Isabel, now aged twenty, taught in a Board School at Bridgewater, and Monica, just fifteen, was on the point of being apprenticed to a draper at Weston, where Virginia abode. To serve behind a counter would not have been Monica's choice if any more liberal employment had seemed within her reach. She had no aptitude whatever for giving instruction; indeed, had no aptitude for anything but being a pretty, cheerful, engaging girl, much dependent on the love and gentleness of those about her. In speech and bearing Monica greatly resembled her mother; that is to say, she had native elegance. Certainly it might be deemed a pity that such a girl could not be introduced to one of the higher walks of life; but the time had come when she must 'do something', and the people to whose guidance she looked had but narrow experience of life. Alice and Virginia sighed over the contrast with bygone hopes, but their own careers made it seem probable that Monica would be better off 'in business' than in a more strictly genteel position. And there was every likelihood that, at such a place as Weston, with her sister for occasional chaperon, she would ere long find herself relieved of the necessity of working for a livelihood.

To the others, no wooer had yet presented himself. Alice, if she had ever dreamt of marriage, must by now have resigned herself to spinsterhood. Virginia could scarce hope that her faded prettiness, her health damaged by attendance upon an exacting invalid and in profitless study when she ought to have been sleeping, would attract any man in search of a wife. Poor Isabel was so extremely plain. Monica, if her promise were fulfilled, would be by far the best looking, as well as the sprightliest, of the family. She must marry; of course she must marry! Her sisters gladdened in the thought.

Isabel was soon worked into illness. Brain trouble came on, resulting in melancholia. A charitable institution ultimately received her, and there, at two-and-twenty, the poor hard-featured girl drowned herself in a bath.

Their numbers had thus been reduced by half. Up to now, the income of their eight hundred pounds had served, impartially, the ends now of this, now of that one, doing a little good to all, saving them from many an hour of bitterness which must else have been added to their lot. By a new arrangement, the capital was at length made over to Alice and Virginia jointly, the youngest sister having a claim upon them to the extent of an annual nine pounds. A trifle, but it would buy her clothing—and then Monica was sure to marry. Thank Heaven, she was sure to marry!

Without notable event, matrimonial or other, time went on to this present year of 1888.

Late in June, Monica would complete her twenty-first year; the elders, full of affection for the sister, who so notably surpassed them in beauty of person, talked much about her as the time approached, devising how to procure her a little pleasure on her birthday. Virginia thought a suitable present would be a copy of 'the Christian Year'.

'She has really no time for continuous reading. A verse of Keble—just one verse at bedtime and in the morning might be strength to the poor girl.'

Alice assented.

'We must join to buy it, dear,' she added, with anxious look. 'It wouldn't be justifiable to spend more than two or three shillings.'

'I fear not.'

They were preparing their midday meal, the substantial repast of the day. In a little saucepan on an oil cooking-stove was some plain rice, bubbling as Alice stirred it. Virginia fetched from downstairs (Mrs. Conisbee had assigned to them a shelf in her larder) bread, butter, cheese, a pot of preserve, and arranged the table (three feet by one and a half) at which they were accustomed to eat. The rice being ready, it was turned out in two proportions; made savoury with a little butter, pepper, and salt, it invited them to sit down.

As they had been out in the morning, the afternoon would be spent in domestic occupations. The low cane-chair Virginia had appropriated to her sister, because of the latter's headaches and backaches, and other disorders; she herself sat on an ordinary chair of the bedside species, to which by this time she had become used. Their sewing, when they did any, was strictly indispensable; if nothing demanded the needle, both preferred a book. Alice, who had never been a student in the proper sense of the word, read for the twentieth time a few volumes in her possession—poetry, popular history, and half a dozen novels such as the average mother of children would have approved in the governess's hands. With Virginia the case was somewhat different. Up to about her twenty-fourth year she had pursued one subject with a zeal limited only by her opportunities; study absolutely disinterested, seeing that she had never supposed it would increase her value as a 'companion', or enable her to take any better position. Her one intellectual desire was to know as much as possible about ecclesiastical history. Not in a spirit of fanaticism; she was devout, but in moderation, and never spoke bitterly on religious topics. The growth of the Christian Church, old sects and schisms, the Councils, affairs of Papal policy—these things had a very genuine interest for her; circumstances favouring, she might have become an erudite woman; But the conditions were so far from favourable that all she succeeded in doing was to undermine her health. Upon a sudden breakdown there followed

mental lassitude, from which she never recovered. It being subsequently her duty to read novels aloud for the lady whom she 'companioned,' new novels at the rate of a volume a day, she lost all power of giving her mind to anything but the feeble fiction. Nowadays she procured such works from a lending library, on a subscription of a shilling a month. Ashamed at first to indulge this taste before Alice, she tried more solid literature, but this either sent her to sleep or induced headache. The feeble novels reappeared, and as Alice made no adverse comment, they soon came and went with the old regularity.

This afternoon the sisters were disposed for conversation. The same grave thought preoccupied both of them, and they soon made it their subject.

'Surely,' Alice began by murmuring, half absently, 'I shall soon hear of something.'

'I am dreadfully uneasy on my own account,' her sister replied.

'You think the person at Southend won't write again?'

'I'm afraid not. And she seemed so *very* unsatisfactory. Positively illiterate—oh, I couldn't bear that.' Virginia gave a shudder as she spoke.

'I almost wish,' said Alice, 'that I had accepted the place at Plymouth.'

'Oh, my dear! Five children and not a penny of salary. It was a shameless proposal.'

'It was, indeed,' sighed the poor governess. 'But there is so little choice for people like myself. Certificates, and even degrees, are asked for on every hand. With nothing but references to past employers, what can one expect? I know it will end in my taking a place without salary.'

'People seem to have still less need of *me*,' lamented the companion. 'I wish now that I had gone to Norwich as lady-help.'

'Dear, your health would *never* have supported it.'

'I don't know. Possibly the more active life might do me good. It *might*, you know, Alice.'

The other admitted this possibility with a deep sigh.

'Let us review our position,' she then exclaimed.

It was a phrase frequently on her lips, and always made her more cheerful. Virginia also seemed to welcome it as an encouragement.

'Mine,' said the companion, 'is almost as serious as it could be. I have only one pound left, with the exception of the dividend.'

'I have rather more than four pounds still. Now, let us think,' Alice paused. 'Supposing we neither of us obtain employment before the end of this year. We have to live, in that case, more than six months—you on seven pounds, and I on ten.'

'It's impossible,' said Virginia.

'Let us see. Put it in another form. We have both to live together on seventeen pounds. That is —' she made a computation on a piece of paper—'that is two pounds, sixteen shillings and eightpence a month—let us suppose this month at an end. That represents fourteen shillings and twopence a week. Yes, we can do it!'

She laid down her pencil with an air of triumph. Her dull eyes brightened as though she had discovered a new source of income.

'We cannot, dear,' urged Virginia in a subdued voice. 'Seven shillings rent; that leaves only seven and twopence a week for everything—everything.'

'We *could* do it, dear,' persisted the other. 'If it came to the very worst, our food need not cost more than sixpence a day—three and sixpence a week. I do really believe, Virgie, we could support life on less—say, on fourpence. Yes, we could dear!'

They looked fixedly at each other, like people about to stake everything on their courage.

'Is such a life worthy of the name?' asked Virginia in tones of awe.

'We shan't be driven to that. Oh, we certainly shall not. But it helps one to know that, strictly speaking, we are *independent* for another six months.'

That word gave Virginia an obvious thrill.

'Independent! Oh, Alice, what a blessed thing is independence! Do you know, my dear, I am afraid I have not exerted myself as I might have done to find a new place. These comfortable lodgings, and the pleasure of seeing Monica once a week, have tempted me into idleness. It isn't really my wish to be idle; I know the harm it does me; but oh! if one could work in a home of one's own!'

Alice had a startled, apprehensive look, as if her sister were touching on a subject hardly proper for discussion, or at least dangerous.

'I'm afraid it's no use thinking of that, dear,' she answered awkwardly.

'No use; no use whatever. I am wrong to indulge in such thoughts.'

'Whatever happens, my dear,' said Alice presently, with all the impressiveness of tone she could command, 'we must never entrench upon our capital—never—never!'

'Oh, never! If we grow old and useless—'

'If no one will give us even board and lodging for our services—'

'If we haven't a friend to look to,' Alice threw in, as though they were answering each other in a doleful litany, 'then indeed we shall be glad that nothing tempted us to entrench on our capital! It would just keep us'—her voice sank—'from the workhouse.'

After this each took up a volume, and until teatime they read quietly.

From six to nine in the evening they again talked and read alternately. Their conversation was now retrospective; each revived memories of what she had endured in one or the other house of bondage. Never had it been their lot to serve 'really nice' people—this phrase of theirs was anything but meaningless. They had lived with more or less well-to-do families in the lower middle class—people who could not have inherited refinement, and had not acquired any, neither proletarians nor gentlefolk, consumed with a disease of vulgar pretentiousness, inflated with the miasma of democracy. It would have been but a natural result of such a life if the sisters had commented upon it in a spirit somewhat akin to that of their employers; but they spoke without rancour, without scandalmongering. They knew themselves superior to the women who had grudgingly paid them, and often smiled at recollections which would have moved the servile mind to venomous abuse.

At nine o'clock they took a cup of cocoa and a biscuit, and half an hour later they went to bed. Lamp oil was costly; and indeed they felt glad to say as early as possible that another day had gone by.

Their hour of rising was eight. Mrs. Conisbee provided hot water for their breakfast. On descending to fetch it, Virginia found that the postman had left a letter for her. The writing on the envelope seemed to be a stranger's. She ran upstairs again in excitement.

'Who can this be from, Alice?'

The elder sister had one of her headaches this morning; she was clay colour, and tottered in moving about. The close atmosphere of the bedroom would alone have accounted for such a malady. But an unexpected letter made her for the moment oblivious of suffering.

'Posted in London,' she said, examining the envelope eagerly.

'Some one you have been in correspondence with?'

'It's months since I wrote to any one in London.'

For full five minutes they debated the mystery, afraid of dashing their hopes by breaking the envelope. At length Virginia summoned courage. Standing at a distance from the other, she took out the sheet of paper with tremulous hand, and glanced fearfully at the signature.

'What *do* you think? It's Miss Nunn!'

'Miss Nunn! Never! How could she have got the address?'

Again the difficulty was discussed whilst its ready solution lay neglected.

'Do read it!' said Alice at length, her throbbing head, made worse by the agitation, obliging her to sink down into the chair.

The letter ran thus:—

'DEAR Miss MADDEN,—This morning I chanced to meet with Mrs. Darby, who was passing through London on her way home from the seaside. We had only five minutes' talk (it was at a railway

station), but she mentioned that you were at present in London, and gave me your address. After all these years, how glad I should be to see you! The struggle of life has made me selfish; I have neglected my old friends. And yet I am bound to add that some of *them* have neglected *me*. Would you rather that I came to your lodgings or you to mine? Which you like. I hear that your elder sister is with you, and that Monica is also in London somewhere. Do let us all see each other once more. Write as soon as you can. My kindest regards to all of you.—Sincerely yours,

RHODA NUNN.'

'How like her,' exclaimed Virginia, when she had read this aloud, 'to remember that perhaps we may not care to receive visitors! She was always so thoughtful. And it is true that I *ought* to have written to her.'

'We shall go to her, of course?'

'Oh yes, as she gives us the choice. How delightful! I wonder what she is doing? She writes cheerfully; I am sure she must be in a good position. What is the address? Queen's Road, Chelsea. Oh, I'm so glad it's not very far. We can walk there and back easily.'

For several years they had lost sight of Rhoda Nunn. She left Clevedon shortly after the Maddens were scattered, and they heard she had become a teacher. About the date of Monica's apprenticeship at Weston, Miss Nunn had a chance meeting with Virginia and the younger girl; she was still teaching, but spoke of her work with extreme discontent, and hinted at vague projects. Whether she succeeded in releasing herself the Maddens never heard.

It was a morning of doubtful fairness. Before going to bed last night they had decided to walk out together this morning and purchase the present for Monica's birthday, which was next Sunday. But Alice felt too unwell to leave the house. Virginia should write a reply to Miss Nunn's letter, and then go to the bookseller's alone.

She set forth at half-past nine. With extreme care she had preserved an out-of-doors dress into the third summer; it did not look shabby. Her mantle was in its second year only; the original fawn colour had gone to an indeterminate grey. Her hat of brown straw was a possession for ever; it underwent new trimming, at an outlay of a few pence, when that became unavoidable. Yet Virginia could not have been judged anything but a lady. She wore her garments as only a lady can (the position and movement of the arms has much to do with this), and had the step never to be acquired by a person of vulgar instincts.

A very long walk was before her. She wished to get as far as the Strand bookshops, not only for the sake of choice, but because this region pleased her and gave her a sense of holiday. Past Battersea Park, over Chelsea Bridge, then the weary stretch to Victoria Station, and the upward labour to Charing Cross. Five miles, at least, measured by pavement. But Virginia walked quickly; at half-past eleven she was within sight of her goal.

A presentable copy of Keble's work cost less than she had imagined. This rejoiced her. But after leaving the shop she had a singular expression on her face—something more than weariness, something less than anxiety, something other than calculation. In front of Charing Cross Station she stopped, looking vaguely about her. Perhaps she had it in her mind to return home by omnibus, and was dreading the expense. Yet of a sudden she turned and went up the approach to the railway.

At the entrance again she stopped. Her features were now working in the strangest way, as though a difficulty of breathing had assailed her. In her eyes was an eager yet frightened look; her lips stood apart.

Another quick movement, and she entered the station. She went straight to the door of the refreshment room, and looked in through the glass. Two or three people were standing inside. She drew back, a tremor passing through her.

A lady came out. Then again Virginia approached the door. Two men only were within, talking together. With a hurried, nervous movement, she pushed the door open and went up to a part of the

counter as far as possible from the two customers. Bending forward, she said to the barmaid in a voice just above a whisper,—

'Kindly give me a little brandy.'

Beads of perspiration were on her face, which had turned to a ghastly pallor. The barmaid, concluding that she was ill, served her promptly and with a sympathetic look.

Virginia added to the spirit twice its quantity of water, standing, as she did so, half turned from the bar. Then she sipped hurriedly two or three times, and at length took a draught. Colour flowed to her cheeks; her eyes lost their frightened glare. Another draught finished the stimulant. She hastily wiped her lips, and walked away with firm step.

In the meantime a threatening cloud had passed from the sun; warm rays fell upon the street and its clamorous life. Virginia felt tired in body, but a delightful animation, rarest of boons, gave her new strength. She walked into Trafalgar Square and viewed it like a person who stands there for the first time, smiling, interested. A quarter of an hour passed whilst she merely enjoyed the air, the sunshine, and the scene about her. Such a quarter of an hour—so calm, contented, unconsciously hopeful—as she had not known since Alice's coming to London.

She reached the house by half-past one, bringing in a paper bag something which was to serve for dinner. Alice had a wretched appearance; her head ached worse than ever.

'Virgie,' she moaned, 'we never took account of illness, you know.'

'Oh, we must keep that off,' replied the other, sitting down with a look of exhaustion. She smiled, but no longer as in the sunlight of Trafalgar Square.

'Yes, I must struggle against it. We will have dinner as soon as possible. I feel faint.'

If both of them had avowed their faintness as often as they felt it, the complaint would have been perpetual. But they generally made a point of deceiving each other, and tried to delude themselves; professing that no diet could be better for their particular needs than this which poverty imposed.

'Ah! it's a good sign to be hungry,' exclaimed Virginia. 'You'll be better this afternoon, dear.'

Alice turned over 'The Christian Year,' and endeavoured to console herself out of it, whilst her sister prepared the meal.

CHAPTER III

AN INDEPENDENT WOMAN

Virginia's reply to Miss Nunn's letter brought another note next morning—Saturday. It was to request a call from the sisters that same afternoon.

Alice, unfortunately, would not be able to leave home. Her disorder had become a feverish cold—caught, doubtless, between open window and door whilst the bedroom was being aired for breakfast. She lay in bed, and her sister administered remedies of the chemist's advising.

But she insisted on Virginia leaving her in the afternoon. Miss Nunn might have something of importance to tell or to suggest. Mrs. Conisbee, sympathetic in her crude way, would see that the invalid wanted for nothing.

So, after a dinner of mashed potatoes and milk ('The Irish peasantry live almost entirely on that,' croaked Alice, 'and they are physically a fine race'), the younger sister started on her walk to Chelsea. Her destination was a plain, low roomy old house in Queen's Road, over against the hospital gardens. On asking for Miss Nunn, she was led to a back room on the ground floor, and there waited for a few moments. Several large bookcases, a well-equipped writing-table, and kindred objects, indicated that the occupant of the house was studious; the numerous bunches of cut flowers, which agreeably scented the air, seemed to prove the student was a woman.

Miss Nunn entered. Younger only by a year or two than Virginia, she was yet far from presenting any sorrowful image of a person on the way to old-maidhood. She had a clear though pale skin, a vigorous frame, a brisk movement—all the signs of fairly good health. Whether or not she could be called a comely woman might have furnished matter for male discussion; the prevailing voice of her own sex would have denied her charm of feature. At first view the countenance seemed masculine, its expression somewhat aggressive—eyes shrewdly observant and lips consciously impregnable. But the connoisseur delayed his verdict. It was a face that invited, that compelled, study. Self-confidence, intellectual keenness, a bright humour, frank courage, were traits legible enough; and when the lips parted to show their warmth, their fullness, when the eyelids drooped a little in meditation, one became aware of a suggestiveness directed not solely to the intellect, of something like an unfamiliar sexual type, remote indeed from the voluptuous, but hinting a possibility of subtle feminine forces that might be released by circumstance. She wore a black serge gown, with white collar and cuffs; her thick hair rippled low upon each side of the forehead, and behind was gathered into loose vertical coils; in shadow the hue seemed black, but when illumined it was seen to be the darkest, warmest brown.

Offering a strong, shapely hand, she looked at her visitor with a smile which betrayed some mixture of pain in the hearty welcome.

'And how long have you been in London?'

It was the tone of a busy, practical person. Her voice had not much softness of timbre, and perhaps on that account she kept it carefully subdued.

'So long as that? How I wish I had known you were so near! I have been in London myself about two years. And your sisters?'

Virginia explained Alice's absence, adding,—

'As for poor Monica, she has only Sunday free—except one evening a month. She is at business till half-past nine, and on Saturday till half-past eleven or twelve.'

'Oh, dear, dear, dear!' exclaimed the other rapidly, making a motion with her hand as if to brush away something disagreeable. 'That will never do. You must put a stop to that.'

'I am sure we ought to.'

Virginia's thin, timid voice and weak manner were thrown into painful contrast by Miss Nunn's personality.

'Yes, yes; we will talk about it presently. Poor little Monica! But do tell me about yourself and Miss Madden. It is so long since I heard about you.'

'Indeed I ought to have written. I remember that at the end of our correspondence I remained in your debt. But it was a troublesome and depressing time with me. I had nothing but groans and moans to send.'

'You didn't stay long, I trust, with that trying Mrs. Carr?'

'Three years!' sighed Virginia.

'Oh, your patience!'

'I wished to leave again and again. But at the end she always begged me not to desert her—that was how she put it. After all, I never had the heart to go.'

'Very kind of you, but—those questions are so difficult to decide. Self-sacrifice may be quite wrong, I'm afraid.'

'Do you think so?' asked Virginia anxiously.

'Yes, I am sure it is often wrong—all the more so because people proclaim it a virtue without any reference to circumstances. Then how did you get away at last?'

'The poor woman died. Then I had a place scarcely less disagreeable. Now I have none at all; but I really must find one very soon.'

She laughed at this allusion to her poverty, and made nervous motions.

'Let me tell you what my own course has been,' said Miss Nunn, after a short reflection. 'When my mother died, I determined to have done with teaching—you know that. I disliked it too much, and partly, of course, because I was incapable. Half my teaching was a sham—a pretence of knowing what I neither knew nor cared to know. I had gone into it like most girls, as a dreary matter of course.'

'Like poor Alice, I'm afraid.'

'Oh, it's a distressing subject. When my mother left me that little sum of money I took a bold step. I went to Bristol to learn everything I could that would help me out of school life. Shorthand, book-keeping, commercial correspondence—I had lessons in them all, and worked desperately for a year. It did me good; at the end of the year I was vastly improved in health, and felt myself worth something in the world. I got a place as cashier in a large shop. That soon tired me, and by dint of advertising I found a place in an office at Bath. It was a move towards London, and I couldn't rest till I had come the whole way. My first engagement here was as shorthand writer to the secretary of a company. But he soon wanted some one who could use a typewriter. That was a suggestion. I went to learn typewriting, and the lady who taught me asked me in the end to stay with her as an assistant. This is her house, and here I live with her.'

'How energetic you have been!'

'How fortunate, perhaps. I must tell you about this lady—Miss Barfoot. She has private means—not large, but sufficient to allow of her combining benevolence with business. She makes it her object to train young girls for work in offices, teaching them the things that I learnt in Bristol, and typewriting as well. Some pay for their lessons, and some get them for nothing. Our workrooms are in Great Portland Street, over a picture-cleaner's shop. One or two girls have evening lessons, but our pupils for the most part are able to come in the day. Miss Barfoot hasn't much interest in the lower classes; she wishes to be of use to the daughters of educated people. And she is of use. She is doing admirable work.'

'Oh, I am sure she must be! What a wonderful person!'

'It occurs to me that she might help Monica.'

'Oh, do you think she would?' exclaimed Virginia, with eager attention. 'How grateful we should be!'

'Where is Monica employed?'

'At a draper's in Walworth Road. She is worked to death. Every week I see a difference in her, poor child. We hoped to persuade her to go back to the shop at Weston; but if this you speak of were possible—how *much* better! We have never reconciled ourselves to her being in that position—never.'

'I see no harm in the position itself,' replied Miss Nunn in her rather blunt tone, 'but I see a great deal in those outrageous hours. She won't easily do better in London, without special qualifications; and probably she is reluctant to go back to the country.'

'Yes, she is; very reluctant.'

'I understand it,' said the other, with a nod. 'Will you ask her to come and see me?'

A servant entered with tea. Miss Nunn caught the expression in her visitor's eyes, and said cheerfully—

'I had no midday meal to-day, and really I feel the omission. Mary, please do put tea in the dining-room, and bring up some meat—Miss Barfoot,' she added, in explanation to Virginia, is out of town, and I am a shockingly irregular person about meals. I am sure you will sit down with me?'

Virginia sported with the subject. Months of miserable eating and drinking in her stuffy bedroom made an invitation such as this a veritable delight to her. Seated in the dining-room, she at first refused the offer of meat, alleging her vegetarianism; but Miss Nunn, convinced that the poor woman was starving, succeeded in persuading her. A slice of good beef had much the same effect upon Virginia as her more dangerous indulgence at Charing Cross Station. She brightened wonderfully.

'Now let us go back to the library,' said Miss Nunn, when their meal was over. 'We shall soon see each other again, I hope, but we might as well talk of serious things whilst we have the opportunity. Will you allow me to be very frank with you?'

The other looked startled.

'What could you possibly say that would offend me?'

'In the old days you told me all about your circumstances. Are they still the same?'

'Precisely the same. Most happily, we have never needed to entrench upon our capital. Whatever happens, we must avoid that—whatever happens!'

'I quite understand you. But wouldn't it be possible to make a better use of that money? It is eight hundred pounds, I think? Have you never thought of employing it in some practical enterprise?'

Virginia at first shrank in alarm, then trembled deliciously at her friend's bold views.

'Would it be possible? Really? You think—'

'I can only suggest, of course. One mustn't argue about others from one's own habit of thought. Heaven forbid!—this sounded rather profane to the listener—that I should urge you to do anything you would think rash. But how much better if you could somehow secure independence.'

'Ah, if we could! The very thing we were saying the other day! But how? I have no idea how.'

Miss Nunn seemed to hesitate.

'I don't advise. You mustn't give any weight to what I say, except in so far as your own judgment approves it. But couldn't one open a preparatory school, for instance? At Weston, suppose, where already you know a good many people. Or even at Clevedon.'

Virginia drew in her breath, and it was easy for Miss Nunn to perceive that the proposal went altogether beyond her friend's scope. Impossible, perhaps, to inspire these worn and discouraged women with a particle of her own enterprise. Perchance they altogether lacked ability to manage a school for even the youngest children. She did not press the subject; it might come up on another occasion. Virginia begged for time to think it over; then, remembering her invalid sister, felt that she must not prolong the visit.

'Do take some of these flowers,' said Miss Nunn, collecting a rich nosegay from the vases. 'Let them be my message to your sister. And I should be so glad to see Monica. Sunday is a good time; I am always at home in the afternoon.'

With a fluttering heart Virginia made what haste she could homewards. The interview had filled her with a turmoil of strange new thoughts, which she was impatient to pour forth for Alice's wondering comment. It was the first time in her life that she had spoken with a woman daring enough to think and act for herself.

CHAPTER IV

MONICA'S MAJORITY

In the drapery establishment where Monica Madden worked and lived it was not (as is sometimes the case) positively forbidden to the resident employees to remain at home on Sunday; but they were strongly recommended to make the utmost possible use of that weekly vacation. Herein, no doubt, appeared a laudable regard for their health. Young people, especially young women, who are laboriously engaged in a shop for thirteen hours and a half every weekday, and on Saturday for an average of sixteen, may be supposed to need a Sabbath of open air. Messrs. Scotcher and Co. acted like conscientious men in driving them forth immediately after breakfast, and enjoining upon them not to return until bedtime. By way of well-meaning constraint, it was directed that only the very scantiest meals (plain bread and cheese, in fact) should be supplied to those who did not take advantage of the holiday.

Messrs. Scotcher and Co. were large-minded men. Not only did they insist that the Sunday ought to be used for bodily recreation, but they had no objection whatever to their young friends taking a stroll after closing-time each evening. Nay, so generous and confiding were they, that to each young person they allowed a latchkey. The air of Walworth Road is pure and invigorating about midnight; why should the reposeful ramble be hurried by consideration for weary domestics?

Monica always felt too tired to walk after ten o'clock; moreover, the usual conversation in the dormitory which she shared with five other young women was so little to her taste that she wished to be asleep when the talkers came up to bed. But on Sunday she gladly followed the counsel of her employers. If the weather were bad, the little room at Lavender Hill offered her a retreat; when the sun shone, she liked to spend a part of the day in free wandering about London, which even yet had not quite disillusioned her.

And to-day it shone brightly. This was her birthday, the completion of her one-and-twentieth year. Alice and Virginia of course expected her early in the morning, and of course they were all to dine together—at the table measuring three feet by one and a half; but the afternoon and evening she must have to herself. The afternoon, because a few hours of her sisters' talk invariably depressed her; and the evening, because she had an appointment to keep. As she left the big ugly 'establishment' her heart beat cheerfully, and a smile fluttered about her lips. She did not feel very well, but that was a matter of course; the ride in an omnibus would perhaps make her head clearer.

Monica's face was of a recognized type of prettiness; a pure oval; from the smooth forehead to the dimpled little chin all its lines were soft and graceful. Her lack of colour, by heightening the effect of black eyebrows and darkly lustrous eyes, gave her at present a more spiritual cast than her character justified; but a thoughtful firmness was native to her lips, and no possibility of smirk or simper lurked in the attractive features. The slim figure was well fitted in a costume of pale blue, cheap but becoming; a modest little hat rested on her black hair; her gloves and her sunshade completed the dainty picture.

An omnibus would be met in Kennington Park Road. On her way thither, in a quiet cross-street, she was overtaken by a young man who had left the house of business a moment after her, and had followed at a short distance timidly. A young man of unhealthy countenance, with a red pimple on the side of his nose, but not otherwise ill-looking. He was clad with propriety—stove-pipe hat, diagonal frockcoat, grey trousers, and he walked with a springy gait.

'Miss Madden—'

He had ventured, with perturbation in his face, to overtake Monica. She stopped.

'What is it, Mr. Bullivant?'

Her tone was far from encouraging, but the young man smiled upon her with timorous tenderness.

'What a beautiful morning! Are you going far?'

He had the Cockney accent, but not in an offensive degree; his manners were not flagrantly of the shop.

'Yes; some distance.' Monica walked slowly on.

'Will you allow me to walk a little way with you?' he pleaded, bending towards her.

'I shall take the omnibus at the end of this street.'

They went forward together. Monica no longer smiled, but neither did she look angry. Her expression was one of trouble.

'Where shall *you* spend the day, Mr. Bullivant?' she asked at length, with an effort to seem unconcerned.

'I really don't know.'

'I should think it would be very nice up the river.' And she added diffidently, 'Miss Eade is going to Richmond.'

'Is she?' he replied vaguely.

'At least she wished to go—if she could find a companion.'

'I hope she will enjoy herself,' said Mr. Bullivant, with careful civility.

'But of course she won't enjoy it very much if she has to go alone. As you have no particular engagement, Mr. Bullivant, wouldn't it be kind to—?'

The suggestion was incomplete, but intelligible.

'I couldn't ask Miss Eade to let me accompany her,' said the young man gravely.

'Oh, I think you could. She would like it.'

Monica looked rather frightened at her boldness, and quickly added—

'Now I must say good-bye. There comes the bus.'

Bullivant turned desperately in that direction. He saw there was as yet no inside passenger.

'Do allow me to go a short way with you?' burst from his lips. 'I positively don't know how I shall spend the morning.'

Monica had signalled to the driver, and was hurrying forward. Bullivant followed, reckless of consequences. In a minute both were seated within.

'You will forgive me?' pleaded the young fellow, remarking a look of serious irritation on his companion's face. 'I must be with you a few minutes longer.'

'I think when I have begged you not to—'

'I know how bad my behaviour must seem. But, Miss Madden, may I not be on terms of friendship with you?'

'Of course you may—but you are not content with that.'

'Yes—indeed—I *will* be content—'

'It's foolish to say so. Haven't you broken the understanding three or four times?'

The bus stopped for a passenger, a man, who mounted to the top.

'I am so sorry,' murmured Bullivant, as the starting horses jolted them together. 'I try not to worry you. Think of my position. You have told me that there is no one else who—whose rights I ought to respect. Feeling as I do, it isn't in human nature to give up hope!'

'Then will you let me ask you a rude question?'

'Ask me *any* question, Miss Madden.'

'How would it be possible for you to support a wife?'

She flushed and smiled. Bullivant, dreadfully discomposed, did not move his eyes from her.

'It wouldn't be possible for some time,' he answered in a thick voice. 'I have nothing but my wretched salary. But every one hopes.'

'What reasonable hope have you?' Monica urged, forcing herself to be cruel, because it seemed the only way of putting an end to this situation.

'Oh, there are so many opportunities in our business. I could point to half a dozen successful men who were at the counter a few years ago. I may become a walker, and get at least three pounds a week. If I were lucky enough to be taken on as a buyer, I might make—why, some make many hundreds a year—many hundreds.'

'And you would ask me to wait on and on for one of these wonderful chances?'

'If I could move your feelings, Miss Madden,' he began, with a certain dolorous dignity; but there his voice broke. He saw too plainly that the girl had neither faith in him nor liking for him.

'Mr. Bullivant, I think you ought to wait until you really have prospects. If you were encouraged by some person, it would be a different thing. And indeed you haven't to look far. But where there has never been the slightest encouragement, you are really wrong to act in this way. A long engagement, where everything remains doubtful for years, is so wretched that—oh, if I were a man, I would *never* try to persuade a girl into that! I think it wrong and cruel.'

The stroke was effectual. Bullivant averted his face, naturally woebegone, and sat for some minutes without speaking. The bus again drew up; four or five people were about to ascend.

'I will say good-morning, Miss Madden,' he whispered hurriedly.

She gave her hand, glanced at him with embarrassment, and so let him depart.

Ten minutes restored the mood in which she had set out. Once more she smiled to herself. Indeed, her head was better for the fresh air and the movement. If only the sisters would allow her to get away soon after dinner!

It was Virginia who opened the door to her, and embraced and kissed her with wonted fondness.

'You are nice and early! Poor Alice has been in bed since the day before yesterday; a dreadful cold and one of her very worst headaches. But I think she is a little better this morning.'

Alice—a sad spectacle—was propped up on pillows.

'Don't kiss me, darling,' she said, in a voice barely audible. 'You mustn't risk getting a sore throat. How well you look!'

'I'm afraid she doesn't look *well*,' corrected Virginia; 'but perhaps she has a little more colour than of late. Monica, dear, as Alice can hardly use her voice, I will speak for both of us, and wish you many, many happy returns of the day. And we ask you to accept this little book from us. It may be a comfort to you from time to time.'

'You are good, kind dears!' replied Monica, kissing the one on the lips and the other on her thinly-tressed head. 'It's no use saying you oughtn't to have spent money on me; you *will* always do it. What a nice "Christian Year"! I'll do my best to read some of it now and then.'

With a half-guilty air, Virginia then brought from some corner of the room a very small but delicate currant cake. Monica must eat a mouthful of this; she always had such a wretched breakfast, and the journey from Walworth Road was enough to give an appetite.

'But you are ruining yourselves, foolish people!'

The others exchanged a look, and smiled with such a strange air that Monica could not but notice it.

'I know!' she cried. 'There's good news. You have found something, and better than usual Virgie.'

'Perhaps so. Who knows? Eat your slice of cake like a good child, and then I shall have something to tell you.'

Obviously the two were excited. Virginia moved about with the recovered step of girlhood, held herself upright, and could not steady her hands.

'You would never guess whom I have seen,' she began, when Monica was quite ready to listen. 'We had a letter the other morning which did puzzle us so—I mean the writing before we opened it. And it was from—Miss Nunn!'

This name did not greatly stir Monica.

'You had quite lost sight of her, hadn't you?' she remarked.

'Quite. I didn't suppose we should ever hear of her again. But nothing more fortunate could have happened. My dear, she is wonderful!'

At considerable length Virginia detailed all she had learnt of Miss Nunn's career, and described her present position.

'She will be the most valuable friend to us. Oh, her strength, her resolution! The way in which she discovers the right thing to do! You are to call upon her as soon as possible. This very after noon you had better go. She will relieve you from all your troubles darling. Her friend, Miss Barfoot, will teach you typewriting, and put you in the way of earning an easy and pleasant livelihood. She will, indeed!'

'But how long does it take?' asked the astonished girl.

'Oh, quite a short time, I should think. We didn't speak of details; they were postponed. You will hear everything yourself. And she suggested all sorts of ways,' pursued Virginia, with quite unintentional exaggeration, 'in which we could make better use of our invested money. She is *full* of practical expedients. The most wonderful person! She is quite like a *man* in energy and resources. I never imagined that one of our sex could resolve and plan and act as she does!'

Monica inquired anxiously what the projects for improving their income might be.

'Nothing is decided yet,' was the reply, given with a confident smile. 'Let us first of all put *you* in comfort and security; that is the immediate need.'

The listener was interested, but did not show any eagerness for the change proposed. Presently she stood at the window and lost herself in thought. Alice gave signs of an inclination to doze; she had had a sleepless night, in spite of soporifics. Though no sun entered the room, it was very hot, and the presence of a third person made the air oppressive.

'Don't you think we might go out for half an hour?' Monica whispered, when Virginia had pointed to the invalid's closed eyes. 'I'm sure it's very unhealthy for us all to be in this little place.'

I don't like to leave her,' the other whispered back. 'But I certainly think it would be better for you to have fresh air. Wouldn't you like to go to church, dear? The bells haven't stopped yet.'

The elder sisters were not quite regular in their church-going. When weather or lassitude kept them at home on Sunday morning they read the service aloud. Monica found the duty of listening rather grievous. During the months that she was alone in London she had fallen into neglect of public worship; not from any conscious emancipation, but because her companions at the house of business never dreamt of entering a church, and their example by degrees affected her with carelessness. At present she was glad of the pretext for escaping until dinner-time.

She went forth with the intention of deceiving her sisters, of walking to Clapham Common, and on her return inventing some sermon at a church the others never visited. But before she had gone many yards conscience overcame her. Was she not getting to be a very lax-minded girl? And it was shameful to impose upon the two after their loving-kindness to her. As usual, her little prayer-book was in her pocket. She walked quickly to the familiar church, and reached it just as the doors were being closed.

Of all the congregation she probably was the one who went through the service most mechanically. Not a word reached her understanding. Sitting, standing, or on her knees, she wore the same preoccupied look, with ever and again a slight smile or a movement of the lips, as if she were recalling some conversation of special interest.

Last Sunday she had had an adventure, the first of any real moment that had befallen her in London. She had arranged to go with Miss Eade on a steamboat up the river. They were to meet at the Battersea Park landing-stage at half-past two. But Miss Eade did not keep her appointment, and Monica, unwilling to lose the trip, started alone.

She disembarked at Richmond and strayed about for an hour or two, then had a cup of tea and a bun. As it was still far too early to return, she went down to the riverside and seated herself on one of the benches. Many boats were going by, a majority of them containing only two persons—a young man who pulled, and a girl who held the strings of the tiller. Some of these couples Monica disregarded; but occasionally there passed a skiff from which she could not take her eyes. To lie back like that on the cushions and converse with a companion who had nothing of the *shop* about him!

It seemed hard that she must be alone. Poor Mr. Bullivant would gladly have taken her on the river; but Mr. Bullivant—

She thought of her sisters. Their loneliness was for life, poor things. Already they were old; and they would grow older, sadder, perpetually struggling to supplement that dividend from the precious capital—and merely that they might keep alive. Oh!—her heart ached at the misery of such a prospect. How much better if the poor girls had never been born.

Her own future was more hopeful than theirs had ever been. She knew herself good-looking. Men had followed her in the street and tried to make her acquaintance. Some of the girls with whom she lived regarded her enviously, spitefully. But had she really the least chance of marrying a man whom she could respect—not to say love?

One-and-twenty a week hence. At Weston she had kept tolerable health, but certainly her constitution was not strong, and the slavery of Walworth Road threatened her with premature decay. Her sisters counselled wisely. Coming to London was a mistake. She would have had better chances at Weston, notwithstanding the extreme discretion with which she was obliged to conduct herself.

While she mused thus, a profound discouragement settling on her sweet face, some one took a seat by her—on the same bench, that is to say. Glancing aside, she saw that it was an oldish man, with grizzled whiskers and rather a stern visage. Monica sighed.

Was it possible that he had heard her? He looked this way, and with curiosity. Ashamed of herself, she kept her eyes averted for a long time. Presently, following the movement of a boat, her face turned unconsciously towards the silent companion; again he was looking at her, and he spoke. The gravity of his appearance and manner, the good-natured commonplace that fell from his lips, could not alarm her; a dialogue began, and went on for about half an hour.

How old might he be? After all, he was probably not fifty—perchance not much more than forty. His utterance fell short of perfect refinement, but seemed that of an educated man. And certainly his clothes were such as a gentleman wears. He had thin, hairy hands, unmarked by any effect of labour; the nails could not have been better cared for. Was it a bad sign that he carried neither gloves nor walking-stick?

His talk aimed at nothing but sober friendliness; it was perfectly inoffensive—indeed, respectful. Now and then—not too often—he fixed his eyes upon her for an instant. After the introductory phrases, he mentioned that he had had a long drive, alone; his horse was baiting in preparation for the journey back to London. He often took such drives in the summer, though generally on a weekday; the magnificent sky had tempted him out this morning. He lived at Herne Hill.

At length he ventured a question. Monica affected no reluctance to tell him that she was in a house of business, that she had relatives in London, that only by chance she found herself alone to-day.

'I should be sorry if I never saw you again.'

These words he uttered with embarrassment, his eyes on the ground. Monica could only keep silence. Half an hour ago she would not have thought it possible for any remark of this man's seriously to occupy her mind, yet now she waited for the next sentence in discomposure which was quite free from resentment.

'We meet in this casual way, and talk, and then say good-bye. Why mayn't I tell you that you interest me very much, and that I am afraid to trust only to chance for another meeting? If you were

a man'—he smiled—'I should give you my card, and ask you to my house. The card I may at all events offer.'

Whilst speaking, he drew out a little case, and laid a visiting-card on the bench within Monica's reach. Murmuring her 'thank you,' she took the bit of pasteboard, but did not look at it.

'You are on my side of the river,' he continued, still with scrupulous modesty of tone. 'May I not hope to see you some day, when you are walking? All days and times are the same to me; but I am afraid it is only on Sunday that you are at leisure?'

'Yes, only on a Sunday.'

It took a long time, and many circumlocutions, but in the end an appointment was made. Monica would see her acquaintance next Sunday evening on the river front of Battersea Park; if it rained, then the Sunday after. She was ashamed and confused. Other girls were constantly doing this kind of thing—other girls in business; but it seemed to put her on the level of a servant. And why had she consented? The man could never be anything to her; he was too old, too hard-featured, too grave. Well, on that very account there would be no harm in meeting him. In truth, she had not felt the courage to refuse; in a manner he had overawed her.

And perhaps she would not keep the engagement. Nothing compelled her. She had not told him her name, nor the house where she was employed. There was a week to think it over.

All days and times were the same to him—he said. And he drove about the country for his pleasure. A man of means. His name, according to the card, was Edmund Widdowson.

He was upright in his walk, and strongly built. She noticed this as he moved away from her. Fearful lest he should turn round, her eyes glanced at his figure from moment to moment. But he did not once look back.

* * * * *

'And now to God the Father.' The bustle throughout the church wakened her from reverie so complete that she knew not a syllable of the sermon. After all she must deceive her sisters by inventing a text, and perhaps a comment.

By an arrangement with Mrs. Conisbee, dinner was down in the parlour to-day. A luxurious meal, moreover; for in her excitement Virginia had resolved to make a feast of Monica's birthday. There was a tiny piece of salmon, a dainty cutlet, and a cold blackcurrant tart. Virginia, at home a constant vegetarian, took no share of the fish and meat—which was only enough for one person. Alice, alone upstairs, made a dinner of gruel.

Monica was to be at Queen's Road, Chelsea, by three o'clock. The sisters hoped she would return to Lavender Hill with her news, but that was left uncertain—by Monica herself purposely. As an amusement, she had decided to keep her promise to Mr. Edmund Widdowson. She was curious to see him again, and receive a new impression of his personality. If he behaved as inoffensively as at Richmond, acquaintance with him might be continued for the variety it brought into her life. If anything unpleasant happened, she had only to walk away. The slight, very slight, tremor of anticipation was reasonably to be prized by a shop-girl at Messrs. Scotcher's.

Drawing near to Queen's Road—the wrapped-up Keble in her hand—she began to wonder whether Miss Nunn would have any serious proposal to offer. Virginia's report and ecstatic forecasts were, she knew, not completely trustworthy; though more than ten years her sister's junior, Monica saw the world with eyes much less disposed to magnify and colour ordinary facts.

Miss Barfoot was still from home. Rhoda Nunn received the visitor in a pleasant, old-fashioned drawing-room, where there was nothing costly, nothing luxurious; yet to Monica it appeared richly furnished. A sense of strangeness amid such surroundings had more to do with her constrained silence for the first few minutes than the difficulty with which she recognized in this lady before her the Miss Nunn whom she had known years ago.

'I should never have known you,' said Rhoda, equally surprised. 'For one thing, you look like a fever patient just recovering. What can be expected? Your sister gave me a shocking account of how you live.'

'The work is very hard.'

'Preposterous. Why do you stay at such a place, Monica?'

'I am getting experience.'

'To be used in the next world?'

They laughed.

'Miss Madden is better to-day, I hope?'

'Alice? Not much, I'm sorry to say.'

'Will you tell me something more about the "experience" you are getting? For instance, what time is given you for meals?'

Rhoda Nunn was not the person to manufacture light gossip when a matter of the gravest interest waited for discussion. With a face that expressed thoughtful sympathy, she encouraged the girl to speak and confide in her.

'There's twenty minutes for each meal,' Monica explained; 'but at dinner and tea one is very likely to be called into the shop before finishing. If you are long away you find the table cleared.'

'Charming arrangement! No sitting down behind the counter, I suppose?'

'Oh, of course not. We suffer a great deal from that. Some of us get diseases. A girl has just gone to the hospital with varicose veins, and two or three others have the same thing in a less troublesome form. Sometimes, on Saturday night, I lose all feeling in my feet; I have to stamp on the floor to be sure it's still under me.'

'Ah, that Saturday night!'

'Yes, it's bad enough now; but at Christmas! There was a week or more of Saturday night—going on to one o'clock in the morning. A girl by me was twice carried out fainting, one night after another. They gave her brandy, and she came back again.'

'They compelled her to?'

'Well, no, it was her own wish. Her "book of takings" wasn't very good, poor thing, and if it didn't come up to a certain figure at the end of the week she would lose her place. She lost it after all. They told her she was too weak. After Christmas she was lucky enough to get a place as a lady's-maid at twenty-five pounds a year—at Scotcher's she had fifteen. But we heard that she burst a blood-vessel, and now she's in the hospital at Brompton.'

'Delightful story! Haven't you an early-closing day?'

'They had before I went there; but only for about three months. Then the agreement broke down.'

'Like the assistants. A pity the establishment doesn't follow suit.'

'But you wouldn't say so, Miss Nunn, if you knew how terribly hard it is for many girls to find a place, even now.'

'I know it perfectly well. And I wish it were harder. I wish girls fell down and died of hunger in the streets, instead of creeping to their garrets and the hospitals. I should like to see their dead bodies collected together in some open place for the crowd to stare at.'

Monica gazed at her with wide eyes.

'You mean, I suppose, that people would try to reform things.'

'Who knows? Perhaps they might only congratulate each other that a few of the superfluous females had been struck off. Do they give you any summer holiday?'

'A week, with salary continued.'

'Really? With salary continued? That takes one's breath away.—Are many of the girls ladies?'

'None, at Scotcher's. They nearly all come from the country. Several are daughters of small farmers and those are dreadfully ignorant. One of them asked me the other day in what country Africa was.'

'You don't find them very pleasant company?'

'One or two are nice quiet girls.'

Rhoda drew a deep sigh, and moved with impatience.

'Well, don't you think you've had about enough of it—experience and all?'

'I might go into a country business: it would be easier.'

'But you don't care for the thought?'

'I wish now they had brought me up to something different. Alice and Virginia were afraid of having me trained for a school; you remember that one of our sisters who went through it died of overwork. And I'm not clever, Miss Nunn. I never did much at school.'

Rhoda regarded her, smiling gently.

'You have no inclination to study now?'

'I'm afraid not,' replied the other, looking away. 'Certainly I should like to be better educated, but I don't think I could study seriously, to earn my living by it. The time for that has gone by.'

'Perhaps so. But there are things you might manage. No doubt your sister told you how I get my living. There's a good deal of employment for women who learn to use a typewriter. Did you ever have piano lessons?'

'No.'

'No more did I, and I was sorry for it when I went to typewriting. The fingers have to be light and supple and quick. Come with me, and I'll show you one of the machines.'

They went to a room downstairs—a bare little room by the library. Here were two Remingtons, and Rhoda patiently explained their use.

'One must practise until one can do fifty words a minute at least. I know one or two people who have reached almost twice that speed. It takes a good six months' work to learn for any profitable use. Miss Barfoot takes pupils.'

Monica, at first very attentive, was growing absent. Her eyes wandered about the room. The other observed her closely, and, it seemed, doubtfully.

'Do you feel any impulse to try for it?'

'I should have to live for six months without earning anything.'

'That is by no means impossible for you, I think?'

'Not really impossible,' Monica replied with hesitation.

Something like dissatisfaction passed over Miss Nunn's face, though she did not allow Monica to see it. Her lips moved in a way that perhaps signified disdain for such timidity. Tolerance was not one of the virtues expressed in her physiognomy.

'Let us go back to the drawing-room and have some tea.'

Monica could not become quite at ease. This energetic woman had little attraction for her. She saw the characteristics which made Virginia enthusiastic, but feared rather than admired them. To put herself in Miss Nunn's hands might possibly result in a worse form of bondage than she suffered at the shop; she would never be able to please such a person, and failure, she imagined, would result in more or less contemptuous dismissal.

Then of a sudden, as it she had divined these thoughts, Rhoda assumed an air of gaiety of frank kindness.

'So it is your birthday? I no longer keep count of mine, and couldn't tell you without a calculation what I am exactly. It doesn't matter, you see. Thirty-one or fifty-one is much the same for a woman who has made up her mind to live alone and work steadily for a definite object. But you are still a young girl, Monica. My best wishes!'

Monica emboldened herself to ask what the object was for which her friend worked.

'How shall I put it?' replied the other, smiling. 'To make women hard-hearted.'

'Hard-hearted? I think I understand.'

'Do you?'

'You mean that you like to see them live unmarried.'

Rhoda laughed merrily.

'You say that almost with resentment.'

'No—indeed—I didn't intend it.'

Monica reddened a little.

'Nothing more natural if you have done. At your age, I should have resented it.'

'But—' the girl hesitated—'don't you approve of any one marrying?'

'Oh, I'm not so severe! But do you know that there are half a million more women than men in this happy country of ours?'

'Half a million!'

Her naive alarm again excited Rhoda to laughter.

'Something like that, they say. So many *odd* women—no making a pair with them. The pessimists call them useless, lost, futile lives. I, naturally—being one of them myself—take another view. I look upon them as a great reserve. When one woman vanishes in matrimony, the reserve offers a substitute for the world's work. True, they are not all trained yet—far from it. I want to help in that—to train the reserve.'

'But married woman are not idle,' protested Monica earnestly.

'Not all of them. Some cook and rock cradles.'

Again Miss Nunn's mood changed. She laughed the subject away, and abruptly began to talk of old days down in Somerset, of rambles about Cheddar Cliffs, or at Glastonbury, or on the Quantocks. Monica, however, could not listen, and with difficulty commanded her face to a pleasant smile.

'Will you come and see Miss Barfoot?' Rhoda asked, when it had become clear to her that the girl would gladly get away. 'I am only her subordinate, but I know she will wish to be of all the use to you she can.'

Monica expressed her thanks, and promised to act as soon as possible on any invitation that was sent her. She took leave just as the servant announced another caller.

CHAPTER V

THE CASUAL ACQUAINTANCE

At that corner of Battersea Park which is near Albert Bridge there has lain for more than twenty years a curious collection of architectural fragments, chiefly dismembered columns, spread in order upon the ground, and looking like portions of a razed temple. It is the colonnade of old Burlington House, conveyed hither from Piccadilly who knows why, and likely to rest here, the sporting ground for adventurous infants, until its origin is lost in the abyss of time.

It was at this spot that Monica had agreed to meet with her casual acquaintance, Edmund Widdowson, and there, from a distance, she saw his lank, upright, well-dressed figure moving backwards and forwards upon the grass. Even at the last moment Monica doubted whether to approach. Emotional interest in him she had none, and the knowledge of life she had gained in London assured her that in thus encouraging a perfect stranger she was doing a very hazardous thing. But the evening must somehow be spent, and if she went off in another direction it would only be to wander about with an adventurous mind; for her conversation with Miss Nunn had had precisely the opposite effect of that which Rhoda doubtless intended; she felt something of the recklessness which formerly excited her wonder when she remarked it in the other shop-girls. She could no longer be without a male companion, and as she had given her promise to this man—

He had seen her, and was coming forward. Today he carried a walking-stick, and wore gloves; otherwise his appearance was the same as at Richmond. At the distance of a few yards he raised his hat, not very gracefully. Monica did not offer her hand, nor did Widdowson seem to expect it. But he gave proof of an intense pleasure in the meeting; his sallow cheeks grew warm, and in the many wrinkles about his eyes played a singular smile, good-natured but anxious, apprehensive.

'I am so glad you were able to come,' he said in a low voice, bending towards her.

'It has been even finer than last Sunday,' was Monica's rather vague reply, as she glanced at some people who were passing.

'Yes, a wonderful day. But I only left home an hour ago. Shall we walk this way?'

They went along the path by the river. Widdowson exhibited none of the artifices of gallantry practised by men who are in the habit of picking up an acquaintance with shop-girls. His smile did not return; an extreme sobriety characterized his manner and speech; for the most part he kept his eyes on the ground, and when silent he had the look of one who inwardly debates a grave question.

'Have you been into the country?' was one of his first inquiries.

'No. I spent the morning with my sisters, and in the afternoon I had to see a lady in Chelsea.'

'Your sisters are older than yourself?'

'Yes, some years older.'

'Is it long since you went to live apart from them?'

'We have never had a home of our own since I was quite a child.'

And, after a moment's hesitation, she went on to give a brief account of her history. Widdowson listened with the closest attention, his lips twitching now and then, his eyes half closed. But for cheek-bones that were too prominent and nostrils rather too large, he was not ill-featured. No particular force of character declared itself in his countenance, and his mode of speech did not suggest a very active brain. Speculating again about his age, Monica concluded that he must be two or three and forty, in spite of the fact that his grizzled beard argued for a higher figure. He had brown hair untouched by any sign of advanced life, his teeth were white and regular, and something—she could not make clear to her mind exactly what—convinced her that he had a right to judge himself comparatively young.

'I supposed you were not a Londoner,' he said, when she came to a pause.

'How?'

'Your speech. Not,' he added quickly, 'that you have any provincial accent. And even if you had been a Londoner you would not have shown it in that way.'

He seemed to be reproving himself for a blunder, and after a short silence asked in a tone of kindness,—

'Do you prefer the town?'

'In some ways—not in all.'

'I am glad you have relatives here, and friends. So many young ladies come up from the country who are quite alone.'

'Yes, many.'

Their progress to familiarity could hardly have been slower. Now and then they spoke with a formal coldness which threatened absolute silence. Monica's brain was so actively at work that she lost consciousness of the people who were moving about them, and at times her companion was scarcely more to her than a voice.

They had walked along the whole front of the park, and were near Chelsea Bridge. Widdowson gazed at the pleasure-boats lying below on the strand, and said diffidently,—

'Would you care to go on the river?'

The proposal was so unexpected that Monica looked up with a startled air. She had not thought of the man as likely to offer any kind of amusement.

'It would be pleasant, I think,' he added. 'The tide is still running up. We might go very quietly for a mile or two, and be back as soon as you like.'

'Yes, I should like it.'

He brightened up, and moved with a livelier step. In a few minutes they had chosen their boat, had pushed off, and were gliding to the middle of the broad water. Widdowson managed the sculls without awkwardness, but by no means like a man well trained in this form of exercise. On sitting down, he had taken off his hat, stowed it away, and put on a little travelling-cap, which he drew from his pocket. Monica thought this became him. After all, he was not a companion to be ashamed of. She looked with pleasure at his white hairy hands with their firm grip; then at his boots—very good boots indeed. He had gold links in his white shirt-cuffs, and a gold watch-guard chosen with a gentleman's taste.

'I am at your service,' he said, with an approach to gaiety. 'Direct me. Shall we go quickly—some distance, or only just a little quicker than the tide would float us?'

'Which you like. To row much would make you too hot.'

'You would like to go some distance—I see.'

'No, no. Do exactly what you like. Of course we must be back in an hour or two.'

He drew out his watch.

'It's now ten minutes past six, and there is daylight till nine or after. When do you wish to be home?'

'Not much later than nine,' Monica answered, with the insincerity of prudence.

'Then we will just go quietly along. I wish we could have started early in the afternoon. But that may be for another day, I hope.'

On her lap Monica had the little brown-paper parcel which contained her present. She saw that Widdowson glanced at it from time to time, but she could not bring herself to explain what it was.

'I was very much afraid that I should not see you to-day,' he said, as they glided softly by Chelsea Embankment.

'But I promised to come if it was fine.'

'Yes. I feared something might prevent you. You are very kind to give me your company.' He was looking at the tips of her little boots. 'I can't say how I thank you.'

Much embarrassed, Monica could only gaze at one of the sculls, as it rose and fell, the water dripping from it in bright beads.

'Last year,' he pursued, 'I went on the river two or three times, but alone. This year I haven't been in a boat till to-day.'

'You prefer driving?'

'Oh, it's only chance. I do drive a good deal, however. I wish it were possible to take you through the splendid country I saw a day or two ago—down in Surrey. Perhaps some day you will let me. I live rather a lonely life, as you see. I have a housekeeper; no relative lives with me. My only relative in London is a sister-in-law, and we very seldom meet.'

'But don't you employ yourself in any way?'

'I'm very idle. But that's partly because I have worked very hard and hopelessly all my life—till a year and a half ago. I began to earn my own living when I was fourteen, and now I am forty-four—to-day.'

'This is your birthday?' said Monica, with an odd look the other could not understand.

'Yes—I only remembered it a few hours ago. Strange that such a treat should have been provided for me. Yes, I am very idle. A year and a half ago my only brother died. He had been very successful in life, and he left me what I regard as a fortune, though it was only a small part of what he had.'

The listener's heart throbbed. Without intending it, she pulled the tiller so that the boat began to turn towards land.

'The left hand a little,' said Widdowson, smiling correctly. 'That's right. Many days I don't leave home. I am fond of reading, and now I make up for all the time lost in years gone by. Do you care for books?'

'I never read very much, and I feel very ignorant.'

'But that is only for want of opportunity, I'm sure.'

He glanced at the brown-paper parcel. Acting on an impulse which perturbed her, Monica began to slip off the loosely-tied string, and to unfold the paper.

'I thought it was a book!' exclaimed Widdowson merrily, when she had revealed a part of her present.

'When you told me your name,' said Monica, 'I ought perhaps to have told you mine. It's written here. My sisters gave me this to-day.'

She offered the little volume. He took it as though it were something fragile, and—the sculls fixed under his elbows—turned to the fly-leaf.

'What? It is *your* birthday?'

'Yes. I am twenty-one.'

'Will you let me shake hands with you?' His pressure of her fingers was the lightest possible. 'Now that's rather a strange thing— isn't it? Oh, I remember this book very well, though I haven't seen it or heard of it for twenty years. My mother used to read it on Sundays. And it is really your birthday? I am more than twice your age, Miss Madden.'

The last remark was uttered anxiously, mournfully. Then, as if to reassure himself by exerting physical strength, he drove the boat along with half a dozen vigorous strokes. Monica was rustling over the pages, but without seeing them.

'I don't think,' said her companion presently, 'you are very well contented with your life in that house of business.'

'No, I am not.'

'I have heard a good deal of the hardships of such a life. Will you tell me something about yours?'

Readily she gave him a sketch of her existence from Sunday to Sunday, but without indignation, and as if the subject had no great interest for her.

'You must be very strong,' was Widdowson's comment.

'The lady I went to see this afternoon told me I looked ill.'

'Of course I can see the effects of overwork. My wonder is that you endure it at all. Is that lady an old acquaintance?'

Monica answered with all necessary detail, and went on to mention the proposal that had been made to her. The hearer reflected, and put further questions. Unwilling to speak of the little capital she possessed, Monica told him that her sisters might perhaps help her to live whilst she was learning a new occupation. But Widdowson had become abstracted; he ceased pulling, crossed his arms on the oars, and watched other boats that were near. Two deep wrinkles, rippling in their course, had formed across his forehead, and his eyes widened in a gaze of complete abstraction at the farther shore.

'Yes,' fell from him at length, as though in continuation of something he had been saying, 'I began to earn my bread when I was fourteen. My father was an auctioneer at Brighton. A few years after his marriage he had a bad illness, which left him completely deaf. His partnership with another man was dissolved, and as things went worse and worse with him, my mother started a lodging-house, which somehow supported us for a long time. She was a sensible, good, and brave woman. I'm afraid my father had a good many faults that made her life hard. He was of a violent temper, and of course the deafness didn't improve it. Well, one day a cab knocked him down in the King's Road, and from that injury, though not until a year after, he died. There were only two children; I was the elder. My mother couldn't keep me at school very long, so, at fourteen, I was sent into the office of the man who had been my father's partner, to serve him and learn the business. I did serve him for years, and for next to no payment, but he taught me nothing more than he could help. He was one of those heartless, utterly selfish men that one meets too often in the business world. I ought never to have been sent there, for my father had always an ill opinion of him; but he pretended a friendly interest in me—just, I am convinced, to make the use of me that he did.'

He was silent, and began rowing again.

'What happened then?' asked Monica.

'I mustn't make out that I was a faultless boy,' he continued, with the smile that graced wrinkles about his eyes; 'quite the opposite. I had a good deal of my father's temper; I often behaved very badly to my mother; what I needed was some stern but conscientious man to look after me and make me work. In my spare time I lay about on the shore, or got into mischief with other boys. It needed my mother's death to make a more sensible fellow of me, and by that time it was too late. I mean I was too old to be trained into profitable business habits. Up to nineteen I had been little more than an errand and office boy, and all through the after years I never got a much better position.'

'I can't understand that,' remarked Monica thoughtfully.

'Why not?'

'You seem to—to be the kind of man that would make your way.'

'Do I?' The description pleased him; he laughed cheerfully. 'But I never found what my way was to be. I have always hated office work, and business of every kind; yet I could never see an opening in any other direction. I have been all my life a clerk—like so many thousands of other men. Nowadays, if I happen to be in the City when all the clerks are coming away from business, I feel an inexpressible pity for them. I feel I should like to find two or three of the hardest driven, and just divide my superfluous income between. A clerk's life—a life of the office without any hope of rising—that is a hideous fate!'

'But your brother got on well. Why didn't he help you?'

'We couldn't agree. We always quarrelled.'

'Are you really so ill-tempered?'

It was asked in Monica's most naive tone, with a serious air of investigation which at first confused Widdowson, then made him laugh.

'Since I was a lad,' he replied, 'I have never quarrelled with any one except my brother. I think it's only very unreasonable people that irritate me. Some men have told me that I was far too easy-going, too good-natured. Certainly I *desire* to be good-natured. But I don't easily make friends; as a

rule I can't talk to strangers. I keep so much to myself that those who know me only a little think me surly and unsociable.'

'So your brother always refused to help you?'

'It wasn't easy for him to help me. He got into a stockbroker's, and went on step by step until he had saved a little money; then he speculated in all sorts of ways. He couldn't employ me himself—and if he could have done so, we should never have got on together. It was impossible for him to recommend me to any one except as a clerk. He was a born money-maker. I'll give you an example of how he grew rich. In consequence of some mortgage business he came into possession of a field at Clapham. As late as 1875 this field brought him only a rent of forty pounds; it was freehold property, and he refused many offers of purchase. Well, in 1885, the year before he died, the ground-rents from that field—now covered with houses—were seven hundred and ninety pounds a year. That's how men get on who have capital and know how to use it. If I had had capital, it would never have yielded me more than three or four per cent. I was doomed to work for other people who were growing rich. It doesn't matter much now, except that so many years of life have been lost.'

'Had your brother any children?'

'No children. All the same, it astonished me when I heard his will; I had expected nothing. In one day—in one hour—I passed from slavery to freedom, from poverty to more than comfort. We never *hated* each other; I don't want you to think that.'

'But—didn't it bring you friends as well as comfort?'

'Oh,' he laughed, 'I am not so rich as to have people pressing for my acquaintance. I have only about six hundred a year.'

Monica drew in her breath silently, then gazed at the distance.

'No, I haven't made any new friends. The one or two men I care for are not much better off than I used to be, and I always feel ashamed to ask them to come and see me. Perhaps they think I shun them because of their position, and I don't know how to justify myself. Life has always been full of worrying problems for me. I can't take things in the simple way that comes natural to other men.'

'Don't you think we ought to be turning back, Mr. Widdowson?'

'Yes, we will. I am sorry the time goes so quickly.'

When a few minutes had passed in silence, he asked,—

'Do you feel that I am no longer quite a stranger to you, Miss Madden?'

'Yes—you have told me so much.'

'It's very kind of you to listen so patiently. I wish I had more interesting things to tell, but you see what a dull life mine has been.' He paused, and let the boat waver on the stream for a moment. 'When I dared to speak to you last Sunday I had only the faintest hope that you would grant me your acquaintance. You can't, I am sure, repent of having done me that kindness—?'

'One never knows. I doubted whether I ought to talk with a stranger—'

'Rightly—quite rightly. It was my perseverance—you saw, I hope, that I could never dream of giving you offence. The rule is necessary, but you see there may be exceptional cases.' He was giving a lazy stroke now and then, which, as the tide was still, just moved the boat onwards. 'I saw something in your face that *compelled* me to speak to you. And now we may really be friends, I hope?'

'Yes—I can think of you as a friend, Mr. Widdowson.'

A large boat was passing with four or five young men and girls who sang in good time and tune. Only a song of the music-hall or of the nigger minstrels, but it sounded pleasantly with the plash of the oars. A fine sunset had begun to glow upon the river; its warmth gave a tone to Monica's thin cheeks.

'And you will let me see you again before long? Let me drive you to Hampton Court next Sunday—or any other place you would choose.'

'Very likely I shall be invited to my friend's in Chelsea.'

'Do you seriously think of leaving the shop?'

'I don't know—I must have time to think about it—'

'Yes—yes. But if I write a line to you, say on Friday, would you let me know whether you can come?'

'Please to let me refuse for next Sunday. The one after, perhaps—'

He bent his head, looked desperately grave, and drove the boat on. Monica was disturbed, but held to her resolution, which Widdowson silently accepted. The rest of the way they exchanged only brief sentences, about the beauty of the sky, the scenes on river or bank, and other impersonal matters. After landing, they walked in silence towards Chelsea Bridge.

'Now I must go quickly home,' said Monica.

'But how?'

'By train—from York Road to Walworth Road.'

Widdowson cast a curious glance at her. One would have imagined that he found something to disapprove in this ready knowledge of London transit.

'I will go with you to the station, then.'

Without a word spoken, they walked the short distance to York Road. Monica took her ticket, and offered a hand for good-bye.

'I may write to you,' said Widdowson, his face set in an expression of anxiety, 'and make an appointment, if possible, for the Sunday after next?'

'I shall be glad to come—if I can.'

'It will be a very long time to me.'

With a faint smile, Monica hurried away to the platform. In the train she looked like one whose mind is occupied with grave trouble. Fatigue had suddenly overcome her; she leaned back and closed her eyes.

At a street corner very near to Messrs. Scotcher's establishment she was intercepted by a tall, showily-dressed, rather coarse-featured girl, who seemed to have been loitering about. It was Miss Eade.

'I want to speak to you, Miss Madden. Where did you go with Mr. Bullivant this morning?'

The voice could not have been more distinctive of a London shop-girl; its tone signified irritation.

'With Mr. Bullivant? I went nowhere with him.'

'But I *saw* you both get into the bus in Kennington Park Road.'

'Did you?' Monica returned coldly. 'I can't help it if Mr. Bullivant happened to be going the same way.'

'Oh, very well! I thought you was to be trusted. It's nothing to me—'

'You behave very foolishly, Miss Eade,' exclaimed the other, whose nerves at this moment would not allow her to use patience with the jealous girl. 'I can only tell you that I have never thought again of Mr. Bullivant since he left the bus somewhere in Clapham Road. I'm tired of talking about such things.'

'Now, see here, don't be cross. Come and walk a bit and tell me—'

'I'm too tired. And there's nothing whatever to tell you.'

'Oh, well, if you're going to be narsty?'

Monica walked on, but the girl caught her up.

'Don't be so sharp with me, Miss Madden. I don't say as you wanted him to go in the bus with you. But you might tell me what he had to say.'

'Nothing at all; except that he wished to know where I was going, which was no business of his. I did what I could for you. I told him that if he asked you to go up the river with him I felt sure you wouldn't refuse.'

'Oh, you did!' Miss Eade threw up her head. 'I don't think it was a very delicate thing to say.'

'You are very unreasonable. I myself don't think it was very delicate, but haven't you worried me to say something of the kind?'

'No, that I'm sure I haven't! Worried you, indeed!'

'Then please never to speak to me on the subject again. I'm tired of it.'

'And what did *he* say, when you'd said that?'

'I can't remember.'

'Oh, you *are* narsty to-day! Really you are! If it had been the other way about, I'd never have treated *you* like this, that I wouldn't.'

'Good-night!'

They were close to the door by which Messrs. Scotcher's resident employees entered at night. Monica had taken out her latchkey. But Miss Eade could not endure the thought of being left in torturing ignorance.

'Do tell me!' she whispered. 'I'll do anything for you I can. Don't be unkind, Miss Madden!'

Monica turned back again.

'If I were you, I wouldn't be so silly. I can't do more than assure you and promise you that I shall never listen to Mr. Bullivant.'

'But what did he say about *me*, dear?'

'Nothing.'

Miss Eade kept a mortified silence.

'You had much better not think of him at all. I would have more pride. I wish I could make you see him as I do.'

'And you did really speak about me? Oh, I do wish you'd find some one to go out with. Then perhaps—'

Monica stood still, hesitated, and at length said,—

'Well—I *have* found some one.'

'You have?' The girl all but danced with joy. 'You really have?'

'Yes—so now don't trouble me any more.'

This time she was allowed to turn back and enter the house.

No one else had yet come in. Monica ate a mouthful of bread and cheese, which was in readiness on the long table down in the basement, and at once went to bed. But no welcome drowsiness fell upon her. At half-past eleven, when two of the other five girls who slept in the room made their appearance, she was still changing uneasily from side to side. They lit the gas (it was not turned off till midnight, after which hour the late arrivals had to use a candle of their own procuring), and began a lively conversation on the events of the day. Afraid of being obliged to talk, Monica feigned sleep.

At twelve, just as the gas went out, another pair came to repose. They had been quarrelling, and were very gloomy. After a long and acrimonious discussion in the dark as to which of them should find a candle—it ended in one of the girls who was in bed impatiently supplying a light—they began sullenly to throw off their garments.

'Is Miss Madden awake?' said one of them, looking in Monica's direction.

There was no reply.

'She's picked up some feller to-day,' continued the speaker, lowering her voice, and glancing round at her companions with a grin. 'Or else she's had him all along—I shouldn't wonder.'

Heads were put forward eagerly, and inquiries whispered.

'He's oldish, I should say. I caught sight of them just as they was going off in a boat from Battersea Park, but I couldn't see his face very well. He looked rather like Mr. Thomas.'

Mr. Thomas was a member of the drapery firm, a man of fifty, ugly and austere. At this description the listeners giggled and uttered exclamations.

'Was he a swell?' asked one.

'Shouldn't wonder if he was. You can trust Miss M. to keep her eyes open. She's one of the sly and quiet 'uns.'

'Oh, is she?' murmured another enviously. 'She's just one of those as gets made a fool of—that's *my* opinion.'

The point was argued for some minutes. It led to talk about Miss Eade, who was treated with frank contempt because of her ill-disguised pursuit of a mere counter-man. These other damsels had, at present, more exalted views, for they were all younger than Miss Eade.

Just before one o'clock, when silence had reigned for a quarter of an hour, there entered with much bustle the last occupant of the bedroom. She was a young woman with a morally unenviable reputation, though some of her colleagues certainly envied her. Money came to her with remarkable readiness whenever she had need of it. As usual, she began to talk very loud, at first with innocent vulgarity; exciting a little laughter, she became anecdotic and very scandalous. It took her a long time to disrobe, and when the candle was out, she still had her richest story to relate—of point so Rabelaisian that one or two voices made themselves heard in serious protest. The gifted anecdotist replied with a long laugh, then cried, 'Good-night, young ladies!' and sank peacefully to slumber.

As for Monica, she saw the white dawn peep at the window, and closed her tear-stained eyes only when the life of a new week had begun noisily in Walworth Road.

CHAPTER VI

A CAMP OF THE RESERVE

In consequence of letters exchanged during the week, next Sunday brought the three Miss Maddens to Queen's Road to lunch with Miss Barfoot. Alice had recovered from her cold, but was still ailing, and took rather a gloomy view of the situation she had lately reviewed with such courage. Virginia maintained her enthusiastic faith in Miss Nunn, and was prepared to reverence Miss Barfoot with hardly less fervour. Both of them found it difficult to understand their young sister, who, in her letters, had betrayed distaste for the change of career proposed to her. They were received with the utmost kindness, and all greatly enjoyed their afternoon, for not even Monica's prejudice against a house, which in her own mind she had stigmatized as 'an old-maid factory,' could resist the charm of the hostess.

Though Miss Barfoot had something less than a woman's average stature, the note of her presence was personal dignity. She was handsome, and her carriage occasionally betrayed a consciousness of the fact. According to circumstances, she bore herself as the lady of aristocratic tastes, as a genial woman of the world, or as a fervid prophetess of female emancipation, and each character was supported with a spontaneity, a good-natured confidence, which inspired liking and respect. A brilliant complexion and eyes that sparkled with habitual cheerfulness gave her the benefit of doubt when her age was in question; her style of dress, gracefully ornate, would have led a stranger to presume her a wedded lady of some distinction. Yet Mary Barfoot had known many troubles, poverty among them. Her experiences and struggles bore a close resemblance to those which Rhoda Nunn had gone through, and the time of trial had lasted longer. Mental and moral stamina would have assured her against such evils of celibacy as appeared in the elder Maddens, but it was to a change of worldly fortune that she owed this revival of youthful spirit and energy in middle life.

'You and I must be friends,' she said to Monica, holding the girl's soft little hand. 'We are both black but comely.'

The compliment to herself seemed the most natural thing in the world. Monica blushed with pleasure, and could not help laughing.

It was all but decided that Monica should become a pupil at the school in Great Portland Street. In a brief private conversation, Miss Barfoot offered to lend her the money that might be needful.

'Nothing but a business transaction, Miss Madden. You can give me security; you will repay me at your convenience. If, in the end, this occupation doesn't please you, you will at all events have regained health. It is clear to me that you mustn't go on in that dreadful place you described to Miss Nunn.'

The visitors took their leave at about five o'clock.

'Poor things! Poor things!' sighed Miss Barfoot, when she was alone with her friend. 'What can we possibly do for the older ones?'

'They are excellent creatures,' said Rhoda; 'kind, innocent women; but useful for nothing except what they have done all their lives. The eldest can't teach seriously, but she can keep young children out of mischief and give them a nice way of speaking. Her health is breaking down, you can see.'

'Poor woman! One of the saddest types.'

'Decidedly. Virginia isn't quite so depressing—but how childish!'

'They all strike me as childish. Monica is a dear little girl; it seemed a great absurdity to talk to her about business. Of course she must find a husband.'

'I suppose so.'

Rhoda's tone of slighting concession amused her companion.

'My dear, after all we don't desire the end of the race.'

'No, I suppose not,' Rhoda admitted with a laugh.

'A word of caution. Your zeal is eating you up. At this rate, you will hinder our purpose. We have no mission to prevent girls from marrying suitably—only to see that those who can't shall have a means of living with some satisfaction.'

'What chance is there that this girl will marry suitably?'

'Oh, who knows? At all events, there will be more likelihood of it if she comes into our sphere.'

'Really? Do you know any man that would dream of marrying her?'

'Perhaps not, at present.'

It was clear that Miss Barfoot stood in some danger of becoming subordinate to her more vehement friend. Her little body, for all its natural dignity, put her at a disadvantage in the presence of Rhoda, who towered above her with rather imperious stateliness. Her suavity was no match for Rhoda's vigorous abruptness. But the two were very fond of each other, and by this time thought themselves able safely to dispense with the forms at first imposed by their mutual relations.

'If she marry at all,' declared Miss Nunn, 'she will marry badly. The family is branded. They belong to the class we know so well—with no social position, and unable to win an individual one. I must find a name for that ragged regiment.'

Miss Barfoot regarded her friend thoughtfully.

'Rhoda, what comfort have you for the poor in spirit?'

'None whatever, I'm afraid. My mission is not to them.'

After a pause, she added,—

'They have their religious faith, I suppose; and it's answerable for a good deal.'

'It would be a terrible responsibility to rob them of it,' remarked the elder woman gravely.

Rhoda made a gesture of impatience.

'It's a terrible responsibility to do anything at all. But I'm glad'—she laughed scornfully—'that it's not my task to release them.'

Mary Barfoot mused, a compassionate shadow on her fine face.

'I don't think we can do without the spirit of that religion,' she said at length—'the essential human spirit. These poor women—one ought to be very tender with them. I don't like your "ragged regiment" phrase. When I grow old and melancholy, I think I shall devote myself to poor hopeless and purposeless women—try to warm their hearts a little before they go hence.'

'Admirable!' murmured Rhoda, smiling. 'But in the meantime they cumber us; we have to fight.'

She threw forward her arms, as though with spear and buckler. Miss Barfoot was smiling at this Palladin attitude when a servant announced two ladies—Mrs. Smallbrook and Miss Haven. They were aunt and niece; the former a tall, ungainly, sharp-featured widow; the latter a sweet-faced, gentle, sensible-looking girl of five-and-twenty.

'I am so glad you are back again,' exclaimed the widow, as she shook hands with Miss Barfoot, speaking in a hard, unsympathetic voice. 'I do so want to ask your advice about an interesting girl who has applied to me. I'm afraid her past won't bear looking into, but most certainly she is a reformed character. Winifred is most favourably impressed with her—'

Miss Haven, the Winifred in question, began to talk apart with Rhoda Nunn.

'I do wish my aunt wouldn't exaggerate so,' she said in a subdued voice, whilst Mrs. Smallbrook still talked loudly and urgently. 'I never said that I was favourably impressed. The girl protests far too much; she has played on aunt's weaknesses, I fear.'

'But who is she?'

'Oh, some one who lost her character long ago, and lives, I should say, on charitable people. Just because I said that she must once have had a very nice face, aunt misrepresents me in this way—it's too bad.'

'Is she an educated person?' Miss Barfoot was heard to ask.

'Not precisely well educated.'

'Of the lower classes, then?'

'I don't like that term, you know. Of the *poorer* classes.'

'She never was a lady,' put in Miss Haven quietly but decidedly.

'Then I fear I can be of no use,' said the hostess, betraying some of her secret satisfaction in being able thus to avoid Mrs. Smallbrook's request. Winifred, a pupil at Great Portland Street, was much liked by both her teachers; but the aunt, with her ceaseless philanthropy at other people's expense, could only be considered a bore.

'But surely you don't limit your humanity, Miss Barfoot, by the artificial divisions of society.'

'I think those divisions are anything but artificial,' replied the hostess good-humouredly. 'In the uneducated classes I have no interest whatever. You have heard me say so.'

'Yes, but I cannot think—isn't that just a little narrow?'

'Perhaps so. I choose my sphere, that's all. Let those work for the lower classes (I must call them lower, for they are, in every sense), let those work for them who have a call to do so. I have none. I must keep to my own class.'

'But surely, Miss Nunn,' cried the widow, turning to Rhoda, 'we work for the abolition of all unjust privilege? To us, is not a woman a woman?'

'I am obliged to agree with Miss Barfoot. I think that as soon as we begin to meddle with uneducated people, all our schemes and views are unsettled. We have to learn a new language, for one thing. But your missionary enterprise is admirable.'

'For my part,' declared Mrs. Smallbrook, 'I aim at the solidarity of woman. You, at all events, agree with me, Winifred?'

'I really don't think, aunt, that there can be any solidarity of ladies with servant girls,' responded Miss Haven, encouraged by a look from Rhoda.

'Then I grieve that your charity falls so far below the Christian standard.'

Miss Barfoot firmly guided the conversation to a more hopeful subject.

Not many people visited this house. Every Wednesday evening, from half-past eight to eleven, Miss Barfoot was at home to any of her acquaintances, including her pupils, who chose to call upon her; but this was in the nature of an association with recognized objects. Of society in the common sense Miss Barfoot saw very little; she had no time to sacrifice in the pursuit of idle ceremonies. By the successive deaths of two relatives, a widowed sister and an uncle, she had come into possession of a modest fortune; but no thought of a life such as would have suggested itself to most women in her place ever tempted her. Her studies had always been of a very positive nature; her abilities were of a kind uncommon in women, or at all events very rarely developed in one of her sex. She could have managed a large and complicated business, could have filled a place on a board of directors, have taken an active part in municipal government—nay, perchance in national. And this turn of intellect consisted with many traits of character so strongly feminine that people who knew her best thought of her with as much tenderness as admiration. She did not seek to become known as the leader of a 'movement,' yet her quiet work was probably more effectual than the public career of women who propagandize for female emancipation. Her aim was to draw from the overstocked profession of teaching as many capable young women as she could lay hands on, and to fit them for certain of the pursuits nowadays thrown open to their sex. She held the conviction that whatever man could do, woman could do equally well—those tasks only excepted which demand great physical strength. At her instance, and with help from her purse, two girls were preparing themselves to be pharmaceutical chemists; two others had been aided by her to open a bookseller's shop; and several who had clerkships in view received an admirable training at her school in Great Portland Street.

Thither every weekday morning Miss Barfoot and Rhoda repaired; they arrived at nine o'clock, and with an hour's interval work went on until five.

Entering by the private door of a picture-cleaner's shop, they ascended to the second story, where two rooms had been furnished like comfortable offices; two smaller on the floor above

served for dressing-rooms. In one of the offices, typewriting and occasionally other kinds of work that demanded intelligence were carried on by three or four young women regularly employed. To superintend this department was Miss Nunn's chief duty, together with business correspondence under the principal's direction. In the second room Miss Barfoot instructed her pupils, never more than three being with her at a time. A bookcase full of works on the Woman Question and allied topics served as a circulating library; volumes were lent without charge to the members of this little society. Once a month Miss Barfoot or Miss Nunn, by turns, gave a brief address on some set subject; the hour was four o'clock, and about a dozen hearers generally assembled. Both worked very hard. Miss Barfoot did not look upon her enterprise as a source of pecuniary profit, but she had made the establishment more than self-supporting. Her pupils increased in number, and the working department promised occupation for a larger staff than was at present engaged. The young women in general answered their friend's expectations, but of course there were disappointing instances. One of these had caused Miss Barfoot special distress. A young girl whom she had released from a life of much hardship, and who, after a couple of months' trial, bade fair to develop noteworthy ability, of a sudden disappeared. She was without relatives in London, and Miss Barfoot's endeavours to find her proved for several weeks very futile. Then came news of her; she was living as the mistress of a married man. Every effort was made to bring her back, but the girl resisted; presently she again passed out of sight, and now more than a year had elapsed since Miss Barfoot's last interview with her.

This Monday morning, among letters delivered at the house, was one from the strayed girl. Miss Barfoot read it in private, and throughout the day remained unusually grave. At five o'clock, when staff and pupils had all departed, she sat for a while in meditation, then spoke to Rhoda, who was glancing over a book by the window.

'Here's a letter I should like you to read.'

'Something that has been troubling you since morning, isn't it?'

'Yes.'

Rhoda took the sheet and quickly ran through its contents. Her face hardened, and she threw down the letter with a smile of contempt.

'What do you advise?' asked the elder woman, closely observing her.

'An answer in two lines—with a cheque enclosed, if you see fit.'

'Does that really meet the case?'

'More than meets it, I should say.'

Miss Barfoot pondered.

'I am doubtful. That is a letter of despair, and I can't close my ears to it.'

'You had an affection for the girl. Help her, by all means, if you feel compelled to. But you would hardly dream of taking her back again?'

'That's the point. Why shouldn't I?'

'For one thing,' replied Rhoda, looking coldly down upon her friend, 'you will never do any good with her. For another, she isn't a suitable companion for the girls she would meet here.'

'I can't be sure of either objection. She acted with deplorable rashness, with infatuation, but I never discovered any sign of evil in her. Did you?'

'Evil? Well, what does the word mean? I am not a Puritan, and I don't judge her as the ordinary woman would. But I think she has put herself altogether beyond our sympathy. She was twenty-two years old—no child—and she acted with her eyes open. No deceit was practised with her. She knew the man had a wife, and she was base enough to accept a share of his attentions. Do you advocate polygamy? That is an intelligible position, I admit. It is one way of meeting the social difficulty. But not mine.'

'My dear Rhoda, don't enrage yourself.'

'I will try not to.'

'But I can't see the temptation to do so. Come and sit down, and talk quietly. No, I have no fondness for polygamy. I find it very hard to understand how she could act as she did. But a mistake, however wretched, mustn't condemn a woman for life. That's the way of the world, and decidedly it mustn't be ours.'

'On this point I practically agree with the world.'

'I see you do, and it astonishes me. You are going through curious changes, in several respects. A year ago you didn't speak of her like this.'

'Partly because I didn't know you well enough to speak my mind. Partly yes, I have changed a good deal, no doubt. But I should never have proposed to take her by the hand and let bygones be bygones. That is an amiable impulse, but anti-social.'

'A favourite word on your lips just now, Rhoda. Why is it anti-social?'

'Because one of the supreme social needs of our day is the education of women in self-respect and self-restraint. There are plenty of people—men chiefly, but a few women also of a certain temperament—who cry for a reckless individualism in these matters. They would tell you that she behaved laudably, that she was *living out herself*—and things of that kind. But I didn't think you shared such views.'

'I don't, altogether. "The education of women in self-respect." Very well. Here is a poor woman whose self-respect has given way under grievous temptation. Circumstances have taught her that she made a wild mistake. The man gives her up, and bids her live as she can; she is induced to beggary. Now, in that position a girl is tempted to sink still further. The letter of two lines and an enclosed cheque would as likely as not plunge her into depths from which she could never be rescued. It would assure her that there was no hope. On the other hand, we have it in our power to attempt that very education of which you speak. She has brains, and doesn't belong to the vulgar. It seems to me that you are moved by illogical impulses—and certainly anything but kind ones.'

Rhoda only grew more stubborn.

'You say she yielded to a grievous temptation. What temptation? Will it bear putting into words?'

'Oh yes, I think it will,' answered Miss Barfoot, with her gentlest smile. 'She fell in love with the man.'

'Fell in love!' Concentration of scorn was in this echo. 'Oh, for what isn't that phrase responsible!'

'Rhoda, let me ask you a question on which I have never ventured. Do you know what it is to be in love?'

Miss Nunn's strong features were moved as if by a suppressed laugh; the colour of her cheeks grew very slightly warm.

'I am a normal human being,' she answered, with an impatient gesture. 'I understand perfectly well what the phrase signifies.'

'That is no answer, my dear. Have you ever been in love with any man?'

'Yes. When I was fifteen.'

'And not since,' rejoined the other, shaking her head and smiling. 'No, not since?'

'Thank Heaven, no!'

'Then you are not very well able to judge this case. I, on the other hand, can judge it with the very largest understanding. Don't smile so witheringly, Rhoda. I shall neglect your advice for once.'

'You will bring this girl back, and continue teaching her as before?'

'We have no one here that knows her, and with prudence she need never be talked about by those of our friends who did.'

'Oh, weak—weak—weak!'

'For once I must act independently.'

'Yes, and at a stroke change the whole character of your work. You never proposed keeping a reformatory. Your aim is to help chosen girls, who promise to be of some use in the world. This Miss Royston represents the profitless average—no, she is below the average. Are you so blind as to imagine that any good will ever come of such a person? If you wish to save her from the streets, do so by all means. But to put her among your chosen pupils is to threaten your whole undertaking. Let it once become known—and it *would* become known—that a girl of that character came here, and your usefulness is at an end. In a year's time you will have to choose between giving up the school altogether and making it a refuge for outcasts.'

Miss Barfoot was silent. She tapped with her fingers on the table.

'Personal feeling is misleading you,' Rhoda pursued. 'Miss Royston had a certain cleverness, I grant; but do you think I didn't know that she would never become what you hoped? All her spare time was given to novel-reading. If every novelist could be strangled and thrown into the sea we should have some chance of reforming women. The girl's nature was corrupted with sentimentality, like that of all but every woman who is intelligent enough to read what is called the best fiction, but not intelligent enough to understand its vice. Love—love—love; a sickening sameness of vulgarity. What is more vulgar than the ideal of novelists? They won't represent the actual world; it would be too dull for their readers. In real life, how many men and women *fall in love*? Not one in every ten thousand, I am convinced. Not one married pair in ten thousand have felt for each other as two or three couples do in every novel. There is the sexual instinct, of course, but that is quite a different thing; the novelists daren't talk about that. The paltry creatures daren't tell the one truth that would be profitable. The result is that women imagine themselves noble and glorious when they are most near the animals. This Miss Royston—when she rushed off to perdition, ten to one she had in mind some idiot heroine of a book. Oh, I tell you that you are losing sight of your first duty. There are people enough to act the good Samaritan; *you* have quite another task in life. It is your work to train and encourage girls in a path as far as possible from that of the husband-hunter. Let them marry later, if they must; but at all events you will have cleared their views on the subject of marriage, and put them in a position to judge the man who offers himself. You will have taught them that marriage is an alliance of intellects—not a means of support, or something more ignoble still. But to do this with effect you must show yourself relentless to female imbecility. If a girl gets to know that you have received back such a person as Miss Royston she will be corrupted by your spirit of charity—corrupted, at all events, for our purposes. The endeavour to give women a new soul is so difficult that we can't be cumbered by side-tasks, such as fishing foolish people out of the mud they have walked into. Charity for human weakness is all very well in its place, but it is precisely one of the virtues that you must *not* teach. You have to set an example of the sterner qualities—to discourage anything that resembles sentimentalism. And think if you illustrate in your own behaviour a sympathy for the very vice of character we are trying our hardest to extirpate!'

'This is a terrible harangue,' said Miss Barfoot, when the passionate voice had been silent for a few ticks of the clock. 'I quite enter into your point of view, but I think you go beyond practical zeal. However, I will help the girl in some other way, if possible.'

'I have offended you.'

'Impossible to take offence at such obvious sincerity.'

'But surely you grant the force of what I say?'

'We differ a good deal, Rhoda, on certain points which as a rule would never come up to interfere with our working in harmony. You have come to dislike the very thought of marriage—and everything of that kind. I think it's a danger you ought to have avoided. True, we wish to prevent girls from marrying just for the sake of being supported, and from degrading themselves as poor Bella Royston has done; but surely between ourselves we can admit that the vast majority of women would lead a wasted life if they did not marry.'

'I maintain that the vast majority of women lead a vain and miserable life because they *do* marry.'

'Don't you blame the institution of marriage with what is chargeable to human fate? A vain and miserable life is the lot of nearly all mortals. Most women, whether they marry or not, will suffer and commit endless follies.'

'Most women—as life is at present arranged for them. Things are changing, and we try to have our part in hastening a new order.'

'Ah, we use words in a different sense. I speak of human nature, not of the effect of institutions.'

'Now it is you who are impractical. Those views lead only to pessimism and paralysis of effort.'

Miss Barfoot rose.

'I give in to your objection against bringing the girl back to work here. I will help her in other ways. It's quite true that she isn't to be relied upon.'

'Impossible to trust her in any detail of life. The pity is that her degradation can't be used as an object lesson for our other girls.'

'There again we differ. You are quite mistaken in your ideas of how the mind is influenced. The misery of Bella Royston would not in the least affect any other girl's way of thinking about the destiny of her sex. We must avoid exaggeration. If our friends get to think of us as fanatics, all our usefulness is over. The ideal we set up must be human. Do you think now that we know one single girl who in her heart believes it is better never to love and never to marry?'

'Perhaps not,' admitted Rhoda, more cheerful now that she had gained her point. 'But we know several who will not dream of marrying unless reason urges them as strongly as inclination.'

Miss Barfoot laughed.

'Pray, who ever distinguished in such a case between reason and inclination?'

'You are most unusually sceptical to-day,' said Rhoda, with an impatient laugh.

'No, my dear. We happen to be going to the root of things, that's all. Perhaps it's as well to do so now and then. Oh, I admire you immensely, Rhoda. You are the ideal adversary of those care-nothing and believe-nothing women who keep the world back. But don't prepare for yourself a woeful disillusion.'

'Take the case of Winifred Haven,' urged Miss Nunn. 'She is a good-looking and charming girl, and some one or other will want to marry her some day, no doubt.'

'Forgive my interrupting you. There is great doubt. She has no money but what she can earn, and such girls, unless they are exceptionally beautiful, are very likely indeed to remain unsought.'

'Granted. But let us suppose she has an offer. Should you fear for her prudence?'

'Winifred has much good sense,' admitted the other. 'I think she is in as little danger as any girl we know. But it wouldn't startle me if she made the most lamentable mistake. Certainly I don't fear it. The girls of our class are not like the uneducated, who, for one reason or another, will marry almost any man rather than remain single. They have at all events personal delicacy. But what I insist upon is, that Winifred would rather marry than not. And we must carefully bear that fact in mind. A strained ideal is as bad, practically, as no ideal at all. Only the most exceptional girl will believe it her duty to remain single as an example and support to what we call the odd women; yet *that* is the most human way of urging what you desire. By taking up the proud position that a woman must be altogether independent of sexual things, you damage your cause. Let us be glad if we put a few of them in the way of living single with no more discontent than an unmarried man experiences.'

'Surely that's an unfortunate comparison,' said Rhoda coldly. 'What man lives in celibacy? Consider that unmentionable fact, and then say whether I am wrong in refusing to forgive Miss Royston. Women's battle is not only against themselves. The necessity of the case demands what you call a strained ideal. I am seriously convinced that before the female sex can be raised from its low level there will have to be a widespread revolt against sexual instinct. Christianity couldn't spread

over the world without help of the ascetic ideal, and this great movement for woman's emancipation must also have its ascetics.'

'I can't declare that you are wrong in that. Who knows? But it isn't good policy to preach it to our young disciples.'

'I shall respect your wish; but—'

Rhoda paused and shook her head.

'My dear,' said the elder woman gravely, 'believe me that the less we talk or think about such things the better for the peace of us all. The odious fault of working-class girls, in town and country alike, is that they are absorbed in preoccupation with their animal nature. We, thanks to our education and the tone of our society, manage to keep that in the background. Don't interfere with this satisfactory state of things. Be content to show our girls that it is their duty to lead a life of effort—to earn their bread and to cultivate their minds. Simply ignore marriage—that's the wisest. Behave as if the thing didn't exist. You will do positive harm by taking the other course—the aggressive course.'

'I shall obey you.'

'Good, humble creature!' laughed Miss Barfoot. 'Come, let us be off to Chelsea. Did Miss Grey finish that copy for Mr. Houghton?'

'Yes, it has gone to post.'

'Look, here's a big manuscript from our friend the antiquary. Two of the girls must get to work on it at once in the morning.'

Manuscripts entrusted to them were kept in a fire-proof safe. When this had been locked up, the ladies went to their dressing-room and prepared for departure. The people who lived on the premises were responsible for cleaning the rooms and other care; to them Rhoda delivered the door-keys.

Miss Barfoot was grave and silent on the way home. Rhoda, annoyed at the subject that doubtless occupied her friend's thoughts, gave herself up to reflections of her own.

CHAPTER VII

A SOCIAL ADVANCE

A week's notice to her employers would release Monica from the engagement in Walworth Road. Such notice must be given on Monday, so that, if she could at once make up her mind to accept Miss Barfoot's offer, the coming week would be her last of slavery behind the counter. On the way home from Queen's Road, Alice and Virginia pressed for immediate decision; they were unable to comprehend how Monica could hesitate for another moment. The question of her place of abode had already been discussed. One of Miss Barfoot's young women, who lived at a convenient distance from Great Portland Street, would gladly accept a partner in her lodging—an arrangement to be recommended for its economy. Yet Monica shrank from speaking the final word.

'I don't know whether it's worth while,' she said, after a long silence, as they drew near to York Road Station, whence they were to take train for Clapham Junction.

'Not worth while?' exclaimed Virginia. 'You don't think it would be an improvement?'

'Yes, I suppose it would. I shall see how I feel about it tomorrow morning.'

She spent the evening at Lavender Hill, but without change in the mood thus indicated. A strange inquietude appeared in her behaviour. It was as though she were being urged to undertake something hard and repugnant.

On her return to Walworth Road, just as she came within sight of the shop, she observed a man's figure some twenty yards distant, which instantly held her attention. The dim gaslight occasioned some uncertainty, but she believed the figure was that of Widdowson. He was walking on the other side of the street, and away from her. When the man was exactly opposite Scotcher's establishment he gazed in that direction, but without stopping. Monica hastened, fearing to be seen and approached. Already she had reached the door, when Widdowson—yes, he it was—turned abruptly to walk back again. His eye was at once upon her; but whether he recognized her or not Monica could not know. At that moment she opened the door and passed in.

A fit of trembling seized her, as if she had barely escaped some peril. In the passage she stood motionless, listening with the intensity of dread. She could hear footsteps on the pavement; she expected a ring at the door-bell. If he were so thoughtless as to come to the door, she would on no account see him.

But there was no ring, and after a few minutes' waiting she recovered her self-command. She had not made a mistake; even his features had been discernible as he turned towards her. Was this the first time that he had come to look at the place where she lived—possibly to spy upon her? She resented this behaviour, yet the feeling was confused with a certain satisfaction.

From one of the dormitories there was a view of Walworth Road. She ran upstairs, softly opened the door of that room, and peeped in. The low burning gas showed her that only one bed had an occupant, who appeared to be asleep. Softly she went to the window, drew the blind aside, and looked down into the street. But Widdowson had disappeared. He might of course be on this side of the way.

'Who's that?' suddenly asked a voice from the occupied bed.

The speaker was Miss Eade. Monica looked at her, and nodded.

'You? What are you doing here?'

'I wanted to see if some one was standing outside.'

'You mean *him*?'

The other nodded.

'I've got a beastly headache. I couldn't hold myself up, and I had to come home at eight o'clock. There's such pains all down my back too. I shan't stay at this beastly place much longer. I don't want to

get ill, like Miss Radford. Somebody went to see her at the hospital this afternoon, and she's awfully bad. Well, have you seen him?'

'He's gone. Good-night.'

And Monica left the room.

Next day she notified her intention of leaving her employment. No questions were asked; she was of no particular importance; fifty, or, for the matter of that, five score, young women equally capable could be found to fill her place.

On Tuesday morning there came a letter from Virginia—a few lines requesting her to meet her sisters, as soon as possible after closing time that evening, in front of the shop. 'We have something *very delightful* to tell you. We *do hope* you gave notice to-day, as things are getting so bright in every direction.'

At a quarter to ten she was able to run out, and close at hand were the two eagerly awaiting her.

'Mrs. Darby has found a place for Alice,' began Virginia. 'We heard by the afternoon post yesterday. A lady at Yatton wants a governess for two young children. Isn't it fortunate?'

'So delightfully convenient for what we were thinking of,' put in the eldest, with her croaking voice. 'Nothing could have been better.'

'You mean about the school?' said Monica dreamily.

'Yes, the school,' Virginia replied, with trembling earnestness. 'Yatton is convenient both for Clevedon and Weston. Alice will be able to run over to both places and make enquiries, and ascertain where the best opening would be.'

Miss Nunn's suggestion, hitherto but timidly discussed, had taken hold upon their minds as soon as Alice received the practical call to her native region. Both were enthusiastic for the undertaking. It afforded them a novel subject of conversation, and inspirited them by seeming to restore their self-respect. After all, they might have a mission, a task in the world. They pictured themselves the heads of a respectable and thriving establishment, with subordinate teachers, with pleasant social relations; they felt young again, and capable of indefinite activity. Why had they not thought of this long ago? and thereupon they reverted to antistrophic laudation of Rhoda Nunn.

'Is it a good place?' their younger sister inquired.

'Oh, pretty good. Only twelve pounds a year, but nice people, Mrs. Darby says. They want me at once, and it is very likely that in a few weeks I shall go with them to the seaside.'

'What *could* have been better?' cried Virginia. 'Her health will be established, and in half a year, or less, we shall be able to come to a decision about the great step. Oh, and have you given notice, darling?'

'Yes, I have.'

Both clapped their hands like children. It was an odd little scene on the London pavement at ten o'clock at night; so intimately domestic amid surroundings the very antithesis of domesticity. Only a few yards away, a girl, to whom the pavement was a place of commerce, stood laughing with two men. The sound of her voice hinted to Monica the advisability of walking as they conversed, and they moved towards Walworth Road Station.

'We thought at first,' said Virginia, 'that when Alice had gone you might like to share my room; but then the distance from Great Portland Street would be a decided objection. I might move, but we doubt whether that would be worth while. It is so comfortable with Mrs. Conisbee, and for the short remaining time—Christmas, I should think, would be a very good time for opening. If it were possible to decide upon dear old Clevedon, of course we should prefer it; but perhaps Weston will offer more scope. Alice will weigh all the arguments on the spot. Don't you envy her, Monica? Think of being *there* in this summer weather!'

'Why don't you go as well?' Monica asked.

'I? And take lodgings, you mean? We never thought of that. But we still have to consider expenditure very seriously, you know. If possible, I must find employment for the rest of the year.'

Remember how very likely it is that Miss Nunn will have something to suggest for me. And when I think it will be of so much practical use for me to see her frequently for a few weeks. Already I have learnt so much from her and from Miss Barfoot. Their conversation is so encouraging. I feel that it is a training of the mind to be in contact with them.'

'Yes, I quite share that view,' said Alice, with tremulous earnestness. 'Virginia can reap much profit from intercourse with them. They have the new ideas in education, and it would be so good if our school began with the advantage of quite a modern system.'

Monica became silent. When her sisters had talked in the same strain for a quarter of an hour, she said absently,—

'I wrote to Miss Barfoot last night, so I suppose I shall be able to move to those lodgings next Sunday.'

It was eleven o'clock before they parted. Having taken leave of her sisters near the station, Monica turned to walk quickly home. She had gone about half the way, when her name was spoken just behind her, in Widdowson's voice. She stopped, and there stood the man, offering his hand.

'Why are you here at this time?' she asked in an unsteady voice.

'Not by chance. I had a hope that I might see you.'

He was gloomy, and looked at her searchingly.

'I mustn't wait to talk now, Mr. Widdowson. It's very late.'

'Very late indeed. It surprised me to see you.'

'Surprised you? Why should it?'

'I mean that it seemed so very unlikely—at this hour.'

'Then how could you have hoped to see me?'

Monica walked on, with an air of displeasure, and Widdowson kept beside her, incessantly eyeing her countenance.

'No, I didn't really think of seeing you, Miss Madden. I wished to be near the place where you were, that was all.'

'You saw me come out I dare say.'

'No.'

'If you had done, you would have known that I came to meet two ladies, my sisters. I walked with them to the station, and now I am going home. You seem to think an explanation necessary—'

'Do forgive me! What right have I to ask anything of the kind? But I have been very restless since Sunday. I wished so to meet you, if only for a few minutes. Only an hour or two ago I posted a letter to you.'

Monica said nothing.

'It was to ask you to meet me next Sunday, as we arranged. Shall you be able to do so?'

'I'm afraid I can't. At the end of this week I leave my place here, and on Sunday I shall be moving to another part of London.'

'You are leaving? You have decided to make the change you spoke of?'

'Yes.'

'And will you tell me where you are going to live?'

'In lodgings near Great Portland Street. I must say good-night, Mr. Widdowson. I must, indeed.'

'Please—do give me one moment!'

'I can't stay—I can't—good-night!'

It was impossible for him to detain her. Ungracefully he caught at his hat, made the salute, and moved away with rapid, uneven strides. In less than half an hour he was back again at this spot. He walked past the shop many times without pausing; his eyes devoured the front of the building, and noted those windows in which there was a glimmer of light. He saw girls enter by the private door, but Monica did not again show herself. Some time after midnight, when the house had long been dark and perfectly quiet, the uneasy man took a last look, and then sought a cab to convey him home.

The letter of which he had spoken reached Monica's hands next morning. It was a very respectful invitation to accompany the writer on a drive in Surrey. Widdowson proposed to meet her at Herne Hill railway station, where his vehicle would be waiting. 'In passing, I shall be able to point out to you the house which has been my home for about a year.'

As circumstances were, it would be hardly possible to accept this invitation without exciting curiosity in her sisters. The Sunday morning would be occupied, probably, in going to the new lodgings and making the acquaintance of her future companion there; in the afternoon, her sisters were to pay her a visit, as Alice had decided to start for Somerset on the Monday. She must write a refusal, but it was by no means her wish to discourage Widdowson altogether. The note which at length satisfied her ran thus:

'DEAR MR. WIDDOWSON—I am very sorry that it will be impossible for me to see you next Sunday. All day I shall be occupied. My eldest sister is leaving London, and Sunday will be my last day with her, perhaps for a long time. Please do not think that I make light of your kindness. When I am settled in my new life, I hope to be able to let you know how it suits me.—Sincerely yours,

MONICA MADDEN.'

In a postscript she mentioned her new address. It was written in very small characters—perhaps an unpurposed indication of the misgiving with which she allowed herself to pen the words.

Two days went by, and again a letter from Widdowson was delivered,

'DEAR MISS MADDEN—My chief purpose in writing again so soon is to apologize sincerely for my behaviour on Tuesday evening. It was quite unjustifiable. The best way of confessing my fault is to own that I had a foolish dislike of your walking in the streets unaccompanied at so late an hour. I believe that any man who had newly made your acquaintance, and had thought as much about you as I have, would have experienced the same feeling. The life which made it impossible for you to see friends at any other time of the day was so evidently unsuited to one of your refinement that I was made angry by the thought of it. Happily it is coming to an end, and I shall be greatly relieved when I know that you have left the house of business.

'You remember that we are to be friends. I should be much less than your friend if I did not desire for you a position very different from that which necessity forced upon you. Thank you very much for the promise to tell me how you like the new employment and your new friends. Shall you not henceforth be at leisure on other days besides Sunday? As you will now be near Regent's Park, perhaps I may hope to meet you there some evening before long. I would go any distance to see you and speak with you for only a few minutes.

'Do forgive my impertinence, and believe me, dear Miss Madden.— Ever yours,
EDMUND WIDDOWSON.'

Now this undoubtedly might be considered a love-letter, and it was the first of its kind that Monica had ever received. No man had ever written to her that he was willing to go 'any distance' for the reward of looking on her face. She read the composition many times, and with many thoughts. It did not enchant her; presently she felt it to be dull and prosy—anything but the ideal of a love-letter, even at this early stage.

The remarks concerning Widdowson made in the bedroom by the girl who fancied her asleep had greatly disturbed her conception of him. He was old, and looked still older to a casual eye. He had a stiff dry way, and already had begun to show how precise and exacting he could be. A year or two ago the image of such a man would have repelled her. She did not think it possible to regard him with warm feelings; yet, if he asked her to marry him—and that seemed likely to happen very soon—almost certainly her answer would be yes. Provided, of course, that all he had told her about himself could be in some satisfactory way confirmed.

Her acquaintance with him was an extraordinary thing. With what amazement and rapture would any one of her shop companions listen to the advances of a man who had six hundred a year! Yet Monica did not doubt his truthfulness and the honesty of his intentions. His life-story sounded

credible enough, and the very dryness of his manner inspired confidence. As things went in the marriage war, she might esteem herself a most fortunate young woman. It seemed that he had really fallen in love with her; he might prove a devoted husband. She felt no love in return; but between the prospect of a marriage of esteem and that of no marriage at all there was little room for hesitation. The chances were that she might never again receive an offer from a man whose social standing she could respect.

In the meantime there had come a civil little note from the girl whose rooms she was to share. 'Miss Barfoot has spoken of you so favourably that I did not think it necessary to see you before consenting to what she suggested. Perhaps she has told you that I have my own furniture; it is very plain, but, I think, comfortable. For the two rooms, with attendance, I pay eight and sixpence a week; my landlady will ask eleven shillings when there are two of us, so that your share would be five-and-six. I hope you won't think this is too much. I am a quiet and I think a very reasonable person.' The signature was 'Mildred H. Vesper.'

The day of release arrived. As it poured with rain all the morning, Monica the less regretted that she had been obliged to postpone her meeting with Widdowson. At breakfast-time she said good-bye to the three or four girls in whom she had any interest. Miss Eade was delighted to see her go. This rival finally out of the way, Mr. Bullivant might perchance turn his attention to the faithful admirer who remained.

She went by train to Great Portland Street, and thence by cab, with her two boxes, to Rutland Street, Hampstead Road—an uphill little street of small houses. When the cab stopped, the door of the house she sought at once opened, and on the threshold appeared a short, prim, plain-featured girl, who smiled a welcome.

'You are Miss Vesper?' Monica said, approaching her.

'Yes—very pleased to see you, Miss Madden. As London cabmen have a narrow view of their duties, I'll help you to get the boxes in.'

Monica liked the girl at once. Jehu condescending to hand down the luggage, they transferred it to the foot of the staircase, then, the fare having been paid, went up to the second floor, which was the top of the house. Miss Vesper's two rooms were very humble, but homely. She looked at Monica to remark the impression produced by them.

'Will it do?'

'Oh, very nicely indeed. After my quarters in Walworth Road! But I feel ashamed to intrude upon you.'

'I have been trying to find someone to share my rent,' said the other, with a simple frankness that was very agreeable. 'Miss Barfoot was full of your praises—and indeed I think we may suit each other.'

'I shall try to be as little disturbance to you as possible.'

'And I to you. The street is a very quiet one. Up above here is Cumberland Market; a hay and straw market. Quite pleasant odours—country odours—reach us on market day. I am country-bred; that's why I speak of such a trifle.'

'So am I,' said Monica. 'I come from Somerset.'

'And I from Hampshire. Do you know, I have a strong suspicion that all the really nice girls in London *are* country girls.'

Monica had to look at the speaker to be sure that this was said in pleasantry. Miss Vesper was fond of making dry little jokes in the gravest tone; only a twinkle of her eyes and a movement of her tight little lips betrayed her.

'Shall I ask the landlady to help me up with the luggage?'

'You are rather pale, Miss Madden. Better let me see to that. I have to go down to remind Mrs. Hocking to put salt into the saucepan with the potatoes. She cooks for me only on Sunday, and if I

didn't remind her every week she would boil the potatoes without salt. Such a state of mind is curious, but one ends by accepting it as a fact in nature.'

They joined in merry laughter. When Miss Vesper gave way to open mirth, she enjoyed it so thoroughly that it was a delight to look at her.

By the time dinner was over they were on excellent terms, and had exchanged a great deal of personal information. Mildred Vesper seemed to be one of the most contented of young women. She had sisters and brothers, whom she loved, all scattered about England in pursuit of a livelihood; it was rare for any two of them to see each other, but she spoke of this as quite in the order of things. For Miss Barfoot her respect was unbounded.

'She had made more of me than any one else could have done. When I first met her, three years ago, I was a simpleton; I thought myself ill-used because I had to work hard for next to no payment and live in solitude. Now I should be ashamed to complain of what falls to the lot of thousands of girls.'

'Do you like Miss Nunn?' asked Monica.

'Not so well as Miss Barfoot, but I think very highly of her. Her zeal makes her exaggerate a little now and then, but then the zeal is so splendid. I haven't it myself—not in that form.'

'You mean—'

'I mean that I feel a shameful delight when I hear of a girl getting married. It's very weak, no doubt; perhaps I shall improve as I grow older. But I have half a suspicion, do you know, that Miss Barfoot is not without the same weakness.'

Monica laughed, and spoke of something else. She was in good spirits; already her companion's view of life began to have an effect upon her; she thought of people and things in a more lightsome way, and was less disposed to commiserate herself.

The bedroom which both were to occupy might with advantage have been larger, but they knew that many girls of instinct no less delicate than their own had to endure far worse accommodation in London—where poverty pays for its sheltered breathing-space at so much a square foot. It was only of late that Miss Vesper had been able to buy furniture (four sovereigns it cost in all), and thus to allow herself the luxury of two rooms at the rent she previously paid for one. Miss Barfoot did not remunerate her workers on a philanthropic scale, but strictly in accordance with market prices; common sense dictated this principle. In talking over their arrangements, Monica decided to expend a few shillings on the purchase of a chair-bedstead for her own use.

'I often have nightmares,' she remarked, 'and kick a great deal. It wouldn't be nice to give you bruises.'

A week passed. Alice had written from Yatton, and in a cheerful tone. Virginia, chronically excited, had made calls at Rutland Street and at Queen's Road; she talked like one who had suddenly received a great illumination, and her zeal in the cause of independent womanhood rivalled Miss Nunn's. Without enthusiasm, but seemingly contented, Monica worked at the typewriting machine, and had begun certain studies which her friends judged to be useful. She experienced a growth of self-respect. It was much to have risen above the status of shop-girl, and the change of moral atmosphere had a very beneficial effect upon her.

Mildred Vesper was a studious little person, after a fashion of her own. She possessed four volumes of Maunder's 'Treasures', and to one or other of these she applied herself for at least an hour every evening.

'By nature,' she said, when Monica sought an explanation of this study, 'my mind is frivolous. What I need is a store of solid information, to reflect upon. No one could possibly have a worse memory, but by persevering I manage to learn one or two facts a day.'

Monica glanced at the books now and then, but had no desire to cultivate Maunder's acquaintance. Instead of reading, she meditated the problems of her own life.

Edmund Widdowson, of course, wrote to her at the new address. In her reply she again postponed their meeting. Whenever she went out in the evening, it was with expectation of seeing

him somewhere in the neighbourhood; she felt assured that he had long ago come to look at the house, and more likely than not his eyes had several times been upon her. That did not matter; her life was innocent, and Widdowson might watch her coming and going as much as he would.

At length, about nine o'clock one evening, she came face to face with him. It was in Hampstead Road; she had been buying at a draper's, and carried the little parcel. At the moment of recognition, Widdowson's face so flushed and brightened that Monica could not help a sympathetic feeling of pleasure.

'Why are you so cruel to me?' he said in a low voice, as she gave her hand. 'What a time since I saw you!'

'Is that really true?' she replied, with an air more resembling coquetry than any he had yet seen in her.

'Since I spoke to you, then.'

'When did you see me?'

'Three evenings ago. You were walking in Tottenham Court Road with a young lady.'

'Miss Vesper, the friend I live with.'

'Will you give me a few minutes now?' he asked humbly. 'Is it too late?'

For reply Monica moved slowly on. They turned up one of the ways parallel with Rutland Street, and so came into the quiet district that skirts Regent's Park, Widdowson talking all the way in a strain of all but avowed tenderness, his head bent towards her and his voice so much subdued that occasionally she lost a few words.

'I can't live without seeing you,' he said at length. 'If you refuse to meet me, I have no choice but to come wandering about the places where you are. Don't, pray don't think I spy upon you. Indeed, it is only just to see your face or your form as you walk along. When I have had my journey in vain I go back in misery. You are never out of my thoughts—never.'

'I am sorry for that, Mr. Widdowson.'

'Sorry? Are you really sorry? Do you think of me with less friendliness than when we had our evening on the river?'

'Oh, not with less friendliness. But if I only make you unhappy—'

'In one way unhappy, but as no one else ever had the power to. If you would let me meet you at certain times my restlessness would be at an end. The summer is going so quickly. Won't you come for that drive with me next Sunday? I will be waiting for you at any place you like to appoint. If you could imagine what joy it would give me!'

Presently Monica assented. If it were fine, she would be by the southeast entrance to Regent's Park at two o'clock. He thanked her with words of the most submissive gratitude, and then they parted.

The day proved doubtful, but she kept her appointment. Widdowson was on the spot with horse and trap. These were not, as he presently informed Monica, his own property, but hired from a livery stable, according to his custom.

'It won't rain,' he exclaimed, gazing at the sky. 'It *shan't* rain! These few hours are too precious to me.'

'It would be very awkward if it *did*,' Monica replied, in merry humour, as they drove along.

The sky threatened till sundown, but Widdowson was able to keep declaring that rain would not come. He took a south-westward course, crossed Waterloo Bridge, and thence by the highways made for Herne Hill. Monica observed that he made a short detour to avoid Walworth Road. She asked his reason.

'I hate the road!' Widdowson answered, with vehemence.

'You hate it?'

'Because you slaved and suffered there. If I had the power, I would destroy it—every house. Many a time,' he added, in a lower voice, 'when you were lying asleep, I walked up and down there in horrible misery.'

'Just because I had to stand at a counter?'

'Not only that. It wasn't fit for you to work in that way—but the people about you! I hated every face of man or woman that passed along the street.'

'I didn't like the society.'

'I should hope not. Of course, I know you didn't. Why did you ever come to such a place?'

There was severity rather than sympathy in his look.

'I was tired of the dull country life,' Monica replied frankly. 'And then I didn't know what the shops and the people were like.'

'Do you need a life of excitement?' he asked, with a sidelong glance.

'Excitement? No, but one must have change.'

When they reached Herne Hill, Widdowson became silent, and presently he allowed the horse to walk.

'That is my house, Miss Madden—the right-hand one.'

Monica looked, and saw two little villas, built together with stone facings, porches at the doors and ornamented gables.

'I only wanted to show it you,' he added quickly. 'There's nothing pretty or noticeable about it, and it isn't at all grandly furnished. My old housekeeper and one servant manage to keep it in order.'

They passed, and Monica did not allow herself to look back.

'I think it's a nice house,' she said presently.

'All my life I have wished to have a house of my own, but I didn't dare to hope I ever should. Men in general don't seem to care so long as they have lodgings that suit them—I mean unmarried men. But I always wanted to live alone—without strangers, that is to say. I told you that I am not very sociable. When I got my house, I was like a child with a toy; I couldn't sleep for satisfaction. I used to walk all over it, day after day, before it was furnished. There was something that delighted me in the sound of my footsteps on the staircases and the bare floors. Here I shall live and die, I kept saying to myself. Not in solitude, I hoped. Perhaps I might meet some one—'

Monica interrupted him to ask a question about some object in the landscape. He answered her very briefly, and for a long time neither spoke. Then the girl, glancing at him with a smile of apology, said in a gentle tone—

'You were telling me how the house pleased you. Have you still the same pleasure in living there?'

'Yes. But lately I have been hoping—I daren't say more. You will interrupt me again.'

'Which way are we going now, Mr. Widdowson?'

'To Streatham, then on to Carshalton. At five o'clock we will use our right as travellers, and get some innkeeper to make tea for us. Look, the sun is trying to break through; we shall have a fine evening yet. May I, without rudeness, say that you look better since you left that abominable place.'

'Oh, I feel better.'

After keeping his look fixed for a long time on the horse's ears, Widdowson turned gravely to his companion.

'I told you about my sister-in-law. Would you be willing to make her acquaintance?'

'I don't feel able to do that, Mr. Widdowson,' Monica answered with decision.

Prepared for this reply, he began a long and urgent persuasion. It was useless; Monica listened quietly, but without sign of yielding. The subject dropped, and they talked of indifferent things.

On the homeward drive, when the dull sky grew dusk about them, and the suburban street-lamps began to show themselves in long glimmering lines, Widdowson returned with shamefaced courage to the subject which for some hours had been in abeyance.

'I can't part from you this evening without a word of hope to remember. You know that I want you to be my wife. Will you tell me if there is anything I can say or do to make your consent possible? Have you any doubt of me?'

'No doubt whatever of your sincerity.'

'In one sense, I am still a stranger to you. Will you give me the opportunity of making things between us more regular? Will you allow me to meet some friend of yours whom you trust?'

'I had rather you didn't yet.'

'You wish to know still more of me, personally?'

'Yes—I think I must know you much better before I can consent to any step of that kind.'

'But,' he urged, 'if we became acquaintances in the ordinary way, and knew each other's friends, wouldn't that be most satisfactory to you?'

'It might be. But you forget that so much would have to be explained. I have behaved very strangely. If I told everything to my friends I should leave myself no choice.'

'Oh, why not? You would be absolutely free. I could no more than try to recommend myself to you. If I am so unhappy as to fail, how would you be anything but quite free?'

'But surely you must understand me. In this position, I must either not speak of you at all, or make it known that I am engaged to you. I can't have it taken for granted that I am engaged to you when I don't wish to be.'

Widdowson's head drooped; he set his lips in a hard gloomy expression.

'I have behaved very imprudently,' continued the girl. But I don't see—I can't see—what else I could have done. Things are so badly arranged. It wasn't possible for us to be introduced by any one who knew us both, so I had either to break off your acquaintance after that first conversation, or conduct myself as I have been doing. I think it's a very hard position. My sisters would call me an immodest girl, but I don't think it is true. I may perhaps come to feel you as a girl ought to when she marries, and how else can I tell unless I meet you and talk with you? And your position is just the same. I don't blame you for a moment; I think it would be ridiculous to blame you. Yet we have gone against the ordinary rule, and people would make us suffer for it—or me, at all events.

Her voice at the close was uncertain. Widdowson looked at her with eyes of passionate admiration.

'Thank you for saying that—for putting it so well, and so kindly for me. Let us disregard people, then. Let us go on seeing each other. I love you with all my soul'—he choked a little at this first utterance of the solemn word—'and your rules shall be mine. Give me a chance of winning you. Tell me if I offend you in anything—if there's anything you dislike in me.'

'Will you cease coming to look for me when I don't know of it?'

'I promise you. I will never come again. And you will meet me a little oftener?'

'I will see you once every week. But I must still be perfectly free.'

'Perfectly! I will only try to win you as any man may who loves a woman.'

The tired horse clattered upon the hard highway and clouds gathered for a night of storm.

CHAPTER VIII

COUSIN EVERARD

As Miss Barfoot's eye fell on the letters brought to her at breakfast-time, she uttered an exclamation, doubtful in its significance. Rhoda Nunn, who rarely had a letter from any one, looked up inquiringly.

'I am greatly mistaken if that isn't my cousin Everard's writing. I thought so. He is in London.'

Rhoda made no remark.

'Pray read it,' said the other, handing her friend the epistle after she had gone through it.

The handwriting was remarkably bold, but careful. Punctuation was strictly attended to, and in places a word had been obliterated with a circular scrawl which left it still legible.

'DEAR COUSIN MARY,—I hear that you are still active in an original way, and that civilization is more and more indebted to you. Since my arrival in London a few weeks ago, I have several times been on the point of calling at your house, but scruples withheld me. Our last interview was not quite friendly on your side, you will remember, and perhaps your failure to write to me means continued displeasure; in that case I might be rejected at your door, which I shouldn't like, for I am troubled with a foolish sense of personal dignity. I have taken a flat, and mean to stay in London for at least half a year. Please let me know whether I may see you. Indeed I should like to. Nature meant us for good friends, but prejudice came between us. Just a line, either of welcome or "get thee behind me!" In spite of your censures, I always was, and still am, affectionately yours,

EVERARD BARFOOT.'

Rhoda perused the sheet very attentively.

'An impudent letter,' said Miss Barfoot. 'Just like him.'

'Where does he appear from?'

'Japan, I suppose. "But prejudice came between us." I like that! Moral conviction is always prejudice in the eyes of these advanced young men. Of course he must come. I am anxious to see what time has made of him.'

'Was it really moral censure that kept you from writing to him?' inquired Rhoda, with a smile.

'Decidedly. I didn't approve of him at all, as I have frequently told you.'

'But I gather that he hasn't changed much.'

'Not in theories,' replied Miss Barfoot. 'That isn't to be expected. He is far too stubborn. But in mode of life he may possibly be more tolerable.'

'After two or three years in Japan,' rejoined Rhoda, with a slight raising of the eyebrows.

'He is about three-and-thirty, and before he left England I think he showed possibilities of future wisdom. Of course I disapprove of him, and, if necessary, shall let him understand that quite as plainly as before. But there's no harm in seeing if he has learnt to behave himself.'

Everard Barfoot received an invitation to dine. It was promptly accepted, and on the evening of the appointment he arrived at half-past seven. His cousin sat alone in the drawing-room. At his entrance she regarded him with keen but friendly scrutiny.

He had a tall, muscular frame, and a head of striking outline, with large nose, full lips, deep-set eyes, and prominent eyebrows. His hair was the richest tone of chestnut; his moustache and beard—the latter peaking slightly forward—inclined to redness. Excellent health manifested itself in the warm purity of his skin, in his cheerful aspect, and the lightness of his bearing. The lower half of his forehead was wrinkled, and when he did not fix his look on anything in particular, his eyelids drooped, giving him for the moment an air of languor. On sitting down, he at once abandoned himself to a posture of the completest ease, which his admirable proportions made graceful. From his appearance one would have expected him to speak in rather loud and decided tones; but he had a soft voice, and

used it with all the discretion of good-breeding, so that at times it seemed to caress the ear. To this mode of utterance corresponded his smile, which was frequent, but restrained to the expression of a delicate, good-natured irony.

'No one had told me of your return,' were Miss Barfoot's first words as she shook hands with him.

'I fancy because no one knew. You were the first of my kinsfolk to whom I wrote.'

'Much honour, Everard. You look very well.'

'I am glad to be able to say the same of you. And yet I hear that you work harder than ever.'

'Who is the source of your information about me?'

'I had an account of you from Tom, in a letter that caught me at Constantinople.'

'Tom? I thought he had forgotten my existence. Who told him about me I can't imagine. So you didn't come straight home from Japan?'

Barfoot was nursing his knee, his head thrown back.

'No; I loitered a little in Egypt and Turkey. Are you living quite alone?'

He drawled slightly on the last word, its second vowel making quite a musical note, of wonderful expressiveness. The clear decision of his cousin's reply was a sharp contrast.

'A lady lives with me—Miss Nunn. She will join us in a moment.'

'Miss Nunn?' He smiled. 'A partner in your activity?'

'She gives me valuable help.'

'I must hear all about it—if you will kindly tell me some day. It will interest me greatly. You always were the most interesting of our family. Brother Tom promised to be a genius, but marriage has blighted the hope, I fear.'

'The marriage was a very absurd one.'

'Was it? I feared so; but Tom seems satisfied. I suppose they will stay at Madeira.'

'Until his wife is tired of her imaginary phthisis, and amuses herself with imagining some other ailment that requires them to go to Siberia.'

'Ah, that kind of person, is she?' He smiled indulgently, and played for a moment with the lobe of his right ear. His ears were small, and of the ideal contour; the hand, too, thus displayed, was a fine example of blended strength and elegance.

Rhoda came in, so quietly that she was able to observe the guest before he had detected her presence. The movement of Miss Barfoot's eyes first informed him that another person was in the room. In the quietest possible way the introduction was performed, and all seated themselves.

Dressed, like the hostess, in black, and without ornaments of any kind save a silver buckle at her waist, Rhoda seemed to have endeavoured to liken herself to the suggestion of her name by the excessive plainness with which she had arranged her hair; its tight smoothness was nothing like so becoming as the mode she usually adopted, and it made her look older. Whether by accident or design, she took an upright chair, and sat upon it in a stiff attitude. Finding it difficult to suspect Rhoda of shyness, Miss Barfoot once or twice glanced at her with curiosity. For settled conversation there was no time; a servant announced dinner almost immediately.

'There shall be no forms, cousin Everard,' said the hostess. 'Please to follow us.'

Doing so, Everard examined Miss Nunn's figure, which in its way was strong and shapely as his own. A motion of his lips indicated amused approval, but at once he commanded himself, and entered the dining-room with exemplary gravity. Naturally, he sat opposite Rhoda, and his eyes often skimmed her face; when she spoke, which was very seldom, he gazed at her with close attention.

During the first part of the meal, Miss Barfoot questioned her relative concerning his Oriental experiences. Everard spoke of them in a light, agreeable way, avoiding the tone of instruction, and, in short, giving evidence of good taste. Rhoda listened with a look of civil interest, but asked no question, and smiled only when it was unavoidable. Presently the talk turned to things of home.

'Have you heard of your friend Mr. Poppleton?' the hostess asked.

'Poppleton? Nothing whatever. I should like to see him.'

'I'm sorry to tell you he is in a lunatic asylum.'

As Barfoot kept the silence of astonishment, his cousin went on to tell him that the unhappy man seemed to have lost his wits among business troubles.

'Yet I should have suggested another explanation,' remarked the young man, in his most discreet tone, 'You never met Mrs. Poppleton?'

Seeing that Miss Nunn had looked up with interest, he addressed himself to her.

'My friend Poppleton was one of the most delightful men—perhaps the best and kindest I ever knew, and so overflowing with natural wit and humour that there was no resisting his cheerful influence. To the amazement of every one who knew him, he married perhaps the dullest woman he could have found. Mrs. Poppleton not only never made a joke, but couldn't understand what joking meant. Only the flattest literalism was intelligible to her; she could follow nothing but the very macadam of conversation—had no palate for anything but the suet-pudding of talk.'

Rhoda's eyes twinkled, and Miss Barfoot laughed. Everard was allowing himself a freedom in expression which hitherto he had sedulously avoided.

'Yes,' he continued, 'she was by birth a lady—which made the infliction harder to bear. Poor old Poppleton! Again and again I have heard him—what do you think?—laboriously *explaining* jests to her. That was a trial, as you may imagine. There we sat, we three, in the unbeautiful little parlour—for they were anything but rich. Poppleton would say something that convulsed me with laughter—in spite of my efforts, for I always dreaded the result so much that I strove my hardest to do no more than smile appreciation. My laugh compelled Mrs. Poppleton to stare at me—oh, her eyes! Thereupon, her husband began his dread performance. The patience, the heroic patience, of that dear, good fellow! I have known him explain, and re-explain, for a quarter of an hour, and invariably without success. It might be a mere pun; Mrs. Poppleton no more understood the nature of a pun than of the binomial theorem. But worse was when the jest involved some allusion. When I heard Poppleton begin to elucidate, to expound, the perspiration already on his forehead, I looked at him with imploring anguish. Why *would* he attempt the impossible? But the kind fellow couldn't disregard his wife's request. Shall I ever forget her. "Oh—yes—I see"—when obviously she saw nothing but the wall at which she sat staring.'

'I have known her like,' said Miss Barfoot merrily.

'I am convinced his madness didn't come from business anxiety. It was the necessity, ever recurring, ever before him, of expounding jokes to his wife. Believe me, it was nothing but that.'

'It seems very probable,' asserted Rhoda dryly.

'Then there's another friend of yours whose marriage has been unfortunate,' said the hostess. 'They tell me that Mr. Orchard has forsaken his wife, and without intelligible reason.'

'There, too, I can offer an explanation,' replied Barfoot quietly, 'though you may doubt whether it justifies him. I met Orchard a few months ago in Alexandria, met him by chance in the street, and didn't recognize him until he spoke to me. He was worn to skin and bone. I found that he had abandoned all his possessions to Mrs. Orchard, and just kept himself alive on casual work for the magazines, wandering about the shores of the Mediterranean like an uneasy spirit. He showed me the thing he had last written, and I see it is published in this month's *Macmillan*. Do read it. An exquisite description of a night in Alexandria. One of these days he will starve to death. A pity; he might have done fine work.'

'But we await your explanation. What business has he to desert his wife and children?'

'Let me give an account of a day I spent with him at Tintern, not long before I left England. He and his wife were having a holiday there, and I called on them. We went to walk about the Abbey. Now, for some two hours—I will be strictly truthful—whilst we were in the midst of that lovely scenery, Mrs. Orchard discoursed unceasingly of one subject—the difficulty she had with her domestic servants. Ten or twelve of these handmaidens were marshalled before our imagination; their

names, their ages, their antecedents, the wages they received, were carefully specified. We listened to a *catalogue raisonne* of the plates, cups, and other utensils that they had broken. We heard of the enormities which in each case led to their dismissal. Orchard tried repeatedly to change the subject, but only with the effect of irritating his wife. What could he or I do but patiently give ear? Our walk was ruined, but there was no help for it. Now, be good enough to extend this kind of thing over a number of years. Picture Orchard sitting down in his home to literary work, and liable at any moment to an invasion from Mrs. Orchard, who comes to tell him, at great length, that the butcher has charged for a joint they have not consumed—or something of that kind. He assured me that his choice lay between flight and suicide, and I firmly believed him.'

As he concluded, his eyes met those of Miss Nunn, and the latter suddenly spoke.

'Why will men marry fools?'

Barfoot was startled. He looked down into his plate, smiling.

'A most sensible question,' said the hostess, with a laugh. 'Why, indeed?'

'But a difficult one to answer,' remarked Everard, with his most restrained smile. 'Possibly, Miss Nunn, narrow social opportunity has something to do with it. They must marry some one, and in the case of most men choice is seriously restricted.'

'I should have thought,' replied Rhoda, elevating her eyebrows, 'that to live alone was the less of two evils.'

'Undoubtedly. But men like these two we have been speaking of haven't a very logical mind.'

Miss Barfoot changed the topic.

When, not long after, the ladies left him to meditate over his glass of wine, Everard curiously surveyed the room. Then his eyelids drooped, he smiled absently, and a calm sigh seemed to relieve his chest. The claret had no particular quality to recommend it, and in any case he would have drunk very little, for as regards the bottle his nature was abstemious.

'It is as I expected,' Miss Barfoot was saying to her friend in the drawing-room. 'He has changed very noticeably.'

'Mr. Barfoot isn't quite the man your remarks had suggested to me,' Rhoda replied.

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