THE LITTLE VANITIES OF MRS WHITTAKER

The Little Vanities of Mrs Whittaker

A Novel

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CHAPTER I

REGINA BROWN

There are many who think that the unfamiliar is best.

To begin my story properly, I must go back to the time when the Empress Eugenie had not started the vogue of the crinoline, when the Indian Mutiny had not stained the pages of history, and the Crimean War was as yet but a cloud the size of a man's hand on the horizon of the world—that is to say, to the very early fifties.

It was then that a little girl-child was born into the world, a little girl who was called by the name of Regina, and whose father and mother bore the homely appellation of Mr and Mrs Brown; yes, plain, simple and homely Brown, without even so much as an "e" placed at the tail thereof to give it a distinction from all the other Browns.

So far as I have ever heard, the young childhood of Regina Brown was passed in quite an ordinary and conventional atmosphere. Her parents were well-meaning, honest, kindly, well-disposed, middle-class persons. According to their lights they educated their daughter extremely well; that is to say, she was sent to a genteel seminary, she was always nicely dressed, and she wore her hair in ringlets.

This state of things continued, without any particular change, until Regina was nearly twenty years old. By that time the great Franco-Prussian War had beaten itself into peace, the horrors of the Commune of Paris had come and gone, and the sun of Regina Brown's twentieth birthday rose upon a world in which nations had come once more, at least to outward seeming, to the conclusion that all men are brothers. It might have been some long-forgotten echo from the early days when France and England fought against Russia, or it might have been in a measure owing to the conflict, so long, so deadly and so bloody, between France and Germany, but certain is it that, when Regina Brown realised that she was twenty years old, she came to the conclusion that she was leading a wasted life.

If the period in which she lived had been that of to-day, I think Regina Brown would have entered herself at any hospital that would have accepted her and would have trained for a nurse; but, in the early seventies, nursing was not, as now, the almost regulation answer to the question, "What shall we do with our girls?"

"What shall I do with my life?" she said, looking in the modest little glass which swung above her toilet-table. "What shall I do with my life? Live here, pandering to my father and mother, listening to my father's accounts of how some man at the club wagered a shilling on a matter which could make no difference to anyone; hearing mother's elaborate account of the delinquencies of Charlotte Ann, who really is not such a bad girl, after all. I can't go on like this—I can't bear it any longer. It's a waste of life; it's a waste of a strong, capable, original brain. I must get out into the world and do something."

In the course of life one comes across so many people who are always yearning to go out into the world and do something, but Regina Brown was not a young woman who could or would content herself with mere yearning. With her to think was to do. With her a resolve was a fact practically accomplished.

"I will go in for the higher education," she said to herself. "What do I know now? I can dance a little, play a little, paint a little. I know no useful things. My mother sews my clothes and makes my underlinen; my mother orders the dinner, and never will entrust the making of the pastry to any hand but her own. What is there left for me? Nothing! I must go out into the world. There is only one line in which I am likely to make success, and I am not the class of woman who makes for failure. I will become a great teacher. To become a great teacher, I must qualify myself. I must work, and work hard. I

must enter at some regular school of learning, or, failing that, I must find a first-class tutor to work with me."

Eventually Regina Brown adopted the latter course. As a matter of fact, she was not sufficiently advanced in any branch of education to enter at any school of learning which admitted women to its curriculum. To Regina it mattered little or nothing. For the next ten years she lived in an atmosphere of hard learning. She proved herself a worker of no mean ability. She passed all manner of examinations, she took numberless degrees, and on the day on which she was thirty years old, she found herself once more gazing at her face in the glass and wondering what she was going to do with the knowledge that she had so laboriously acquired.

"Regina Brown," she said to herself, "you are no nearer to becoming a great teacher than you were ten years ago this very day. Will anyone ever put you in charge of a high school? Will anyone give you a responsible post in any of the spheres where women can prove that they are the equals, and more than the equals, of men? It is very doubtful. You know much, but you have no influence. Ten years ago today, Regina Brown, you told yourself that your mode of existence was a waste of life. Well, you are wasting your life still. The best thing you can do, Regina Brown, is to get yourself married."

So Regina Brown got herself married.

Now, to put such an action in those words is not a romantic way of describing the most—or what should be the most—romantic episode of a woman's

life; but I use Regina's own words, and I say that she got herself married.

She was not wholly unattractive. She had a pinky skin and frank grey eyes, but her figure was of the pincushion order, and much study had done away with that lissomness which is one of the most attractive attributes of womankind. Her hands were white, strong, determined; white because they were mostly occupied about books and papers, strong because she herself was strong, and determined because it was her nature to be so. Her feet, frankly speaking, were large. She was a young woman who sat solidly on a solid chair, and looked thoroughly in place. Her features otherwise were neither bad nor good, and I think she was probably one of the worst dressers that the world has ever seen. It was no uncommon thing for Regina Brown to wear a salmon-pink ribbon twisted about her ample waist, and to crown her toilet with a covering of turquoise blue.

It was about this time that Regina received a valentine—the first in her life. She held it sacred from any eye but her own, in fact she put it into the fire before any of the family had time te see it. The words ran thus:—

"Regina Brown, Regina Brown,
You think yourself a beauty;
In pink and green
And yellow sheen
You go to do your duty.

Regina Brown, Regina Brown,
Whenever will you learn

That pink and green
And golden sheen
Are colours you should spurn?

Regina Brown, Regina Brown,
Take lesson from the lily,
A lesson meek,
Not far to seek,
'Twill keep you from being silly!"

I cannot with truth say that the valentine did Regina the smallest amount of good. You know, my gentle reader, if we only look at things the right way, we can find good in everything. As some poet has beautifully put it in a couplet about sermons in stones and running brooks—"And good in everything," Regina might even have found good out of that malicious and spiteful valentine with its excellent likeness, done in water colours, of herself clad in weird and wonderful garments, the like of which even she had never attempted. But Regina consigned it to the flames, and went on her way precisely as she had done before, for Regina was a woman of strong nature and settled convictions. I give you this piece of information because you will find by the story which I shall tell and you will read, that this curious dominance of nature proved to be one of the mainsprings of this remarkable character.

So Regina went on her way and she got married. I don't say that it was a brilliant alliance—by no means. The man was young, younger than Regina. He was weak-looking and pretty, of a pink-and-white, wax-doll type, with shining fair hair and rather watery blue eyes. To his weakness Regina's dominant nature

strongly appealed; perhaps, also, in some measure the fact that she was the sole child of her father's house, and that her father lived upon his means, and described himself as "gentleman" in the various papers connected with the politics of his country which from time to time reached him. Be that as it may, an engagement came about between Regina Brown and this young man, who was "something in the city" and who rejoiced in the name of Alfred Whittaker.

I must confess that it was somewhat of a shock to Regina when she found that among his fellows—young, vapid, rather raffish young men—he was known by the abbreviative of "Alf."

"Dearest," she said to him one day, after this unpalatable information had come to her, "I noticed that your friend, Mr Fitzsimmons, called you 'Alf' last night."

"Yes, the fellows mostly do," he replied.

"But you were not called Alf at home, dearest," said Regina.

She laid her substantial hand upon his arm and looked at him yearningly.

"My mother and my sisters always called me Alfie," said he, returning the gaze with interest, for he admired Regina with an admiration which was wholly genuine.

"I really couldn't call you Alfie," she said.

"I don't see why you couldn't, Regina," he replied. "It seems to me such an awful thing for people who love one another to be saying 'Regina' and 'Alfred.' There is something so chilly about it. Did your people never call you by a pet name?"

"Never," said Regina.

"I should like to," said Alfred, still more yearningly.

"If you can think of a pet name that will not be derogatory to my dignity—" Regina began, when the weak and weedy Alfred insinuated an arm about her ample waist and drew her nearer to him.

Without some effort on the part of Regina Brown, I doubt if his intention could have been carried into effect, but Regina yielded herself to his tenderness with a shy coyness which was sufficiently marked to have merited even the pet name of Tiny.

"What would you like me to call you—Alfred?" she asked, with the faintest possible pause before the last word.

"Call me Alfie," said he in manly and imperative tones.

"Dear Alfie!" said Regina.

"Darling!" said Alfie.

"You couldn't call me darling as a name," said Regina, coyly.

"I shall always call you darling," he gurgled. "But I should like, as a name, to call you Queenie."

"You shall call me Anna Maria Stubbs if you like," said Regina, with a sudden surrender of her dignity.

And forthwith, from that moment, between themselves she was known no longer by her regal name, but sank into a state of hopeless adoration, and was called Queenie.

CHAPTER II

MRS ALFRED WHITTAKER

It is curious how the possession of humble things satisfies the souls of naturally ambitious people.

In due course Regina Brown merged her identity into that of Mrs Alfred Whittaker.

They were not married in a hurry. Regina had come of old-fashioned people, who held firmly to the belief that courting time is the sweetest of a woman's life; that it is good for man to look and long for the woman of his heart, and for woman to be coy and to hold him who will eventually become her liege lord at arm's length for a suitable period. To people of the Brown, and indeed of the Whittaker class, there is something in a short engagement and a hurried-on marriage which borders almost upon immodesty.

"We won't be engaged very long," said Alfred, when he had been made the happiest man in the world for nearly six weeks.

"No, not long," returned Regina. "My father and mother were engaged for seven years."

"Good God!" exclaimed Alfred, who was somewhat given to strong language, as many weak men are. "Good God, Regina, you have taken my breath away!"

"I wasn't proposing to be engaged to *you* for seven years, Alfie dear," she said to him, with an indulgent air. "Oh no. I always thought that father and mother made such a mistake, although you couldn't get mother to own it."

"I should think so, indeed. Seven years! Seven months is nearer my idea of the proper time for being engaged."

"Seven months? Oh, that would be too soon. I couldn't possibly get my things ready."

"Oh, *things*," said he, with a manly disregard of chiffons which appealed to Regina as nothing else would have done.

"I must have things, Alfie."

"Yes, darling, I know you must. And I don't say that a good start-out wouldn't be very useful to us; but you won't spin it out too long, will you?"

"I never was brought up to sew," said Regina. "I am learning now."

"Can't you buy 'em ready-made?"

"They don't last," said Regina. "And mother's idea of the trousseau is to give me three dozen of everything. And they've all got to be made. I'm sewing white seams now, although I can't cut out and plan. Look at my finger."

He possessed himself of the firm, strong, first finger of his *fiancée's* left hand and kissed it rapturously. "Poor little finger," said he, "poor dear little finger! Can't you have people in to do the things?"

"I am afraid that would go against mother's ideas," Regina returned, "but I'll sound her on the point."

Eventually Regina Brown's three dozen of everything were got together, neatly folded, and tied up in half-dozens with delicate shades of ribbon, and the wedding day was fixed to take place just fourteen months after the engagement had come about.

The bride's parents came down handsomely on the occasion. It was a great event, that wedding. Eight bridesmaids, four in pink and four in blue, followed Regina to the altar. Regina herself was dressed as a bride in a shiny white silk, with a voluminous veil. There was a large company, and much flying to and fro of hired carriages—mostly with white horses—distributing of favours, and a popping of champagne corks, when all was over and the two had been made man and wife. And then there was a heart-broken parting, when Regina was torn away from the ample bosom of her adoring mother, and a wild shower of rice and satin slippers, such as strewed the road before the Brown domicile for many days after the wedding was over.

So Regina Brown became Mrs Alfred Whittaker, and her place in her father's house knew her no more.

All things considered, she made an admirable wife. If Alfred adored Regina, Regina worshipped Alfred, and under her care, and in the sunshine of her lavish and outspoken admiration of his personal beauty, he grew sleek and prosperous.

If only a son had been born to them, a little son who would have carried on the traditions of both families, who could have been called Brown-Whittaker, and gladdened the hearts of three

separate households. But no son came—never a sign of a son. On the contrary, about a year after their marriage a little daughter arrived on the scene, who was welcomed as a precursor of the unborn Brown-Whittaker, and was named Maud. And little Maud Whittaker grew and throve apace, went through the usual early infantile troubles, and, about two years later, the process which is known among domestic people as having her nose put out of joint.

And again it was a girl.

For some reason not explained to the whole world, the second baby was christened Julia, and forthwith became a very important item of the Whittaker family.

"The next one *must* be a boy," said Mrs Alfred Whittaker, as she cuddled the new arrival to her side.

But there never was a next one, and slowly, as the second baby got through her troubles and began to toddle about and to play games with her sister, the truth was borne in upon her parents that what Maud had begun Julia had finished—that no boy would come to gladden the hearts of the Whittaker and Brown households, that no little Brown-Whittaker would ever make history.

Well, it was when Julia Whittaker was about six years old that her mother's mind underwent a curious change. She was then just forty years old, a fine, buxom, healthy woman, a good deal given to looking upon the rest of the world with a superior eye, to feeling that whereas the other married ladies of her set had been content with the genteel education of a

private seminary, she had gone further and had received the wide-minded and broad education of a professional man.

It was true enough. There was no subject on which Mrs Alfred Whittaker was not able to demonstrate an exceedingly pronounced and autocratic opinion. She seldom wasted her time, even after her marriage, in reading what she called trash, and other people spoke of as a "circulating library." Deep thoughts filled her mind, great questions entranced her interest, and high views dominated her life. She was keen on politics of the most Radical order. She had sifted religion, and found it wanting. She was an advanced Socialist—in her views, that is to say—and deep down in her heart, although as yet it had never found expression, was an innate admiration of men and an equal contempt for women. She felt, and often she said, that she had a man's mind in an extremely feminine body.

"I cannot," she declared one day, when discussing a great social question with a clever friend of Alfred's, "shut my eyes to the fact that I do not look on a question of this kind as an ordinary woman would. An ordinary woman jumps to conclusions without knowing why or wherefore. I, on the contrary, have a clear and logical mind, which gets me perhaps to the same goal by a clear and definite process of reasoning. We may come from the same, and we may arrive at the same, and yet we are so different that neither has any sympathy with the other."

And out of this conversation there arose in Regina

Whittaker's mind an idea that, after all, another decade had gone by, and she was still wasting her life.

"I asked myself a question at twenty," her thoughts ran. "I asked it again at thirty, and now I have touched my fortieth birthday, here I am asking it yet once more. I have fulfilled the functions of wife and mother, and nothing else. Yet I am an extraordinary woman, far out of the common in intelligence, brain power, logic, and in all mental attributes. It only shows me that the time is not yet ripe for woman to become the equal of man. It is not the fault of the woman. Through many generations—nay, hundreds of years—she has been kept ignorant, inefficient, downtrodden by her lord and master. She has been used as a toy, and her one mission in life has been a mere function of nature—the reproduction of the race. It makes me savage," she went on, talking to herself, "when I hear it cited as an immense work that a woman has produced so many babies. How many, I wonder, have produced those babies with any love of duty, poor feeble souls? After all, there is so little duty about it, and no choice midway. Well, here am I, who should be in a big position in the world, I who should have made myself a name, I who could have put George Eliot and all her set in the shade. I have absolutely wasted my life. I suppose I began too late. I am out of the common, but I do not rank as a woman out of the common. Still, I have daughters. From this moment I dedicate my life to my little Maud and Julia. They shall not begin their mission in the

world too late. I would rather have been the mother of boys, but as I have proved to be only the mother of girls, I will try to make those girls what I have missed being myself. They shall be out of the common; they shall belong to the New Womanhood; they shall be brought up at least to be the equals of men."

Now by this time the "something in the city" on which Regina and Alfred had started housekeeping had resolved itself into a very solid and prosperous position, though Alfred Whittaker—make no mistake about it—was not, and was never likely to be, a millionaire, or even a very wealthy man. But he was prosperous in a comfortable, assured, middle-class way. He was ambitious too—I mean socially ambitious—and he liked to feel that his wife was in a good set in the suburb in which they lived. He liked to go to church occasionally, and to have his own seat when he did so. He liked his rector to come to him as an open-handed, clean-living man on whom he could depend for contributions suitable to his style of living. He liked to be able to take his wife to a theatre, and to dine her beforehand, and to give her a bit of supper afterwards. He liked to go to the seaside for August, and to take a trip to Paris at Easter if he was so inclined. And, above all things, Alfred Whittaker liked a good dinner, a pretty, tasteful table, and a neat handmaiden to wait upon him. To do him justice, he never lost his early admiration for Regina. It was wonderful that he had not done so, for with her improved circumstances and her improved

position, Regina's taste in dress had not advanced. Sometimes, on a birthday, or some anniversary kept religiously by them, such as their day of engagement, their wedding day, the day on which they first met, the day on which they moved into the house they occupied—such domestic altars as most of us erect during the course of our lives—he would bring her home a present of a bonnet. He called it a bonnet, but it was generally a hat. Alfred always called it a bonnet nevertheless, and Regina invariably accepted it with gushes of admiration, and wore it with what, in another woman, would have been the courage of a martyr. It was no martyrdom to Regina. I have seen her with all her fair hair turned back from her large face, crowned with a *modiste's* edifice which would have proved trying to a lovely girl of eighteen.

"You like my hat?" said Regina, one day to a friend. "Isn't it lovely? Dear Alfie brought it for me from town. I believe he sent to Paris for it. It has a French name in the crown. Much more extravagant than I should have got for myself—these white feathers won't wear, and all this lovely sky-blue velvet and these delicate pearl ornaments are far beyond what I should have chosen on my own responsibility. But I can't help seeing how it becomes me."

"Why don't you have a waistcoat of the same colour—a front, you know—this part?" asked her friend, making a line from her throat to her belt buckle.

"There is a sameness about the idea," said Regina,

superbly. "I have always flattered myself, Mrs Marston, that I am one of the few women who can bear to mix her colours. You remember the old story of the young man who asked Sir Joshua Reynolds what he mixed his colours with, and his reply—'Brains, sir, brains.'"

CHAPTER III

YE DENE

There is something very alluring in the idea of kicking down conventions, yet if this be carried too far, it is possible that all the feminine virtues will follow suit. A woman bereft of all the feminine virtues is as pitiable a sight as a head which has been shorn of its locks.

A COUPLE of years went by, and again the circumstances of the Alfred Whittakers were improved. For the old lady whose husband had courted her for seven long years was taken ill and quite suddenly died. Her death affected and upset Regina very much. It happened that she had not been over to her old home for several days, though Regina, although she was such a good wife, had continued to be also an extremely good daughter, and usually contrived to visit the old people at least twice a week. Just at this time, however, some trifling indisposition of little Julia's had kept her from paying her usual visit to her parents.

"Here is a letter from my father," she said one morning at breakfast to Alfred. "He seems to think mother is not very well."

"Oh, poor dear, poor dear. You had better go across and see her."

"Yes. I should have gone yesterday but for the child not being quite well," Regina responded.

"Anyway, she's all right to-day—well enough for you to leave her with nurse. You had better go across and spend the day, and I'll come round that way and fetch you home in the evening."

To this arrangement Regina agreed, and she went over to her father's house as soon as she had concluded arrangements for the children's meals. She did not, however, return to Fairview—as their house was called—that evening with Alfred. No, she remained under the paternal roof for a few days, and then, when she at length returned to her home and her children, she was accompanied by the old man, who was as a ship without a rudder when he found himself bereft of the wife for whom he had served, even as Jacob served seven years for Rachel.

It was the beginning of the end for old Mr Brown. He declined absolutely to go back to the house where he had lived so long and so happily, and took up his permanent abode at Fairview. Very soon the better part of the furniture, and certain priceless possessions with which there was no thought of parting, were transferred from the one house to the other, the old domicile was done up and eventually let, and then, as so often happens with old people who have been uprooted from their regular life, Mr Brown sank into extreme illness.

Poor man, he had never been ill in his life, and he took to it badly. One paralytic stroke succeeded another, and, at last, after a few months of much repining and wearing suffering, he passed quietly

away, his last words being that he was going to rejoin his dear wife on the other side.

It was then that the Alfred Whittakers left Fairview.

"I shall never fancy the house again since poor father's death," said Regina on the evening of the funeral.

"No, I can quite believe that," returned Alfred Whittaker, sympathetically. "Well," he added after a pause, "you will be able to afford a larger house if you want it."

"I should like a larger garden," said Regina. "I think children brought up without a garden are generally unhappy little creatures, and ours are getting big enough to enjoy it."

By that time Julia was nine years old, and Maud, of course, two years older still. Their father and mother therefore gave notice to their landlord, and cast about in their minds for some new and desirable neighbourhood which would contain a new and desirable residence.

They decided eventually on purchasing a house in the most artistic suburb of London, that which is known among Londoners as Northampton Park. They were lucky enough to find a house to be sold at a reasonable price in the main road of this quaint little village. It stood well back from the traffic, having a long garden between the gate and the entrance. The gate was rustic and wooden, and was decorated with an art copper plate of irregular shape, on which the name of the house was embossed in quaint letters extremely difficult to read—"Ye Dene."

"Why," asked Julia, when she and her sister were taken to see the new domicile, "why do you call our new house Ye Den? Is it a den?"

"Ye *Dene*, dearest—Ye *Dene*. It is old English spelling," said Regina. "I think it is rather pretty, don't you, Alfie?"

"H'm, the house is nice enough, and you youngsters will enjoy the garden, which is far better than you have ever had before. I believe it costs a lot of money to alter the name of a house; in fact, I don't know whether one is allowed to or not. I'll find out."

But, somehow, they took possession of their new home without finding out whether it was possible to alter the name thereof.

"What about headed paper, Queenie?" said Alfred, when they were at breakfast on the second morning after their entrance into the new domicile.

"Headed paper? Oh yes, we must have that, dear."

"Well, will you stick to calling the house Ye Dene?"

"Well," said Regina, "I went for a little turn yesterday, and I took note of all the houses and what their names were. I passed Charles Lodge and George Cottage, and The Poplars, The Elms, The Quarry, The Nook, Ingleside, High Elms, The Briars, and a dozen different variations of the same, such as Briar Cottage, High Elms Cottage, and so on; but I didn't see any other house that seemed to be connected with this one. I rather like the name, and that queer, irregular-shaped copper plate will be a

sort of landmark when our friends come from town to see us."

"How would it be," suggested Alfred, "to have the shape of the plate reproduced for our address—a kind of scroll the shape of that with 'Ye Dene' in the middle?"

"Yes, that's a good idea," said Regina. "But you will have to put Northampton Park within the shield, or else it will look very odd."

"Well, look here," said he, "I'll take the pattern of it and see what Cuthberts can suggest."

The result of this conversation was that Cuthberts, the celebrated notepaper dealers, made a very pretty suggestion embodying the shield, the name of Ye Dene and the further postal address, and the Whittakers finally decided that they would not trouble to alter the name of their new residence.

It was at the Park—for I may as well follow the customs of its inhabitants and speak of it as they do—that Mrs Whittaker began to seriously think of the education of her children.

They made friends slowly. In due course the vicar called upon them, and was followed a little later by his wife. Then the wife of a doctor just across the road made it her business to welcome the newcomers, and the neighbours on either side of Ye Dene called; but, all the same, they made friends slowly.

Mrs Whittaker made many and searching inquiries into the possibilities of education, and she finally concluded that she would send them to the High School, at which all the youth of the Park received

their learning. So, morning after morning, the two quaint little figures set out from Ye Dene at a little after nine o'clock, returning punctually at half-past twelve and sallying forth again about a quarter-past two for the afternoon school, which lasted until four.

What queer, quaint little maids they were! Regina's own curious taste in dress she did not reproduce in her children. She held lofty theories that little girls should not be made vain by curled hair and flounced frocks. Their hair was therefore cut close to their heads, as if they had been two boys, and they wore curious little Quaker-brown jackets and hoods, which gave them an air of having come out of the ark.

"I regard it as terrible that children, who should be wholly irresponsible and whose troubles will come soon enough, should ever have to think of the care of their clothes," she said one day to the doctor's wife across the road.

"For my part," the lady replied, "I don't think that you can too early inculcate a proper care of the person into little girls. My own child, who was ten last week, is as particular about the fit and style of her clothes as I am about mine. If you bring girls up, dear lady, to run quite wild, do you not think that you do away with their domesticity, that most precious quality to all women?"

"I am only too anxious to do away with their domesticity," said Mrs Whittaker, quietly but very firmly. "You see, Mrs M'Quade, I am no ordinary woman myself. I have had the education of a man,

I have a man's brain. I believe that in the near future the position of women will be entirely altered."

"Then you are going to bring your girls up to professions?"

"I am going to bring my girls up to follow the natural bent of their minds. If they show any aptitude for and desire to follow one of the learned professions, neither their father nor I will put any stumbling-block in their way."

"I see. Have you pushed them on already?"

"No, that is altogether against my principles. I never do anything against my principles. I think that all children should reach the age of seven years before they imbibe any learning, except such as comes through the eye and in a perfectly natural and simple manner. After the age of seven, until ten years old, I believe that lessons should be of the simplest and most harmless description. After that, the brain is strong and is better able to bear forcing."

"I see. Well, your plan may be a good one; my plan may be a good one. I sent my little girl to a kindergarten when she was four years old, because she was lonely; she was not happy, she was always bored, always wanting somebody to play with her, and she yearned for playmates and little occupations. When she went to the kindergarten, she took to it like a duck to water. She loved her school then, and now that she is in a more advanced class, she is well on with her studies."

"I see. And you dress her very elaborately?"

"Oh no, not elaborately," said Mrs M'Quade. "I

always try to dress her daintily and smartly, but never elaborately."

"It is not in accordance with my principles," said Regina, loftily. "I have a set fashion for my children, and I intend to keep them to it until they are old enough to choose for themselves. Then they will take to the task of dressing themselves with minds untrammelled by the opinions of other people, even of their own mother. I have always tried so to bring up my girls as to make them thoroughly original in every possible way. They are not quite like other children. They are children as much out of the ordinary as their mother was before them; convention has no part, and shall have no part in their lives whatsoever. Indeed, I may say that conventions is one of the greatest bugbears of my existence."

"But we must have conventions," said the doctor's wife.

"Must we?" said Mrs Whittaker, with a superior smile. "Ah, I see that you and I, dear Mrs M'Quade, must agree to differ. Let me give you some tea. I assure you it is quite conventional tea."

"Thank you very much," said Mrs M'Quade, smiling.

In retailing the conversation to her husband that evening, Mrs M'Quade remarked that it *was* quite conventional tea. "I should think about one-and-twopence a pound," was her comment.

"And how did you like the lady?" her husband asked.

"She is an extraordinary woman, a very extraordinary woman. I don't know that I like her; on

the other hand, I don't know whether there is anything about her to dislike."

"What age—what size—what sort of a woman is she?" he asked.

"In age something over forty; in person plump and rather comely. A large, solid woman, with no idea of making the best of herself. She had a tea-gown on to-day that would have made the very angels weep."

"Would any tea-gown make the angels weep?"

"I think that one would. It was a dingy brown and a salmon-pink. Wherever it was brown you wished it was salmon-pink, and wherever it was salmon-pink you wished it was brown, except when you were wishing that it was black altogether, without any relief at all."

"Dear me! What was it like?"

"Well, it was just the one garment that she should never have worn. She wears old-fashioned stays, and though people may think they don't matter in a tea-gown, I think stays have more effect on the general cut of a tea-gown than they have on any other garment. I should like to have dressed that lady in a plain coat and skirt from my own tailor, with a loose white front, and a good black hat. But I don't think anybody would know her."

"Well, it's no business of yours, little woman," said the doctor, cheerily. "And, after all, it's a new family — children — infantile diseases — servants — people apparently thoroughly well-to-do. Bought the house—done it up inside and out. It isn't for you and I to quarrel with our bread-and-butter."

CHAPTER IV

SKATING ON THIN ICE

Was it, I wonder, a mother who first evolved the proverb : 'Where ignorance is bliss 'twere folly to be wise' ?

It cannot be said that as a family the inhabitants of Ye Dene were a success at Northampton Park. I have already said that they made friends slowly, and in saying so I was of course speaking of Mr and Mrs Whittaker and not of the children. The children, on the contrary, made friends very quickly and as quickly got through them. I doubt indeed if two more unpopular children had ever attended the Northampton Park High School. Fortunately for them, I mean for their peace of mind as the time went by, Mrs Whittaker was not aware of the real reason for this state of affairs.

"I hear," she remarked one day to long-legged Maud, who had been for a couple of years advanced to the dignity of a pigtail, "I hear that Gwendoline Hammond had a party yesterday."

Maudie went very red and looked extremely uncomfortable. "I—I—did hear something about it," she stammered.

"How was it that you were not asked ?" inquired

Regina, with an air very much like that of a porcupine suddenly shooting its quills into evidence.

"Oh, Gwendoline Hammond is a mean little sneak!" burst out Julia, who was much the bolder of the sisters.

"A sneak? How a sneak? What had she to sneak about?" demanded Regina.

"Well, it was like this, mother. Gwendoline is an awful bully, you know, and poor little Tuppenny was being frightfully bullied by her one day, and she's a dear little thing, she can't take care of herself —somebody's got to stand up for her—and Maudie punched her head."

"Punched her head! And what was she doing?"

"Well, she was twisting poor little Tuppenny's arm round."

"What! That mere child? And Gwendoline head and shoulders taller than she?"

"Yes."

"And you say Maudie—punched her head?"

"Yes, and she punched it hard, too. And then Gwendoline went blubbering home, and Mrs Hammond came to Miss Drummond, and—" Well, really, my reader, I hesitate to say what happened next, but as this is a true chronicle I had better make the plunge and get it over and done with—"and then," said Julia, solemnly, "there was the devil to pay!"

"You had better not put it in that way," said Regina, hurriedly. I must confess that she had the greatest difficulty to choke down a laugh. "You had better not put it in that way. 'The devil to

pay' is next door to swearing itself, to say nothing of being what a great many people would call excessively vulgar; and if you were heard to say such a thing at school, you would get yourselves into dreadful trouble, and me too. I shall be obliged, Julia, if you will not use that expression again."

"Very well, mother," said Julia, with an air of great meekness, which, I may say in passing, she was far from feeling.

"With regard," went on Regina in her most magnificent manner, "with regard to Gwendoline Hammond and her miserable party, I consider it distinctly a feather in your cap, Maudie, that you were left uninvited. If it were told to me, as I presume it was told to Mrs Hammond, that one of you had been brutally cruel to a child many sizes smaller than yourself and incapable of self-defence, I should mete out the severest punishment that it was possible for me to give you. You have never been punished, because it has never been necessary. Some mothers," she continued, "would punish you for using such a term as 'the devil to pay.' I regard that as a venial offence which your own common-sense will teach you is inexpedient as a phrase for everyday conversation. But brutal cowardice is a matter which I should find it very difficult to forgive, and I am extremely proud that you should have taken the part of a poor little child who was not able to do it for herself. I shall tell your father when he comes home, and I shall ask him to reward you in a suitable manner; and meantime, when I see Miss Drummond—"

"If you please, mother," broke in Julia, who was, as I have said, the dominant one of the two sisters, "if you please, mother, just drop it about Miss Drummond. We are quite able to fight our own battles at school—we don't want Miss Drummond, or anybody else, to think that we come peaching to you telling you everything. We tell you because we are fond of you and you ask, and—and—we don't like to lie to you." She stammered a little, because on occasion no one could tell a prettier lie than Julia Whittaker. "In fact," ended Julia, "our lives wouldn't be worth living if it was known that we came peaching home."

"It is your duty to tell me everything," said Regina.

"Well, you might say the same about Gwendoline Hammond," remarked Julia, with a matter-of-fact air.

"You are within your right," said Mrs Whittaker; "you are within your right. I apologise."

"Oh, please don't do that," said Julia, magnanimously; "it isn't at all necessary. But you please won't say anything to Miss Drummond about it—not unless she should speak to you, which she won't. She was very indignant with Gwendoline when she found the whole truth out, and I believe she—at least I did hear that she paid a special visit to Mrs Hammond and made things extremely unpleasant for Gwendoline. I don't wonder she didn't ask Maudie to her party, because her father happened to be there, and he was very angry about it. He almost stopped her having her party altogether, only Mrs Hammond

had asked some people and she did not like to go back upon her word and disgrace Gwendoline before everybody. So you understand, mother, not a word, please, to Miss Drummond."

"My dear child," said Regina, "my dear original, splendid child!"

Julia coughed. She would have liked to have taken the praise to herself, but with Maudie standing open-mouthed at her side it was not altogether feasible. She coughed again. "You—you forget Maudie," she remarked mildly.

"My dear, noble, generous child! I forget nothing—and I will forget nothing for either of you. Here," she went on, in ringing accents which would have brought down the house if Regina had been speaking at any public meeting, "is a small recognition from your mother, and at dinner-time to-night your father shall speak to you."

"I think," remarked Julia, ten minutes later, when she and her sister were on the safe ground of that part of the garden which belonged exclusively to them, "I think we got out of that uncommonly well, Maudie, don't you?"

"Yes, but it was skating on thin ice," said Maudie. "I don't know how you dared, Ju. You told mother you didn't like telling lies!"

"Well," said Julia, "it is to be hoped it will never come out, for if it does there will be the devil to pay and no mistake about it."

It was as well for Regina's peace of mind that the thin ice never broke, and that the actual truth never came to light. You know what the poet says—"A

lie that is half a lie is ever the hardest to fight." Well, the same idea holds good for a truth that is half a truth. I don't say that Julia's account of the difference between themselves and Gwendoline Hammond was wholly a lie, but it was certainly not wholly the truth; indeed, it was such a garbled account that nobody concerned therein but would have found it difficult to recognise it.

"Wasn't mother's little sermon about the devil to pay lovely?" said Julia, swinging idly to and fro while Maudie stood contemplating her gravely.

"Yes," said Maudie, "but she was quite right. That's the best of mother—she's always so full of sound common-sense."

"Except when she calls you her brave, noble child!" rejoined the sharp wit.

"I don't know," said Maudie, reflectively, "that that was altogether mother's fault."

"Perhaps it wasn't. It will be just as well for you and for both of us as far as that goes, if mother doesn't happen to just mention the matter to Tuppenny's mother. I think I was a fool not to have safeguarded that point."

"There's time enough," said Maudie. "You can lead up to it when you go in, because, you know, Ju, if they ever do find out—"

"Yes, there *will* be the devil to pay," put in Julia. "You are quite right."

It was astonishing how sweet a morsel the phrase seemed to be to the child.

"You'll get saying it to Miss Drummond," said Maudie, warningly.

"Well, if I do," retorted Julia, "I shall have had the pleasure of saying it—that will be something."

Now this was but one of many similar instances which occurred during the childhood of Regina's two girls. They were so sharp—at least Julia was—and as she was devoted to Maudie, she always put her wits at the service of her sister, and the other children whom they knew not unnaturally resented the fact that they were invariably to be found in the wrong box in any discussion in which the Whittaker children had a share. So they became more and more isolated as the years went by.

"Why don't we like the Whittakers?" said a girl to her mother, who had met Mrs Whittaker and thought her a very remarkable woman. "Well, because we don't."

"Yes, but why?"

"Oh, well, we don't exactly know why—but we don't. They're queer."

Have you noticed, dear reader, how frequent it is to set down those who are too sharp for you as "queer"? Well, it was just so at Northampton Park, and what the girl didn't choose to put into plain words, she stigmatised as queer.

"And what do you mean by queer?" the mother asked.

"Well, they *are* queer. I think their mother must be queer too, because their dress is so funny."

"Is it?"

"Oh, awfully. They always wear brown."

"What are they like?"

"Well, Maudie is fairish and Julia is darkish.

Maudie has quite a straight nose and Julia's turns up —oh, it isn't an ugly turn-up nose, I didn't mean that. But they are such guys, and what is worse, they don't care a bit."

"Really? What sort of guys?" asked the mother, who was immensely amused.

"Well, they never have anything like anybody else. They've got long, pokey frocks made of tough brown stuff, like—er—like—er—pictures of Dutch children. And over them they wear long holland pinafores."

"It sounds very sensible," remarked the mother. "And when they come out of school?"

"In the winter they've got long brown coats, with little bits here—you know."

"You mean a yoke?"

"I don't know what you call it, mother—little bits, and skirts from it, and poke bonnets, and brown wool gloves; brown stockings and brown shoes, and little brown muffs. Oh, they really are awfully queer!"

"And in the summer?"

"In the summer? Well, in the summer they wear brown holland things. They're queer, mother, I can't tell you any more—they're queer."

"I see," said the mother. "But in themselves," she persisted, "what are they like in themselves?"

"Oh, I don't know. Nobody likes them much."

"Poor children! I wish you would be a little kind to them."

"Do you?" said the girl, rather wistfully. "Well, I will if you like, but it would be an awful bore, and they wouldn't thank us."

"I see," said the mother. But she was wrong; she only thought she saw.

So time sped on, and these two children grew more and more long-legged, more and more definite in character, and as they progressed towards what Mrs Whittaker fondly believed to be originality and unconventionalism, so did her mother's heart bound and yearn within her.

"I am amply satisfied with the result of our scheme of education," she was wont to say. "No, it is not easy—it is much easier to bring up children in the conventional way. But the result—oh, my dear lady, the result, when you feel a thrill of pride that your children are different to others, is worth the sacrifice."

"Now I wonder what," said the lady in question in the bosom of her family, "did that foolish woman particularly have to sacrifice? The general feeling in the Park seems to be that the Whittakers are horrid children—disagreeable, ill-bred, sententious, and altogether ridiculous; too sharp in one way, too stupid for words in another. And yet she talks about sacrifice!"

"Oh, Maudie isn't sharp—at least, not particularly so," said her own girl, who, being a couple of years older than Maudie Whittaker, knew fairly well the lie of the land. "Julia's sharp—a needle isn't in it. It's Julia who backs Maudie up in everything, and Julia is a horrid little beast whom everybody hates and loathes. She tried it on with me once when I was at school, but I soon put the young lady in her right place with a good setting down, and she never

tried it on any more. They'd have been all right if they had been properly brought up, which they weren't."

"You think not?"

"Oh no, mother. You have no idea how intensely silly Mrs Whittaker is."

"Is she? I thought she was such a brilliant woman."

"I believe she calls herself so; nobody else agrees with her."

"Do you know what I heard about Mrs Whittaker only yesterday?" said the mother, with a sudden gleam of remembrance. "She has gone in for public speaking. They say it's too killing for words."

"Speaking on what?" asked the girl.

"On the improvement of the condition of women."

"What! a political affair?"

"No, no; not political at all; a something quite disconnected with politics—quite above them. She has been chosen President of a new society which is to be called 'The Society for the Regeneration of Women.'"

CHAPTER V

THE S.R.W.

Why is it that women are so fond of founding societies both for the improvement of themselves and of each other? Is it a confession of weakness, or is it one of the signs of the coming of the millennium?

MRS WHITTAKER was a woman who never did things by halves. She distinctly prided herself thereupon.

"If a thing, my dear, is worth doing," I heard her say about the time of which I am writing, "it is worth doing *well.* I have great faith—although I have gone so far above the old-world thoughts of religion—in the verse which says: 'Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with all thy might.' It is a grand precept, one that I instil into my children—er—er—"

"For all you are worth," remarked a flippant young woman who was listening.

"I—I shouldn't have expressed it in that way," stammered Regina, somewhat taken aback. "But—but—er—it's what I mean."

"And your children, are they the same?"

"Yes, I am proud to say that my children are very much like me in that respect. When they play, they play; when they work, they work; when they idle

they idle; and I am sure if ever they were naughty, that they would be naughty with all their might."

Poor Regina! Well, to make the story somewhat shorter, I must tell you that when Regina Whittaker went into public life, she did so in no half-hearted manner.

"I am convinced," she remarked to the lord of her bosom, "I am convinced that I am taking a step in the right direction. What do you think, Alfie?"

"My dear," said Alfred Whittaker, somewhat sleepily, for he had had a hard day in the city and had eaten an extremely good dinner, "if it pleases you, it pleases me. You have such a clear, sensible head," he went on, feeling that perhaps he had been a little too unsympathetic, "you have such a clear, sensible head, that I am sure you will take up no question that is not a good one—an advantageous one."

"I thought you would see it in that light, dear Alfie," said Mrs Whittaker in tones which betokened much pleasure. "You are so generous and so just. Some men would hate to feel that their wives had any interest outside their own homes."

"Oh, my dear heart and soul!" exclaimed Alfred Whittaker, looking up in a very wide-awake sort of way, "surely this is a land of liberty. I don't want to tie you down to being no better than my slave. God knows you fag enough and slave enough for all of us. It would be hard if you couldn't have a few opinions and a few interests of your own."

"Yes, dear; but it isn't quite that. It is not only of opinions that I am speaking, it is the encouraging

way in which you consent to my entering on this somewhat pronounced question."

"I have absolute faith in your judgment," said Alfred Whittaker; and again he composed himself for his after-dinner nap.

Regina sat looking at him as he slumbered. Her heart was very full, for she was an affectionate woman, and, in spite of her little airs and pretensions, she was really a good woman at bottom. Her heart swelled with pride to think that this was her husband, this handsome, portly, dignified man, with a presence, an air of being somebody, this man who was so good, so easy to live with, such a good husband and such an affectionate father. And to think that he was hers! As I have said already, her heart thrilled within her.

It was true that others might not have agreed with Regina in her estimate of her husband. The outer world might have thought him anything but handsome, might have thought that he had anything rather than a presence. What Regina called portly, a less tender critic might have described in an extremely unpleasant manner; but, you see, Regina looked at him with eyes of possession, and the eyes of possession are ever somewhat biassed.

So her thoughts ran pleasantly on. Yes, it was indeed sweet to be so blessed as she was in her home life. She had once believed that her life was a wasted one. Well, that was in the foolish days, before she had tried her wings. Not that she ever regarded her flights into the world of higher thought *with the very smallest regret; that could never be.* Enlightenment is always enlightenment, whether it is

actually paying in a monetary sense or not. She firmly believed that an elaborate and somewhat masculine education had enabled her to become a better wife and mother than she would have been had she been contented with the genteel education which her parents had thought good enough, further than which indeed their minds had never attempted to fly. Perhaps, her thoughts ran, her mission in life was to bring enlightenment to the minds of other women, in a somewhat different way to that which she had hitherto accepted as the most reasonable. Be that as it may, Regina entered upon her duties as President of the S.R.W., armed with the full sanction of her husband's permission and approval.

To all her friends she was an amazing and, at the same time, an amusing study about this epoch.

"I am perfectly certain," remarked Mrs M'Quade to the mother of the little girl who at school was called Tuppenny, "I am perfectly certain that Mrs Whittaker has at last found her *mètier*. Are you going to join her scheme for the regeneration of women?"

"I don't think so," replied the lady who lived at Highthorn. "My husband is so very sneering when anything of the kind is mentioned. I shouldn't mind for myself; I think it would be rather fun. They are going to have tea-parties and *soirées*, and all sorts of amusements. But George would be so full of his fun, that I don't feel somehow it would be good enough for me to go into. Besides, it's three guineas a year. As far as I can tell," she continued, "from what Mrs Whittaker has told me, there won't be any real regeneration of women in our day. It may come in the

day of our grandchildren, but I don't feel inclined to work for that."

"That shows a great want of public spirit," remarked the doctor's wife, laughingly.

"Yes, I daresay it does, but I don't believe women are public-spirited, except here and there—generally when they have made a failure of their own lives, as my old man always says."

"But Mrs Whittaker hasn't made a failure of her life."

"Well, she has and she hasn't. She has failed to become anything very much out of the ordinary. She is very fond of calling herself an unconventional woman who never does anything like anybody else, but I fail to see very much in it excepting that she makes horrible guys of her girls."

"Well, I am going to join the society," said Mrs M'Quade, with the air of one who is prepared to receive ridicule. "No, I don't pretend for a moment that I want regenerating myself—or even that other women do—but Mrs Whittaker has been a very good patient to the doctor one way and another, and she's stuck to us, and I think the least I can do is to join her pet scheme—and, mind you, it *is* a pet scheme."

"I call that absolutely Machiavellian," said her friend.

"Oh, a doctor's wife has to be Machiavellian, my dear, and a thousand other things," said Mrs M'Quade, easily. "I have been fifteen years in the Park, and I have kept in with everybody—never had a wrong word with a single one of Jack's patients. You may

call it Machiavellian, and doubtless you are right, but I call it ripping good management myself."

"So it is, my dear, so it is. And you shall have the full credit of it," said Tuppenny's mother, who was a genial soul and loved a joke as well as most people.

And Regina meantime was taking life with considerable seriousness. She fell into a habit of speaking of the S.R.W. as of her life's work; indeed, she became a very important woman. No sooner was it known that she was an excellent and dominant President of the S.R.W. than she came into request for other societies of a kindred nature—no, I don't mean societies solely for the regeneration of women, not a bit of it. There was one for the sensible education of children between three and seven years old, whose committee she was asked to join not many weeks after the birth of the S.R.W.; and there was another society which bore the name of "The Robin Redbreast," and provided the poor children of a south London district with dinners for a halfpenny a head, and a number of others that they provided with dinners for nothing at all. Then there was a Shakespeare Society, which had long existed in the Park, and which until Regina became a full-blown president had never thought of asking her to come on to its committee.

Now all this took Regina a good deal away from her home, and the result of her absence and of these wider interests in life was that the two girls at Ye Dene were enabled to shape their lives very much more in their own way than ever they had done before. Regina had, it is true, always aimed at

inculcating a spirit of independence in her children. She required them to do certain things during the course of the day, to be punctual at meals, especially at breakfast, to report themselves when they were going to school and when they returned; but otherwise, she left them fairly free to spend the rest of their time as their own inclinations led them. They had their own sitting-room and their own tea-table, at which they could invite any children belonging to their school, or indeed, for the matter of that, any of the children living in the Park; and up to the advent of the S.R.W. it must be owned that this system worked as well as any system could have worked with children of such pronounced characters as the young Whittakers. But after their mother became a public woman, Maudie and Julia may be said to have run absolutely wild. No longer did they report themselves in the old way, because they had a very complete contempt for servants, and there was usually no one else to whom they could report themselves.

"Does your mother never want to know where you are?" asked a schoolfellow when Maudie was just sixteen.

"Well, yes, we always tell her at night what we have done during the day."

"Oh, do you?"

"Yes," returned Maudie. "Mother is most deeply interested in all our doings. Did you think she wasn't? How funny of you! Isn't your mother interested in what you do?"

"Oh yes, of course mine is. But then mine is

rather different to yours. Mine is not a public character."

"Well, I don't know that our mother is exactly a public character," said Julia, who was keenly on the watch for a single word which would in any way pour ridicule or contempt upon her mother.

"Oh yes, she is. Father says she's a philanthropist."

"Oh, does he? Well, I don't know, I'm sure. Perhaps she is. I know she's a jolly hard-worked woman, and if she wasn't as clever as daylight she wouldn't be able to keep going as she does. As for her being a philanthropist—well, after all, what is a philanthropist?"

"Well, I did ask father, and he explained it, but he didn't make it very clear. It seems to be a sort of person who goes about doing good."

"That's mother all over," said Maudie.

"Then who mends your stockings?" asked Evelyn Gage.

"Our stockings? Why, mother has never mended our stockings. Sewing is one of the things mother isn't great on. You couldn't expect it."

"Why not? Mine does."

"Oh, yes, but our mother is rather different. You see, she was educated like a man."

"How funny!" giggled Evelyn.

"I think," said Maudie to Julia, half an hour later, when Evelyn Gage had gone home and the two were getting out their lesson-books for their home work, "I think it would be rather funny to have a mother like an ordinary mother, don't you, Ju?"

"Well, I don't know," returned Julia. "Evelyn's mother makes jam and pickles and pastry and lovely little rock cakes, and things that our mother never seems to think of. *She* is always too much taken up with great questions to bother herself with little etceteras, as old nurse always called such things."

"Perhaps, though, we should find it rather a bore to have a mother who worried about our stockings and things, just an ordinary, average kind of mother. But anyway, we haven't got a mother like that, so we must make the best of what we have got."

CHAPTER VI

REGINA'S VIEWS

A Parisian finishing school is for English girls like putting French polish on British oak.

NOTHING of any importance happened in the household at Ye Dene for two years after this. Then it became time for Maudie to be introduced into society. With most girls this epoch in life is one eagerly looked forward to, tremulously entered upon, and very frequently looked back to with a certain amount of disappointment. Regina herself, I am bound to confess, thought with no small misgiving of the time when she should have to be a wallflower for her daughter's sake.

"The child must have her chance like other girls," she remarked to Alfred one night when they were sitting together in the drawing-room at Ye Dene. "She is very beautiful. She will not go empty-handed to her husband. She ought to make a brilliant marriage."

"Yes, she is a nice-looking girl," said Alfred Whittaker.

"My daughters," said Regina, with an air of dignity which was very pardonable in a mother, "are both beautiful in different styles. Maudie is purely

Greek in type; Julia is purely Irish—or I might say French. I noticed when we were in Brittany, two years ago, how thoroughly Irish one type of the peasantry was."

"Yes, she's a good-looking girl. They're both all right," said Alfred Whittaker, with the easy indifference of an ordinary father. "I daresay you'll have your hands full a little bit further on, old lady, when we get shoals of young men about Ye Dene, and you have to think out little dances and suppers and theatre parties, and other things of that kind, instead of giving up all your time to making other people happy."

"Well, whatever I have to do, I hope I shall do it with all my might," said Regina.

"I am sure you will," said Alfred, tenderly; "I am sure you will, Queenie."

For his peace of mind's sake, it was just as well that Alfred Whittaker was at business during the greater part of each day, for he might have been upset, not to say scandalised, by the extremely independent, not to say free-and-easy, life which was led by his two daughters.

Regina herself was very strong on this point. "I like to hear everything that my girls tell me," she said, in discussing the question about this time with the doctor's wife, "but I don't demand it as a right. Nobody would demand of a boy of nearly eighteen that he should tell his mother everything that he has said, done and thought during the twenty-four hours of the day. Why shouldn't a girl be brought up on the same system?"

"It is not the custom, that's all. I was amenable to my mother," Mrs M'Quade replied, "and I expect my daughter to be amenable to me. It is not a question of want of independence—the child is independent enough—but a girl's mind and a boy's mind are not the same, they're different."

"Only because men and foolish mothers have made them so," persisted Regina.

"Ah, well, you and I agree to differ on those points, —don't we, Mrs Whittaker? Heaven forbid that I should make my girl less independent than I would wish to be myself, but to shut the mother out of her life is no particular sign of a girl's independence—at least, that is the way in which I look at it. Then I suppose," went on the doctor's wife, "that you will, a little later on, allow your girls to have a latchkey?"

"Certainly, if they wish to have a latchkey. Why not?" Mrs Whittaker demanded. "I should not expect them to come in at three o'clock in the morning because I gave them the privilege of a latchkey. If they misused the privilege, I should take it away from them."

"You are beyond me," the doctor's wife cried. "With regard to my Georgie, all I can say is, that until she is married she will have to live just as I lived until I was married; that is to say, she will do what I tell her, she will wear what I advise her to wear, or what I give her to wear; she will have a very good time, but she will not have a separate existence from mine until she goes into a home of her own, or until I am carried out to my last long resting-place."

"We are good friends," said Regina, with an air of superb tolerance, "we are good friends, Mrs M'Quade, and I hope we shall always continue so; but in some of our ideas we are diametrically opposed to each other, and we must agree to differ."

But to go back to the question of the entrance of Maud Whittaker into society, not a little to her parents' surprise, Maud absolutely declined to do anything of the kind.

"Come out—go into society!" she echoed. "Oh, there will be time enough for that when Ju is ready."

"Julia? Why, she is two years younger than you," Mrs Whittaker exclaimed.

"Yes, dearest, I know it; but I am young for my age and Julia is old for hers. If she comes out in another year, I can wait until she is ready."

"But why? I never heard of such a thing!"

"I am not very great on society," said Maud. "I would rather wait until Ju is fully fledged."

"And you will stay at school?"

"Yes, I'd just as soon, only when one comes to think of it, I've learnt all they can teach me, as far as I know. We are both of us much too big to be at that school—it's a perfect farce. Why don't you take us away and give us a course of lessons? That is the proper thing to do—like they do in Paris. Or why don't you send us to Paris for a year? Then we may contrive to speak French that is French, and not Park polyglot."

"Maudie!" cried Regina.

"Yes, I know, dearest. You may say 'Maudie!'

but facts are facts. The other day, being, or being supposed to be, the best French speaker in the school, I was put up to talk to a French lady who was staying at the Vicarage. You know Mrs Charlton speaks French like a native—indeed, I think she has French relations, and I think this was an old schoolfellow. Anyway, I was put up to talk to her as being the show girl at French conversation."

"Well?" Regina's tone was as the sniff of a war-horse who scents the battle from afar.

"I couldn't make head or tail of her," said Maudie. "Ju did—at least, in a kind of way she did. All the same she had to repeat everything she said three times over, and then whatever-her-name-was had to make shots at her meaning."

"But, my dear children," exclaimed Regina, aghast, "I hear you talking French to each other every day!"

"Yes, I know," said Ju; "but you hear us talking something that isn't French."

"My education," said Regina, "did not include many modern subjects. That was one reason why I was so very anxious that you two should learn French and German."

"Then you had better send us to Paris—because French is just what we cannot speak. When we want to talk without the servants knowing, we speak what we call the Park polyglot; but it doesn't go down with French people. I could see that that friend of Mrs Charlton's caught a word here and there, and her native wit supplied the rest."

"Perhaps she was not a person of position, and did

not speak good French," said Regina, who was loath to admit that a child of hers could do anything badly.

"Oh, not a bit of it! Mrs Charlton kept calling her Comtesse. She was all right."

"And how did Miss Drummond come off?"

"Oh, well, Miss Drummond speaks a little honest English-French, which has no pretence of being the real thing."

It is not surprising that after this, Regina's two girls were withdrawn from the school at Northampton Park, and were, as she particularly told everybody, by their own request sent to a school kept by a French lady on the outskirts of Paris; to be particular, in that off-shoot of Paris which Regina called "Nully."

During the year that followed, Regina worked harder than ever; indeed, even her complacent husband now and again uttered a mild protest that his wife should be absolutely absorbed by work which brought him neither comfort nor emolument.

"I had a wife, once," he said in joke to the doctor, one night when the M'Quades were dining at Ye Dene; "but now I often think I've only got a Chairman of Committee."

Nevertheless, he said it with an air of pride, and later, when Regina asked him seriously whether he would prefer that she should give up her public duties and once more merge her identity into his, he exclaimed, "God forbid! What makes you happy, my dear, makes me happy, as long as you still regard me as the lynch-pin of your existence."

"I do, my dear Alfie, I do," she cried. "Indeed

I'm the same Queenie that you married all those years ago. My heart has never altered or changed in the very least. No other man has ever crossed its threshold since you first took possession of it."

"As long as you feel that, my dear girl," he returned, putting his arm about her ample waist and looking at her with fond eyes of loving, if somewhat sleepy, devotion, "as long as you feel like that, you can do what work you like and have what interests you like. And good luck go with you, for I am sure you must be a great comfort to a good many people."

And Regina did work, like the traditional negro slave. Still, she never neglected her home duties Regularly every week she wrote to her girls, and sometimes when she was dog-tired and found her eyes closing over the sheet on which she was writing, she shook herself quite fiercely, and reminded herself of her duty; then blamed herself passionately that her letters to her girls, her own girls, who thought of her, loved her, trusted her, made her the recipient of their hopes, doubts and fears, joys and pleasures, and even such simple sorrows as had as yet entered into their lives, should ever have come to be a duty—a mere duty.

Poor Regina! I will not pretend that the two girls never wished to hear from their mother, or that they would not have been bitterly disappointed had she wholly and totally neglected them, but they were happy in their school life, and they did not spend their time watching for the arrival of the

facteur de poste, as Regina fondly believed of them. No, they quietly accepted their mother's letters when they received them, read them, discussed them, and then put them on one side to think about them no more.

So time went on until the Christmas holidays arrived. The two girls did not come home to the Park for their vacation, but their father and mother made a little break in their respective callings and went to Paris, where the girls joined them at a modest but comfortable boarding-house.

Now the boarding-house had been recommended by the lady of the school at which the sisters were being educated. It was one kept by a French lady, to which but few English people were in the habit of going. Of the charming language of our neighbours across the Channel, Alfred Whittaker did not know one word beyond a form of salutation which he called *bong jour!* and an equally useful word which he was pleased to call *messy*. These two old people were therefore absolutely at the mercy of their young daughters; and the young daughters themselves thanked Heaven many times, during the three weeks which they passed together in Paris, that French had not been included in the curriculum of either their father's or mother's education. Oh, they meant no harm, don't think it for a moment. There was no harm in either the one or the other. They were modern, human girls, into whom a life of independence had been instilled as a religion. Independent their mother wished them to be, and independent they were to an abnormal and an aggressive degree.

They were as sharp as needles, exactly as their old schoolfellow had said years before; they had acquired a knowledge of Paris which was simply extraordinary considering that they had been immured in a *pensionnat* for demoiselles. They knew all the great emporiums quite intimately, and having extracted some money from their father on the score that it was no use their mother coming to Paris without buying clothes, and also that their own wardrobes required renewing, they whisked their mother from the *Louvre* to the *Bon Marché*, from the *Bon Marché* to the *Mimosa*, and even got wind of that wonderful old market down in the Temple, where the Jews hold high revel between the hours of nine o'clock in the morning and noon.

What a time it was. "My girls," said Regina to an elderly English lady with whom she foregathered in one of the pretty little white *crêmeries* in the Rue de la Paix, "speak French like natives. I was educated in all sorts of ways—I have taken degrees and done all sorts of things that most women don't do—but when you put me down in Paris, I am utterly undone. I never realised before what a terrible thing want of education is."

"And yet you have taken degrees," said the lady, admiringly.

"Yes, but they are not much good when you come to Paris. But my daughters," she added, with pride, "speak French like Parisians."

It was a little wide of the mark. The girls did speak French with considerable fluency, and they had the advantage of not being shy, and of never allowing

want of knowledge to keep them back from communicating with their fellow-beings. And as they gabbled on, as Alfred Whittaker frequently declared, nineteen to the dozen, Regina stood by and admired.

CHAPTER VII

"LITTLE PIGLETS OF ENGLISH"

I doubt if even a universal *entente cordiale* will ever make the French mind and the English mind think alike.

Now it happened before Regina and her husband left Paris that Madame de la Barre intimated through the girls that she would like to have a little confidential chat with her pupils' mother.

"Mother," said Julia to Regina, "Madame wants to see you."

"She has seen me," said Reginia.

"Yes, yes, mother, but she wants to see you *toute seule.* I suppose she wants to tell you some delinquencies of ours, or something."

"I hope not," said Regina.

"Well, dear, you must expect us to be human, like other girls. We have never been in any trouble since we came here, and I don't know why she wants to see you, but, anyway, she asks if you will do her the favour of taking tea with her to-morrow afternoon at four o'clock."

"I will," said Regina.

"She doesn't speak one word of English, you know," said Julia.

"We shall communicate somehow," said Regina, with a superb air.

"I don't know how," said Julia, "since you can't speak two words of French—"

"*Excuse* me," said Regina, pointedly.

"Well, excuse me too, mother—I didn't mean to be rude. But your French isn't equal to your Latin, is it?"

"I will be there," said Regina, with a distinct accession of dignity.

And so, punctual to the moment, Regina appeared in the *salon* of the schoolmistress. Their mode of communication was original, it was also a little difficult, but both being determined women, they overcame the difficulties of the situation with a supreme indifference to the effect the one might have upon the other. As a matter of fact, Julia had been a little wide of the mark when she had declared to her mother that Madame did not speak one word of English. Madame spoke a little more English than Regina spoke French, and by a series of contortions, gesticulations, and other efforts which I need not attempt to reproduce here, Madame de la Barre contrived to make known to Mrs Whittaker her object in seeking for the interview. And her object in seeking the interview was that she should explain to her that she considered the taste in dress of the demoiselles Whittaker to be something too atrocious for words.

"*C'est affreux! c'est affreux,*" she exclaimed, when she found that Regina was a little dense of understanding. "Horreeble—horreeble!"

"I have never," said Regina, speaking very slowly and distinctly, and with an indulgent air as if she were communicating with someone a little short of being an idiot, "I have never trained my children to care about those matters."

"But they are young ladies! It is most important," Madame exclaimed, with quite a tragic air.

"It will come," said Regina, waving her substantial hand with a vast gesture, as if good taste in dressing was likely to drop from the clouds, "it will come. I never worry about things that are not essential."

"But it is essential for a young lady—a demoiselle—it is—it is for her life."

Poor Madame de la Barre! She tried very hard indeed to explain that the many purchases made by the young ladies were not such as should have been made by young girls not yet entered into the great world. She made no impression upon Regina.

"These are small matters," she said, with a magnificent air; "not essentials in any way. They will make mistakes at first—I don't doubt it, Madame—we have all done it in our day, but they will learn, oh, they will learn."

Madame shrugged her shoulders. She felt that she was dealing with a fool of the first water, upon whom valuable breath was wasted. After all, these were *English* girls. What did it matter? They were going to live in a land where it is the rule for women to make themselves such objects as Madame Whittaker herself. It is no exaggeration to say that when Mrs Whittaker had finally swept out of the

schoolmistress's presence, Madame de la Barre sat down and closed her eyes with a genuine shudder.

"What does it matter, these pigs of English, what they wear? Thou art too good-natured, Heloïse," she went on, apostrophising herself. "Thou canst forbid these little piglets of English from wearing their too disgraceful garments. What happens to them after they have left thy roof is no concern of thine. Thou art too good-natured, Heloïse!"

So the "little piglets of English" continued unchecked in their career of vicious millinery, and when the time came for them to return to the paternal roof, they went, taking with them a stock of garments calculated to make the Park, as they put it, "sit up."

And truly the Park did sit up, for the appearance of Regina's two girls was something quite out of the common.

"It is the latest fashion," said Regina, with an air of conviction to a neighbour who remarked that Maudie's hat was a little startling. "The girls brought all their things from Paris. It is the seat of good dressing."

You will observe that Regina never left any doubt in expressing her opinions. Hers was a positive nature. She would say, "My daughters *are* beautiful, my daughters *are* elegant, my daughters attract an enormous amount of attention," but never "I *think* my daughters are—" this, that, or the other.

So she gave forth, with the air of one whose fiat could not be questioned, the intimation that as

Maudie and Julia's things had come from Paris, they must be the *dernier cri.*

And the Park thought they were horrid.

Poor Regina! She was very happy in the return of her girls, so happy that she took a little holiday from her public work, and spent a whole week in talking things over, in arranging and rearranging their rooms, in examining all their purchases, in discussing what kind of life they should live in the immediate future.

"Now, what are your own ideas?" she demanded, on the second day after the return home of the girls, when they had settled down to tea and muffins.

Maudie looked at Julia. As usual, Julia answered for Maudie. Regina herself was full of suppressed eagerness.

"Well, if you really wish us to tell you exactly what we do want, mother," said Julia, "we will put it in a nutshell. We want father to give us an allowance."

"A decent allowance," put in Maudie.

"Yes, yes, dears; yes, yes," murmured Regina, who had prepared herself for an unfolding of great schemes, such as would have swayed her at her girls' age.

"The kind of allowance," Julia went on, "that he ought to give to girls of our age and position—that is to say, of *our* age and *his* position. Then we sha'n't go making sillies of ourselves; we shall know how to cut our coat according to our cloth."

"And how much do you think such an allowance ought to be?" Regina inquired.

"Oh, about a hundred a year each," said Julia.

"A hundred a year? That's a very ample allowance. I never spend more than that myself."

"Well, mother, it just depends on what you want us to be. If you want us to be smart, well-dressed girls with some position in the world, we couldn't do it under. We have talked it over thoroughly with French girls who know what society is, and with English girls of the same sort, and they all say that a hundred a year is the least a girl can dress herself decently on."

"And that would include—?" Regina questioned.

"It would include our clothes, our club subscriptions—"

"Your what?"

"Our club subscriptions."

"Oh, you are going to join a club, are you?"

"Of course. You have a club, mother. We want some place where we can rest the sole of our feet when we are in London. It isn't as if you lived right in Mayfair, you know."

"No, no; you are quite right. I have no objection to your joining a club, or doing anything else that is reasonable. So it would include your club subscriptions?"

"Oh yes, it would have to do that. And our personal expenses. We shouldn't have to look to father for any money other than an occasional present which he might like to give us if we were good, or if he could afford it; or on some special occasion."

"I see."

"Then we should like to have—er—er—" and here Julia stopped short and eyed her mother with a certain amount of apprehension.

"Well, go on, my darling. You would like to have what?"

"We should like to have a sitting-room of our own."

"Oh!"

"To which," Julia went on, emboldened by her mother's mild expression of face, "to which we could ask our friends without upsetting the house, and—and—and—"

"Go on," said Regina.

"Well, you see, most girls nowadays have an At Home day of their own—just for their own friends, irrespective of their mothers'."

"I haven't time for an At Home day," said Regina. "I used to have one, but I gave it up when you went to Paris."

"I think that was rather foolish of you, mother," said Julia. "A woman is nothing nowadays if she doesn't have an At Home day. I don't quite see myself what all your work brings you."

"Brings me?" echoed Regina.

"Yes, brings you. What's the good of working day and night, toiling into the small hours of the morning for a lot of other people? What do they ever do for you, mother?"

"Do for me?" Regina seemed suddenly to have become an echo of her own daughter. "I don't know that anybody does anything for me."

"No; it is always Mrs Alfred Whittaker toiling

and fagging and slaving for other people's glorification. I don't see the force of it. It seems to us," she went on, with a certain air of severity which ought to have amused Regina, but did nothing of the kind, "it seems to us that you get the worst of it in every way. We think, mother, that you ought to be very glad that we have come home to take care of you."

"Oh! Then you," said Regina, with a tinge of sarcasm in her tones, "you and Maudie are to have all the independence, and I am to be taken care of? That is very kind of you. Now, once for all let me speak, and then for ever after hold my peace. I give you, as long as you remain in your father's house, I give you the same amount of liberty that I had in mine and which I wish to have for myself now, but I give it you on one condition, which is that you never abuse it. If ever you should disappoint me by doing so—which not for one moment do I anticipate—I should instantly withdraw that free gift of liberty. But I want you to remember that while you have your liberty, I still need and require mine. One is so apt to forget, and particularly when one is devotedly attached to anyone, the rights and liberties of others. You are quite welcome, my children, to have your day at home, and your father will certainly not wish to curtail you in the matter of provision therefor. I shall not expect that your little entertainments will come out of your own personal income. At any time that you seek my advice on any matter, it will be there ready for your use. I shall never give it to you unsought, unless I should

see you going absolutely wrong. I will only ask you to remember that before all things I have striven, since you were tiny babies, first and foremost to preserve the originality of your minds. The more original you are, the more completely will you please me. There is so much in the circumstances and in the lives of women that tend to trammel and to stifle their better judgment and their better selves, that they have but little chance of letting any originality of mind which they may possess have fair play. You are singularly blessed in having an enlightened father and mother, who wish you to be in most respects as free as air. Take care, therefore, children, that you don't lose sight of this precious opportunity. Let honour and originality go hand in hand. With your gifts and your beauty, you must land yourselves upon the very crest of the wave. There," she went on, letting the tension of her feelings find relief in a little laugh, "there ends my little homily!" And she stretched forth her firm white hand and helped herself to the last piece of muffin in the dish.

CHAPTER VIII

CANDID OPINIONS

We train up our children, kindly or harshly, according to our temperaments, that they may walk along a certain road. The road is usually one of several, and it is an almost invariable chance that our children will take one contrary to that of our choice.

LET there be no mistake about the Whittaker girls. They were not in any way deceived or blinded by their mother's partiality for them.

"There is one thing you and I have got to make up our minds to, Maudie," said Julia, the day after they had had the little serious talk with their mother. "It's one thing to climb up a wall, it's another to topple over on the other side. If we don't look out what we are doing, *we* shall topple over the other side of our wall."

"I don't understand you," said Maudie; "at least, not quite."

"Well, it's like this," remarked Julia. "We have got to take everything that mother says as partly being mother's way. I don't know whether you have ever noticed it, Maudie, but mother never half does things. That's why she's such a splendid worker on all these committees she goes in for. Mother calls us

beauties; she says you are purely Greek in type, and that I am a cross between the French and Irish styles of beauty. Well, that's as may be. We can't go against mother; it would be rude—besides, it wouldn't be any good—but you and I needn't stuff each other up—or even ourselves for that matter—with the idea that we are going to set the world on fire with our faces. We sha'n't," she ended conclusively.

"I think you are rather nice-looking, Ju," said Maudie.

"Do you? I don't agree with you. But that's neither here nor there. As to your being purely Greek—well, I don't understand that either. I never saw a Greek that was the least little bit like you. You remember those girls at Madame's? Why, they had a touch of the East about them; they were next door to natives. I used to talk to them about it. I told them that I never knew Greeks were so dark—I always had an idea Greeks were fair people—but Zoe declared they were the common or garden pattern, and that a fair Greek was a thing almost unheard of."

"That's all rubbish and nonsense!" said Maudie in a more dominant tone than was her wont. "Do you remember Maurice Dolmanides?"

"The man who was at the boarding-house in Paris? Of course I do."

"Well, he was ginger."

"So he was—yes. And he was a Greek, wasn't he? All the same, Maudie, he had a Scotch mother, you know."

"Ah, I see. Yes, that does make a difference."

"I assure you," Julia went on, "that I talked it over with Zoe and Olga, and they both declared that they were the ordinary Greek type—round features, round black eyes, masses of coal-black hair, palest of olive skins. There's a touch of the Orient about it. But you, you are blonde; your nose has got a bump in the middle of it, your mouth is far from Greek—"

"Oh, my mouth," cried Maudie, with a look at herself in the glass, "my mouth is a regular shark's mouth!"

At this the two girls fell to laughing as heartily as if they were discussing the merits of some animal rather than one of themselves.

"In short," Julia went on, when they had somewhat recovered themselves, "in short, you and I have got to consider, first and foremost, what we can do to be original. We are not beauties, although mother, poor dear lady, persists that we have inherited an amount of beauty which is absolutely fatal. Dress us in an ordinary manner and we should look horrid. If we want to be any good in the world at all, we must do something a bit out of the common."

"Follow in our mother's footsteps?" said Maudie.

"Not a bit of it. What good does mother do by all her strenuous efforts to improve the condition of women? Is mother's condition one that requires improvement? Not a bit of it. Is our condition one that requires improvement? Not a bit of it."

"We don't know yet," said Maudie in a quiet, sensible tone.

"No, we don't. And until we get married and see how we get on with our respective husbands, we shall have to remain in our ignorance. One thing is very certain, Maudie, that neither you nor I are girls that can go in leading-strings. We have been made original and unconventional and independent; in fact, originality and unconventionalism and independence have been rammed down our throats from the time we could remember anything. It has been the key-note of mother's life. But we have, before we can do anything in our own set, to see to our room and arrange all our things. Now that old playroom is just as we left it. It's an awfully jolly room, capable of great things in the way of adornment. We must get daddy to have it done up for us, and to give us a certain amount for furnishing it. And we must have a piano."

"A piano?" said Maudie. "I don't think a piano is at all a necessary article. Clean paper and paint, a decent something to walk on—yes, that we can fairly ask father to give us, and I'm sure he won't grudge it; but seeing that neither you, nor I, nor mother knows one tune from another, and that there is a piano that cost a hundred and twenty guineas in the drawing-room, I don't think it would be fair to ask father to spend even half that sum in such an instrument for our exclusive use."

"Perhaps you are right," said Julia. "I must think that over. But a piano we *must* have. If we are going to have an At Home day we must be able to have music, even though we can't make it ourselves."

"But why not have our At Home day in mother's drawing-room?"

"Because that would very quickly degenerate into mother's At Home day, and you know what mother's At Home day means—seven women, two girls, and half a man. No, if we have an At Home day of our own, it must be in our own room. I'll tell you what we'll do, Maudie, we'll go up to town and choose a little piano somewhere, the kind of piano that you see in the Army and Navy Stores' list as suitable for yachts, and we'll pay for it out of our allowance."

"But we can't."

"Yes, we can. We can take three years to pay for it. If we spend thirty pounds on a piano, that's quite enough. People can't walk into your room and ask you whether your piano cost thirty pounds or ninety pounds. It wouldn't be very much out of our allowance for each of us to pay fifteen pounds in three years—only five pounds a year—then the piano will be ours."

"And suppose one of us gets married?" asked Maudie.

"Well if one of us gets married, she must leave it for the other one."

"And the other one?"

"Well, if the other one gets married, she must leave it for the use of the home."

"Oh, I see."

"Well," said Julia, briskly, putting down the book that she held in her hand, "let us go into the playroom and just cast our eyes over its capabilities."

So the two girls went off to their old playroom, which was just as they had left it when they had departed for their school in Paris two years before.

"It's a good shape," said Julia. "That bow window and those two little windows on that side give it great possibilities. We ought to have a cosy corner there."

"That will cost five-and-twenty guineas," said Maudie.

"Oh no; I mean a rigged-up cosy corner. We'll take in *Home Blither* for a few weeks. We are sure to get an idea out of that."

"I've never," remarked Maudie, "seen anything about a cosy corner in *Home Blither* that did not combine a washstand with it. We don't want a washstand, Julia."

"No, not in this room—certainly not. I propose that we have a delicate French paper with bouquets of roses—perhaps a white satin stripe with bouquets of roses tied up with delicate blue or mauve ribbons. That will give us an interesting background to work upon."

"Then for the curtains?" said Maudie.

"Well, for the curtains I should have—well, now, what should I have? Well, I'll tell you. I should have chintz."

"I shouldn't; I should have cretonne. It will look warmer."

"We don't want to look warm; we want to look dainty. Or we might have lace curtains."

"Yes, we might. And we might have those lovely

dewdrops to hang in front of the window, but of course it looks into the garden, and it would be rather a pity to shut the garden out in any way."

"Yes," said Julia. "A little desk there," she went on; "white wood, you know, the kind of thing that you get in the High Street all ready for painting, or poker work. We might sketch all over it, or get our friends to autograph it."

"Autograph it?"

"Yes. And then varnish it over with a very clear, colourless varnish. It would look very beautiful, and it would be original too."

"Yes, it would be original. Supposing we have all the furniture like that?"

"No, no, not all the furniture — only the writing-table. There's something appropriate about autographs on a writing-table," Julia declared.

Eventually Mr Whittaker agreed to have the room done up according to the girls' ideas, and to give them a certain sum for furnishing it according to their own taste.

"Now I do beg, dear Alfie," said Mrs Whittaker, who, in spite of her desire that her girls should be original, was a person who loved to have a finger in every pie, "now I do beg, Alfie, that you will not be too lavish. Have the room thoroughly done up according to their ideas, that is only right. I like the notion of delicate bouquets of roses, tied together with a sky-blue ribbon, on a white satin stripe. It is elegant, refined, and capable of great things in

the general effect. I would have a suitable ceiling paper to match, and you must give them a pretty electric light arrangement in place of this simple one. After that, leave everything to the girls. Yes, dears, the paint will have to be touched up. It won't require newly painting, because, you see, it has been white, and it is not in very bad condition. So have it entirely done, Alfie—ceiling, walls, paint—then give them a sum of money, just enough for them to exercise their ingenuity in making it go the very furthest."

"I'll give you thirty pounds," said Alfred Whittaker, slapping his pocket and thrusting his hand into it with an air of firm determination. "Thirty pounds after I have done the decoration, and no more. If you can't make a room look smart with thirty pounds, you don't deserve to have a room of your own."

"All right, daddy. Thank you very much," said Julia.

"Yes, daddy dear, we'll make it do very nicely," said Maudie.

And then they sat down to hold another council of war.

"Maudie," said Julia, "thirty pounds won't go very far."

"No," replied Maudie. "We can't possibly buy a carpet under ten pounds for a room of that size."

"Well, then, I'll tell you what we'll do—we'll polish the floor, and we'll have two or three nice rugs. We shall get them for about a guinea or

thirty shillings apiece. And we must go in for bamboo."

"Oh, I hate bamboo," Maudie cried.

"We could enamel it white."

"H'm—bamboo enamelled white," said Maudie, dubiously; "it doesn't sound particularly fascinating."

"Well, that was rather a nice stand we saw up at Derry & Tom's the other day, wasn't it, with three sticks of bamboo arranged so as to hold a pot in the middle? Enamelled white it would be rather fetching, particularly if we had a nice trailing plant in it. Then we've got to get a fender; and they've got some lovely basket chairs at Barker's, I know they have; and I saw some tables at two-and-eleven in a shop down the High Street—I don't know what the name is. Oh, we shall find it easy enough; you can do a good deal at furnishing a room when you can get a table for two-and-eleven."

"Yes, I daresay you're right. You've got a wonderful headpiece, Ju. Then, I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll get our room papered and painted, and then we'll have the floor done up—that's all quite plain sailing—and then we shall be better able to decide whether we'll have a small square of carpet or two or three rugs. We needn't have very expensive ones; it isn't as if we had got a lot of boys to come clumping about with muddy boots, is it?"

"No, there's something in that. And I'll tell you what, Maudie—if we have chintz for the curtains, we could have chintz covers for the big old couch and

the large armchair that we had in the room from the beginning. One thing is very certain," Julia continued impressively, "that we shall have to weigh every penny before we spend it."

CHAPTER IX

THE GIRLS' DOMAIN

We learn most through our mistakes.

You know what the British workman is. Believe me, that the particular specimen of the British workman who haunts Northampton Park has no fewer sins than his fellow who inhabits the heart of London. The days dragged on, dragged on, dragged on. Oh, that lovely sitting-room of Maudie and Julia Whittaker's imagination, day by day it seemed as if it was receding further and further into the Never-Never-Land.

First of all, there was a difficulty about the paper. After a week's delay, various samples of paper were submitted to them, papers that were marvellously cheap, marvellously dainty. The choice being left entirely to the girls, it fell upon one at two-and-four the piece. It was an elegant paper; stripes of white satin alternated with a wide white rib, upon which were flung at regular intervals delicate bouquets of banksia roses and violets. The ribbon which tied each bouquet and meandered on to the next was of the most delicate blue. The ceiling was of embossed white satin (apparently), and the frieze, which was rather

deep, was composed of long festoons of the tiny roses caught at intervals with bunches of violets. Oh, it was a lovely paper! But they had to wait for it. For some occult reason, best known to the decorator who had undertaken the work of transforming that particular room at Ye Dene—which, by-the-bye, the girls determined to christen the *parloir*—that particular paper was out of stock. Impatient Julia suggested that they should choose another one, but the decorator blandly informed her that it was such a favourite with fashionable people in the West End that the manufacturers were reprinting, and he expected the consignment for their room—which he had already ordered—to arrive at any moment.

And the days went by after the manner of days when there is a little house-decorating on hand. The decorator suggested that they could get on with the rest of the work, so on a duly-appointed day several gentlemen, dressed in lily-white garments, arrived and began to work their will upon the empty room. They swept the chimney—not the lily-white gentlemen, but a black one who seemed to be on friendly terms with them; they tore off the existing paper and they washed the ceiling, and then they went away and thought about things. They thought about things for several days, until at last the Whittaker girls hied them to the head office and made representation to the master of the business. Then they came and papered half the ceiling.

"How lovely it looks, doesn't it?" said Maudie to Julia.

"It would look lovelier if it were all done. I expect

we shall have to go and fetch them to paper the other half."

It was quite true. But still, bit by bit, the room progressed towards a thing of beauty, and at length, after a period of about five weeks, the foreman in charge of the work announced in a tone of triumph that they had come to bid the household at Ye Dene adieu. He didn't put it in those words, my reader, but that was his meaning.

"I am sure we are very much obliged to you," said Julia. "You have been a very long time about it.'

"Well, lady, the workman gets blamed when the blame belongs to somebody else. You see, we had to wait for the paper, and when we got the paper we had to wait for the frieze, and then when we got the frieze we had to wait for that bit of paint just to finish off the doors. Still, it'll last much longer because it has been slow in doin'."

"Oh, really, will it?" said Julia, rather taken aback. "Oh, I'm glad of that, because, of course, as it takes such a long time doing, one doesn't want to be often turned out of one's room for so long. Thank you so much. Would you like a glass of beer?"

"Well, lady, a glass of beer never comes amiss to a man at the end of a hard day's work," rejoined the foreman. "Me and my mates thank you very much."

So Julia called to one of the servants and ordered "Beer for these gentlemen" with a lavish air which the more frugal Regina might not have approved had she happened to be at home. Regina was, however, at that moment gracing with her dignified presence a platform devoted at that hour to the restriction of the

sale of strong drinks, and the incident never came to her knowledge.

"Now, Maudie," said Julia, "have you any suggestions to make?"

Maudie stood looking round and round the room which was to do their especial domain.

"It's awfully pretty," she said. "Well, as to suggestions, I should suggest that we get the floor done before we do anything else."

"Yes. And then I suggest that we choose the chintz," said Julia.

"I like cretonne better than chintz," replied Maudie.

"No, cretonne is like flannelette at fourpence-ha'penny a yard—looks like the loveliest flannel, and you make up your blouse and think you have got a treasure that's going to last you for six weeks without washing. You find out your mistake in about six days, and when you send it to the wash, it comes back as rough as a badger and can never be worn more than once afterwards. No, dear girl, let us have chintz."

"I suppose," said Maudie, "if you want chintz you'll have chintz."

"Well, we'll go up to the High Street to-morrow morning and we'll look at both—"

"Excuse me making so bold," said a voice at the door, "but if I might be allowed to speak to you ladies—"

They both turned with a start. The foreman, politely pressing the back of his hand across his lips, was standing in the hall. "Well?" they said in the same breath.

"If I might make so bold, ladies, as to suggest, our guv'nor is a one-er on chintzes."

"Oh, really?"

"Loose covers is his special'ty—his special'ty." He again passed the back of his hand across his lips. "Thank you very much for the drink, ladies. It was very welcome. If I might make so bold as to—"

"You had better have another," said Julia.

"I'm not saying no, miss. It's very polite of you, and I accepts it as it's offered. If I might make so bold, I would suggest that I just speak to the guv'nor as I go past the head office, and he'd send his book of patterns up in the morning. He could send them up and then you could look at them in the room itself. It's always more satisfactory than seeing them at a distance. It isn't everyone," the foreman went on, "that can hold a scheme of colour in the *h*eye and carry it to a shop miles away, and take the exact match of it."

"No," said Maudie, "I suppose not."

"Well, I can," said Julia, with decision. "If there's one thing I can do, it is to carry a scheme of colour in my eye; but at the same time you might as well tell Mr Broxby to send in his book of chintz patterns, and we'll have a look at them. But who shall we get to make them?"

"Makin' loose covers is one of Mr Broxby's special'ties," said the foreman. He turned and held out his glass that he might have it refilled. "My respects to you young ladies," he said politely, raising his glass towards the two girls, "my respects to you. It isn't often that a man in my position

finishes a job with such pleasure as it's been to us fellows to do this 'ere room for you young ladies, and if I can put any little tip in your way, it's a great pleasure to me to do it."

"Thank you," said Julia. "You are very kind. You have done the room beautifully, we are most satisfied. And if you'll tell Mr Broxby to send us his chintzes to-morrow morning, we can look at them."

Then began another period of waiting. Mr Broxby arrived himself with the books of patterns. He viewed the great roomy old couch on which for years the girls had played, and which they had, as Julia frankly said, used abominably, and he made one or two suggestions for adding to its comfort at no great outlay of money. And finally they chose a chintz for the curtains of the three windows, and for covers for the couch and the large armchair. The cost thereof was a question into which Mr Broxby found it difficult to go.

"I couldn't exactly say, Miss Whittaker, what the price will be, but it won't be very much," he remarked. "You see, cretonne is cheaper than chintz, that is why so many people chooses cretonne in preference to the other; but when you come to the question of wear—why, chintz has it all its own way."

"Just what I said," said Julia, "just what I said. Well, now, look here, Maudie, we'll have this chintz, and as to the cost—well, we must leave it to Mr Broxby's honour that he doesn't ruin us. If you ruin us," she said, "you won't get your bill paid as soon, or nearly as soon, as if you keep the prices down. Our father has given us a sum of money to do this room

up with. He pays for the papering, but he gives us a fixed sum of money for everything else, and if you charge us too much you'll have to leave half your bill till next year."

"And who'll pay it then?" asked Maudie.

"Oh, well, you and I will have to pay it."

"I see."

Now Maudie was a careful soul who detested procrastination: at any time she preferred to go out in a pair of extremely dirty gloves rather than procure others by forestalling her next quarter's money (for I must tell you that for several years these girls had had a small allowance paid quarterly which provided them with gloves and ties).

Then there set in another period of waiting. The chintz, like the wall-paper, was not in stock, and on learning this fact the two girls went round and explained to Mr Broxby that they would just as soon choose another.

"Now, young ladies, if you would allow me to advise you," said Mr Broxby—"it's the same thing to me, of course—but if you would allow me to advise you, I should say wait and have the chintz that exactly suits your wall-paper. There isn't another chintz in the book that exactly goes with the paper. If you chance on one that clashes with the paper, well, your room is spoilt at once. I'll hurry them on all I know, but I must say that it will give me more satisfaction to make things up with a legitimate end in view."

"There's something in that," said Maudie. "I should wait."

"Very well," said Julia, "but if I have to wait another five weeks, all I can say is, Mr Broxby, that I shall come every morning and I shall worry you until we do get the covers."

"Young ladies, you will not come too often to please me," said Mr Broxby, gallantly. At which the two girls laughed, and literally took to their heels and fled.

I won't say that they waited quite five weeks for the chintz, but they did have to wait; and when at length Mr Broxby announced that he had received the chintz, they had to wait yet a little longer while the curtains and covers were put together.

"But doesn't it look sweet now it's done?" said Julia. "Isn't it sweet? Yes, it's true they've cost a lot—you're quite right there, Maudie; and they'll make a big hole in our thirty pounds. Of course, we ought to have an Aubusson carpet, but we can't possibly afford that."

"No," said Maudie, shaking her head resolutely, "that is certain, as certain as that one day we shall both die. The best thing we can do is to go for one of those square things we saw at Barker's the other day—'cord squares,' I think they called them."

"I wanted a carpet our feet would sink in," said Julia.

"You can't have it, my dear. Besides, it wouldn't be much in keeping with a girls' room. Have a pretty dark blue cord square. We shall get it for about three pounds. We shall have endless bother with people slipping about and smashing things if we try and make these boards look like parquet."

"You don't slip on parquet as you do on boards," said Julia. "You see, we haven't very much left, and we must have two big basket chairs, a couple of small chairs, and a stool or two; and we must have a writing-table. And then we haven't got any sort of an overmantel, no sort of a looking-glass, and no pictures, to say nothing of a stand or two to put plants in. I don't see where it is all coming from—still less the piano. Oh, I haven't given up all idea of the piano. That we must squeeze out of our dress allowance."

"You don't think," said Maudie, "that we could put the piano off for another year?"

"No," said Julia, decidedly, "it's no good spoiling the ship for a ha'porth of tar."

CHAPTER X

A WEIGHTY BUSINESS

I have always had a tender feeling about the great Idiot Asylum which teaches its children by means of keeping shop, with real pennies and real sweeties.

Now if there was one thing on which Julia Whittaker prided herself, it was that she could carry colour in her eye. A great many people have the same belief, and it is a point upon which a very large number entirely deceive themselves.

On the very afternoon of the day that they had decided on the chintz for the curtains and covers, the sisters hied themselves to that part of London which is familiarly known as "the High Street." Knowing that their mother would be away from the Park during all the hours which intervened between breakfast and dinner, so the girls determined that they would get something which would serve as lunch in one of the large shops in Kensington High Street which catered for that particular meal. Thus they had several hours before them for selection and consideration.

"Maudie," said Julia, as they walked into the carpet room at John Barker's, "there's one thing we've never given a thought to."

"What's that?" asked Maudie.

"The blinds. And, mind you, the blinds will cost us a pretty penny."

"Won't those we have do?" Maudie suggested.

"Oh, Maudie!"

"No, I suppose they won't," Maudie admitted.

"Of course," Julia went on, "mother was right enough when she had those green blinds to match the bedrooms at the back of the house—they were quite good enough for a playroom, but they would be horrid for us. Well, that keeps us down to the idea of a cord for the carpet. We want to look at carpets," she said to a gentlemanly young man who came up asking her pleasure. "No, nothing so expensive as that," she continued, casting reflective eyes upon a very beautiful carpet square. "We want something that will be—I think you call them a cord—something in deep blue, or deep crimson, or a rich green."

"I'm afraid," said the young man, shaking his head doubtfully, "that we haven't anything quite in those colours. We have a blue, and we have a terra-cotta. What size, madam?"

Well, I needn't go through the process of buying a cheap carpet. The transaction ended by the two girls purchasing a carpet which, as Julia remarked, was really almost too ugly for words. It was not an ugly carpet as carpets for that price go—it would have been admirable in a bedroom, but for a sitting-room with a delicate Louis XV. paper, with exquisite

chintzes to match, it was certainly not a little out of keeping.

"After all, the carpet doesn't matter," said Julia, with an air of making the best of it, "so long as it's unobtrusive and neat."

"I believe plain felt would have been the best," said Maudie, eyeing the carpet with much disfavour.

"They don't wear, do they?" said Julia, appealing to the young man.

"No, a felt carpet doesn't wear, madam. It sweeps up into a good deal of fluff, and it's apt to induce moths in the house, and we really don't find them very satisfactory. It looks very nice at first," he ended with a flourish, as if their brains were enough to fill up the rest of the sentence.

"Yes, I think so, too. Well, we'll have it, Maudie, eh? It will do for us to begin with," she added in a whisper. "Now tell us, where are the blinds?"

"I can show you the blinds, madam. They are in the other end of the department."

I must confess that the blinds were another blow. Mind you there were five windows to provide for—two single windows and a large bay of three lights.

"These blinds are ruinous," remarked Maudie, as the young man drew down one rich linen and lace specimen after another.

"I am afraid," said Julia, "we must have something more simple than that."

"A good blind, madam, is worth its money. Blinds don't wear out like carpets," said the young gentleman. "I should personally recommend this one. Yes, it *is* rather dear to begin with, but it

gives the window an air, and it will clean again and again and again. Perhaps your house is in a very smoky district."

"No, it isn't. We live in Northampton Park."

"Ah, then I should recommend these—I should really. They will be more satisfaction to you afterwards. A carpet is a very different thing. You are walking on a carpet every day, and it's hidden by other things, but blinds, unless you are having curtains quite stretched across the windows, blinds are always in view. Really, I should recommend these."

And eventually they did buy them; and then they bade their tempter adieu and went across the road to look into furniture. Well, the furnishing of a room is always more or less a matter of taste, a matter of individual taste, I may say, and the two girls that afternoon displayed their individual taste in a most extraordinary manner. They bought the most curious and unnecessary articles. First of all they fell in love with a most elaborate overmantel, which was ready to be enamelled in any colour that the purchaser desired, or which might be stained to simulate oak. For its centre it had a square of looking-glass with bevelled edges, and it had many little cupboards and shelves and pillars. It was a most elaborate creation. Then Maudie fell in love with a couple of Japanese vases. They were exceedingly meretricious in their art, they were the most modern specimens of that style of Japanese handicraft which is produced exclusively for the English market. The English have much to answer for, and the prostitu-

tion of Japanese art, like the prostitution of art in India, is among the sins for which one day England will surely be called upon to justify herself. The price of these vases was twelve-and-ninepence. You know perhaps what it is to buy your first piece of porcelain, either new or old. It's like that first downward step out of the rigid paths of honesty which leads eventually to the gallows. The Whittaker girls took the step at a jump.

The consequences were disastrous. Oh, the rubbish they bought that day, the absurd little tables that turned over almost with being looked at, the ridiculous plant stands, the preposterous little cupboards for hanging on the wall. Then they must needs have a horrible curtain of reeds and beads and string, and a three-fold screen, which was a marvel of cheapness because it was the last one left in stock. Then their taste went to Venetian glass—such Venetian glass!—some modern faïence from Rouen, and some Wedgwood which surely would cause the originator of that great art to turn in his grave could he have beheld it. Fans they bought also, and a gipsy pot for a coal pan, and then they remembered that they must have a fender, and they did themselves rather nicely in a black curb with a brass railing. Then they reminded each other that they must have a set of fireirons, and then they went off to see the basket chairs.

"They're very ugly," said Maudie.

"And they're not very comfortable," rejoined Julia. "But there, we have spent such a lot of money

already that we certainly must get our chairs before we think of anything else."

"And we have no small chairs."

"No, we haven't. I don't know where we shall get small chairs—we can't possibly afford expensive ones."

"If I were you, ladies, I should go and look in the second-hand furniture department," suggested the young lady who was convoying them round the basket department.

"Yes, that's a good idea. We might pick up some odd chairs there. That's a good idea," said Julia. "Well, then, Maudie, if we have those two big lounge chairs and those two little occasional chairs, that ought to do us very well."

"Will you have them cushioned, madam?"

"Cushioned? Of course we ought to have them cushioned. Is there much difference in the price?"

"Oh, no, madam, not very much. Cushions in a pretty cretonne are quite inexpensive."

So eventually, without any reference either to the carpet or the wall-paper, or the chintz curtains and covers, they chose a pretty cretonne of a nice salmon-pink shade. And then they went to the second-hand department and looked out two or three occasional chairs, which were in reality the most sensible purchases that they made.

I wish I could adequately paint the scene the following morning, when the van conveying all the purchases, with the exception of the blinds and the chairs which had still to be cushioned, drew up at the door of Ye Dene. First came the carpet, which was

promptly laid down and tacked into position.

"It clashes with everything," said Maudie, quite tragically.

"I don't think it does. It goes quite well with that blue in the wall-paper. I carried the colour in my eye," said Julia. "And, after all, it won't show much. There's a lot to go on it."

And true enough, compared with the other things, the carpet was absolutely inoffensive.

"You would like the over-mantel put up, lady?" said the workman who laid the carpet.

"Yes, I think so."

"You wouldn't like to have it enamelled first?"

"No, I think we'll keep it as it is," Julia replied. "Don't you think so, Maudie?"

"Oh yes," said Maudie in a voice of complete despair, "keep it as it is."

Honestly, I do not know how to describe this room, the room that had started so well. With a few articles of real Louis Quinze furniture to give it a tone, and the rest decently shrouded in the exquisite chintz which the girls had chosen, the room might have been one whose equal was not to be found in the length and breadth of the Park. As it was, it ended by having the air of a bazaar stall, put together by somebody who did not properly understand the business.

"There, that looks awfully nice and cosy behind the couch," said Julia, eyeing with much satisfaction the three-fold screen, which was of a vivid scarlet embroidered in garish colours. "At least it will

do when the couch gets its pretty new frock on."

"And what are you going to do with this?" asked Maudie, holding up a mass of bright-coloured beads and string depending from a lath.

"I thought we would hang it over that window."

"But you want them over all the windows."

"Well, do you know I really don't know what we did have that for. Look here, we've gone on the conventional line in this room, let's start and have something that's not at all conventional. "We'll hang it on one side of the bay window—yes, just up there."

"Well, we can't fix it up ourselves. We'll have to get one of Broxby's men to come in."

"It will look awfully well," said Julia, "and it will screen off that part of the room. Maudie," she went on, breaking off sharp as a new idea struck her, "what on earth were we thinking of? We ought to have had a window seat."

"That would have been a good idea—I wonder we never thought of it," Maudie cried.

"Well, we can't now," said Julia in a very matter-of-fact tone, "because we haven't any money left. As it is, I don't believe thirty pounds will cover all we spent yesterday."

"Neither do I, for when the blinds come you'll find they will be ever so much dearer than we bargained for. Shall we stand this tall bamboo thing here?"

"Yes—just in front of where the reed and bead curtain is to go. Well, then, since we haven't a window

seat," Julia went on, "we must put one of the big wicker chairs there."

"But who's going to sit there alone?"

"Oh, we can put a small occasional chair beside it. The man can sit on that."

"And a table?"

"Yes—oh yes, I should put a table for their tea-cups. Well, then, when the piano comes—and by-the-bye don't forget we have to go up to-day and choose it—when the piano comes, what do you say to standing it out here?"

"It would not look bad."

"And this wicker chair like that—a little table there—"

"Oh, it will be exquisite! There won't be another room in the Park like it."

"And there are all these things, Julia," said Maudie, looking down upon a great dust-sheet on which were spread the rest of their many purchases. "I don't know where we shall put everything. All these little knick-knacks and odds and ends, they are awfully quaint and funny and pretty, but I'm sure I don't know what we are to do with them. Here, you have got the eye; you must say just where they are to go."

And Julia, having the eye, did say where they were to go; in fact, with her own energetic hands she spread them about the room—crawling beetles, grinning devils, spotted cats with exaggerated green eyes, odds and ends of pottery, glass and porcelain.

"Do you think we need have that overmantel enamelled?" she asked Maudie at last.

"No, I should have it stained black—ebonised, that's the word," said Maudie, looking round. "As it is, the room is too new, too ornate, too dazzlingly modern. There isn't a touch of shadow in it anywhere—it's like a face without any eyelashes."

CHAPTER XI

AMBITIONS

Many people look upon mental blindness as they do upon physical blindness—as a terrible affliction. Yet, when the mentally blind suddenly see, their condition is not usually improved thereby.

If the Whittaker girls had been unpopular as children, they certainly made up for it, so far as Northampton Park was concerned, when they became young women. The innovation of having an At Home day of their own, at which their mother made a point of not appearing, was so daring that every girl in the Park made it her duty to be present thereat, and when it was bruited abroad that it was really a girls' At Home, with no overshadowing mothers and suchlike sober persons, that the girls had their own room and their own tea-things, and excellent provision in the way of cakes, and that cigarettes were allowed after six o'clock, then not only the girls, but also their brothers, soon came flocking into Ye Dene in considerable numbers. The whole winter did this state of things continue, until the At Home days at Ye Dene were no longer a nine days' wonder but an established fact.

Then Maudie and Julia began to meet with other

girls further afield than their own immediate vicinity, girls who were connections or friends of the girls who lived in the Park, and invitations began to shower in upon Regina's daughters. They were perfectly independent—Regina wished them to be so, and prided herself on the fact that they were so—and as their comings and goings did not interfere with the comfort of their father, Alfred Whittaker saw nothing to which he could frame any reasonable objection in his daughters' mode of life.

It happened one afternoon that the two girls were having tea and muffins in their own sitting-room. It was just before Easter, that week when the tide of suburban entertaining lulls a little, and the two were sitting by a blazing fire in big wicker chairs drawn close up to the fender, the low Moorish tea-table conveniently placed between them.

"Maudie," said Julia, suddenly, "I think we shall have to pull up."

"Pull up! why?" Maudie's tone was blank, for she herself had a particular reason for not wanting to pull up in any shape or form just then.

"We're getting too cheap," said Julia.

"Cheap! and we've spent nearly all our dress allowance!" Maudie exclaimed.

"I don't mean cheap in that way. No, we're getting cheap socially. Anybody thinks they can come to our days and bring anyone they like, and we do half the entertaining of the Park for people who do nothing for us."

"It makes us popular," said Maudie, helping herself to another piece of muffin.

"Yes, yes, but is such popularity worth it?"

"I don't know."

"Are we going on right through the season?"

"Well, you know, Ju, the season doesn't make much difference to us."

"It's going to," said Julia.

"Is it going to this season?" Maudie demanded. "That's the question — is it going to this season?"

"I don't see why not. We've got any amount of invitations for next month, and not more than a third of them are in the Park. A third? A quarter, I should say. Now I'll tell you what I propose doing."

"Well?"

"I propose, as it is the regulation thing to do, to chuck our 'day' until next autumn."

"Julia!" Maudie was so taken aback that she was surprised into giving her sister her full name, the diminutive thereof not seeming to express sufficiently what was in her mind.

"You may say 'Julia,' but my head is screwed on the right way. I suppose I shall never get mother and the dad to move away from Ye Dene."

"From the Park?"

"Yes. We have got too much of the Park about us. It's all Park. Dad is very well off, mother has money of her own—why shouldn't we go and live in Kensington? We could shunt all these Park people, excepting just the best—those we have been the most intimate with—and get into a real good set. What's the use of having a well-off father and a very

distinguished mother if we hide our light under a bushel in such a place as this?"

"The people that live here are just as good as we are."

"Well, perhaps they are, and perhaps they're not, Maudie," Julia retorted sharply. "If we satisfy them, I'm quite sure they don't satisfy me. I don't believe myself in sitting on the bottom rung of the ladder when you can easily and comfortably climb up to the top."

"But shall we ever get to the top?"

"No, never; that means strawberry leaves. But there are a dozen reasons for getting out of Ye Dene. In the first place, the dad has to get up at an ungodly hour in the morning so as to get to his office at the usual time. Mother spends half her life in the train, and you know neither of them are as young as they were. I went up to town with mother yesterday, and I'm sure it was pitiful to see her dragging herself up those steep station stairs. She ought to be able to get into a cab and go to her meetings, a woman of her substance."

"Perhaps. But we shall never get a house like this—never, never, Ju. We shall have to do without our own sitting-room, or else have a little box somewhere at the back of the house, looking into a yard. We shall have to have clean curtains every fortnight like the Brookeses. We shall have to sleep up on the third or fourth storey—and it will all be horrid, horrid, horrid!"

"Not at all. My dear, there are plenty of houses quite as good as this in Kensington."

"They'll be three times the rent."

"Not a bit of it, not the least little bit of it. Look at that house where the Ponsonby-Piggots live; garden—charming garden, tea-house at the end, greenhouse, shrubs, lawn, three lovely sitting-rooms on the entrance floor, and only two storeys above. We don't want a castle with eight or nine bedrooms—what should we do with them? *Why, the Ponsonby-Piggots keep fowls!*"

"Oh, well, I suppose you'll have your own way. You had better talk to mother about it."

"I've learned a lot from the Ponsonby-Piggots," Julia went on. "They don't just trust to tea and cakes and cigarettes, and a song or two, to make them somebody. Each of those three plain girls—and *that's* rather paying them a compliment—has got some special line of her own. Gwenny is engaged to the ugliest man in London, and she makes a parade of having his presentment everywhere—statuettes, photographs, pastels, miniatures, everything you can think of—to bring the man into prominence. And he hasn't got twopence; and though he's a gentleman, they probably won't be able to marry for the next ten years. Theo collects Napoleon relics. Didn't you notice that the end of their sitting-room is devoted to Napoleon?"

"Yes, I did, but I didn't know why," said Maudie in rather a wondering tone.

"Well, that's why. And Stella, the little one with the curly red hair, she collects half-a-dozen things—postcards, autographs, souvenir teaspoons, and old lustre ware. These girls only have an allowance of forty pounds a year for their dresses—each, I mean,"

she added hurriedly. "And if they want more they make it."

"But how?"

"Oh, in various ways. Gwenny, I believe, is secretary to a big doctor up in town. She only has to attend from ten till five, and she gets a rousing good salary, and she's putting it all away towards house furnishing. Then Theo, she does a bit of journalism, and Stella, well, she's the most original of all. She's a regular little Jew."

"How do you mean—regular little Jew?"

"Oh, she's always chopping and changing among her collections. She made a hundred and twenty pounds last year in selling things at a thoroughly good profit that she had picked up for nothing. If her mother would let her, she'd go into a flat with Theo and open a regular business. But Mrs Ponsonby-Piggot says that the girls have plenty of money for their needs, and always will have."

"Well, if so, why should they? You wouldn't like to open a shop?"

"I'd do anything rather than stick in the mud," said Julia, "anything in the wide world."

"Stick in the mud!" echoed Maudie. "And this is all that has come of mother's higher education!"

"Well, mother higher-educated herself. She made a huge mistake, and nobody knows it better than mother. She is up in all sorts of learned and abstruse subjects that she has never been able to turn to account in any shape or form, and the ordinary things that women ought to know she is perfectly ignorant of. Fancy setting mother to make a pie!"

"Fancy setting *you* to make a pie," retorted Maudie.

"Oh, well, I've been thinking it wouldn't be half a bad idea if we were to enter at the Park Polytechnic and take a course of dressmaking, another of millinery, another of cooking, and, for the matter of that, we might take a fourth at housekeeping."

"How should we get it all in?"

"Oh, well, that's easy enough. You pay two guineas a year, and you can join any class you like. The classes are going on all day long, so Rita Mackenzie tells me, and you pay sixpence each as a sort of entrance fee."

"Then we couldn't do that if we left Ye Dene."

"Ah, but we sha'n't leave Ye Dene to-day, nor to-morrow—I never thought of that for a moment. But if we once graft into the dad's head that it is possible we may one day want to leave Ye Dene, he'll put himself in the right channel for getting good offers for it. Don't make any mistake about the value of Ye Dene. It's freehold, it is in the main road, and it is in the best position in the whole place. It's in perfect repair inside and out. I don't believe, if the dad was to put it in the hands of two or three good agents, that we should be here two months."

"What is Rita Mackenzie going in for?"

"House decoration. My dear, I went in to see her yesterday—I forgot to tell you; it was when you were over at the Marksbys. You know there's a studio to their house?"

"Oh yes."

"Well, her father has made it over to her. She took a course of lessons, and she's decorated it herself. It's a dream!" said Julia. "When I look round this room and think of Rita's, it makes me feel sick."

"What's the matter with this room?"

"Oh, what's the matter! Just this, Maudie, that since we evolved this room out of our own ignorant, vulgar minds, I've been getting educated."

"My dear, I thought we had finished our education long ago," said Maudie, somewhat taken aback.

"That's where your limitations come in, Maudie. If ever you get married, you'll find that you have everything to learn that will make life happy and comfortable to you, unless you enter yourself at the Polytechnic beforehand."

"I might do worse," said Maudie, looking round. She honestly couldn't see, poor, prosaic girl that she was, that anything was amiss with their own especial sanctum. It was bright, cheerful, dainty, and scrupulously clean. There were evidences on all sides that it was a room in which people lived a great share of their lives. A great Persian cat lay on a blue velvet cushion on one side of the hearth, and a very presentable black spaniel was curled up in a padded basket on the other. "I'm sure," she said, looking into the blazing depths of the fire, and then helping herself to another piece of muffin, "I'm sure there's not a prettier room in the Park than ours."

"Oh, my dear, don't talk nonsense! It's horrid. We've got a Louis Quinze paper, Louis Quinze

chintz, and make-believe Japanese bead and reed curtains. We've got cheap bazaar rubbish all over the place, and not one scrap of furniture worth calling furniture in it. The carpet gets up and hits the walls, and the walls in their turn slap the screen, and the screen clashes with the chintz, and you and I clash with everything else. Oh, it's dreadful, it's horrible!"

"We've spent most of our dress allowance on it," wailed Maudie.

"That's the piano. You know, Maudie, you would have a good one. And by-the-bye," she added, letting her remark fly into the air like a bombshell, and by-the-bye, if either of us gets married before the piano is paid for, will the other poor wretch have to finish off the payments by herself?"

"Well, even if she does," said Maudie, "the one that has to finish off the payments will have the piano."

CHAPTER XII

TWOPENNY DINNERS

Possession to some natures seems always to demand value in what is possessed; to others it has exactly the opposite effect.

JULIA duly implanted in her parents' minds the preliminary idea that a change from Ye Dene might be desirable. But the Whittakers did not leave the Park just then, for it was only a few days after the conversation between the two girls on the subject of removal, that quiet, unoriginal Maudie cast a veritable bombshell into the family circle. For Maudie got engaged to be married.

I have spoken earlier in this story of a house in the immediate neighbourhood of Ye Dene which was called Ingleside, and I have just mentioned a family of the name of Marksby. The Marksbys lived at Ingleside, and Ingleside was almost exactly opposite to Ye Dene; the Marksbys, indeed, were next-door neighbours of the M'Quades. They had not very long been in possession of that desirable residence, and, mind you, Ingleside was a most desirable residence, one of the best to be found in the length

and breadth of the Park. The family consisted of the father and mother, two daughters and a son. Mr Marksby, as far as the Park was concerned, was that mysterious "something in the city" which covers such a multitude of sins, or if not sins, at least of blemishes, social and otherwise. They did themselves and their neighbours extremely well, kept good-class servants, had the smartest window-curtains and flower-boxes in the Park, went to church regularly, gave largely in charity and entertained freely. What wonder that, in their case, people did not too closely inquire into the exact definition of "something in the city."

From the very first it had been Maudie rather than Julia who had caught on with the Marksbys. The Marksby girls were quiet and singularly unassuming, and as Maudie Whittaker grew older she was attracted, perhaps because of Julia's excessive energy, by quietness rather than the reverse, and was indeed herself a girl of singularly few words. But if the Marksby girls were quiet, then young Harry Marksby did not share their nature. He was himself the gayest of the gay, one who, a century ago, would have been called an "agreeable rattle," indeed he was a young man who prided himself on stirring things up. He by no means approved of the fact that his father and mother had turned their backs upon convenient Bayswater in favour of the more distant Park. He was a young man who worked hard when he worked, and who abandoned himself to amusement when he was not working. But he was a sensible young man and did not see the force of burning the candle at

both ends, so that he stayed a great deal more at home in the evenings than many a young man of his age and general proclivities would have done; and thus it was that he came somehow to fall in love with Regina Whittaker's eldest girl. And, as I said, the news fell upon the Whittaker family like a bombshell.

Not that they were displeased! Mr and Mrs Whittaker had been too happy in their own married life to grudge either of their girls entering upon the same joys. But they had not seen it coming. Parents are often like that, and so the news came upon them with startling suddenness.

"I am not surprised, though," said Regina to her husband and Julia when the great news had been broached and Harry Marksby had gone to seek his lady-love in the seclusion of the girl's own sitting-room, "I am not surprised. She is very beautiful."

"Oh, mother, how can you stuff her up like that?" cried Julia. "Nobody thinks Maudie very beautiful but yourself—not even Harry. You shouldn't do it, dear. It gives us such a wrong idea of ourselves, or it might do if we hadn't got the sense to see what we see in our looking-glasses."

"Your modesty," said Regina, "is most becoming. I honour and admire you for it—"

"I'm off to my housekeeping class," said Julia, whisking herself out of the room.

"That is the most wonderful thing about our girls," said Regina to Alfred, when they found themselves alone, "that is the most wonderful thing about

our girls—their utter absence of self-consciousness. Beauty has never been a bane to them, because they have never had a vain thought between them. It is a beautiful and wonderful thing."

"They're good-looking enough," said Alfred, "but they'll never, either of them, be a patch upon you, dearest."

"Upon *me?*" She blushed rosy red in spite of her fifty and odd years. "Why, Alfie, looks were never my strong point. They get their looks from you."

Nobody but yourself ever thought so, Queenie," said Alfred Whittaker, with an indulgent glance at his wife; "and everybody may not think of our girls just as you do."

"And as you do, Alfie?"

"And as I do. All the same, I don't know that I should call them beautiful myself. They're good-looking, wholesome, straight, clean, desirable girls, as good as gold and as merry as grigs. By the way," he added, "the Marksbys must be very well off."

"Indeed! What makes you think so?"

"From what he told me of his circumstances."

"But what *are* the Marksbys?" asked Regina.

"He's in his father's business."

"But what *is* his father's business?"

Alfred Whittaker stretched out his hand and took hold of his wife's. "Queenie," he said, "we have never been very proud people, have we?"

"I hope we have always had proper pride, and no more," said Regina.

"He is a nice young chap," Alfred went on, as if he were following out a train of thought; "and Maudie seems to be very much taken with him—"

"Alfie," said Regina in a tone of apprehension, "you are trying to break something to me."

"Well, in one sense, I am," he said, smiling; "and on the other hand I am not. Myself I believe in honest character and good solid comfort before all other considerations, and I feel that you will be sensible and do the same. Maudie has still to learn, as far as I know, the exact nature of the way in which the Marksbys' money is made."

"Go on," said Regina, impatiently.

"Well, to go on," said Mr Whittaker, "is to let the blow fall without any further fuss."

"Let it fall!" cried Regina in a tone of tragedy.

"Marksby," returned Alfred, "is their private name. "They trade under a different one."

"Yes?"

"And Marksby," went on Alfred, slowly, "is the Twopenny Dinner King."

"The Twopenny Dinner King!" cried Regina. "You mean they sell twopenny dinners?"

"Yes, Queenie—twopenny dinners. I'm told they are excellent—indeed, young Harry told me so himself just now. He has invited me to go down and have lunch with him one day, and he promises he will give me the regular twopenny fare—not by way of entertaining me, but rather in order to

show me that it really could be done at such a price."

"And—and—does Harry wear an apron—and—and *serve* twopenny dinners?"

"No, no! The concern's too big for that," Mr Whittaker replied. "He has never done anything of that kind. It's a regular going concern—they employ hundreds of hands, make all their own sausages, make their own beef, mutton, veal, pork and ham pies, cook their own potatoes and green vegetables. They've got about thirty of these shops—Bunderby's Eating Houses they are called. They must be coining money."

"*My* daughter married to a sausage-maker!" said Regina in a bewildered tone.

"There's nothing in that," Alfred Whittaker rejoined; "there's nothing in that, my dear girl, provided he makes his sausages good and wholesome and enough of 'em. But I was afraid it would be a bit of a blow to you."

"My daughter—*my* daughter married to a sausage-maker!" Regina repeated.

"Now come, come, Queenie, you mustn't—you mustn't—hang it all, I don't know what you mustn't do! The girl fancies the boy, and he has plenty of money. He's a nice, gentlemanly chap, and she'll live in style. He's going to have a motor car; she'll live in far better style than we've ever done."

"But you are not a sausage-maker," said Regina. "Alfie, Alfie, I'm afraid I couldn't have married you if you had been a sausage-maker."

The word "sausage" seemed positively to stick in Regina's throat.

"Queenie," said Alfred, "you know perfectly well that what I was had nothing to do with your feelings towards me. If I had been a crossing-sweeper—"

"Alfie," said she, interrupting him, "a duke might sweep a crossing and sweep it nobly, and remain a duke, unsullied and unsoiled; but a duke would never make sausages!"

"No, but sausages may make a duke," said Alfred, promptly. "I know just how you feel, my dear girl —I felt a sort of a lump come in my throat myself when he told me—but he was frank and unashamed. I should hate one of my girls to marry a man who was ashamed of his calling, whatever it was."

"My noble Alfred!" cried Regina.

"I don't know that I'm particularly noble," said Alfred. "I never feel it if I am. I'm afraid it's only your eyes that see me in such a light. But I did feel a bit of a lump in my throat, a sort of extra big stone in my gizzard, don't you know. And then it came over me that it is the girl's own choice, and that it is not for me to damp it."

"But Maudie doesn't know."

"In a way she does, and in another way she doesn't. I asked young Harry if he had told her the exact nature of his business. He said no, he hadn't. He had told her he was in business in the city, that they had a great many branches, but he had not told her the exact nature of it. "We never

think about it," he said, "excepting as the business; and if our friends don't know that Bunderby's Eating Houses belong to us, well, we don't see why we should enlighten them."

"If nobody knows—" began Regina.

"Come, come, old lady, you'll have to swallow it, and we shall have to break it to the little girl, unless young Harry does it himself."

It was eleven o'clock before they had any opportunity of speaking on the subject to Maudie; indeed, they were still talking the affair over when they heard the pair come into the hall, and Maudie opened the door of the room in which they were sitting.

"Yes, I must go now," said Harry Marksby. "I've got to be up so fearfully early in the morning. To-morrow night I shall be able to stay a bit later."

He came in, as he said, just to say good-night, and his way of saying good-night to Maudie's mother did a good deal to wipe the word "sausage" off the slate of Regina's impressionability.

"I've only come in for a minute, Mrs Whittaker," he said. "I must be off home, because I've got to be up awfully early in the morning. I made half-a-dozen business appointments for to-morrow ever so early, before I knew that Maudie and I would quite come to an understanding to-night. May I come to-morrow evening?"

"You may come whenever you like," said Regina. "You had better begin, Harry, as you mean to go on. I have no son of my own, and the young men who take my girls away from me must not think they are going to rob me of my daughters — on the contrary, they must make me forget that I never had sons."

"I shall be very willing to do that," Harry Marksby returned. "I've always managed to get on with my own mother all right, and I don't see why I shouldn't get on with my mother-in-law. It won't be my fault if I don't."

"I'm sure it won't be mine," said Regina.

"No, I'm sure it won't," said he, heartily. "Well, good-night, Mrs Whittaker." He bent down and kissed her just as frankly as if she had been his own mother, and Regina choked a little as the boy and girl went out of the room together.

In a couple of minutes or so Maudie came back, came in with quite a rush for one of her quiet nature, and flung herself down at her mother's feet.

"I am so happy, mother dear," she said. "You have been happy in your married life, and you can understand what I feel. To-morrow will be a great day for me. I'm going to meet Harry in Bond Street at four o'clock, and we're going to choose our ring together; and after that I'm going right down to the city with him, and I'm going to have my tea

at one of the Bunderby shops. I always did think I should like to keep a shop, mother," she went on, "you have heard me say so lots of times, but I never thought that I should one day be at the head of at least thirty!"

CHAPTER XIII

DETAILS

The young rush along the pathway of life cheerfully surmounting or overturning every obstacle, while their more cautious elders look on aghast at their nerve.

WHEN once Harry Marksby had taken the plunge, and was accepted as a lover of Maudie's, he was determined not to let the grass grow under his feet. May was then about three parts over, and Harry insisted that the wedding should be, as he called it, "pulled off" before the end of July.

"But why this hurry?" asked Regina, who, in spite of her modernity, still retained some traces of her aboriginal ways of thought.

"No hurry at all; but why waste time, Mrs Whittaker?" said Harry. "What is there to wait for? We have plenty of money. I always go away for August, and, for an occasion like this, my father won't think anything of it if I take a good share of September too. A man only gets married now and again, you know."

"But why not leave it till the autumn?"

"Because I want to take Maudie for a good trip

abroad. She wishes it—I wish it. What do you say? Clothes? Oh, surely we needn't consider a few clothes. Get as little as she can do with for a continental trip—lay the wedding gown up in lavender, and let Maudie buy the rest of her things in Paris as we come home."

"There's reason in it," said Alfred Whittaker, from the depths of his big chair.

"I don't like my daughter being married in such a hurry as this," said Regina, half hesitatingly.

"But why? Hurried marriages are the fashion nowadays. Royalty pulls it off in a couple of months or so—long engagements are out of date. I knew a man once," Harry went on—"I didn't know him very well, but I met him—who had been engaged to a girl for thirteen years, and they somehow or other didn't altogether hit it off when they did get married. There's nothing to be gained by waiting. You don't really get to know one another until the knot is actually tied. I know Maudie as well now as I should know her if I was engaged to her for seven years."

"I don't want you to wait seven years," said Regina.

"Well, I should hope not," replied Harry.

"But as many months—" began Regina, when Harry Marksby impetuously interrupted her.

"Oh no, Mrs Whittaker," he exclaimed. "Maudie would be worn to fiddlestrings long before seven months were over. The end of July, if you please. I can work all my business up to that point—then everything's slack, it's a sort of off-time, so to speak

—and I can go away with a clear conscience and give my wife a ripping honeymoon—get a ripping honeymoon myself, for the matter of that."

"You have decided where you want to go?" Regina inquired.

"Yes, we're going to Switzerland, taking the Rhine on our way and the Italian lakes as we come back; get a fortnight in Paris, or if we drive it too late for that, stay three or four days in Paris, and perhaps go back again for a few days in the early autumn—if Maudie wants clothes, that is to say."

"I sha'n't," said Maudie. "I am not going to get my dresses in Paris. I've come to see now that we made fools of ourselves when we came home from school with everything Parisian. They were horrid, and were a full year in advance of the fashions here. I hate being a year ahead of the fashions—it's quite as bad as being two years behind them. I would much rather not have all my things bought now, mother. I think Harry is quite right. A couple of good tailor-made dresses, a few muslins, my wedding dress, and a tea-gown, and other things of that kind are necessary, but I can get my further trousseau as I want it."

"I call that a practical suggestion," put in Alfred Whittaker.

"Most practical," agreed Harry. "That was why I was fascinated in the first instance by Maudie—she *is* so practical."

"Do you want a wife to be altogether practical?" demanded Julia, while Maudie looked up anxiously, as if her beloved Harry was about to find some flaw in her.

A most odd look flashed across the young man's keen face. "You'll understand one day," he said, addressing Julia directly. "You'll understand, and you'll sympathise with me. A fellow likes a wife who knows how many beans make five. A fool has no charm for any man, except he's too big a blackguard to want his wife to find him out. As regards frocks, and the spending of money, and the business side of life, a man does like his wife to be altogether practical."

"That implies another side of the picture," said Julia.

"Yes, it does. And the other side of the picture is me and those that may come after me; and if a man is a straight, clean wholesome man, he likes his wife to be altogether sentimental as regards him, and those that come after him. You will understand me some day, Julia, my dear."

Maudie's face dropped instantly, and something like the flash of diamonds came into her eyes. She heaved a great sigh, a tremulous sigh, not one of pain; and hearing it, Harry Marksby caught hold of her hand and tried to pull her ring off. And Maudie began to laugh with those tell-tale little twinkling drops bedewing her eyelashes, and Regina looked on, much as an elephant might regard her offspring at play, with a look which only required a little encouragement for her to put it into words. And if that look had been put into words, they would have been but three—"*My noble boy!*"

"Ah, well," said Julia, now busy a few yards away, "you are not half good enough for our Maudie,

Harry. You are taking away the biggest part of my life, and of course you are very cock-o'-whoop about it; but if you're not good to her, Harry, you will have to reckon with *me*."

"All right, I'll be there when you want me," Harry replied. "Then we may take it, Mrs Whittaker," he continued, with a change of tone, "that the end of July will be the date to work to?"

"I suppose so," said Regina, "if her father has no objection."

"I detest long engagements myself," said Alfred Whittaker. "I never could see the good of them. I was engaged much too long to you, my dear."

"It was the happiest time of my life—" Regina began, somewhat wistfully.

"Oh, don't say that," her husband interrupted "don't say that. It might have been happier than any time that went before—I know it was for me—but at best it is only a foreshadowing, it's only like water to wine, like moonlight to sunlight. There, there, children," he said, flinging out his hands with a deprecating gesture, "there, there, your old dad doesn't often get so sentimental as that. The end of July let it be, and after that we shall all go away and breathe freely."

As a matter of fact, after that Ye Dene became like a seething whirlpool. Such a coming and going, such a dumping of parcels and patterns and presents, such sending out of invitations and receiving of congratulations there was, that more than once even Regina herself admitted that two months was quite

long enough for a young couple to be engaged in these modern days.

The Marksby family were frankly and undeniably delighted and overjoyed at the new state of affairs. They received Maudie with wide-open arms, lavished their love and admiration and gifts upon her. Papa Marksby came across to Ye Dene one evening, and was solemnly closeted with Alfred Whittaker for the space of a whole hour, during which time they smoked extremely long cigars, drank whisky-and-soda out of extremely long tumblers, and went solemnly, although in very friendly fashion, into extremely long figures.

And then Alfred Whittaker introduced his future son-in-law's father into the circle in the drawing-room, and Papa Marksby informed Regina in a voice of much satisfaction and some oiliness, that he and his good friend and neighbour had settled all the little details of future ways and means for the young couple.

"Fifty thousand pounds, my dear Queenie," said Alfred Whittaker, when he found himself once more alone with his wife.

"Fifty thousand pounds, Alfie? What do you mean?"

"Fifty thousand pounds, as our neighbour across the road puts it, 'to be tied to Maudie's tail!'"

"You mean to say he's going to settle fifty thousand pounds upon her?"

"I do. Papa Marksby isn't the man to do things by halves. He puts it very clearly and in a very business-like manner, that he has set aside the sum

of a hundred and fifty thousand pounds to be divided equally, on their marriage, between his two daughters and his prospective daughter-in-law. He says he can well afford it, that it won't affect the business the least little bit in the world, and, whatever happens, the three girls will always be safe, they and their children after them. It's a wonderful thing," he went on, "that two girls like Rachel and Emmeline Marksby, with fifty thousand pounds apiece to their fortune—to their immediate fortune, one may say—should remain unmarried, and our little Maudie, who hasn't, and never will have, more than a third of that sum, should snap up a big prize as she has done."

"I knew they were well off," said Regina, "I knew it in many ways as soon as they came here, but I am not surprised that Maudie has made this wealthy marriage. She is very beautiful — *very* beautiful. What surprises me is that the Marksbys should turn out to have so much money. He gave over a hundred pounds for her engagement ring, and next week he's going to buy her a diamond necklace. Think of *my* daughter with a diamond necklace."

"That is as it should be," said Alfred, complacently. "Even when it is made out of sausages."

"Dear, dear, Alfie, how you do harp on those sausages!"

"My dear, I went and lunched on them the other day—excellent, excellent! Don't know how they do it for the money. I saw the whole process—went over the factory. Everything as clean as a new pin; you could eat your dinner off the floor."

"I—I—don't know," said Regina. "It seems a

little— However, having put my hand to the plough, I am not one to look back. Once my daughter has married sausages, I will honour sausages!"

"You will certainly be able to honour a good deal that sausages will give her," said Alfred Whittaker. "And now, Queenie, there's a subject on which I have been trying to get a word with you for the last week or more. What are we going to give, Queenie, for our wedding present?"

But that was not a question to be answered off-hand. It was a matter requiring much consideration, consultation — divination, I might say. The major points of the coming ceremony were all arranged; the bride's dress, the costumes of the maids, the favours for the men, and the wording of the invitations. It was the last and greatest, and perhaps the least easy to decide—what should be the present of the father and mother of the bride.

CHAPTER XIV

DIAMOND EARRINGS

It is an accepted rule that a gift is enhanced if it comes in the nature of a surprise.

THE great question was not settled exclusively by Mr and Mrs Whittaker.

"You must," said Alfred to his wife in the sanctity of their sleeping apartment, "find out what Maudie would like to have for her wedding present from us. I wouldn't buy her 'a pig in a poke,' she'll have too many of such articles, and it is important that she should have something from us that she really wants."

"The question is," said Regina to her lord, "what your ideas are on the subject."

"No, my dear Queenie, my ideas will not make the least difference," he returned, as he carefully examined one side of his respectable face to see if he had scraped it sufficiently clean. "I can afford, my dear Queenie, to give you a free hand in this matter. I only stipulate that it shall be something that Maudie wants—really wants. A grand piano?"

"Not a grand piano," said Regina. "Mr Marksby's rich aunt is giving them that."

"Bless me! I didn't know they had a rich aunt.

I thought Mr Marksby had made all the money in the family. Well, there are plenty of things to make a choice of, silver for the table, furniture for the drawing-room, a brougham—anything else that she likes and that you like."

"Well, I will have a little chat with Julia," said Regina, with that rapt air of contemplation which was all her own. "Julia is a girl with ideas, Julia is far removed from the commonplace, Julia is a genius."

"Well," said Alfred Whittaker, "I don't know that it takes much genius to choose a wedding present."

"In a sense, dear Alfie, in a sense. But there is one question, dearest, that you must decide. How much is our wedding present to cost?"

"Well," said Alfred, as he gave his face a final rub with the towel, "thank God I am able to give a hundred pounds for my girl's wedding present, to give her a decent trousseau and to give her a decent dot. What you like to add to that is you own affair. There now," he said, as he threw the towel on the rail by the washstand, "I can't waste another moment, I must get my tub, charming as your conversation always is."

He whisked out of the room, a quaint figure enough in his demi-toilette. But Regina saw nothing quaint about her lord and master. "A handsome man with a presence," was her usual description of him. But there are moments when the state of being which we describe as "a presence" has its grotesque aspects, and surely the flight to the bathroom is one of them. Mrs Whittaker might have been the little blind god

himself for all she saw of the grotesque in her noble Alfred.

"A hundred pounds," she murmured, stopping in the process of arranging her hair for the day in order to rest the end of her hair brush on the edge of the toilet-table, and gazing at herself fixedly in the glass. "A hundred pounds! And, thank goodness, I can if need be put a hundred pounds of my own to it; I have only two darlings. I must consult Julia."

Mrs Whittaker took the earliest opportunity of a chat with her younger flower. It was not many minutes after Alfred Whittaker had departed for his office that a maid-servant came running across from Ingleside with a message to the effect that three large parcels had come for the bride, as she was affectionately called on both sides of the road, and would Miss Maudie please come across and open them as the young ladies were dying to know what they contained. So Maudie disappeared in the direction of Ingleside, and Mrs Whittaker seized the opportunity of broaching the important subject that was uppermost in her mind to Julia.

"Don't go away, Julia," she said, almost nervously.

"Yes, mother darling, what is the matter?"

"Nothing is the matter. But I want to consult you."

"Oh," said Julia, with a little air of conscious pride, "and what do you want to consult me about?"

"It is about our present—your father's and mine."

"I should ask Maudie herself."

"No, your father wants it to be a surprise, quite a

surprise. I thought if you knew, or could find out something she really wants, I could go to town and meet your father and get it settled."

"What is daddy's idea?"

"Your father's idea is a grand piano, but Mr Marksby's aunt is giving them that."

"Well, they don't want two," said Julia, sensibly. "The employees are giving them table silver, and the directors are giving them three silver bowls. If I were you I should give Maudie diamond earrings."

"You think she would like them?"

"Yes, dear mother; every woman who has had her ears pierced likes diamond earrings."

"What sort of diamond earrings?"

"Oh," said Julia, "there can be no doubt the sort. Have the biggest single stones that you can squeeze out of the money."

So the great question was settled, and a day or two later Mrs Whittaker and Julia went up to town and lunched with the noble Alfred. They lunched at a very cosy little restaurant not a thousand yards from Charing Cross. A spoonful of white soup, a scrap of salmon, a serve of chicken stewed in the French fashion in the pot, and some asparagus, washed down by some excellent white wine, and followed by a black coffee and a liqueur made the trio very much inclined to look on the rosy side of life. Then they got into a hansom, Julia sitting bodkin-wise, and drove off to the jeweller's at which Mrs Whittaker had decided that they would buy Maudie's earrings. Their choice fell upon a pair which the shopman described as "fit for an empress." They were not

vulgarly large, but they were of the purest water, and of the most dazzling brilliance.

"You think," said Mrs Whittaker to Julia, "you think that Maudie would like these better than the larger ones?"

"Oh yes, mother, there's no comparison. The big ones don't look better than paste; these are unmistakably the real thing."

"It is a pleasure to sell diamonds to so good a judge," said the gentleman who was attending to them.

"I should have thought," said Alfred Whittaker, in his most prosaic manner, "that as long as you sold your goods it would not matter to whom you sold them."

"Excuse me, sir, that is where you make a mistake. We have a lady customer—she is a duchess—who frequently brings her jewels to be cleaned. She says her maid is a child at jewel-cleaning. It is not our business to say to the contrary, but that lady kills every diamond in her possession."

"How kills?" said Julia.

"I cannot say, madam. Something in her magnetism causes the stones to look dead and slatey. The stones that she has had in her possession and worn continually for the last twenty years are not now worth a twentieth part of what was originally paid for them—all the fire has gone out of them. Whether they would recover themselves by being worn by a magnetic wearer I do not know. We have a young lady here in our establishment of quite radiant magnetism. She does no work, but gets a good

salary and simply remains here and occupies herself as she likes and wears certain jewels a certain number of times. Sometimes when that particular lady—the duchess—is anxious to make a great appearance on some special occasion, we have her best stones for a month or even longer. This young lady of ours wears them all day long, and I can assure you it is an odd sight to see her with her two hands covered with rings, even her thumbs, her arms loaded with bracelets, one diamond necklace worn in the ordinary way, and another one worn over her shoulders."

"And the diamonds recover their colour?"

"Oh yes, madam, but these are only the stones that her Grace wears occasionally. I have been told," he went on, "that their brilliance never lasts with her, and that long before the Drawing-room, or whatever the function may be, is over, they look as if they had been black-leaded. You can quite understand, sir," he said, turning to Alfred Whittaker, "that it is positive pain to me to sell any of our best diamonds to such a wearer."

"Well," said Alfred, "the lady who is going to wear these earrings will never, I think, trouble you in the same way."

"Oh no!" said Julia.

And then, somehow, the idea was born that Alfred Whittaker should give a little trifle of remembrance to Regina and their daughter. The little trifle of remembrance consisted of a very handsome turquoise ring for the mother and a very smart bangle for the girl.

"I had no idea, dear daddy," said Julia, "of your buying me anything to-day. I have been wanting one of these bangles for, oh! such a long time."

"And you never breathed it!" said Regina.

"I never thought of it," said Julia; "but I am all the more delighted because I did not think of anything for myself."

Then they departed carrying with them the lovely earrings which Maudie was to wear in remembrance of home as long as she should live.

"They know you in that shop, daddy," said Julia, as they walked back towards Piccadilly.

"Oh yes, I have gone there for years; but how do you know that they knew me?"

"Oh—from the way they said 'good day' to you when you went in, and then you brought the earrings away with you and only paid for them by cheque—to say nothing of my beautiful bangle and mother's ring."

At this Alfred Whittaker laughed and said that being known at shops like this was one of the advantages of having a solid business behind one. Then they looked into one or two windows, and Mrs Whittaker beguiled Alfred into a certain lace shop under the excuse that she was going to wear a lace garment at the wedding and that she wanted him to help her to choose it. Then they went to some very smart tea-rooms and refreshed themselves after the usual manner of five o'clock, and then they went home to Ye Dene, where they found Maudie, who had just come in, struggling with a perfect avalanche of presents.

"Where did you get that heart?" said Julia, looking fixedly at her sister.

Maudie's hand, the one with the diamonds on it, touched the jewel. "Oh, my heart," she said in her soft, cooing voice. "Harry has been over, he brought it from town—he wants me to wear it always. See, it's got a little miniature of him at the back. He thought I should like to have it to be married in—just his heart, you know—because I had decided not to wear my necklace, or—my—er—fender."

"A very pretty idea," said Regina, beaming proudly upon the bride-elect, with an expression as if the thought had emanated from her brain instead of that of the bridegroom to be. "We have come from town, your father and I, and we have brought you a present."

"Oh! you darlings! What have you brought me? But I know it is something nice."

"It's not very big," said her father, producing the little packet from his waistcoat pocket, "but we hope you will like it, all the same."

"Oh, a ring," cried Maudie, as she caught sight of the box. "I love rings more than anything else, and it is so sweet and kind of you to remember my little tastes, and to give me something that I can carry about with me always when I am not living here any more."

Regina looked hard out of the window. In spite of her pride at her girl's approaching marriage, it was a bitter wrench to her to think that she soon would have only one child in the home nest. Indeed, she looked forward further still to the time when she

and Alfred would be Darby and Joan, with no young life to disturb the serenity of their daily round. It was the voice of Julia which brought her back to earth again.

"Now come, don't stand there rhapsodising about it, but open your parcel, old lady, and see what luck will send you," she said to her sister. "I am sure Harry has given you rings enough. You don't credit mother and father with over-much sense when you think they would give you something of which Harry has already given you a dozen."

At this moment Maudie gave a faint scream. "Oh, you darlings! you darlings! I never thought of this; I don't know which of you to kiss first. Oh, oh, what will Harry say? Oh! Julia, you had a hand in this. Single stone earrings! Oh, they are too good for me."

"Why should you say they are too good for you?" said Regina. "Nothing is too good for me to give my daughter."

"But you were right in one thing," said Julia, as Maudie slipped one of the sparkling stones from its nest of white velvet, and insinuated the gold ring into her ear, "they have given you something that you can wear every day."

CHAPTER XV

A GOLDEN DAY

Most people detest tears at a wedding, and yet weddings give much more cause for tears than funerals.

At last Maudie Whittaker's wedding day dawned—a golden July day, fair and still, without being oppressively hot. I think I have already said that the houses of Marksby and Whittaker were situated in one of the main roads of that favourite residential locality which is known to Londoners as Northampton Park, and to its residents as "the Park," without any distinguishing prefix. A stranger passing along Milton Avenue might have wondered what great function was afoot, for at both houses flags were flying, and on lines stretched across from house to house, amidst streaming pennons, was a great green and white marriage bell. From the gate to the porch of Ye Dene Alfred Whittaker had, some two years ago, erected a covered glass way, almost a conservatory. This was lined with flowers and carpeted with red felt. A couple of stalwart commissionaires stood at either side of the entrance, and a crowd of the poorer denizens of the Park had gathered to watch the coming and going of the wedding guests.

I must tell you at once that on this occasion Regina was truly great.

"Mother," Maudie had said on the previous evening, when she bade her parents good-night for the last time as Maudie Whittaker. "Mother darling, there's one thing that you must not do to-morrow."

"What is that, my love?" said Regina.

"You will not cry when you get to church, and you will not cry when we go away, will you? Remember that in Harry you are gaining a son, not losing a daughter."

"No," said Regina, "no, I shall not disgrace you. At the same time, Maudie, my love, if I am not losing a daughter I am losing my little girl."

"Not a bit of it, mother," said Julia, chiming in to support her sister, and resolutely keeping her thoughts turned from the fact that on the morrow half her life would be torn away; "you mustn't think that, dearest. You know the old saying, 'My son is my son till he gets him a wife, but my daughter's my daughter all the days of my life.'"

"Then I hope," said Regina, solemnly, to the bride-elect, "that you will never make that poor little woman across the road feel that *her* son is her son till he gets him a wife. But rest assured of one thing, Maudie darling, your mother will not disgrace you on your wedding day. I was at a wedding a few years ago when the bride's mother howled persistently all through the ceremony and till the bride departed on her honeymoon. They had not been on such terms as we have always been—in fact, if Constance

Colquhoun had not fortunately found a husband, it is very certain that Mrs Colquhoun and she would have parted company rather than have gone on living together in a continual state of wrangling. I have no regrets for the past and very few fears for the future. You will have your ups and downs, my darling, as your mother has had before you and as your children will have after you. You must look for them in this vale of tears, but anticipation of them on a joyful occasion is foolish even to criminality."

Probably no sweeter bride had ever passed up the aisle of the fantastic little church which was alike the spiritual and material centre of Northampton Park. It was not that Maudie Whittaker was a very pretty girl—no one but her mother had ever given a second thought to personal beauty as one of her attributes—but she was soft and round and fair, with radiant eyes and a winning smile. Her bridal gown was simple and girlish, and her veil of plain tulle enveloped her like a cloud of innocence. Her only jewel was the diamond heart which her bridegroom had given her for his wedding-day present. Her bouquet was a real ornament, a loosely-arranged posy of flowers tied with broad white ribbon—not the usual over-weighted bundle of blossoms showering from the hand to the ground, conveying the idea that if the bride was sufficiently unlucky to tread upon the mass of trails, the result would be the complete downfall of bride and bouquet alike. The bridesmaids were quite reasonably attired. Maudie had been inflexible on that point. "My dear Ju," she

had said to her sister when the question was first mooted, "the bride ought to choose the bridesmaids' dresses. I have seen bridesmaids in Charles II. dresses, in Tudor dresses, in Directoire costumes, and such close copies of Boughton's Dutch maidens, that one felt they only wanted sabots to be entirely correct. I have seen bridesmaids with their gathers under their arms, and with pouches down to their knees. I am going to have none of these monstrosities. You and I are ordinary-looking girls, but, between ourselves, we are dreams of style compared with Rachel and Emmeline Marksby."

"Harry seems to have monopolised all the style in the Marksby family," said Julia, with a judicial air.

"Oh, Harry has style enough," rejoined Maudie, with not a little pride in her tones.

"Yes, you are quite right, Rachel and Emmeline are two dear little girls, but they are dumpy and snub-nosed, and would look ridiculous in any sort of fancy dress. You could hardly find a greater contrast to them than the Ponsonby-Piggots."

"Oh, my dear, where could you find a greater contrast than the Ponsonby-Piggots themselves? One girl as tall as a lamp post, has straight features, and is definite and rather commanding; and the other is a little slip of a thing, with curly red hair, misty blue eyes, and an air of fragility which completely deceives the ordinary observer. So no monstrosities and eccentricities of bridesmaids' dresses for me. I should like white *crêpe de chine* frocks over turquoise blue petticoats, belts of some handsome

embroidery with clasps studded with big blue stones that will look like turquoise, and big black hats with a touch of blue under the brim; Harry is going to give them blue enamel watches. There, I think that is as smart an idea for bridesmaids' dresses as we need trouble about."

So it was decided, and the eight bridesmaids who followed Maudie Whittaker to the altar were all dressed alike as I have just described. On her left breast each wore the enamel watch given by the bridegroom, while the bride's gifts to her bridesmaids were the embroidered belts studded with blue stones.

Yes, it was a very pretty wedding, and Regina, resplendent in ruby velvet, with a white feather waving in her coronet bonnet, and over her ample shoulders a large cape arrangement of rich lace, sailed up the aisle on the arm of Mr Marksby. She had an air of "alone I did it" about her which was at the same time touching and misleading. In her tightly-gloved hand she carried a large posy of roses, and truly there was nothing of Niobe in her expression and demeanour. The service went off without a hitch, the decorations were lavish, and the little boys, who were all that could be mustered of the regular choir, wore clean surplices. The favours were extremely choice, and the happy face of the bride was more than matched by the radiant self-satisfaction of the bridegroom. "A delightful wedding" was the general verdict. And then there was the streaming back to the house just down the road, there was the string of carriages belonging to friends from town, the Park

guests having followed the simpler plan of going afoot. How shall I describe it all? The palms, the flowers, the gay dresses, the gently-murmured felicitations, the health drinking, the speech making, the cake cutting, the present inspecting, which is the usual course of the smart wedding. These things were all there, for the Alfred Whittakers had given their daughter what is generally called "a good send-off."

Then there came the terrible moment when Regina might have been forgiven for breaking down. But Regina was equal to the occasion—Regina was a woman of her word.

"Oh no, I am not at all inclined to break down," she said in reply to a friend who was offering judicious sympathy. "I feel that in my girl's husband I have gained what I have always longed for—a son. I am going to be a mother-in-law quite out of the ordinary run, and I am not going to begin by making him feel himself a cruel marauder who is taking away my most valued possession. I should not like to have children who did not marry, it is a natural thing, and Maudie's choice is so absolutely ours that I have nothing to regret and everything to be delighted with."

"But did not Maudie choose her own husband?" said someone who was standing by.

"Oh, of course she did, but if we had chosen her husband our choice would have been Harry Marksby."

It chanced that Harry was just entering the house,

having been across the road to change his wedding garments for travelling gear. He was in time to hear the whole of his mother-in-law's reply to the question as to whether Maudie had chosen her own husband. He slipped his hand under her arm and twisted her round a little.

"You are not going to be a mother-in-law out of the common," he said, "because you are one. Nothing you could do would be in the common. But I cannot thank you enough for saying that if you had chosen Maudie's husband you would have chosen me. And I'm so glad," he went on in a lower tone, "that you did not think it necessary to treat us to the usual shower of maternal tears on this occasion."

"Perhaps I should have done," cried Mrs Whittaker, "if I were not so perfectly happy in Maudie's choice. Why should I want to weep over my girl's happiness? Why should your mother want to make herself look a silly fright because you have married the girl of your heart? We are agreed, are we not, Mrs Marksby?"

"Oh yes, I always did believe in young men getting married as soon as they are in a position to marry comfortably. As I said to Harry as we were having a little talk last night, 'Remember, my boy, that you are marrying in a very different position to what pa and me did. Pa and me married to a little house with three bedrooms in the south-east district, with never a thought that we should end up west, and see our boy married as we have seen him married this day—didn't we, pa?"

"Yes, mother, we did. And I don't know that we've had any cause to regret it."

"I don't know about you, pa," said Mrs Marksby, bridling visibly.

"Oh, I don't say but that you might have done better," said Mr Marksby, "but we were very happy in that little house, and I only hope that the young people will be as happy in their beginning as we were in ours."

"We shall not be less happy because we are able to afford a decent house in the West-End," said Harry, sensibly. "If we are, you may take it as certain that we should have been just as unhappy in the cottage with three bedrooms. But, I say, Mrs Whittaker, isn't Maudie nearly ready? We sha'n't catch that train if we don't look out. Ah, here she is. Come along, my dear girl, come along; we've got none too much time to spare."

Perhaps it was as well. There was a moment's hesitation as Maudie said "good-bye" to her mother, for one instant, Julia standing by, vigilant and keen, feared that her mother was going to break down in spite of all her good resolves. But Mrs Whittaker was a valiant soul, she pulled herself up sharply as the little bride, holding her father's hand, went out to face the storm of rice and old slippers which was awaiting them outside the house.

"I know," she said, her voice a little tremulous in spite of her self-control, "I know she will make a good wife, because she has been such a good daughter."

"We can cry quits, Mrs Whittaker," said the mother of the bridegroom, "for a better boy to his father and mother than our Harry I don't believe you could find from one end of the earth to the other."

CHAPTER XVI

OTHER GODS

How little noise people make when they are suddenly stricken with great mental anguish.

THEY say that after a storm there comes a calm, and a very true saying it is. After the storm of orange blossoms that raged around Ye Dene on that July day, there came a calm which was broken only by the excitement of watching for the postman. The most valuable of the wedding presents were safely packed up on the evening of the wedding day, and consigned to Alfred Whittaker's private safe. The others were left in the girls' sitting-room, carefully covered up, in preparation for the long trip in which the bride and bridegroom were indulging themselves prior to regular housekeeping.

For years the Whittakers had made a point of seeking a fresh holiday resort with each summer, and this year, by a kind of instinct, they decided not to go to an English watering-place. Perhaps the feeling that the bride and groom were enjoying themselves in the Bernese Oberland, and meant to cover a good deal of ground before they turned their footsteps homewards, made them feel that the contrast of an English watering-place would be too much.

They therefore decided that Dieppe would be a bright and convenient change for them; but they were not due to leave home until some ten days after the wedding.

Now, it happened that Regina, instead of following the usual course of mothers, and making the little absent bride into a sort of deity, was possessed of a feeling that she would like in some way to reward her younger girl for her helpfulness at the time of the wedding, and the unselfish manner in which she had deferred in every possible way to her sister's wishes. She therefore determined that she would give Julia a little surprise present. No, it was not a birthday, it was not any kind of commemoration, but she felt that this was an occasion on which she could appropriately spend a little money. Now Regina was amply blessed with this world's goods—I mean in her own right. Alfred Whittaker had done extremely well in the world, and whereas Regina had once loomed in his horizon as an heiress in a modest way, she was now the wife of an exceedingly warm man, and happy in the possession of a tidy little income of her own. She breathed not a word of her purpose to a soul. She did not intend her little gift to take the form of raiment. Julia's father gave her an ample dress allowance, and Regina was in the habit of adding to it with special offerings at such times as birthdays and the season of Christmas. It was not difficult for her to carry out her purpose, for she had but seldom gone to town in company with her girls. She was so busy a woman, she had so many excuses

so many appointments and engagements of a semi-business kind, that her comings and goings were not often questioned.

"What are you doing to-day, Julia?" she asked, one morning at breakfast, about a week after the wedding.

"To-day, mother dear? Well, I have to go out with Emmeline Marksby this morning, and unless you want me I am going to lunch there. And then I am going to get my new white frock fitted on, and I am going to tea at the Dravens."

"So you will be occupied all day?"

"Why, do you want me?"

"Not at all, dear child, only I feel that you must be lonely now that Maudie has gone, and I have at least a dozen things to occupy me."

"Oh, don't worry yourself about me, I shall be busy right up to dinner-time."

So they went their separate ways, and two hours later Mrs Whittaker might have been seen deliberately pacing up the arcade in which was situated the shop at which Maudie's earrings had been bought. A smooth-spoken young gentleman came forward to receive her. Regina explained her pleasure; she wanted earrings. No, not for the bride, for the young lady who was with her when she bought the bride's earrings. Solitaire earrings? Yes. Turquoise were very nice, but she fancied that Miss Whittaker did not care much about turquoise. Did she fancy pink coral? Yes, that was a happy idea, so suitable for a young lady. So Regina was shown various solitaire

earrings in that most delicate and girlish substance. But even then she was not satisfied, and the pink coral earrings were set in diamonds. No, it was not the expense, that was not the question, but Mrs Whittaker thought that not even tiny diamonds should find a place in the jewel-box of a very young girl.

"Pink coral without— ?"

"Just a few sparks, madam," said the gentleman on the other side of the counter, "they will be a little —well, a little insignificant—as earrings."

"Perhaps," Mrs Whittaker admitted, "you might let me see the turquoise, I could have those without diamonds."

"Yes, or pearls. Solitaire pearls are quite young ladies' jewellery."

"And are they very expensive ?" asked Regina.

"Oh no, madam. Let me show you the pearls."

So another tray was handed out, and yet another tray; one containing all manner of turquoise studs for the ears, and the other showing an assortment of pearl earrings, from modest ones at five guineas a pair to some which were far beyond Regina's means or Julia's necessities. Eventually a pair of pearl solitaires were chosen and paid for.

"Yes, I shall take them with me," said Regina, opening her smart black and gold wrist bag in order that the little jewel-case might be comfortably nested in company with her small purse and her pocket-handkerchief.

"I hope, madam," said the shopman, "that you liked Mr Whittaker's last present to you."

"I like it very much," said Regina, smoothing the back of her hand, and gazing admiringly at the big turquoise ring that adorned it, "I think it is a very handsome ring." Then she looked straight into the young man's eyes, "You were not speaking of this?" she said with a gesture of her hand to show that she was speaking of the ring.

"No, madam," he stammered, "I remember Mr Whittaker buying the ring and the bangle for the young lady—I—I was thinking of quite another customer."

At that moment another figure came from the office behind the shop. It was, indeed, the assistant who had actually attended to their wants on the occasion of her previous visit.

"I hope," said he, "that the bracelet that Mr Whittaker bought the other day met with your approval, madam."

For a moment Regina felt as if the earth were opening under her feet; a wild impulse seized her to catch violently hold of something, and scream in a series of sharp intermittent yelps as a locomotive does when something has gone wrong, and a wild instinct to catch the two smooth-faced young men on the other side of the counter by the ears and bang their heads together—a feeling as if heaven and earth were slipping away from her. But Regina was a remarkable woman! She had her vanities and her weaknesses, but in all the emergencies of life Regina

might be counted upon for not losing her head. In spite of the sea of tempestuous emotions which surged within her at that moment, she maintained her dignity and her common-sense.

"No," said she, "I have not yet seen it. I am afraid that you have given my husband away; as a matter of fact I have a birthday next week."

It was the first plump and deliberate lie that Regina had ever told in her life. She did not hurry out of the shop—she even went so far as to choose a little present for her lord, going back with a curious persistence to the idea of pink coral, and bought for him what Julia would have described as a perfectly sweet tie pin, consisting of a bit of pink coral set between two small but fiery diamonds.

"Mr Johnson," said the younger of the two assistants, as the door closed behind Regina, "you have put your foot in it this time."

"Why—how—what d'you mean?"

"Simply this, that Mr Alfred Whittaker, of Ye Dene, Northampton Park, won't thank you for letting on to that good lady that he was here last week buying a bracelet that she don't know anything about."

"Oh Lord! I never thought of it. She said she had a birthday next week."

"She said, yes, she *said*, but that ain't any proof to me, I never saw an old girl pull herself together in a neater manner; she even went so far as to buy a tie pin on the strength of it. But, mark my words, Mr Alfred Whittaker won't thank you for letting on

to that lady that he was here last week buying that bracelet."

"If I thought that," said Mr Johnson, "I'd put my head straight in a bag."

"If it had been me," said the other, "being a youngster I might have been excused, but an old hand like you—tittle-tattling about other customers' purchases—you ought to know better."

"You are quite right, I deserve anything that may come of it; I don't think that I have ever done such an idiotic thing in my life. What can I do to make up for it?"

"Nothing," said the other. "If anything is said swear that Mr Whittaker told you that the present was for his wife."

"I think he did."

"That's as may be. Anyway, stick to it through thick and thin that he mentioned that it actually was for his wife."

"Well, don't tell any of the others, Dick."

"I shouldn't dream of doing that; it isn't likely. I might make a slip myself one day, so I am not going to point out the slips of other people." Which, considering the very near shave the young gentleman had had of making the very same slip not ten minutes before, might be considered a very feeling remark.

Meantime Regina had gone blindly along the arcade. She was dressed in summer garments, and not a few very curious glances were cast at her. Twice she stopped to look in shop windows with eyes that saw nothing. The first was a gunsmith's,

and the second was a man's window of a distinguished bootmaker's. Regina never knew the exact objects at which she had gazed during that painful peregrination. When she got to the end of the arcade she turned and walked back again, and all the time there beat to and fro in her brain an idea which said that Alfred, her noble Alfred, had gone after other gods—after other gods! Well, in the worst trials of life, in the griefs and shocks and sorrows of the newest and most unaccustomed kind, a woman cannot walk up and down a fashionable arcade for ever. When she again reached the entrance by which she had gone in, it occurred to her that she must sit down and think—she must go somewhere where she could be quiet, where she could face this new sensation which had come into her life. Her club? No, not her club. She would meet there women who were interested in the same work as herself. If she lunched, and she could not be there in the lunch hour without lunching, someone would join her. There was a little pastry-cook's where she sometimes lunched when she was in a hurry; she had never seen anybody there she knew, she would go there. To eat! No—no—not to eat! Regina Whittaker was sure that she would never eat with relish again. So she bent her steps toward this little side-street haven, and, like all women in dire trouble, ordered tea and a muffin!

CHAPTER XVII

REGINA COMES TO A CONCLUSION

Have you ever noticed how accurately women judge from small circumstances. Men call this intuition, and men think of intuition as being on the same level as instinct.

If Regina had ordered a plate of soup it would have been brought to her immediately, because at one o'clock that comestible would have been ready and awaiting the wishes of customers. But Regina, as I have said, like most women in trouble, ordered the food and drink that were nearest her heart, and therefore she had to wait while the tea was brewed and the muffin toasted. The waiting did her good. She was alone, as it happened, in the comfortable room over the shop, and thus she was able to grasp the situation more clearly than she had done while still talking to the jeweller's assistant, when she had had to consider the ordinary conventions of existence. Poor Regina! She sat there by the tall mantelshelf and stared at the paper roses which filled the summer grate. Her Alfred, her noble Alfred, had fallen from his pedestal—he was hers no longer! In all the years of their married life, indeed in their knowledge of each other, she had never wronged Alfred by even so much as a doubt of his nobility. To her he had been noble, truly noble, kind, affectionate, dignified and a highly-

successful man—and now all was over; her house of matrimony had fallen about her ears like a pack of cards—she had been supplanted by another. Truly Regina's thoughts were very bitter. She had been supplanted by another—what was she going to do? It came to her memory that in times gone by, when other women had fallen upon evil days of a like description, she had helped to bear their sorrows with a very light heart. Well, it had not then entered her head that their portion might one day be hers; but now the blow had fallen upon herself, and she must perforce give herself the same advice that she had given to others. "My dear," she had remarked once to a poor little woman whose husband had been spoiled by over-much adoration, "you have made one mistake in your life, you have been too good to that husband of yours. What? Nobody could be too good to him? You have, my dear, and it doesn't do to be too good to a man for all time whether he behaves himself or not; it doesn't do to put all your wares in your front window. Keep something back, let there be always some little corner of womanly dignity which men, even husbands, must respect." "But, Mrs Whittaker," the little woman had replied, "I haven't any dignity where Jack is concerned; I don't want any dignity, I only want Jack, and he has gone away and left me." How well she remembered the words as she sat alone in the pastry-cook's shop in Regent Street, how well she remembered! Well, she felt very much as that little woman had felt—she did not care about her dignity any more, she only wanted Alfred, and if

Alfred was deceiving her, if Alfred was living a double life and sharing his heart with another, she only wanted to go back to the blissful time of blind ignorance, when to her he had been the embodiment of manly dignity and robust virtue.

She got up and looked at herself in the long strip of glass which was set between the two tall windows. It was not a becoming glass, nor was it placed in a particularly becoming light, and Regina, who had been through a storm of tempestuous emotion, and who bore upon her strongly-marked countenance the visible signs of her mental upheaval, looked, frankly speaking, quite hideous. At that moment the young lady who had taken her order for tea and muffin came into the room carrying a little tray, and Regina made a slight pretence of adjusting her hair before she went back to the table.

"Would you prefer to sit here, or by the window?"

"I think by the window," said Regina. Her tone was admirably careless—so careless that it almost deceived herself.

"Will you have cream also with your tea?"

"Yes, I think I will have cream. Thank you very much."

A couple of minutes later Regina was once more alone. Certainly the open window was more comfortable than the empty fireplace with its paper roses. The tea was freshly made, and was good of its kind, the cream was rich, and the muffin was the perfection of a muffin, and Regina sat with the summer wind fanning her troubled brow, and ate and drank her

simple fare and was comforted. As she sat she stole a glance at herself in another strip of looking-glass, in which she could see herself by turning her head an inch or two. And as she sat there and her storm-tossed soul was soothed and comforted by her little meal, she began to turn things over in her mind with a less tragic spirit than she had done before. Perhaps if Alfred had been drawn away to other gods it had been her own fault; Alfred was so handsome, so manly, had such a presence, and she had despised all the trifling feminine womanly things. She had given up so much of her time to the regeneration of women that she had let the material part of Regina Whittaker take its own course, and Nature, left to take its own course, is never very attractive. She was too stout. There are people of the plump little partridge order who would look frightful in a nearer approach to their bones, but Regina had gone fat in lumps, and Regina's eyes had never been aware of the fact until this morning. Too much chin, too much nape of the neck, too much at the top of the arms, too much of that which, even back in Scripture days when coupled with "a proud look," was ever a subject for derision.

"Never proud to my Alfred," said she, leaning back in her chair; "but," and here she crossed her hands just below her waist, "the other is an indisputable fact."

As she decided the question in her own mind she laid her hand upon the little bell which stood beside her on the table.

"Did I ring?" said she. "Oh, I was not conscious of it. I think I made a mistake in having this kind of meal. I am not accustomed to it, I feel as if I had taken nothing."

"Try a sandwich, madam," said the young lady.

"Sandwich? I think I am not equal to sandwich to-day. Something has happened to me, I have had a shock, and you know how we weak women fly to feminine articles of food when we are in trouble."

"I am sorry you are in trouble, madam."

"I came in here knowing I should be quiet, and it is very quiet."

"It is the end of July. In another week we shall be more quiet still, and after that, when the country people come we shall not know where to turn. When you come back from abroad or from your sojourn by the sea we shall be as you always see us."

"I think I will have another muffin."

"I would, madam. I will tell them to put plenty of butter on it. And a pot of tea, and a little more cream?"

"Yes," said Regina, rather weakly. The girl disappeared again, and Regina sat back in her chair, a very comfortable one, and felt that it was pleasant to be ministered to, and then fell to thinking about herself again. How strange that she had never noticed any change in Alfred! He had never seemed to find her wanting in any way. More than once, even of late years, he had told her that the girls would never be a patch upon her for looks, and she

had accepted his tribute to her charms in all good faith. And then she turned to the glass again and regarded herself with new eyes—critical eyes—and she saw that her dress was hideous, her bonnet a travesty, her hair, fine in quality and very decent in colour, made nothing of, her gloves were too small or her hands too large. What did it matter? the result was the same; she was inelegant, unfashionable, grotesquely stout—she was all wrong, and it seemed as if all she had done by her work for the regeneration of womanhood had been to cut herself adrift from her own husband.

I have said that Regina Whittaker was a very remarkable character, and I have tried to show that she was a woman who was accustomed to judge for herself in most circumstances of life, and who, even if she took the wrong line, took it on her own, so to speak. Now, in what I may honestly say was the bitterest moment of her life, she decided, judged and determined on her own line of action just as she had done in previous times. At this moment the relay of muffin and fresh tea arrived, and Regina, with a smile of thanks, began with an excellent appetite to eat the second half of her meal, and as she ate her thoughts were working busily.

Alfred had fallen a victim to a hussy! That she was a hussy of tender years, as compared with Regina herself, was evident. There was no evidence to prove it, but once the idea had entered Regina's mind it remained there and throve apace. This ignorant, youthful, gay little hussy *must be sup-*

planted, her influence must be undermined, and Alfred must be lured back to his original nobility. It was curious that no shadow of blame for the noble Alfred presented itself to Regina. If he had been unfaithful it was because he had been tempted by a hussy from the allegiance which had stood the test of over twenty years. If he had left her for other divinities it was because she had not made herself sufficiently alluring to him, and Regina, as she ate the last piece of the second muffin, determined there and then that she would mend her ways.

"I will go to a beauty doctor," she told herself. "I will get rid of every blemish that has lessened my attractions for him; I will put myself in the hands of an expert dressmaker, she shall dress me like a fashion-plate; I will be young, I will be slim, I will be attractive, I will win my husband's heart back again."

Then her thoughts ran towards the Society for the Regeneration of Women—that darling project of her later years, which she now realised had cost her very dear. From that she must free herself; not publicly, not with any ostensible reason, except that she had worked sufficiently long. Others must take the reins from her hands and she must put forward the plea that new blood was necessary, even essential, in all such undertakings. When she had arrived at this point she was already quite cheerful. She took out her purse from her black and gold bag and deposited a bright new sixpence under her muffin plate as a delicate little reward to the girl whose kindly words

had been her first solace, then satisfied herself with a long look at Julia's earrings; and then she opened the little case which contained the tie pin that she intended as an offering to her lord and master. This she determined she would not present to him. A curious fancy took possession of her that she would give him some little symbol of her unaltered affection for him. She had never heard that pink coral was coupled with any particular meaning; it had no place among what may be called the birthday stones. Now, Alfred's birthday was in October, so she would choose him an opal—yes, a little tie pin of opals with a single diamond like a crystallised tear-drop, and she could say to him, "This opal is to bring you luck in your later years, and the diamond has a meaning which I will tell you at some future time—not now."

Then Regina rose up, strong in her new resolve, and, having paid her money at the desk, went out into the summer sunshine.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE FIRST LITTLE VANITIES

We are often blamed for not speaking out as soon as a doubt enters our mind, yet oftentimes the reticence which such a doubt begets is a saving grace which redeems and sanctifies our whole character.

It was with quite a cheerful countenance that Regina went through the rest of her day's work. Arriving home at Ye Dene in time for dinner she changed her dress for a cool and light tea-gown, in which, I am bound to confess, she looked more than anything like a gigantic perambulating baby's bassinette. She laved her face with a little scented water, and, for the first time in her life, she dusted her countenance with a little powder. She did not herself possess such things as a powder-box and puff, but in Maudie's deserted bedroom she found on her dressing-table the one which she had used up to the morning of her marriage, for she had naturally taken with her on her wedding-tour the smartly-fitted dressing-case which had been among her husband's wedding presents to her. It was with quite unaccustomed hands that Regina sought for the powder-box, and she used the powder too thickly. Maudie had had a pretty taste in powder, and prided herself on never using a common kind. Being so very fair

she used that of a pure white tint, and when Mrs Whittaker had finished her application of it I must confess she looked ghastly.

"How dreadful!" her thoughts ran. "How can women ever use this stuff?"

Then she took a towel from the towel-rail and rubbed her face vigorously, shook the puff out of the window, and started again, succeeding this time in merely making herself of a delicate pallor. As she descended the stairs her husband turned in at the gate and came along the covered way to the porch. He noticed at once that there was something unusual in her appearance.

"Well, Regina, my love," he remarked, "have you been grilling in town this hot day?"

"Yes, I have been to town, Alfred," she replied, trying hard to make her tone quite an ordinary one.

"You must have over-tired yourself, my dear, you are as pale as a sheet," he remarked, looking at her keenly. "Here, come with me." He led the way into the dining-room, that large, cool, pleasant apartment in which Regina had so often sat admiring him, and, going to the sideboard, poured her out a glass of port.

"Here, drink this down at once. I am sure you have been overdoing it. Have you been to any of those beastly meetings?"

"I have not been to a meeting though I looked in at the offices of the S.R.W."

"I feel very much inclined to say 'Damn the S.R.W.,'" said Alfred Whittaker, warmly. "I can't

bear to see you looking so jaded and worn-out as you do now. Here, drink this down, it will pull you together better than anything else."

He was an old-fashioned man, who believed in a glass of port, and Regina, with unwonted meekness and the same happy feeling of being ministered to that she had felt in the pastry-cook's shop, obediently swallowed the pleasant potion.

"I shall be very glad," Alfred Whittaker continued, "when we are off on our holiday, for I never felt the need of one so badly as I do this year. I suppose it is the excitement of Maudie's wedding, but I can't bear to see you looking as you do now."

"I am better—I feel better," said Regina, nervously. It was hard for her to resist the inclination to fling herself upon Alfred's broad bosom and tell him everything that was in her mind. It would have been better if she had done so, but she resisted the inclination from a desire not to give way to unusual weakness.

"Now sit down quietly by the window and rest while I run up and change my coat."

It was his habit to make what might be called a half-toilette for dinner—to take off his frock-coat and substitute for it a sort of smoking-jacket, quite a glorified garment, in which Regina admired him as some women admire their husbands when they get drunk, with that curious admiration for the breaking off of shackles, even merely conventional ones. It was a delight to Regina, strong-minded, commanding, magnetic, almost eccentric nature that she was, to

give her husband's behests instant obedience, and she sat down in the huge armchair by the window with a sigh of relief. Well, some hussy might have got hold of him, yes—but his heart was with her.

She owned to herself that there was a little bit of the hypocrite in her, but she forgave herself the infinitesimal sin because Alfred had noticed instantly that she was paler than usual. Ought she to have told him that she had been using powder, and that she was not really more worn-out than usual? Perhaps so, and yet, she told herself, no woman on earth could have forced herself to be so strictly just. Then there was a sound of the gong in the hall, and Alfred came down, Julia coming with him.

"I'm afraid, my bird," he was saying, as they crossed the threshold, "that you miss Maudie more every day that goes by, and soon you'll be marrying yourself, and there'll only be old Darby and Joan to jog along together."

"I've not gone yet, daddy," said Julia. "Maudie had what we may call adequate temptation. I may go on for years before I meet anybody who takes my fancy as completely as Harry took hers."

"Meantime, I think you ought to go out with your mother a little more. She looks worn-out to-day."

"Do you, darling?" looking towards the large white figure at the window. "I declare you do. Why, you told me that you would be busy all day and wouldn't want me."

"Did I?" said Regina. "I do not think quite

that, dearest. But it was true, I did not want you with me to-day; I was full of business of one sort or another."

"Well, well, come to dinner," said Alfred, genially, "come to dinner. We needn't live to eat, but we must eat to live, and here's a bit of salmon that would gladden the heart of a king."

He was very full of joke that night, telling wife and daughter of one or two little incidents which had happened to him during the day, and making merry exceedingly.

"You're very mischievous and gay to-night," said Julia. "What have you been doing to-day?"

Regina looked across the table involuntarily.

"Oh, I have been doing the usual thing, my dear—making money for you to spend. By the way, I have had an excellent offer for the house."

"For the house!" cried Julia. "Have you taken it?"

"I've not taken it, I shouldn't think of doing so until I have consulted your mother. It is a good offer, and I have a week to think it over in. The question is, Do we really want to leave the Park?"

"Yes," said Julia.

"What do you say, Queenie?"

"I do not know."

"But, mother, you find it such a fag and such a drag getting to and fro to your committees."

For a moment Regina did not speak; she put her fish-knife and fork down upon her plate.

"I don't know that we need consider my com-

mittees," she said quietly. "I am thinking of giving them all up."

"Your committees!" cried Julia in a tone that was almost frightened.

"My dear—!" said Alfred.

"I have worked for others during the last ten years, Alfred," said Regina, leaning back in her chair and looking at her husband, "but I am not sure if I've done quite the right thing in giving up so much of my time to outside work."

"My dear, I have never complained."

"No, dear, you have never complained. I do not know that you might not have done."

"My dear girl, what does it matter to me how you amuse yourself while I am at business?"

"No, there's something in that. On the other hand, in a sense it does matter. I have worked long enough; I think I want to be a little more in my own home—I'm not so young as I was."

"You're worn-out, that's about the English of it," said Alfred Whittaker, putting his knife and fork on his plate and sitting back. "As long as it amused you it was all right, it was as good as spending your life in running from one hot, stuffy party to another. Cut it, my dear, cut it. There's one axiom in business that never fails, 'cut your loss'—at least, I have never known it fail yet. By-the-bye," he said, "I have brought you a little present."

Regina almost screamed aloud. So she had been wrong all the time, there was no hussy, his solicitude for her pale looks had been the solicitude of the old

affectionate Alfred who had been ever and always her *beau ideal* of what a husband should be. She gasped a little. "Yes," she said faintly.

"Something nice?" said Julia. "Jewellery?"

"Well," said Alfred Whittaker, and his face wore a curious little smile, "yes—it's jewellery. I came by it in an odd fashion. I had some business up west this morning, a very unexpected bit of business, it took me right out of my regular track. I was going along a little street at the back of Manchester Square and I saw something in a little shop that attracted my attention. It was a quaint little shop, half jeweller's and half curiosity dealer's."

"And you stopped and bought it?"

"Not at all, I stopped and looked at it. It was a tea-service of that scale blue Worcester which fetches such tremendous prices at Christie's, only I don't think that particular set will ever have a show at Christie's, handsome as it is, and while I was looking at it I noticed this. I haven't seen such a thing for ages, and I've never seen anything like it at the price before, so I bought it and paid for it, and here it is." He took a little parcel from his pocket wrapped in tissue paper, and pushed it along the table to Julia. "Give that to your mother. No, I did not buy anything for you."

"Then you did not go to Templeton's for it?" said Regina, as her fingers closed over the little parcel.

"Templeton's? Oh no, this is not modern, it is an antique. The people haven't the faintest idea of its value; it is worth ten times what I gave for it. It

happened to be one of the things in which I am interested and which I understand. No, when I want jewels, I go to Templeton's. I don't understand gems and I can trust them."

"And their discretion?" said Regina.

"Yes, if it were necessary I would trust their discretion too. Now, what do you think of that?"

Regina opened the parcel with fingers which visibly trembled. He had bought her a present, his mind, at the moment of looking into that little shop, half jeweller's, half curiosity shop, on seeing something in which he was personally interested, had instantly flown to her. He might have given a bracelet to a hussy, but his interest had remained with Regina.

CHAPTER XIX

BROKEN-HEARTED MIRANDA

When we are in trouble we often take means to comfort ourselves that we should utterly despise in others.

MRS WHITTAKER in no way faltered in her resolve to win back Alfred to his old allegiance. The dinner was excellent.

"A very good bit of salmon," said Alfred, looking inquiringly at his wife as he held the fish server and fork suggestively towards the dish; "you will have a bit more, dearest?"

"A little bit more," said Regina.

In spite of the blow which had fallen upon her she was honestly and genuinely hungry. To a woman who lives well and eats her three meals a day, to say nothing of a very good tea thrown in, the loss of a meal is a very serious matter. Muffins, though consoling, are not possessed of much staying power, and Regina was, in spite of being so upset, genuinely famished.

"Cook is improving in her sharp sauce," Alfred went on cheerfully as he helped himself a second time. "I often think," he continued, "what a lucky thing it is that salmon is a summer fish, it is such a refreshing dish in hot weather."

"Yes, I confess I like a bit of salmon myself," said Regina, rather tamely.

Julia looked up. Something in her mother's tone struck her as unusual. "Don't you feel well to-day, mother?" she asked.

Alfred looked up sharply. "Don't you feel all right?"

"Yes, quite all right," she replied; "I think I want to get away."

"You're over-doing it," said Alfred in genial yet uneasy tones. "Why don't you take a little rest—not a holiday, but a rest from your outside work? You're over-doing it."

"I think so too," said Regina. "I went down to the offices to-day and told them to prepare my resignation as President of the S.R.W."

"Mother!" cried Julia in sharp staccato accents.

"Oh, come, come, you needn't say 'mother' in that tone. It is the best bit of news I have heard for a long time. My dear, I look towards you— Stay, we'll have a glass of fizz on the strength of it. Margaret, here, take my keys, go down to the cellar, look in bin marked number three and bring up a bottle."

"Large or small, sir?"

"Oh, a large one."

"If you did not like it, Alfred, I wish you had told me before," said Regina, as the door closed behind Margaret.

"It isn't that I did not like it, or that I grudged your amusing yourself in your own way, or making your life interests in your own way, but when I see

you looking so worn and harried, so pulled down and fagged out—well, I naturally begin to wonder where it is going to end."

"I'm getting older," said Regina.

"Nonsense, nonsense, fiddle-faddle! we're all getting older, as a matter of fact, but you are still a young woman in the very prime of life. When you have had a good change and a little sea air, when you give yourself a little more ease and a little more personal indulgence, you'll look ten years younger, my dear child, ten years younger."

Regina only replied by a smile. At that moment Margaret came back carrying, with the care of a thoroughly well-trained parlour-maid, the bottle of champagne in which they were to drink, as Alfred put it five minutes later, to the degeneration of Mrs Whittaker.

"They'll be very angry, they'll never replace you," he went on, leaning back in his chair and nursing his stomach in the manner peculiar to elderly gentlemen who do not despise their dinner, "I think they ought to give you a diamond star to show their appreciation of the star you have been to them."

"I hope not," said Regina, decidedly.

"Don't fuss yourself," put in Julia, whose fears for her mother were somewhat allayed; "they won't. I notice that when women give things to women it is generally something they've got cheap. They'll give you an illuminated address, no doubt, and you can frame it and hang it in the hall."

"Not in the hall," said Regina, who was not strong

in the point of humour, "not in the hall, Julia darling."

After that the evening passed over very quietly. Julia ran over to the house of Marksby and was seen no more till bed-time. Alfred sat down in his own special easy-chair in the cool, pleasant drawing-room, and, over a pretence of reading the newest art journal, gently dosed off into slumber, and Regina, in her corresponding chair in the big bow window, sat and thought things out. She was resolved upon one thing, she would leave nothing to chance. As for fate, she would brave it. Like her husband, she was making a pretence of reading, and as she sat thinking things over she became conscious that she was looking at the portrait of a very beautiful woman, exquisite in face, elegant in figure, luxuriously gowned. The journal she was holding in her hand was one devoted to feminine interests, and this was an interview with a lady very highly placed in Society. Some impulse made Regina turn to the beginning of the article and read it. "Devoted mother, idolised wife, adored *châtelaine*, the lady bountiful of her village, her highest aim is gratified in being her husband's countess." There was a portrait of the husband, who, in Regina's eyes, was not to be named in the same twelvemonth with the noble Alfred sleeping on the other side of the room. There were pictures of the children, of her ladyship's boudoir, of her village school and her cottage hospital. "The world has but little attraction for the beautiful subject of our sketch," the article ended; "she is seen occasionally at

Court and at great functions, as a part of her duties, but that is all. Her heart is in her beautiful country home with her husband and her children, and there she shares the joys and sorrows of all who are brought in touch with the great historic name which she bears."

Regina's heart was stirred by new and conflicting emotions. She had, all her life, thought much of those who could be credited with working for eternity, whose toil was to benefit the whole world, to whom the personal touch had but small value. The picture of this great lady with her indisputable charms of beauty and disposition, came to her with an alluring sense of restfulness; here was one who wished to be far removed from the struggles of a contentious world, and somehow there came a second picture which linked itself with the first in a strange sweetness, the picture of an anxious, busy housewife, eager to honour the great guest, and through the summer night there seemed to float to Regina's disturbed senses that simple, soft and sweet reproach, that was only a little bit of a reproach, "she hath chosen the better part and it shall not be taken away." Yes, she was glad that she had laid the train for the resignation of her presidential office, she was glad that she was going to be all in all to her husband and children — well, husband and child. Perhaps before long Julia would take wings and fly away from the old nest as her sister had done before her. But Alfred would remain, and she determined in that soft summer evening hour that for Alfred's sake she would choose the better

part, and her title to honour should be within rather than without doors. Having arrived at this point in her thoughts, she began idly turning over the leaves of the journal in her hand. It contained nothing of particular interest to Regina; there were accounts of entertainments given by people to whom she was unknown; there was a page devoted to fashionable weddings, including a portrait of her own girl and of Harry Marksby, and a glowing account of the wedding just gone by; and then she came to a column of answers to correspondents which appeared under the heading of "Feminine Wants." Regina's heart gave a sick thrill as she saw the two words, "Feminine Wants." The woes of womanhood seemed to crowd in upon her in an overwhelming wave of sorrow and desolation. Doubtless other women had suffered more than she had done. The first answer ran, "Humming Bird. I am so sorry for you, poor little thing, bravely struggling along in your little flat without a servant to do the rough work. Keep a brave heart, little wife, and always make a toilette for dinner. I know this may sound ridiculous, and I do not mean you to put on a low-necked dress, or commit any folly of that kind, but when you have set your dinner in train, go and dress yourself. Change your day dress for a silk blouse, do your hair smartly and neatly, have a smile ready for 'him' when he comes home, for he is just as tired and ready for refreshment as you are. You will enjoy your dinner twice as well if you have a little change in your gear, and you can easily put the dinner things

on one side to be washed up in the morning. Be sure, after doing any dirty work, to wash your hands thoroughly with a spoonful of Lux in the water, then rub in a mixture of equal parts of glycerine and lemon juice. This will keep your hands soft and white. Write to me again if there is any way in which I can help you."

Regina drew a long breath. It was hard on the little soul to have no servant, but, after all, they were boy and girl together, no hussy had crept in to dispute her kingdom. At that moment Regina would cheerfully have consented to wash dishes and clean doorsteps for the price of Alfred's undivided affection.

"Sad Maudie," was the next reply. "Yes, you are, indeed a sad Maudie, and I am truly sorry for you, for I well know the trouble that acne gives." "Acne—that's something to do with the skin," said Regina to herself. "Send me a stamped and addressed envelope, and I will send you a prescription which will do wonders for this troublesome complaint. I would insert it here, but my editor does not like me to deal with medical matters in this column."

"Cheerful Sally. It is *not* etiquette to introduce callers when they meet in your drawing-room. Life would become utterly impossible if one were liable to meet one's next-door neighbour, whom one had taken infinite pains to avoid, when merely paying a call. I should be very strict on this point if I were you, particularly as you are a newcomer in your neighbourhood."

Regina gave a sniff of disgust and passed on.

"Delia W.—My dear Delia, you can't be old and faded at your age, but you have let anxiety and worry get the better of you, and you should remedy these ill-effects at once. Go to Mrs Vansittart, the famous beauty specialist, and put yourself unreservedly in her hands. It will cost you a few guineas, but to win your heart's love, what is that?"

A sudden resolution seized hold of Regina. She would write to the editress of "Feminine Wants." She got up softly and went to her writing-table.

"DEAR EDITRESS, she wrote, "I am a woman of middle age. I have reason to believe that my husband has swerved from his allegiance to me. Tell me, what can I do to win him back? I am too stout, I have never taken care of my skin, I have let my hair take care of itself, I do not think I have good taste in dress. Pray advise your broken-hearted MIRANDA."

CHAPTER XX

FAMILY CRITICISM

Sometimes it is a good thing to be aroused out of sleep, especially if the sleep has been a fool's paradise.

MRS WHITTAKER crept softly out of the room, and went as softly out of the house. There was a pillar-box a little way along the road, and it was not an infrequent habit with her to carry her own letters to the post without troubling to make any sort of outdoor toilette. So on that soft summer night she gathered up her voluminous skirts, and with the letter in her hand went down the covered way to the gate and walked as far as the pillar-box.

"My dear," said a neighbour, who had been to the club and was on his way home, as he entered the room where his wife was sitting, "I met Mrs Whittaker just now. I never saw anything so remarkable."

"Really! She's always rather remarkable in her dress, but how?"

"I don't know, but it was white, it looked like a voluminous exaggerated nightgown."

"Mrs Whittaker in a nightgown, Charley? She must have been out of her mind, or was she walking in her sleep, do you think?"

"Oh no, I don't think she was; she was evidently going to the post-box, but her gown— 'Pon my word, she looked like a dressed-up figure in a carnival."

"Oh, she is quite mad," said the little wife; "they say she's very nice, but quite mad."

Meanwhile, Regina, all unconscious of the strictures which had been passed upon her appearance, had gone back into Ye Dene, and lingered in the covered way adjusting a plant here and a leaf there, as if she had no higher object in life than the arrangement of her house. It happened that Alfred woke up as his wife gently closed the door behind her.

"I thought Queenie was here. Dear me, it is quite chilly—what a fool I was to go to sleep here! I suppose it's a sign of old age."

Then he stretched out one arm and then the other one.

"I suppose I ought to write that letter to Jenkinson," was his next thought. So he heaved himself up out of his comfortable chair, picked up the art magazine, and sought his own little sanctum, which was behind the dining-room. There he wrote a letter of three lines making an appointment for the next morning, and then he too set off for the pillar-box.

"Hullo! Queenie, are you here?" he exclaimed, as he saw the tall figure in the voluminous white draperies. "Walk up as far as the post with me."

"Oh, are you going to the post?" she said. "I have just been. Yes, I will come with you, certainly."

He opened the gate to let her pass out in front of him.

"You won't take cold?" he said anxiously.

"Oh no, not a night like this."

"I don't know," he remarked, as they sauntered up the pathway together, "that there is much protection in a frock like this."

"It's not a frock, dear, it's a tea-gown."

"Oh, is it?"

"What the French call *saute de lit.*"

"It's flimsy. I don't know that I altogether like it," said Alfred, slipping his hand under her arm.

"It has the advantage of being cool," said Regina.

"Yes, I daresay it is cool, but this kind of gown makes you look—" He wobbled his hand about to express something that was not very clear to either of them.

"I know, it makes me look too fat," said Regina in quite a crushed tone. "I *am* too fat."

"Oh, I don't know—you're just comfortable."

"No, Alfred, I'm too fat," Regina reiterated with an air of firm conviction.

"Well, as to that," said Alfred, slipping the letter into the letter-box, and wheeling round, still keeping hold of his wife's arm, "I never did admire the 'two-deal-board' style of woman myself."

Regina immediately decided in her own mind that the hussy was of the plump little partridge order.

"When I take hold of a lady's arm," continued Alfred, with the facetious air of a heavy father, "I like an arm that I can feel, I object to taking hold of

a bone. No, no, my dear, you are not at all too fat, but I don't think you ought to wear gowns, except purely for reasons of comfort, that tend to increase your apparent size."

"But you don't think it matters much?"

"I'm sure it does not matter very much."

"Alfred, do you think that I am greatly altered?" She asked the question wistfully, as if the issue of life and death hung upon his reply.

"As a matter of fact, said Alfred Whittaker, promptly, "I think you are the least altered of any woman I ever knew in my life. I see other women going to pieces in the most extraordinary manner. Now, Mrs Chamberlain came into the office this morning. My goodness, what a wreck! Yellow as a guinea, her face lined all over—she made me think of a mummy."

"Yet she is younger than I am," said Regina.

"Oh, years—they have nothing to do with the case. You have been a happy woman, a prosperous woman, a healthy woman, there has been nothing in your life to seam your face with lines and generally stamp you with all the worry that is too plainly visible on poor Mrs Chamberlain's features. Well, here we are, and here is Julia skipping across the road."

As the words left his lips a slim young figure in white emerged from the rustic gate that gave entrance and egress to the house of Marksby. They stood until Julia came running across the road.

"Have you two dear things been out for an airing?" she exclaimed as she reached the foot-path.

"No, only to the post-box," said Regina.

"Mother dear," said Julia, "you look exactly as if you were walking about in your nightgown—a very voluminous and sublimated nightgown, but a nightgown all the same."

For a moment Regina was too dashed to speak. The thought came fluttering through her mind, and seemed to fall to the floor of her heart with a great crash, that surely it was hopeless for her ever to try to win back Alfred from the hussy by personal means. Evidently she was hopelessly out of it as regards all questions of dress and the toilette.

"Of course," she hastened to reply, for she did not wish Julia to think that she was annoyed by her criticism, "it really is a bedroom garment. I put it on because I was so hot to-day, and in this little country sort of place I thought going to the post in it would not matter, and—we—we did not meet anyone, did we, Alfred?"

"It would not have mattered if you had," said Julia; "what you wear is a matter for your own consideration. But it does look like a nightgown."

"And your mother," said Alfred, "looks better in a sort of glorified nightgown than most women do in their best frocks. And now don't you think we had better go off to bed? You will have the least as ever was, dear?"

Regina's face broke into a smile. "The least as ever was," she replied. So the two went into the

dining-room, where, as usual, the refreshment tray was set out upon the table. Julia, with a laughing declaration that she did not want even the least as ever was, went gaily upstairs to her bedroom.

"I shall be very glad to get away," said Alfred, sitting on the edge of the oaken dining-table and holding his whisky-and-soda up to the light. "I want a change badly this year. We are not as young as we were, Queenie; I've taken a lot out of myself lately."

"You've been so busy."

"Yes, we've never had such a good year in business as the last one, but there's something wrong with Chamberlain."

"How wrong?"

"I don't know, I can't make it out. Whether there's a screw loose at home, or whether his wife's health is worrying him, I don't know."

"Does she own to being ill?"

"No, never. This morning I quite offended her by telling her that she did not look very well."

"And they are not going away till September?"

"No, she has just come back."

"She has been to the sea?"

"Yes."

"Then she came up specially for Maudie's wedding?"

"I suppose so, I did not know she had been away till Chamberlain told me this morning. He seems dull and gloomy—ah, there's a screw loose there, but I don't know just where it is. Anyway, I know I

want my holiday very badly this year, and glad I shall be when we have packed up and are off for La Belle France."

"And I," said Regina, with a sigh which, though quickly suppressed, was full of meaning. Somehow, she could not sleep that night; during the day some of her most cherished ideals had been ruthlessly torn up by the roots. Never in all her life before had she had even so much as a suspicion of her noble Alfred's matrimonial integrity, and she had come to see flaws in her own life and rents in her own robes. Indeed, had she not been, as it were, aroused out of sleep, the regeneration of women had been like to cost her very dear. But, God be thanked! she had been awakened in time, and in future she would leave the great question of womanhood to look after itself, and she would devote her time and thought and the use of her astute brain to regaining her husband's love. "Think," her thoughts ran, "think — Maudie is married, Julia is young and beautiful, and fascinating to the opposite sex, you cannot hope to keep her long in the home nest; think what your life would be living alone with a husband whose heart was wholly gone from you."

CHAPTER XXI

DEAR DIEPPE

There is occasionally a time in our life which proves a veritable oasis in a desert of doubt and suspicion.

DURING the month which they spent in the fascinating little town on the northern coast, Regina lived a very *dolce far niente* kind of life. Her anxieties as to the hussy were, for a time, lulled to sleep. They stayed at a comfortable hotel on the front, had rooms overlooking that wonderful stretch of sea which is one of the great charms of Dieppe, and they did themselves remarkably well, that is to say, they went without nothing that would give them pleasure. As soon as they arrived and were settled down Alfred Whittaker went to the extravagance of engaging a motor car for their exclusive use during their stay. It was a very comfortable car, and held six persons in addition to the chauffeur, and almost every day they made excursions into the green heart of the quiet country, lunching at some snug French hostelry on homely but delicious fare. Personally, I have always thought that one of the chief reasons why art and sentiment flourish and thrive apace in sunny France is because the people live upon food so much

less gross than is the case with ourselves. In the poorest little inn on the other side of the Channel one is always sure of an excellent soup, a delicious omelette, bread and butter that are beyond reproach, and a sound and excellent drink, be it of red wine or only of homely cider. To Regina, the freedom from household cares, which she detested, and from all questions of orderings and caterings, made this quite the most charming holiday of her whole life. She was happy, too, that Julia was happy, that Julia made many friends of her own age and condition, that she, as the phrase goes, danced her feet off four nights a week, and was able to enter with zest and enjoyment into the young life of the place. As for Alfred Whittaker himself, he so thoroughly enjoyed the rest and change, seemed so happy and contented with himself and everything around him, that sometimes Regina caught herself wondering if she had been entirely mistaken in imagining that there was, after all, a hussy in the background. He was loud in his expressions of satisfaction in the new ground which they had broken. How they ever came to go year after year to a dull English watering-place, and never thought of coming abroad, was really beyond him.

"But we have been abroad," said Regina.

"Yes, for a trip, for a fortnight in Paris, for tours in different parts of Europe; there's no rest in that kind of thing, it is an excitement, an opening of one's mind — quite different to this," he rejoined. "It's very improving to one's mind to go up the Rhine in

a steamer, and go round all the sights of Cologne; to gaze at Ehrenbreitstein, and wonder whether it really is like Gibraltar or not; to feed the carp at Frankfort; to gaze at the falls at Schaffhausen; but it is not restful, it is not really a holiday. It is a nice fillip for a placid, blank or uneventful life, but for a man overdone with the stress of business, give me this. Restful without being dull, interesting without being overwhelming, and bright and gay without being fagging."

"You are always so sensible," said Regina. She felt at that moment that the hussy was farther away than ever. Yet, a little later, when she and Alfred were taking a stroll down the Grande Rue, it being market morning, and therefore unusually interesting, she was reminded of the skeleton in her cupboard as sharply and unexpectedly as the jerk with which the proverbial bird, tied by a string to the leg, is stopped in its peregrinations. As a rule on market morning the world promenades in the middle of the street, in the actual roadway, but it happened on this occasion that Alfred and Regina met a carriage and pair coming slowly between the market people squalling on the edge of the pavement. To avoid the carriage they stepped on to the *trottoir*, and this brought them under the awning of a jeweller's shop.

"I think I ought to buy you a present," said Alfred, "for I won last night."

"Did you? You never told me."

"I didn't think of it. I was so sleepy I was glad to tumble into bed and forget everything," Alfred

replied. I only had five louis in my pocket when I went into the Casino, and this morning I find that I have twenty-five. Now, twenty louis is sixteen pounds. If I keep it I shall lose it all back to the tables again, whether it is at the fascinating little horses or the more fascinating green cloth in the Grand Cercle. Come, what would you like? Here's a jeweller's shop, there are sixteen good English pounds lying at your feet, make your choice."

"In francs?" asked Regina.

"In francs—well, in francs it's four hundred. Now, there's a ring, I call that a very good bargain for four hundred francs—there's something for your money, there's body in it." He pointed to a large and deep-coloured sapphire set in a circle of diamonds. Regina saw that the ring was beautiful, but, woman-like, her eyes wandered to the other gewgaws displayed in the window.

"I have a good many rings," she said hesitatingly. Then her eyes fell upon a thick gold curb bracelet clasped by a horse-shoe of diamonds.

"This is handsome," she said. Her voice was quite faint, for she felt that she was approaching that subject which had troubled her so much.

"Oh, horrid!" said he. "I love to see you with plenty of rings, but as to bracelets—I can't endure them."

"Never?" said Regina. "Never?"

"No, I never buy a bracelet for anybody. I like to give you something that you can wear for weeks or years together. Bracelets always seem in the way,

they don't set off a pretty wrist, and they draw attention to an ugly one. Besides, they are intensely disagreeable if you happen to put your arm round my neck. Come, let us go inside and see how the sapphire suits your hand."

He led the way into the shop, as a man always does when he is going to buy something for a woman. Have you ever noticed, my reader, how the most polite of men, who stands aside on all occasions for the lady to precede him, marches into a shop right in front of her when he is going to make her a present?

Now, Alfred Whittaker's knowledge of French was what may be described as infinitesimal, and it being his habit to state his business whenever he entered a shop of any kind, he did not wait for Regina's faulty but more understandable explanations.

"Vous-avez un ring la," pointing with a sturdy British thumb towards the window, "sappheer."

"*Ah, ah, une broche, monsieur?*"

"Regina, what does she mean by that?"

Now, for the life of her Regina could not think of the French word for ring.

"She means 'brooch' of course," she replied. "I really don't know what ring is in French."

"*Pas une broche?*" the lady of the establishment demanded.

"No, not a brooch," Alfred Whittaker shouted at her, as if her understanding lay at the back of deaf ears.

"*Un bracelet, peut-etre?*" the Frenchwoman asked, touching her wrist with a gesture that conveyed more than her words.

"No, no," said Alfred, tapping his first finger.

"*Ah, ah, une bague.*" She quickly opened the window and brought out several sapphire rings, including the one which had taken Alfred's fancy, and then, as he had already, being a business man, grasped the initial weakness of the Norman character, there began a period of haggling which Alfred Whittaker would never have thought of employing in the case of the establishment of Templeton. Eventually Regina left the shop with the beautiful sapphire ring upon her finger.

"My dear girl," said Alfred (he always called her his dear girl when he was best pleased), "eighteen pounds for a ring like that is dirt cheap. She said it was an occasion, what did she mean by 'an occasion'?"

"I haven't the least idea, but she certainly said it."

"However, no matter what she may have meant, the ring is given away at the price—it's worth thirty pounds if it's worth a penny. You found it, so to speak, for I won the money that paid for it."

"Not quite all."

"No, not quite all, but the other was a mere bagatelle. I like to see you with plenty of rings; some women have not the hands to show them off."

It occurred to Regina that the hussy's hands were of the kind that look best in gloves. Then a second thought came, one of blame and reproach to herself

for even thinking of the hussy at such a moment when Alfred had generously been thinking only of her.

"It is a beautiful ring, dear Alfred," she said, putting her hand under his arm and squeezing it very gratefully, "it is a beautiful ring and you are very good to me, and I'm not quite sure that I deserve it."

She meant what she said. A curious idea had taken possession of her that while Alfred was so kind and generous to her she ought not to inquire or wish to inquire into his outer life; there might be fifty explanations, and while she was evidently first with him it was her duty to remain content. It was wonderful how that little present, which, after all, had not cost Alfred Whittaker very much, soothed Regina's suspicions and lulled them to sleep. And so, in perfect happiness and harmony, that month went by, and it was with genuine regret that they bade adieu to the town of many colours and turned their faces towards the duller tones of home.

"We will come back again next year," said Regina, gazing sentimentally at the fast-receding shore, now looking most uninteresting. "Dear Dieppe, we have been so happy and had such a good time, we will come again next year."

"I shouldn't be surprised," said Alfred Whittaker in a tone of ludicrous jocosity, "I shouldn't be surprised, for my part, if Darby and Joan found themselves at Dieppe by themselves. Just you and I, you know, Queenie."

"Wherever you are, Alfred," said she, leaning over the side of the ship and keeping her eyes carefully from observing the motion of the water, "wherever you are I am always perfectly happy and content."

CHAPTER XXII

REGINA ON THE WAR-PATH

There is much more value in the many "cures" that we take now-a-days than is at first apparent to the eye. One cannot take a cure for the renovation of any part of one's body without, at the same time, renovating part of one's mind.

THE immediate effect of going home again was to make Regina more convinced than ever that the hussy had a very real and tangible existence. On the very first day Alfred made haste to catch the earlier of the two trains by which he had been in the habit of travelling to town. There was nothing in that circumstance—oh no. He had been away for a full month, and Regina's opinion of her husband's partner was but small. He had brought the bulk of the money into the firm, while Alfred had supplied the major part of the brains, and had, in fact, built up the business to its present flourishing state; so, of course, there was nothing in the actual circumstance that Alfred should hurry through his breakfast so as to catch the earlier train. He fussed and fumed a little, too, and let fall a word to the effect that he knew he should find everything at sixes and sevens, and that he wanted to have one or two things settled before the Chamberlains went away for their autumn holiday. Regina too, on her side, was naturally extremely busy that morning. She had to look after

her housekeeping, to lay in supplies, to hold consultations with each of her servants, and to look out a couple of dresses of slightly more solid material than those which she had worn at Dieppe—not that she needed them for warmth, for the weather was, as the weather so frequently is in September, mild even to sultriness. The sun and the sea air had made the gowns which Regina had taken to Dieppe appear to her worn and shabby, and she therefore would have to fall back upon a couple of spring gowns until she could get her new autumn clothes, the clothes with which she was to win back Alfred. Now, the hussy had been for some time far from Regina's thoughts, her suspicions had been lulled to rest, not only by Alfred's devotion, but by his naturalness of demeanour. In a sort of gush of tenderness towards him she almost determined that she would do nothing to regain his allegiance, she would only be herself. Then her tidy eye fell upon a piece of paper lying on the carpet between Alfred's chair and the door. She went across the room and picked it up, following the housewifely instinct which moves nine women out of ten, and glanced at it to see whether it was something to keep or something to throw away. It was only a folded sheet of paper on which was written in a woman's handwriting, 27 Terrisina Road, St John's Wood, N.W. For a moment Regina was almost too stunned to speak, she stared at the paper. Luckily, Julia had already gone down to that part of the Park called the town to get some flowers with which to deck the house. All the doubts and suspicions of the

past came back in great waves, and broke cruelly upon Regina's palpitating heart. There was a hussy! This had been written by the hussy! This was where the hussy dwelt, 27 Terrisina Road, St John's Wood, N.W. It was far removed from the side of London on which the Park was situate, he had laid his plans carefully and well—or she had. Well, 27 Terrisina Road should not get him or keep him without a struggle, it should be war to the knife. Doubtless this was a little soft-eyed creature young enough to be Regina's child. But Regina would be soft-eyed, Regina would rejuvenate herself, Regina would win all along the line. It was in this spirit that Regina went upstairs and examined her wardrobe. She would leave the house to take care of itself, merely throwing out a few hints as to dinner, and betake herself to town in order to consult the specialists whom she had had in her mind during the last month. She picked out the smartest of the frocks which she had not taken away with her, and, casting off her white cambric wrapper in which she had breakfasted, she began to dress herself with feverishly eager fingers.

Alack and alas! The effect of careering through the fresh country air, tinged as it was with the brine of the ocean, had been to make Regina thoroughly enjoy the lunches by the wayside, and the more elaborate dinners of the evening hour. We all know the effect of good French soup, various kinds of omelettes, in short, of excellent bourgeois cooking, and this effect had stolen upon Regina like a thief in the

night, and neither by coaxing nor force could she get herself into the garment in which she desired to travel to town.

"Good heavens!" she exclaimed in a tone of anxiety, "I must have put on stones while I have been away. The old proverb says 'Laugh and grow fat,' and I take it that laughter and happiness have the same effect if one has a tendency that way. What shall I do?"

There was only one thing to be done, and that was to get into one of the despised and discarded gowns in which she had loomed large and important on the French horizon, and take herself in quest of new ones as quickly as possible. Then she remembered that she had sent a little message on the wings of unanimity, a little message which had been signed, "Your broken-hearted Miranda." Surely by now there would be a reply to it. She finished her toilette, hiding as much of her gown as she could by the addition of a large lace cape which she had bought as a bargain in the little French town where she had been so happy, and then she went downstairs and sought for the back numbers of the ladies' periodical to which she had written. They were in their accustomed place, the four numbers which she had not yet seen. She began with the last. "Faded Iras," "White Heather," "White Rose," "Pussy Cat," were the first words which met her eyes. There was no "broken-hearted Miranda," and she went on to the next number, and there, at the top of the column, was the name she was seeking.

"My poor broken-hearted Miranda," the reply ran, "how grieved and sorry I am for you! Are you sure that your conjectures are correct? I have known wives who made themselves very unhappy on very small grounds—not that I wish to imply that your grounds for uneasiness are small, but are you quite sure? If I were you I would take every means of finding out. With regard to what you tell me of yourself, I can see you, my poor Miranda, in my mind's eye, and I hasten to assure you that, whether you are right or wrong, you will not regret taking yourself in hand in the beauty sense. For your adipose tissue, I would recommend you to try Madame Winifred Polson's little brown tablets. They are wonderful in their effect on stout figures, particularly in reducing bulk below the waist. If you begin them, be sure that you give them a very good trial, and that you carry out her instructions fully and to the very letter. Now, for your complexion, I can advise you no better than to go to Madame Alvara. You needn't be the least nervous of going to her, as it is not a shop, but she has an elegant private house on the best side of Grosvenor Square. You will probably meet three duchesses on the stairs, and may have to wait some time, unless you make an appointment. Place yourself unreservedly in Madame Alvara's hands, she will restore to you the skin of your childhood. For your hair—well, that is difficult. I think you ought to write to me again and tell me what kind of hair you have, whether it is thin or grey, that I may advise you whether to go to a hair specialist or an

artiste in *toupes*. Write to me again, my dear Miranda, and pray believe that nothing is too much trouble if I have the reward of knowing that I have helped you to your legitimate end."

Involuntarily Regina put up her hands and passed them over her head. She had let her hair take care of itself—that did not mean that she was grey or that she had a mere wisp; she had thick and luxuriant hair, turned back from her face and done into a simple coil at the turn of the head.

"I will not write to-day," she said to herself, "I will go and see the face specialist and the beauty specialist, and I will pay a visit to the lady of the little brown tablets, and then I will go to my tailor. Something I must have to wear every day. If I get a smart coat and skirt, something loose and *chic*, I can put off the rest of my wardrobe until I have got my figure down to its normal size."

She went into the hall intending to leave a message with the cook for Julia, but the parlour-maid happened to be going through the dining-room to the pantry with a tray of silver things in her hands.

"Oh, Margaret, tell Miss Julia I shall, in all probability, not be in to lunch, and tell her not to wait for me. She will be occupied during the rest of the day."

"Very good, ma'am."

Then Regina sailed down the covered way and got into the omnibus which would carry her to the railway station. What a day of disappointments it was!

She found the beauty specialist had not yet returned to town, and there was nobody to take her place. Not that she was unceremoniously told this at the door—oh no, she was shown into a room, and the great lady's secretary informed her with an important air that Madame Alvara had been very unwell—she had had such a terribly heavy season—carriages standing a dozen deep at the door all day long—everybody clamouring for Madame's own opinion—and she was so popular, socially."

"Madame will not be back until the end of the month, I can make an appointment for the first week in October."

"Can you recommend me any harmless lotion to begin with?" said Regina.

"Oh no, I should not dare to interfere in Madame's province; I am only the secretary, I arrange appointments, and so on."

"But you have a skin like a rose leaf," said Regina, wistfully.

"Yes, I have to thank Madame Alvara for that. You see, if I were to give you my recipe you might ruin your skin. Oh, every case has quite individual attention and treatment. The staff only work under Madame Alvara's directions. Yes, they are busy, fairly busy, continuing the treatment of cases which were begun last season. No new cases will be taken till Madame Alvara returns."

So Regina had no choice but to make an appointment for the 5th of October, that being the first hour which could be placed at her disposal. She then

went off, after disappointment one, to Madame Winifred Polson. She had difficulty in finding the place, and when she did find it, it did not commend itself to her ideas of shrewd common-sense. However, she left a couple of guineas behind her and brought away instead a little box of something which rattled. Then she went and had some lunch—not tea and muffins this time, but a good hot lunch at a famous drapery establishment which she frequently patronised. After that she made some purchases, and then she went in search of an establishment whose advertisements she had noticed in a ladies' paper which she had taken up while waiting for her lunch to be served. "To Ladies," it said. "If you have no lady's maid you cannot possibly care for your own hair as the glory of womanhood should be cared for. Go and consult the ladies who run The Dressing-Room. You can have special treatment for hair that is not quite in health, special brushings for hair that merely needs attention, and can consult with experts as to the most becoming way of wearing your hair."

"That is the place for me," said Regina, taking note of the address. And so, after paying her two guineas to Madame Polson, she next turned her steps towards the street wherein she should find The Dressing-Room.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE DRESSING-ROOM

I am convinced that there is a huge opening for what I would call an all-round advice bureau. Its claims would reach far and wide, its clients would be drawn from all classes. Among them would be the women who have no taste in dress. The only difficulty would be to convince them of the fact.

REGINA found The Dressing-Room without difficulty. To be exact, it was situated in Berners Street and the number was forty-five. Regina gained admittance, was greeted pleasantly, and expressed a certain portion of her wishes.

"You would like to have your hair brushed?" said the charming little lady who received her. "Oh, but you have beautiful hair," she said, having enveloped Regina in a snowy garment, unfastened the still abundant coils, and allowed the locks to stray over her shoulders. "Oh, you have lovely hair, but how little you make of it!"

"That is exactly why I have come"—her tone was pathetic in its eagerness. "How would you advise me to wear it?"

"I don't know, I never like to give an opinion offhand. I'll brush it thoroughly, see how it lies, study your face and figure—"

"Oh—my figure!" said Regina.

"Why, what is the matter with it?"

"Too fat," Regina sighed.

"Too fat? I'd be glad of a little of your complaint," said the little woman.

"But I am too fat," Regina cried.

"Well, perhaps you might do with a little less, but I shouldn't overdo it in the other direction. Of course, there is no doubt that good-looking women are generally those who are inclined to be stout, but keep themselves within reasonable limits. They have the best skin, the best hair, they have so few lines and so few wrinkles, and they escape the withered look of age."

She was brushing softly yet vigorously at Regina's soft brown locks.

"You are beginning to wear your hair off your forehead."

"I have always worn it off my forehead," said Regina, with dignity.

"No—I don't mean that, I mean that the continued brushing in one direction has begun to wear it away, and your forehead seems higher than it really is."

"Yes, it is wearing back."

"Now, we ought to contradict that tendency."

"I can't wear a fringe," said Regina.

"No, a fringe would be out of keeping with your general appearance, and I never advocate a fringe if it can be dispensed with, but you have been wearing your hair so tightly dressed. Now, would you let me shampoo your hair?"

"Oh yes, do what you like," said Regina, with child-like faith and very unchild-like patience.

"It will help you a little—in this way, it gives the hair a fresh start. One should never try to dress one's hair in a new fashion without shaking off as much as possible the old way."

So Regina's hair was washed and dried, and then came the great question of what style of hairdressing she should adopt.

"I would like you not to look in the glass," said Madame Florence, as the little lady had asked Regina to call her, "I should like you to see the finished picture of yourself without your seeing the process. So often what comes to one as a surprise is so much better than what comes gradually."

She opened a large box on a table at her right hand, and chose from it a light frame of the exact colour of Regina's hair. This she put on Regina's head, then she deftly manipulated the abundant tresses, gathered them loosely over the frame into a knot at the top of the head, fixing it here and there with combs, and then slightly waved the looser portions of hair.

"In most instances," she said when she had reached this point, "I should recommend the wearing of a net, but your hair is so much of a length, and so unlikely to become untidy, that I should not recommend you to trouble to do more than I have done. Now look at yourself."

It was such a glorified vision of Regina that met that lady's gaze when she looked at herself that she positively jumped out of her seat.

"It is really me?" she cried.

"Yes, it is really you," said Madame Florence.

"But how shall I be able to do it myself, I—I do not keep a maid."

"Well, wear it to-day, see how you like it, see how your people appreciate it, do it as well as you can and come back again to me to-morrow. I will do it for you until your hair has got into condition and takes these lines naturally. How do you like it?"

"I think I must have looked a perfect fright before," said Regina in a burst of confidence.

"Well, compared with what you do now, you certainly did. It was a sin to see all that lovely hair wasted and made nothing of. By the way, about your combs—I have put you in any ordinary combs, would you like to have a proper set?"

"Oh yes," said Regina, "I will have everything that is necessary," for, as I have already explained, money was not a matter of paramount importance to her.

"I have put in ordinary imitation tortoise-shell combs just to try. Take the glass, if you please, and look at yourself all round. See, I will turn on the light. Do you like the shape of the head? You see the combs improve it. I should advise you to have real tortoise-shell, it is better for the hair, and more in accordance with your age and position than little cheap ones."

"Oh yes, I will have good combs."

Madame Florence touched a bell and immediately there came into the room a young girl of intelligent aspect and stylish exterior.

"Miss Margaret," said Madame Florence, "will you get me the good combs?"

"In sets?" said Miss Margaret.

"Yes, like these only real."

"Certainly."

As the girl left the room Regina turned to Madame Florence. "You have a quaint custom here of using the Christian name," she said.

"We wish to be impersonal," said Madame Florence. "Our establishment is called The Dressing-Room, that is sufficient for our purpose, and as we must have some distinguishing mark, my partner and I are Madame Florence and Madame Cynthia, and our helpers are Miss Margaret, Miss Bertha and Miss Violet. It gives us a personality here which has nothing to do with our private personality. We find that it works excellently well." She broke off as Miss Margaret came back into the room carrying a large box. Regina chose a set of combs and Madame Florence adjusted them in her hair, taking away the cheaper ones with which she had first dressed it.

"Now," she said, "you may find your toque a little difficult—well, I should like to see your toque on."

The effect was terrible, for Regina's toques were never things of beauty, and this one was less beautiful than most of her headgear.

"It is impossible!"

"Well, it is rather impossible. Forgive me for saying so, but how could you buy such a thing?"

"Madame Florence," said Regina, "you are a lady."

"I hope so, I have always believed myself to be such."

"I recognised it. I recognise it still more as I remain in your presence. I will be frank with you, I will be candid. I see you have a copy of the *Illustrated Ladies' Joy* on the table. I should like to speak to you alone," she said in an undertone.

Madame Florence gave a look at the younger lady, which she interpreted, and immediately disappeared from the room.

"I may speak to you in confidence?"

"Certainly."

"Give me the number of the *Illustrated Ladies' Joy* for the week before last."

"Certainly. Here it is."

Regina turned with trembling fingers to the answers to correspondents on matters connected with the toilette. "Read that," she said, pointing to the answer which was headed "broken-hearted Miranda."

"I am that woman, I am 'broken-hearted Miranda.'"

"Dear, dear, dear," said Madame Florence, "are you really sure that it is so?"

"I am afraid so. My husband is the noblest of men—generous, brave, true-hearted—he has been got hold of, Madame Florence."

"And you must get him back again," said Madame Florence in sharp staccato accents. "You are a

good-looking woman, a little stout, but that can be got rid of by judicious means."

"I have taken means; I have just bought some of Madame Winifred Polson's little brown tablets."

"Two guineas' worth?"

"Yes."

"I would not take them if I were you. They will eat away the lining of your stomach, they will make you dyspeptic, they will perforate your bowels and do all sorts of horrible things. They are made of iodine and sea wrack. Put them into the fire, my dear lady."

"But I paid two guineas for them," said Regina.

Madame Florence laughed. "Well, take them home with you if you like, and look at them occasionally and say 'These cost me two guineas,' but don't take them. If you want to get thin, go to a medical man who thoroughly understands the science of food and fat—or fat and food."

"Are there such people?"

Oh yes. You say you like simple diet, and take all sorts of starchy foods and think that makes your skin fine and clear. My dear lady, it is not the milky foods you take, the bread and butter and cream and the extra two lumps of sugar in your tea that make your skin fine and clear, it is simply that you were born with a fine skin, and have been doing everything you could to ruin it during the whole of your life."

"You think that under diet my skin will regain its normal beauty?"

"Of course it will. If you put yourself into proper hands, you won't know yourself. When I say 'proper hands' I do not mean my own. My business is connected entirely with the hair, nothing else, but I know who are skilled in all matters of diet. I will give you the name and address of a doctor in Harley Street who will charge you a fixed sum for your course, and who will give you the smallest and closest directions for getting rid of your superfluous fat without making you in the least bit skinny or withered."

"I am very grateful to you," said Regina; "I wish I had not gone to Madame Polson. Not that two guineas is a matter of very great importance, but I hate being done."

"Of course you do, all nice, sensible people do. But you will not take those tablets, will you?"

"Not in the face of what you have told me. Will you give me the address of the doctor in Harley Street? I will go to him now."

"You cannot go to him now, you see it is past his hours—you have been here so long. Let me give you a cup of tea."

"You are very kind."

"And you will let me do your hair for a week?"

"Yes, I will come every day for a week. Tell me, how do you charge for your treatments?"

"Well, we give so many for a guinea. A simple treatment is brushing it and arranging it in the ordinary way. Shampooing is extra, the combs are extra, the frame is extra, and waving the hair is

again another charge. We will put your treatment to-day at a lump sum—half-a-guinea. You should take another guinea's worth of simple treatments—that is to say, I will brush your hair every day for a week, wave it and dress it like this for a guinea. After that, if you come to me once a week you will find that your hair will be kept in perfect condition. Occasionally you will care to have a shampoo, but that is as you feel. I have many clients who never have their heads touched except with my hair brushes."

"But about my toque? I cannot go out like this. I must put my hair back to-day. I *must* get home."

"I never like," said Madame Florence, "I never like to recommend special means if my clients are restricted in the way of money. I—er—it is the season of changing one's clothes, you will be buying new toques?"

"Oh yes."

"We have another business—nothing to do with me—but another business is run under this roof," said Madame Florence. "Would you care to see some toques?"

"Oh, have you? Then I will have a new toque," said Regina. "I—I will be frank and candid with you. I am a very remarkable woman—I am Mrs Alfred Whittaker. I have been for many years President of the Society for the Regeneration of Womanhood—I have regenerated all sorts of things connected with women, and now I want to regenerate myself. I have given up my presidency, I have

worked for others long enough, and some hussy has, in a measure, supplanted me with my husband. I want—I want to learn a great deal, I want to go to school again. I have never known how to dress myself, I have never known how to make the most of myself. Dear Madame Florence, I like you, you have faithful eyes, I can see you are a woman to be trusted—it has been my business for years past to judge characters by exteriors—you inspire me with confidence. Will you help me, will you come and choose something to put on my head?"

I am bound to say that it was with great difficulty that Madame Florence restrained the broadest of broad smiles.

"Madame Clementine," she said, "has a suite of rooms on the first floor. If you will come with me I will introduce her to you. No, I would not put your toque on, it is so ugly. Best not to let her know you have ever worn anything so unbecoming. I will send a message down to make sure she is alone." She touched a bell, and again Miss Margaret came into the room. "Just go down and see if Madame Clementine is below and alone. This lady is going down to choose a toque."

Two minutes later Regina found herself following Madame Florence down the stairs leading to the first floor.

"Good afternoon, Madame Clementine," said Madame Florence, cheerfully, "I have brought you a new client. This is Mrs Alfred Whittaker—so

well known — all women know the name of Mrs Alfred Whittaker. I have been arranging her hair, and I want you to crown my efforts with the prettiest toque you have in your showrooms."

CHAPTER XXIV

RUMOUR

Have you ever noticed how a lie spreads and grows as it flies along? What a pity it is that the truth does not increase in the same proportion!

"PRAY be seated, madam," said Madam Clementine. "I am delighted to be honoured by a visit from so distinguished a lady. Certainly I know your name well, everyone interested in the cause of womanhood knows the name of Mrs Alfred Whittaker."

Regina smiled and bowed. She was well accustomed to this kind of flattery, but it had never lost its charm for her, and now, after all those years, she accepted it at its face value.

"Mademoiselle Gabrielle," called Madame Clementine.

"*Mais oui*, Madame," answered a voice from another room, and immediately a little French girl came running in.

"Now, mademoiselle, here is a very distinguished lady—This is my right hand," said Madame Clementine, turning to Regina. "Now, something very *chic*. Yes, look Mrs Whittaker well over. You see, Gabrielle looks from this point and from that point, she takes in the whole. It is not with us to sell any hat that comes first, but to sell madam a hat that will

always give madame satisfaction when she looks in the glass."

"Mrs Whittaker has not been very pleased with her milliner heretofore," said Madame Florence.

"Ah, madame, now you will never go anywhere else. My clients never leave me, because I believe in what you English call 'the personal note.' We have models—oh yes, that is absolutely necessary, because we have ladies who come in and say, 'I want a hat, I want to wear it now,' and they pay for it and go away. Well, we must supply their needs, but, when we have regular clients, we like to have a day or two of notice, to see the dress madame is wearing, the mood madame is in, and her state of health, then we make a toque that is madame's toque, not a toque that you will meet three times between this and Oxford Street."

"If you suit me," said Regina, "and give me something that I can go home in, I will put myself unreservedly in your hands in the future. I know little or nothing about dress," she went on, with a superior, platform kind of air—an assertion which made the lively French woman positively shudder—"yet I am feminine enough to wish to be well dressed."

"Ah, we will satisfy madame. Well, Gabrielle?"

"I think," said little Mademoiselle Gabrielle, "that madame will find the toque that came down yesterday would suit her as well as anything not specially made for her. I will get it, madame."

She disappeared into the next room, returning with a large black toque in her hand. It was light

in fabric, it was bright with jet, and a couple of handsome black plumes fell over the coiffure at the back.

"Ah, yes, Gabrielle, yes. Now try it on, madame. Not with those pins, they do not fit with the style of the hat. Madame will not mind to buy hat-pins?"

"If they are not ruinous," said Regina, who was in a very much "in for a penny, in for a pound" kind of mind.

"Antoinette, Antoinette, bring the box of 'at-pins," said Mademoiselle Gabrielle.

Immediately another little French girl came out carrying a large tray of hat-pins.

"Madame is not in mourning? We will not have jet —no, no! Now these?"

She pounced upon some cut steel hat-pins which matched the ornaments on the hat, and then with deft and soft little fingers she firmly fixed the toque on Regina's head.

"You see," said Madame Clementine, spreading her hands, and looking at Madame Florence for approval. "Yes, that is the hat for madame. Regard yourself, madame—give madame the 'and-glass."

Regina got up and walked with stately mien to the long glass set so as to catch the best light from the windows. Indeed, the toque was most becoming. She saw herself a different woman, more like those gracious, well-furnished superb British matrons whom she was accustomed to see sitting behind prancing horses and powdered footmen on those rare occasions when she had allowed herself to be inveigled into the

Park. It was not a cheap toque, but Regina had the sense to see that it was worth the money asked for it.

"It is not ver' cheap," said Madame Clementine, "non, but it is good, it will last, it is not a toque for a day and then another for to-morrow. Then these plumes, they will come in again and again."

"I will have it," said Regina; "I am quite satisfied with it. I only feel, Madame Clementine, that—er—my—my upper part is, well—is superior to my lower part, what in our vernacular we call 'a ha'penny head and a farthing tail.'"

"Oh, ver', good ver' good," cried Madame Clementine, with your true Parisienne's shriek of laughter. "You see, Gabrielle, the gros sou for the head and the little sou for the tail. Oh, that is most expressive. But, madame, you can remedy that."

"Oh yes, I suppose I can," said Regina, doubtfully, "I wish you were a dressmaker."

"Oh, indeed, no! It does not do, you have not *chic* if you mix all sorts together. To be *modiste* and to be *couturière* is like being a painter and a singer at the same time. But I can tell you of a little Frenchwoman—she could dress you—ah—eugh!" And she kissed the tips of her fingers.

"Well, if you will give me her address I will go to her," said Regina.

"To-day? But it is too late," said Madame Florence. "Mrs Whittaker is coming upstairs to have tea with me," she added; "it will be ready now."

"Does your friend live far away?" said Regina to Madame Clementine.

"No, not very far, just three streets away. It is *une vraie artiste*—no great price, she is not known. By-and-by she will be—unattainable, excepting to her old clients. Antoinette, write down the address of Madame d'Estelle. And when you have arranged your gowns with her, you will come back to me for suitable toques?"

"Yes," said Regina, "I will put myself unreservedly in your hands. I feel you are a woman of taste, an artiste. I frankly confess that I am—*not*."

It was with many wreathed smiles, becks and bows and assurances of welcome when she should come again that Regina was finally allowed to return to The Dressing-Room for the tea which was waiting her. Finally, after having written a cheque for her preliminary treatments, she found herself walking along Berners Street in the direction of Oxford Street, and a feeling took possession of her that, after all, fashionable women knew what they were doing when they patronised private establishments. She had heard of them, because details of dress had not wholly ebbed by leaving her high and dry on the shore of high principle, devoid of the herbage of feminine grace. She had heard that no well-dressed woman, no really well-dressed woman, would ever get her clothes at a shop, and her keen and busy brain turned over the subject as she walked away from The Dressing-Room. After all, she had learned much during her years at the helm of the Society for the Regeneration of Women, and she had learned, above all things, to set a true value on the quality

which is called individualism. She had learned that you cannot herd humanity with success, and she was now learning that you cannot dress humanity *en bloc.* She felt a curious shyness as she caught sight of her unaccustomed appearance in the shop windows as she passed, and once she stopped as she was walking along Oxford Street, at a large furniture establishment, and looked at herself searchingly. Yes, in spite of the feeling of looseness about her head which worried her not a little, she could see the intense becomingness of the new way in which her hair was arranged. It was then after five o'clock, but she steadily pursued her way in search of Madame d'Estelle. I need not go into the details of her visit. Madame d'Estelle made short work of her new client.

"Yes, madame," she said, "you want a little frock built for that toque. Well, leave it to me, leave it to me; I will make you a little frock—say ten guineas? (Take madame's measure.) While they take your measurements I will walk round and study you. You will come again in three days for a fitting, then, if it is necessary you will come again three days after that, then in three days more you will have your frock. I will make you something consistent with your personality—it will be a little black frock, nothing very important, but it will give us a sufficient start. (Write madame a note—ten guineas—and the day of the fitting.) Leave yourself to me, madam, it will be all right."

Then Regina went home. She felt that everybody

in the Park was looking at her. So they were, for the story had gone round that Mrs Whittaker had become a little wrong in her head. The story had been going round that she had been seen walking up the road in her nightgown and many variations of it had already found credence. "Have you heard the news? That Mrs Whittaker of Ye Dene has gone off her dot." "Oh, my dear!" "Well, Charley says he met her walking up the road in her nightgown." "Oh, nonsense!" "Well, that's what I said, but Charley met her himself." "Was she walking in her sleep?" "Charley didn't seem to think so." Then a little later, "You know Mrs Whittaker of Ye Dene, they're saying she's got a tile off." "Well, I always did think she was a peculiar kind of woman, no woman would dress like that who was altogether right in her head." "Yes, but I didn't think she was as bad as that. Why! she, the President of some society for making new women. Who says she's got a tile off?" "Well, my sister was at the Wingfield-Jacksons yesterday, and Mrs Jackson told her that Charley had seen her walking up the road in her nightgown, so she must be quite dotty, you know." A few days after the story spread still further. "You've heard the latest, of course." "No, I've heard nothing particular, most people are away." "They've taken poor Mrs Whittaker away to a lunatic asylum." "Oh, my dear, you don't say so. What for?" "Well, I suppose she's gone out of her mind. Perhaps the wedding, the fuss—so many presents—ah, I thought at the time they were rather overdoing it." "But

I thought she was such a strong-minded woman." "Ah, but don't you think there's always something abnormal about these strong-minded women. Just as my Harry said when he told me—*he* got it from the club, of course; all the gossip in the place comes from the club—as he said it's all very well to take women out of their rightful sphere and let them regenerate the world, but it doesn't pay, that that's just how we ordinary women, who haven't got souls above our natural duties, may take comfort to ourselves." "When did it happen?" "I don't know, but when they were supposed to go abroad she was taken away to a lunatic asylum. They say she's at Bolitho House, and I did hear that she is kept in a padded room." "But, my dear," said the other woman, "just turn your eyes to the window. There's Mrs Whittaker walking down the road with her hair dressed a new way and the smartest hat on her head that I've ever seen in my life!" "Well, I never!'

CHAPTER XXV

POOR MOTHER

I think that nothing in the world shows truer affection than that curious resentment against any change in the appearance of those we love.

REGINA, all unconscious of the gossip that, with her for its central figure, was floating about the Park went slowly down the road in the direction of Ye Dene. Truth to tell, she was a little shy of facing her family in her new guise. It was then after six o'clock ; in fact, it was fast approaching the hour of seven. Now it happened that Julia had been off on an expedition to town with one of the Marksby girls, and had only arrived home about ten minutes previously, and being tired had gone into the pleasant sitting-room which she and Maudie had hitherto shared between them. When Mrs Whittaker came up the covered way, Julia saw her from where she was sitting, for both the sitting-room door and the front door were wide open.

"Hullo, mother, are you back ?" she called out.

Regina, with a certain accession of colour and a certain acceleration of heart beating, replied with a pleasant word and walked into Julia's sitting-room.

"Oh, you've not been back long ?" she said.

Julia did not reply. It was not perhaps a remark

that called for any special attention in the way of answer, but if it had it would have been all the same.

"Why, *mother!*—" and she stared at Regina as if she were indeed fitted for the padded room which had been mentioned a few minutes previously.

"I have got a new toque," said Regina.

"Oh, the toque is all right—a little big—"

"I don't think so. It was chosen for me by a Frenchwoman whose taste is indisputable.

"I have not always found French taste indisputable," said Julia, remembering with a certain shame some of the purchases that she and Maudie had made in days gone by. "Your toque's all right, but what have you been doing to your hair?"

"I have had my hair shampooed and brushed, and I intend to wear it in another mode."

"It looks horrid!" said Julia.

"I don't think so," answered Regina, her colour still heightened and a great accession of dignity in her manner. "You do not always wear your hair the same, why should I? I have got to that time of life when what suited me at thirty does not still suit me at fifty, and my hair showed signs of wearing off the forehead, and I do not like a bald forehead either in a man or a woman."

"Oh, I daresay you are right. Of course, you are at liberty to make whatever sort of a guy you like of yourself, only don't ask me to admire it, that's all."

The tone was rude, and Regina felt stabbed to the heart.

"I do not always admire your taste in dress, Julia," she said very quietly. "I sometimes think that if a mother had all her life had a frightful wart on her nose, her children would resent its removal because they had grown accustomed to it. I have chosen, my dear, to do my hair in a new fashion, and I am not to be turned from my purpose by even your wishes. I have come to the conclusion that I have paid too little attention in the past to the details which most women think of paramount importance. I am going to change all that and I have begun with my hair and my toque."

She did not wait for Julia to reply, but turned and went quietly and quickly out of the room, leaving Julia speechless and astonished.

"Now, what has happened to her?" said Julia. "Why should she, all at once, take to altering herself like that? Surely mother isn't going to be frivolous in her old age. I wonder what daddy will say. She's going to 'alter all that.' Well, of course—she's at liberty to please herself. I suppose I ought not to have jumped on her like that—poor mother!"

She got up and ran up the broad and shallow stairs, knocked at her mother's door, and, without waiting for an answer, entered the room.

"I say, mother," she said.

Regina was standing before the glass, evidently in the act of taking the pins out of her hat. She turned round.

"You want me?" she asked. Her tone was quite pleasant and sweet, but there was an indefinable

sense of woundedness about it which touched Julia to the very quick.

"Oh, I say, mother, I was beastly rude to you just now. But I didn't mean to be."

"I am sure you didn't."

"You see, when one has a mother that one thinks an awful lot of, and who always wears her hair the same, one feels sort of blank when she makes herself look different. But I was rude, and I'm awfully sorry; I didn't mean it for that."

She came to the side of the dressing-table and stood looking at her mother with honest, troubled eyes. Regina caught her by the hand and drew her to her ample bosom.

"I felt myself growing such a frump," she said. "I don't know when, I think it was about the time of Maudie's wedding, that I felt, all at once, that I was getting into a fossil like all other women workers. I never saw it all those years till about that time, and I hated myself for being frumpy and ridiculous."

"You never were that to us," said Julia, with quick reproach. "I hope you never thought we thought so, for we never did."

"Well, well, well, I will wear my hair this way for a little while, and if you and dear father do not like it I will put it back into the old way again. It is bad for the hair to dress it always in the same fashion."

"Well, now I come to think of it, it looks awfully nice, and you've lovely hair and a glorious complexion."

At this the colour on Regina's cheeks deepened into a veritable rose blush. Julia hurried on—"It's a beautiful hat," she said. "Where did you get it? How did you light on this Frenchwoman? Was it very expensive? It's worth it, whatever it cost."

"No," said Regina, "it was four guineas; I don't call that very expensive for a hat with good feathers."

"Oh, not a bit! And even if it was, you can afford it. I think you are quite right, now you have chucked the regeneration business, to start regenerating your own person. I admit it gave me a shock when you came in. You know, somehow one doesn't like the first idea of one's mother being tampered with."

Then Regina told Julia how she came to put herself in the hands of Madame Florence and the little Frenchwoman on the first floor—that is to say, she told her in part, not giving her reasons, her actual reasons, or the source of her information concerning them.

"But how will you do your hair to-morrow morning?"

"I do not know quite how I shall do it. I am going to Madame Florence every day for a week, so that she may do it and get it into the proper set. When she had arranged my hair, she gave me a lesson on a dummy, so that I really do know how things should be, and she thinks after a week I shall be quite able to do it myself. Besides, as she says, it makes such a difference—the way your hair is accustomed to go."

"You'll never be able to wave your own hair, mother."

"Well, I don't like to think about that part of it," said Regina.

"Darling," said Julia, feeling that she had smoothed over her previous indiscretions, "why don't you have a maid? She would be so useful to both of us. Think of somebody who would be able to make smart blouses, do up frocks and touch up hats and generally make life easy and comfortable. Why don't you have a maid?"

"It seems such an expense," said Regina.

"But you can afford it—I shall talk to father."

"If I did have a maid I should pay her myself, I shouldn't think of coming on your father for an extravagance of that sort."

"Well, you have more money than you ever spend. Dearest, you have got into the habit of going without things, and we have got into the habit of regarding you as a person of no vanities, so that we resent it when you show the smallest sign of anything feminine in your nature. Now I come to look at you again," said Julia, with her head on one side, "I think I do like you better like this. It is more important looking, it seems to make your head more of a size with the rest of you. I like you in black—you know, mother, you never wear black. Do you mind if I try it on?"

"Why, of course not." It was with pride that Regina stood by and saw her daughter poise the beautiful black toque upon her own abundant locks.

"Oh yes, it's a ravishing hat," Julia declared. "I think I must go and see your Madame Clementine. You won't mind?—Ah, there is daddy coming."

At that moment Alfred's solid footstep was heard upon the landing. "Hullo, young woman," he said a moment later as he entered the room, "got a new hat?"

"*It's mother's hat,*" said Julia, with emphasis, and awaited developments.

"Your mother's? Well, my dear, you have been doing yourself very well. Why—bless my soul—what have you been doing to your head?"

"I have been having my hair brushed and cared for," said Regina, feeling that she must take her bull by the horns and grasp her nettle without delay.

"Why didn't they put it up as it was—let me look at you. I don't know"—and he passed his thumb down one cheek and his fingers down the other till they met at the lowest point of his chin, "I don't know—it isn't you, you see."

"Don't say you dislike it, Alfred," said Regina, with pathetic wistfulness.

"I don't say I dislike it, at the same time—it isn't you," he replied. "Put the hat on—let's see you in it. Yes—I don't know. It's a pity to hide a forehead like yours with all that loose hair. I know women are all wearing it so; but at the same time, I think it is a pity."

"I've got to look such a frump, Alfred," said Regina, taking the hat off again and patting her hair into place.

"No, my dear, that you never did. You have a distinctiveness all your own. As to this new-fangled arrangement — well, if it pleases you to do it that way, you must do it that way and we must get used to it. Perhaps, in a little while, we shall like it better than as it was before."

"But it does not meet with your unqualified approval, Alfred?" said Regina.

"No, I can't say that it does."

"It makes me look younger," she asserted.

"But I don't want you to look younger. We were a very good match for each other as we were, and I don't know that it *does* make you look younger. Well, well, let it be for a day or two till one gets accustomed to the change. As it is, it doesn't seem right to have you, of all women in the world, thinking about vanities."

"Why not?" said Regina in a very small voice.

At that moment Julia betook herself out of the room, shutting the door as if she did not want to hear any more of what passed between her parents.

"Why not?" repeated Regina.

"Well, they don't seem to be in keeping with you. One never thinks of you as having nerves or the megrims, of being offended about nothing and having to be coaxed back again into a good temper. You are the kind of woman one gives a present to because one desires to give you pleasure, not because you are

to be made to forget some vexation or some disappointment. You are unlike other women, Regina."

And Regina immediately decided that the hussy was a person of moods!

CHAPTER XXVI

THE STRAIGHT AND NARROW PATH

It is odd that, while business is a mantle sufficiently ample to cover a whole lifetime of sins, we usually credit any pastime with being the cloak of a good deal of wickedness.

In the face of the indisputable fact that neither husband nor child approved of the change she had made in her coiffure, Regina entered upon a course of what can only be called complete prevarication. The following day she rose betimes in the morning as was her wont, as one of her fixed habits was always, under all circumstances short of absolute illness, to be ready for breakfast in time to give Alfred a quiet and ample meal. She had from the very beginning conceived it to be her bare duty to be the one to speed him on his daily quest into the city, and to welcome him when he returned to his home in the evening, and to do her full justice, Regina had rarely failed in this particular. She had left her children more or less to shape their own lives, and being of extremely dominant personalities, they had shaped them accordingly—Maudie in the direction of the soft, domestic, luxurious type, which later develops into the "feather bed;" Julia, in a keen, alert, downright, make-your-own-world-as-you-go fashion. She had arranged her domestic affairs so that when she took up the regeneration of women her house-

keeping arrangements did not suffer by her absence, and as I have said, she was always down in ample time to breakfast, always having made a decently becoming toilette, and she was always or almost always the first person that Alfred saw when he came home again in time for dinner. On this occasion she knew it would be impossible for her to arrange her hair in a new and unaccustomed way with anything like success and at the same time be ready at the usual breakfast time. So she merely combed her hair up and twisted it into a knot on the top of her head. Truth to tell, it was much more becoming than any style she had done it in before, though less elaborate than the arrangement of Madame Florence. She donned a plain white cambric wrapper, touched her face with powder, and tied a broad blue ribbon round her waist, bringing the bow low down, and pinning it with a huge brooch at a point about six inches lower than she usually wore her buckle. In the past one of Regina's landmarks had been what is usually called the Holbein curve, and the mere fact of pinning her waist ribbon a few inches lower than usual was sufficient to transform Regina if not from the ridiculous to the sublime, at least from the grotesque to the prevailing mode. She was already in the spacious and comfortable dining-room reading her letters when Alfred made his appearance.

"Whew!" he said, "it's going to be a blazing hot day, the city will be like a grill room!"

"And I suppose you are too busy to take an hour or two off?"

"Why, do you want me to go anywhere?"

"No, I was thinking it would be good for you if you could take an hour or two off and get a little fresh air."

"Utterly impossible, my dear. With any other partner, perhaps, but not with Chamberlain. To put it plainly, my dear, Chamberlain put in the money when I wanted to spread myself, and I did spread myself. The experiment was a success and I am saddled with Chamberlain for the rest of my natural life."

"Is he no help to you?" said Regina.

"Well, he is less than no help. I think I shall be obliged to suggest taking in another partner; the business is too big now to have the whole responsibility on one pair of shoulders. I must have a holiday now and again—goodness knows, it isn't often for a man of my substance—but anything like the muddle in which I found things I never imagined even Chamberlain could accomplish. He's a dear chap, too, full of apologies, perfectly aware of his own shortcomings, always in a domestic pickle—which is not to be wondered at—but as a partner he is hopeless."

"My poor Alfred!" said Regina.

"Ah, you may well say that. Of course, when one just comes back off a holiday, one doesn't feel like doing collar work all the time, all uphill and no easement. But it will pass, and I must seriously think of taking someone else in."

"Have you anyone in your eye?"

"Well, of course, Tomkinson's a splendid man.

One wouldn't give him a full share, wouldn't make him an equal exactly, but I think it would be a wise thing if we were to make him a junior partner. Besides that, someone else might get hold of him; he is well known as a first-class man."

"I should, my dear. But why should you go on working and toiling like this? If you were to realise, and with what money I have we should be quite comfortable."

"Oh no, oh no, thank you, Queenie, not while I am strong and well. I should like a little more time to myself, I should like to be able to run over to Paris for a week or to spend a few days by the seaside. I'm thinking of taking up golf—I began to take an interest in the game at Dieppe. It's good for the liver, a mild craze for golf has saved many a man from an attack of paralysis."

"You would join a golf club?"

"Oh yes, one of those clubs round London."

"And you would get an afternoon twice a week or so? Could I—could—I walk round with you?"

"Oh, I don't think so; I don't think they allow ladies on men's golf links. No, no; if you want to start playing yourself, my dear, you must join a ladies' club and play on your own. It would be good for you."

"Yes—it would. Won't you have any more coffee?"

"No, thanks. I may be late for dinner, possibly I may not be able to get back—I'll send you a wire. By the way, when we leave Ye Dene we will have a telephone put up."

"Yes," she said, "it would be most convenient."

For some time after he had caught his 'bus and gone off to town she sat thinking. Golf, two afternoons a week—that would mean enjoyments in which she could take no part. She knew she was growing suspicious—well, she had enough to make her so. When the scales fall from blind eyes the eyes are not to be blamed for seeing. Some five minutes after Regina had come to this conclusion the door opened and Julia came in.

"All alone, ducky?" she remarked. "Well, I am late. I'd no idea daddy was gone."

"Yes, you are late, or I fancy, to be correct, he was unusually early. He is almost killed with work—or I should say over-work. However, he thinks he will get things straight in a few days and then it will be a little easier."

"Dear daddy! I really don't see what use Mr Chamberlain is to him," said Julia, holding out her hand for the coffee cup which her mother had just filled.

"No, he is no help in a business sense, but he put the money into the concern. What are you going to do to-day, Julia?"

Julia looked up in unmitigated astonishment. "To-day—oh—ah—I shall be out and about all day," she returned promptly.

"I rather wanted you to go to town with me."

"Awfully sorry, dear, I can't go to-day," Julia answered.

Regina felt exactly as she might have felt if someone had flung a pail of cold water in her face.

"I was going to the West-End," she said half hesitatingly. "I thought you might like to go and see this new milliner of mine."

"I should have loved it," said Julia, "if I had known before, but I've made several engagements for to-day."

She did not vouchsafe any information as to her movements, and Regina hastened to explain things for Julia.

"You are going with one of the Marksbys?"

"No, I'm not. I'm going to lunch at the club, then I'm going to do a little shopping and later I'm going to tea with the Ponsonby-Piggots."

"Really! Are you lunching at the club with somebody?"

"No, I've somebody lunching with me."

Again Regina felt that curious sensation of a douche of cold water administered over her entire person. Well, she had brought up her children to be independent, to have wills, caprices, likes and dislikes of their own, she could not blame them if they were not of the clinging, great-chum-with-mother type which she would have preferred them to be at this moment.

"Suppose we make it a fixture for the day after to-morrow?" said Julia, helping herself to more delicate strips of bacon from the covered silver dish before her.

"Yes, certainly."

"Shall we lunch here or in town?" Julia went on.

"Whichever you like."

"Your club is such a long way," said Julia, with a faint accent of disparagement in her tones; "to my mind that is the worst of professional clubs, they're always so ultra-professional that one can't find a corner for anything at all fashionable. Suppose you come and lunch with me, mother dear? If you are giving up your societies why don't you join a good West-End club? You'd find it so useful, living out as far as we do."

"I think I must."

"I shouldn't recommend mine. It's all very well for me, but it's a cheap little club and it wouldn't do for you. Now, why don't you join one of the big clubs in Petticoat Lane?"

"Petticoat Lane!"

"Oh—I beg your pardon, mummy, I meant Dover Street. There are half-a-dozen of them. Shall I see if I can get your name put up? I daresay you will have to wait some little time. Which would you like—one that improves your mind or one that improves your convenience?"

"Certainly not one that improves my mind."

"No, I think you are quite right, I hate clubs where they have lectures and debates and other beastly things that they never have in men's clubs. Now there's the Kaiserin, that would suit you very well: handsome clubhouse, excellent cooking arrangements, spacious entertaining-room which you can hire and have all to yourself, every necessity and comfort to

make a club thoroughly comfy—in fact, a second home without any bother."

"But how do you know?" said Regina in a curiously small voice.

"Oh, I know several women who belong to the Kaiserin," Julia answered carelessly. "What are you going to do to-day, dearest? Going to see your milliner again?"

"No, I'm going to have my hair dressed, I can't do it properly myself for a few days, and I have one or two other things to do."

Now it happened that of the one of two other things that Regina had to do, the most important was a visit to the distinguished specialist in whose hands the fashionable world was content to put itself with a view to getting rid of superfluous tissue. It was just on the stroke of noon when Regina found herself walking across Cavendish Square in the direction of that street of sighs which most of us know, alas! too well. She was kept waiting some little time, but the dining-room in which she spent the period of detention, along with three other ladies much fatter than herself, was cheerful, and the papers were of the newest, (which is not always the case, let me remind you, in the houses of medical specialists.) At last her turn came to penetrate to the sanctum of the great man. Regina was quite nervous, needlessly so, but in five minutes the bland and friendly personality whom she had come to consult had put her quite at ease. She was weighed! I do not think it would be exactly delicate to tell you the precise weight at

which she turned the scale, but I have always held her up to you as a woman of that type which is called "a fine figure."

"Let me see, you want to get rid of four stones," said the doctor, genially; "well, that's not a very severe case. It will take you four or five months, you must take no liberties with yourself and I will send you a card this evening telling you exactly what you may and may not eat and drink. You must live by the card, literally by the card. Remember, no vagaries, no irregularities, no coquetting with the 'one time that never hurts one.' You must make up your mind that you will give up your own will until you have reached the required standard, and believe me, dear lady, you will be a happier woman, a healthier woman and a handsomer woman when you have attained your object."

Regina wrote a cheque and went out into the sunlight, out of the land of liberty and into the straight and narrow path of a strict and severe *régime*.

CHAPTER XXVII

ROUND EVERYWHERE

Young eyes see so clearly that we must often be very thankful that young people do not have the deciding voice in our lives.

REGINA duly received the promised card or diet sheet. I may say that she took it from its enveloping wrapper with a certain feeling of mystery akin to awe, and she studied its items carefully. Its directions were many and explicit; it not only gave the foods which she might eat, but also the foods which she might not eat, the drinks she might take and the drinks she might not take, and it gave the weights of each portion and the number of each special biscuit. Acting according to the instructions from the specialist, Regina had ordered a sufficient quantity of the specially-prepared diet biscuits which were part of the *régime*, and it occurred to her, when the parcel arrived a little later than the diet sheet reached her, that she would have to account to her husband and family for the startling change in her diet. Now, Regina was perfectly sure of one thing, that she would be most unwise to tell Alfred the exact nature of the *régime* on which she was about to start. She felt that a wife who was taking elaborate means, and undergoing great self-

sacrifice, putting herself into prison, so to speak, for the sole and express purpose of thinning herself down, would show to great disadvantage beside a person of the plump order who was probably twenty years her junior, and able to peck greedily at the most fattening kinds of food. So Regina entered upon a course of what I may call harmless prevarication.

"I have something to tell you, dear Alfred," she said that evening when he had well dined and had not noticed that she had passed about half the items of dinner; "I want to have a little talk with you."

"Yes, my dear girl, about having a celebration for the home-coming? Oh yes, you would wish it, and, of course, it was arranged before the wedding."

"No, it is about myself."

"Yourself, dearest? And what about yourself?"

"Alfred, I have not been feeling myself lately."

"Why—how—what d'you mean? You're not ill, are you?"

"Well, not exactly ill, I can't truthfully say that, yet I've not been myself, I've not felt myself, I've not looked myself—"

"No, I've noticed how very much paler you have grown, you seem to have lost your nice fresh colour."

She *had* lost her nice fresh colour; it had disappeared with the advent of the powder box, and Alfred had not, to use a very slang phrase, dropped down to the fact.

"Well, I don't believe in leaving these things to mend themselves," Regina went on, busily pleating

and unpleating the deep black lace which adorned the sleeves of her handsome tea-gown, "it's better to stop anything of that sort at the outset."

"Well, you've been to a doctor?"

"Yes, I've been strongly advised to go to Dr Money-Berry in Harley Street. You see, I've got so very stout lately, Alfred, and he thinks my having gained in weight has put me all wrong. My heart is very feeble—compared with what it used to be."

"My—*dear!* Ough! Tut, tut, tut—think of our going on and living our ordinary life and all the time you are suffering—it's dreadful to think of."

"Well, not exactly suffering, I'm not quite an invalid. Dr Money-Berry advised me to live very carefully during the next few months, he thinks I shall be all right if I leave off starchy foods—they are so bad for the valves of the heart, and—and I don't want to leave you, Alfred," she said in a pathetic little voice.

"Good heavens! Go away and leave me! What are you talking of, Queenie? If you were to go away and leave me—for another man—I should blow my brains out," and here he began to walk about the room. "And if I didn't, I should go to the devil."

I am ashamed to record that there arose in Regina's mind a picture of Alfred, her noble Alfred! going headlong to the devil with a hussy of plump proportions.

Alfred continued excitedly, "And if you were to leave me in the other sense—I don't know what I should do."

"Dear Alfred, you would probably marry again," she observed quietly.

"Never—never! Put that thought out of your mind once and for all. I should live out the rest of my life as best I could—but I really can't talk about it. You were perfectly right to go to a specialist, and you must follow out his treatment to the very letter. Now, promise me you will do everything he tells you, take all the medicine he gives you, and live by line and rule until he tells you that you are really out of danger."

The heart of Regina was sick within her. She knew she was deceiving Alfred, she felt herself to be the basest and blackest and most ungrateful woman that had ever been born into the world, and yet, she told herself, her deception was a harmless one, that if she was sinning against him, she was sinning to a good end. And so Regina entered upon her course of penal servitude, for I can call it nothing more or less. The same explanation which was given to Alfred was given to Julia, and henceforth Regina, although she ate at the same table, ate alone. She did not in any way attempt to curtail the meals of her husband and child, but supplied the table in exactly the usual manner.

"Why do you buy salmon when you can't touch it yourself?" Alfred asked over and over again.

"Because you work hard and want your meals. If you had the same necessity for living as I do, I should keep you up to it."

"I don't believe you would buy salmon for your-

self," said Alfred, almost vexedly; "it must be a temptation to you, so fond of it as you are."

"Oh no, because I have an object in view. Believe me, I often have sweetbreads for lunch."

"But you do not fling them in my face at dinner; that is quite another matter."

So the martyrdom went on, and Regina's figure became smaller by degrees and beautifully less. When she had been dieting for about two months she had lost a couple of stones in weight. She had a couple of smart gowns from Madame d'Estelle in which she had allowed that adroit lady free play for her taste and imagination. The result was that she gradually presented to the eyes of her family a subdued and refined Regina, much more attractive to the outer world, but not the Regina to whom the inhabitants of Ye Dene had been accustomed.

It was about two months from the beginning of Regina's martyrdom that Alfred Whittaker began to be aware that his wife was losing flesh. "My dear," he said one morning, as he sat opposite his wife at the breakfast-table, "I'm not quite satisfied with that doctor of yours."

"Why not, dear?"

"Why, I don't think he's doing well by you."

"But I am so much better."

"You don't look it, you're half the size you were."

"Oh no, Alfred! There's still plenty of me."

"You are much smaller, and since you have taken to wearing black and indefinable grey gowns, you

seem to be wasting away to nothing. When is it going to stop?"

"When he is satisfied that I am just the right weight. I am much stronger, Alfred; I can walk miles!"

"Can you? Well, I don't know that it is necessary for you to walk miles, you can afford to take a cab whenever you want one."

"Yes, dear, but I am much better."

"I know you say so, and you've been awfully plucky about your diet and so on, but when is it going to end? I don't want a wife like a thread paper."

Julia had come into the room while he was speaking. "Dear daddy," she said, "you're very dense. Mother's getting vain in her old age. She's got a French milliner, she's got a French dressmaker, she does her hair a new way, and she's getting her figure back again. She's quite a new woman, she's given up working for womanhood generally, and she's getting frivolous. She's got a club, I mean a real club in the West End, and one of these days she's going to give a dinner party and ask you and me to it."

"Well, well, well, if you're quite sure you are not doing anything foolish," said Alfred Whittaker; "I only want you to be happy in your own way. But I want you to be *quite* sure that you are not doing anything foolish. It's not natural for a woman of your age to be starved down to skin and bone."

"My dear Alfred! Think of the breakfast I have

made this morning; I have had twice as much as you."

"I rather doubt that," said Alfred, patting himself in the region he had just filled, "I rather doubt that. But I should be more satisfied if you went to a heart specialist. Who is Dr Money-Berry? What's his line?"

"He is a specialist," said Regina, with an air, "on all matters connected with the internal organs above the belt, and those bound in the chains of fatty degeneracy of the heart, he sets free. To those whose food does not digest properly, he seems able to give a new digestion. I have full faith in his integrity and his kill, and I beg, dear Alfred, that you will not worry yourself. I am quite a new woman, regenerated, rejuvenated."

"Yes, I know, but you are getting so thin."

"And don't you like me better thinner?"

"No, I couldn't like you better, that's impossible, but if you are better in health for being thinner it's all very well. But if you are going on reducing yourself to a miserable skeleton nothing will make me believe it is good for you or make me declare I admire you, for I never shall."

After he had gone she sat with a flushed and uneasy expression on her smooth face. As the gate clicked behind her father's departing form Julia burst into laughter.

"Lor', mother," she said, "how can you bamboozle poor daddy as you do?"

"Julia!"

"Yes, I mean it. Poor daddy doesn't see one inch before his nose, and you are a sensible woman. You let him think that Dr Money-Berry is a specialist for fat round the heart."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, Dr Money-Berry is a specialist for fat round everywhere, whom fashionable women go to to have their figures made sylph-like. If Dr Money-Berry depended upon cases of heart trouble he wouldn't hang out very long in Harley Street, and nobody knows that better than you do, mother."

"Julia!"

"But," Julia continued, "you've changed immensely during the last few months. I don't know what made you throw up your societies and try to make yourself into a mere domestic woman; but you have regenerated yourself, that's true enough."

"I was too fat, Julia; it was not wholesome."

"You were not more fat than you had been for the last ten years. I never remember you so thin as you are now. You have changed your milliner, you have changed your dressmaker, you do your hair a new way—you are a totally different woman, and I think daddy is quite right when he asks, 'Where is it going to end?'"

CHAPTER XXVIII

A REJUVENATED REGINA

How one admires a woman who takes an unexpected facer without making a scene!

REGINA has come to the end of her period of martyrdom. Her weight was ten stones seven pounds, her waist was twenty-five inches. Her family had grown used to what both father and daughter stigmatised as "mother's little vanities." She was now a radiantly healthy, pleasing, well-dressed person of comely, middle-aged womanhood. It is true that she was hopelessly dependent upon Madame d'Estelle for her taste in dress and upon Madame Clementine for her choice of millinery. She was still an excellent customer at The Dressing-Room, and went there regularly to have her luxuriant hair brushed and waved in the fashion to which Alfred Whittaker and Julia no longer raised any objection. She had started a day at her club, so that friends at a distance might take a cup of tea with her without journeying out to Northampton Park. She was not yet the chaperon of her daughter, for her daughter had long ago got into the habit of arranging her own life, but she was fully convinced that the new ways were a wide advance upon the old ways, and nothing would have

induced her to go back to her original state of benighted self-sufficiency. Never had Regina Whittaker known herself so thoroughly as since she had become aware of the existence of the hussy. And yet, it must be confessed that although she had absolutely remodelled her life, changed her way of being, taken a new standpoint from which to look out upon the world, she was no nearer the consummation of her dearest hopes, she was no more certain than she had been six months before that the heart of Alfred was indisputably hers and hers alone.

"You are going to dine in town again!" she said to him one dreary winter morning.

"My dear girl, you may rest assured that I should not dine in town if there were the ghost of a chance of my being able to get my dinner here, but I shall not be back till late, and I don't know why you and the child should ruin your dinner because I can't get back in reasonable time."

"But Maudie and Harry are coming."

"I can't help that, you must explain to them. My dear girl, there's such a lot at stake just now that I simply dare not leave it to chance. Come, come, be reasonable. One would think," and he smiled benevolently down upon her, "that we were a young couple like our turtle doves, and that one could not dine without the other. I admit that I shall not enjoy it so much."

"Shall you not?"

"Now, how can I? Probably there isn't a man in London who is fonder of his home than I am, but at

the same time one wants to do the right thing by one's home as well as to enjoy it."

"But, Alfred, you don't wish me to understand that the firm is in difficulties?"

"No, no, not in the sense you mean, but in another sense it is. The fact is, Queenie, I must stick to the ship now at whatever inconvenience to myself."

"And to me," said Regina.

"Well, dearest, and to you. But, come now, you are a strong-minded woman, you know how many beans make five as well as any woman I have ever met—better than most. I've got myself tied up with the biggest ass in London; whether he's going out of his great mind, or whether he's going to continue on, a danger to everyone with whom he comes in touch, I don't know. The fact is, he's not mad enough to be shut up in a lunatic asylum and he's not sane enough to be allowed to come and go as he likes."

"But you took in Tomkinson to relieve you."

"And so he will in time, but he isn't the head of the firm, and I am. He's a splendid man and I should have been furious if any other house in the same line had got hold of him; at the same time you can't expect a man to take my place in the first six months of becoming a partner, it wouldn't be reasonable, particularly as Chamberlain is such a difficult card to handle."

"And where are you dining?" said Regina.

"Well, to-night I've got to dine possibly at the Criterion and talk over a business matter that Chamberlain has let himself in for, and which he is

most anxious to get clear of with as little publicity and fuss as possible. Of course the situation with his wife is very difficult; she is a jealous, absurd, sensitive woman, and he makes her a shocking bad husband. It's a pity he was not born to be a clerk with a pound a week, to have to keep his nose down to the grindstone to provide board and lodging; then he would have managed to keep himself straight. I shall get things straightened out in a few months if I can manage it, and then we will take that trip South that we were talking about. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"I shall be happy anywhere with you."

"We'll take that trip South, it will do you good, and it will be a heaven-sent holiday for me, but I can't go as things are now, and you mustn't worry until I have got matters into something like order."

"You are sure we are not spending too much money?"

"Oh no, no, no, it isn't a question of money, but in one way it's a question of business. Now I must be off."

It happened that Julia had been listening during the entire conversation. "I say, mother," she said, "if daddy is not coming home to dinner, why give Harry and Maudie the fag of coming out here? Let's go and dine at the Trocadero and do a theatre afterwards, it isn't often that you and I have the chance of getting off on the loose by ourselves. We could easily send a wire or I could run over and see

Maudie and she could 'phone to Harry from their house."

"Yes, that's a very good idea," said Regina, who certainly did not want to sit at her own table in the absence of her lord and master and explain the exact circumstances of his absence. "You'd better wire, or —no—you might run over."

"Then I'll lunch with Maudie."

"All right. We'll dine at seven o'clock."

"What theatre shall we go to?"

"You can settle that with Maudie, can't you? Then you can 'phone from her house to any theatre you want to go to."

"Very good. Do you know, mother, I think daddy is very worried. I wonder why everything seems to be Mr Chamberlain; our house seems to be dominated by Mr Chamberlain. I don't know why daddy doesn't get rid of him; he's no good to anybody."

"Ah, that's easier said than done with a partner of any kind. Mr Chamberlain may be a little wrong in his head, but he knows right enough when he is in for a good thing; it's no use thinking about that, so we may as well make the best of it."

So at seven o'clock a well-dressed and extremely happy quartette arrived in pairs at the Trocadero and took up a position at a table in the gallery. The dinner was excellent, the music was alluring, the company was abundant and well-dressed, and Regina, released from the thraldom of Dr Money-Berry, was at liberty to eat whatever came in due course. Harry Marksby had chosen the champagne, and all was

merry as a marriage bell, when suddenly Julia made a remark, "Why, there's daddy," she said, looking over the balustrade.

Regina looked in the opposite direction. "Really! he said he was going to dine at the Criterion or somewhere. I suppose his friend preferred to come here."

"His friend is a lady," said Julia.

Regina's heart gave a sick throb, her eyes followed the direction of Julia's gaze, and the next instant she beheld her noble Alfred sitting with his elbow on the table talking earnestly to a young and pretty woman.

"Don't faint, darling," said Julia in a soft undertone.

"I'm not in the least likely to faint," said Regina, with superb dignity. "Doubtless your father will give a perfectly simple explanation of his being here with a lady. Thank you, Harry, I will have a little more champagne."

Oh, she was a plucky woman, Regina Whittaker! It was not in her nature to show the white feather. Her suspicions had crystallised themselves into human form. There was the hussy who had haunted her for months past, there she was in the flesh! "And I must say," said Regina to her own heart, "that Alfred does not look as if he were enjoying himself."

CHAPTER XXIX

WARY AND PATIENT

As a rule, especially in the greater issues of life, little or nothing is to be gained by precipitancy.

DURING the rest of the dinner Regina made a valiant effort to appear as thoroughly at ease as if the portly gentleman down below was no kith or kin of hers. When she had once pulled herself together and realised the worst, she became the life and soul of the table, and Regina, mind you, was a woman of intellect, a woman of wit, when it pleased her to exert herself in that respect. She did not again allude to the fact that her husband was dining under the same roof as herself, until they made a move, intending to go to the theatre. Then Maudie, who was not endowed with much tact, demurred at leaving without making their presence known to her father.

"I must go and speak to daddy," she said.

"Nothing of the kind," said Regina in a fierce whisper, "nothing of the kind; I absolutely forbid it. Harry, you will back me up in this?"

Her tone was one of anxious entreaty, and Harry Marksby, who had been rather a gay dog in his very young days, although always tempered with a large amount of common-sense which had saved him from

getting into a hole, took in his mother-in-law's meaning at a glance.

"No, you can't go downstairs now, my dear," he said, giving her a vigorous nudge with his elbow, and Maudie, without in the least understanding, took the hint and said no more. "We'll meet you at the theatre," he added.

So presently Regina found herself sitting in a hansom with Julia beside her

"I say, mother," said Julia, as the cab started from the doorway, "that was a little awkward, wasn't it? And how silly of Maudie! I really thought she had more sense."

"Not one word of this to your father," said Mrs Whittaker in the same tone of fierce repression. "You children are quite mistaken, I understand it perfectly. You will not speak to your father of our having seen him? He would not be able to explain the circumstances to you."

Oh, certainly, not if you don't wish it, darling. You'd better tell Harry to give Maudie warning because she's sure to blab it out. Who is she?"

"I don't know what her name is," said Regina; "she is a person your father has some business with—business connected with the firm," she added, with a dexterity of explanation which astounded even herself. "I have known of her existence for some time, your father has been almost worried out of his life about it, and it would worry him much more if he thought you children misconstrued his actions."

"Oh, well, I suppose daddy is perfectly at liberty to

do as he likes as long as he makes matters clear to you. We have no right to dictate who he shall take to the Trocadero to dine."

"My dear child—my precious child—" said Regina, almost breaking down, but recovering herself with a snap as it were. Then she went on in the same fierce tone, "I shall not forget this, Julia, my darling; one can always rely on you in a moment of emergency, Maudie has not half your sound common-sense—she's a feather head compared to you."

"Oh, she'll be all right. You tip Harry the wink—"

"What!"

"Oh! I beg your pardon, mummy, I forgot. Shall I tell Harry to stop Maudie blabbing?"

"I wish you would. You might explain to him a little. Now, here we are, here we are, now don't let us speak of it again; it's all much more simple than you children think."

Now it happened that on the way down to the theatre, Harry Marksby had given Maudie a hint, or, as Julia would have put it, tipped her the wink, to say nothing whatever about what had occurred.

"I don't understand why," she had replied. "Why should daddy be dining with that bold-looking woman when mother thought he was dining with a friend at the Criterion?"

"Well, you can't tell. As long as your mother doesn't want it spoken of, it's no business of ours. Now, hold your tongue, Maudie darling; I rely upon you not to say a word, you'll only upset everybody's apple-cart if you do."

"Well, I'm not likely to say anything against my own father. All the same," said Maudie, with the suspicion of a pout, "I do think that father ought to feel it incumbent upon him not to disgrace us in public places. If he was only dining with a friend why couldn't I go and speak to him—I'm his own child? And if he was dining with somebody he wouldn't like to take home—"

"And you can bet your bottom dollar he wouldn't," said Harry.

"Then I think he ought to give an account of himself."

"Oh yes, I know, that's justice, man's justice. Come, come, come, Mrs Harry Marksby," said Harry in a tone of cheerful warning; "and here we are at the theatre. Now, don't say a word to your mother, she's upset enough, poor old lady."

Now, as Mrs Whittaker had dined the little party, it became Harry's pleasing duty to give them supper, and from the theatre they went to a certain fashionable supper-room, again by means of a couple of hansoms. This time it was Julia who shared the hansom of her brother-in-law.

"Now, look here, Harry," she said, "for goodness' sake don't say anything about having seen daddy to-night."

"Why, what do you take me for? Do you think I was born yesterday—or the day after to-morrow?"

"But mother says she knows all about it, and that it's much more simple than we think, and she thinks that Maudie will go blabbing it out."

"Oh, that's all right, I have given her a hint already. At the same time, I think your father ought to—well—ought to make things a little more secure."

"Yes, I know, but he had not the least idea that we were dining out to-night, it was quite an impromptu arrangement, and daddy might be vexed if Maudie said anything to him about it—'We saw you dining with a lady the other night'—you know, that sort of thing."

"Is he—um—um—"

"What do you mean by um—?"

"Is he touchy?"

"Oh no, take him all round he is the most amiable person I know, but there are limits to every man's patience, and if daddy is bothered with the firm's business, as mother seems to imply, it might vex him; besides, mother doesn't wish it mentioned, and that's enough; he's *her* husband."

"And Julia," said Harry Marksby, as they drove up to the door of the restaurant, "if every woman was as wise as your mother, there wouldn't be much domestic broiling to worry the world." And then he jumped out and held out his hand for Julia to alight.

Regina behaved admirably at this juncture, she kept it up, she made a very good supper; but then, you know, that was one of Regina's excellent qualities, when in tribulation her appetite did not fail her. Finally Regina and Julia drove down to the nearest station on the district railway and took train for the Park. They found Mr Whittaker already come in.

"Well, dearest," he said, as they rustled into the dining-room where he was sitting reading, "you never told me you were going to gallivant."

"No, for you see we took it into our heads that we would go to a theatre, and then Harry and Maudie gave us supper at the Golden Butterfly afterwards. We have had a great time, haven't we, Juie?"

"A great time," said Julia. "I like a little supper after a theatre, it always seems so dull, bundling out and scrambling off to one's train. And how long have you been home, daddy?"

"Oh, ever so long; I got home before ten. And what theatre did you go to?"

Regina explained and Alfred mixed her a little whisky-and-soda, and Julia said she would go to bed, for she was dead beat, and so on, and still Regina said nothing beyond throwing out a feeler in order that her husband might confide anything to her if he wished to do so.

"You got through your business, Alfred?"

"Yes—yes, yes."

"And brought it to a successful issue?"

"Well—I can't exactly say that, but I have put things in train." He gave a short, angry sigh, as if he were vexed with himself and the world in general.

It was on the tip of Regina's tongue to ask where he had dined. Perhaps if she had done so an explanation would have taken place between them and her mind have been set at rest, but a certain delicacy

overcame her as if she, in dining at the Trocadero, without giving her husband due warning of the fact, had committed an indiscretion. So she simulated a fatigue which she was far from feeling and she went off to bed, followed two minutes later by Alfred, who declared himself to be tired out, and it was not until Regina found herself in bed in the dark, with her husband sleeping the sleep of the—shall we say?—just, beside her, that she gave herself up to reviewing the situation. Well, "hope deferred maketh the heart sick." It may be so, but certain it is that Regina's heart was very sore and sorry that night. Hope was deferred no longer, uncertainty had become certainty, she knew the worst! She had seen the hussy! It was beyond her understanding to know why Alfred could have allowed himself to be entangled by such a creature—so common, attractive only with a common attractiveness, pretty only in a common type of prettiness, young, yet not blooming. He had not looked happy; he sighed in his sleep.

"What shall I do?" said Regina to herself. "Tell him? No, no, never never own for one instant that I have the smallest knowledge or suspicion that my husband is shared by a creature like that."

She lay awake for hours during that night, and when the first faint streaks of morning came struggling in at the window, she had come to the conclusion that he was unhappy in that relationship, that he had been entangled and that freedom would be infinitely precious to him.

"I must work hard at my task of supplanting

such a person," she told herself, "I must be wary and wily and sweet, and must make myself attractive. Alfred has been most attentive to me since I went to Madame d'Estelle, and since Clementine made my hats for me and Florence rearranged my hair. I must be wary and patient, always wary and patient, give him no excuse for wanting to go away from home, give him no sense of rest in any other place than under his own roof. It will not be easy—no, it will be most difficult. Poor fellow! he's so set on keeping faith with me that he even resents any little thing that I do to change myself. I hate that woman! Yes, I have never hated anyone in my life as I hate that woman!

CHAPTER XXX

DADDY'S HEART

I wonder is there a woman in the world who is not touched by a gift of beautiful furs?

It was fortunate for Regina that she had been in the past accustomed to live her life a good deal to herself. An ordinary wife and mother who started out on a scheme of rejuvenation as elaborate as that of Mrs Whittaker's would find it extremely difficult to account for the hours which she would have to spend outside her own house. The ordinary young girl in decent society usually has to explain to her mother what she has done with her day, sometimes what she is going to do, and must generally gain permission for any expedition which she desires to make. I have known young girls who considered surveillance to be what they indignantly termed espionage, and I have known much heartburning, much kicking against the pricks from the girls of the family because they were not, like their brothers, free as the wind, to go where they listed. But I must tell my readers that the espionage of mothers over daughters is as nothing compared to the espionage of daughters over a popular mother.

In a certain household with which I am intimately

acquainted, these are some scraps of conversation which may frequently be heard.

"Well, darling, where are you going to-day?"

"Oh, I'm going out and about. I want to go along the High Street, and then perhaps I'll go to tea with So-and-So, and I half promised to go to Fuller's to tea with such and such a boy. I'm not going far away. I shall be out and about. Why—do you want me?"

"Oh no, dear. Be in by dinner time."

On the other hand, this is a scrap of conversation from the same family.

"Are you going out to-day, mother?"

"Yes."

"Where are you going?"

"Oh, I'm going out."

"Yes, but where?" Then follows a string of questions—"What are you going to do? What are you going to get? What time shall you be in? Do you want me to go with you? Is daddy going with you?" and so on. The simple answer, "I'm going out and about," or "I'm going for a walk," would in no wise serve that mother. If she managed to slip out without her family knowing the exact details of her programme, she would certainly have to explain how she had spent every minute of her time when she got home again. "Well, where did you go? Who did you see? Where did you have tea? How many teas did you have? Did you have a good time? Are you tired? Why didn't you let me know you were going? I wanted to go with you." These are

only a few of the questions that this particular mother has to answer whenever she happens to go out without attendance; and I say, lucky it was for Regina that she had early inculcated the liberty of the subject into the hearts of her daughters twain.

Just at first, after giving up public life, she had made a feeble effort to assert the ordinary *rôle* of motherhood, but she had found herself brought sharply to a realisation of her own principles, that she was free as air, to do as she liked, and that Julia had the same privileges as herself. Fortunate it was for Regina that it was so, for she was able to continue her work of regeneration, carried out on the most twentieth-century lines, without being hindered by objections and comments from her husband and daughters. For Julia was accustomed to spend her days among her own friends and to follow her own inclinations, and Regina had been for many years accustomed to come and go without hindrance or comment.

Now, at this time, she became almost too busy to worry about even the existence of the hussy. Twice a week she spent an hour at The Dressing-Room, having her hair brushed and kept beautiful. Twice a week she attended the *salons* of her beauty specialist, who did all manner of quaint things to her complexion, smoothing, washing, patting, kneading, dabbing, spraying, using electricity and washes, and employing various other modes of rendering her skin beautifully smooth. Then twice a week she attended

the classes of a fashionable expert in physical culture, and at her bidding Regina, clad in black satin knickers and a white blouse, innocent of corsets or any other artificial means of making a figure, went through a series of antics, from blowing her nose scientifically to hopping about in attitudes suggestive of a gigantic frog—only that Regina grew less and less gigantic, and more and more approached to the proportions of her daughters. And then Regina took to learning the bicycle. Her modesty suggested that she should start on a machine with three wheels, but the professor of that art, who ran a show in Regent's Park—well removed from Regina's own domain—assured her that it was absurd for a person of her age and generally healthy aspect to begin on a machine that he would recommend to anyone old enough to be her mother. So Regina, with many misgivings, set out to learn the bicycle. She was not an easy pupil to teach, but there is no doubt that the nose blowing, hopping, rolling over and over on the floor, and going through the many exercises which the expert in physical culture ordained for her had given her a degree of lissomness which she had never enjoyed in the whole course of her existence.

These pursuits necessitated her lunching in town every single day in the week, and, having some time still on her hands, she devoted one hour in the week to learning fencing, and then she joined a bridge class connected with her club. And truly she proved what marvellous changes an ordinary, stout, podgy, somewhat self-indulgent

woman, getting near her half century, can make in herself if she chooses.

"Regina," said Alfred, one evening when she came down to dinner wearing a bewitching little confection of silk and lace, which, if he had only known it, was called a coffee-coat, "my dear, are you still going to that doctor of yours?"

"Yes."

"How often?"

"Once a week or so."

"I feel very anxious about you."

"But why, when I'm so well?"

"My dear girl, you are fading away, you are going to nothing, you are not as well covered as you were when we were married."

"I am not skinny, Alfred!" said Regina, with dignity.

"Skinny! God forbid! But where are you going to stop?"

"In your heart, Alfred," said Regina, looking at him very sweetly.

"But if you go on as you are at present, there won't be anything of you to stop there."

"Oh, you don't understand. I had so given myself up to public life that I had let myself grow fat and ungainly; I despised things that all women should think much of. But I have seen the error of my ways—and I feel as gay as a bird, as light as air. I only wish, dearest, that you would pay a little more attention to yourself."

"I? Dear, dear, dear! You don't mean to say

that you want me to live on dog biscuits. I decline to do it, Regina, even to please you. I lead a busy life, although, thank God! I am able to make money. I often scamp my lunch—just taking anything that comes handy; but my good breakfast in the morning and my good dinner at night I insist upon having."

"Oh, those good dinners!" said Regina, but she said it good-naturedly, and Alfred only laughed and began to serve the soup.

"Now, try a little of this, Palestine soup—your favourite."

"No, not soup, dear."

"Why punish yourself? You are as thin as a match already."

"Dr Money-Berry warned me against soups."

"Well, this once? I bought something for you to-day. Now, to please me you must have a little of this."

"Very well."

"Your sins shall be upon my head," said Alfred.

"No, I will take my sins on my own shoulders," said Regina.

It was not until the maid had left them alone that she asked him what the present was that he had bought for her that day.

"Ah, you wait till after dinner, old lady. I had the chance of buying something very nice at a quite reasonable price, and I took it, as I had to take it or leave it without any chance of consulting you. If you don't like it you can hand it over to one of the girls."

"I shall like it," said Regina, and she asked no further questions.

It was after dinner, when they had retired to the pleasant drawing-room, that Alfred brought forth his purchase. It was a rather flat parcel, looking like a rather large cardboard box done up in brown paper. With masculine pride Alfred snipped the string, undid the wrappings and brought to view the cardboard box that Regina had expected. Within were more wrappings of tissue paper, and these undone disclosed a large tippet or stole and a big muff of the order usually called "granny," made of the finest dark sables.

"Alfred!" cried Regina, all in a flutter.

"Ah, I thought you'd say that. No question of handing them over to the girls, eh?"

"I should think not indeed. Why, darling boy, you must have given a fortune for them."

He slipped the tippet over her head and kissed her at the same time. "Not too much for you, Queenie, but they did cost, well, a penny or two, but it was a bargain all the same. Now, put your hands in the muff and look at yourself."

"Oh, Alfred—oh, Alfred, you do love me?" said Regina.

"Love you! Ever had cause to doubt it?" he asked quite sharply.

Regina was almost choked by her emotion. The psychic moment had arrived for her to make her confession, to tell him all her doubts and fears, all her efforts to make herself lovely in his eyes. "My

Alfred, my noble Alfred," she exclaimed, flinging her arms round his neck and clasping the muff against his head. She was on the point of saying, "I *have* something to tell you," but she hesitated, in a manner unusual with her, for a choice of words. In the rush of gratitude she almost let slip that she had something to confess when the door opened, and Maudie, followed by her husband, came into the room.

"Furs! Dark sables! Darling, daddy *has* been opening his heart to you."

"Daddy's heart is always open to me," said Regina.

CHAPTER XXXI

REGINA SETS FOOT ON THE DOWN GRADE

There is a great deal of wisdom in the old saying "Truth will out."

SOMEHOW those sables served to put Regina further from her husband instead of drawing her nearer to him. I'm sure that Alfred Whittaker himself would have been shocked had he known the effect that his gift had upon his spouse. Every day—nay, every hour tended to confirm her belief that the hussy she had seen dining with Alfred at the Trocadero had complete ascendency over him, and yet those sables stopped her time after time from broaching the subject to him. They were, so to speak, a sop in the pot, and whenever Regina was on the point of laying her hand on Alfred's shoulder and saying to him, plump and straight, "Alfred, is your heart still mine?" a vision of dark sables seemed to rise up and choke the very words in her throat. Most women would love to have a danger-signal in the shape of dark sables, rich and elegant, soft and cosy, at once luxurious and comforting, but there were times when Regina almost hated her sables because they seemed to have raised an extra barrier between herself and Alfred.

"Mother," said Julia, one morning, when Regina

was about to leave the house on one of her strictly-personal expeditions, "are you going to Dr Money-Berry again?"

"Yes, dear, I am. Why?"

"Do you think he is doing very much good?"

"Oh, I do, indeed! I consider that he has set me free, body and soul, from the burden that I used to carry about with me."

"Oh—you mean—fat, darling? Don't you think it suits you to be a little fat?"

"I don't think it suits anybody to be fat," said Regina, with the enthusiasm of the recent convert.

"And yet I have heard you describe daddy as a man of commanding presence. How would you like it if daddy were to starve himself down until all the command of his presence disappeared into nothingness?"

"Ah, but I was gross," said Regina.

"I never knew you when you were gross," said Julia. "I thought at Maudie's wedding you looked lovely, and daddy said to me—"

"What did your father say to you?"

Julia drew a step nearer to her mother, and smoothed down, with tender yet nervous fingers, the stole of soft grey fur which was around her shoulders.

"Why don't you ever wear your sables?" she asked irrelevantly.

"My sables?" said Regina. "Oh, I don't like to wear them every day."

"But when you are going to town, among smart

West-End physicians—that doesn't mean every day. I don't suggest that you should put them on to go up the village in. Don't you like them?"

"Oh yes, no woman in the world would dislike them."

"That's what I thought. You know, mother dear, you're cooking up something about daddy."

"No, I would rather not discuss it with you, my darling."

"Sometimes," said Julia, still smoothing the stole up and down, "sometimes it's better to get it off your chest."

"What a very vulgar remark!" said Regina.

"Yes, perhaps, but very practical. Now, I've been watching you."

"I wish you wouldn't," said Regina.

"Yes, we all wish others wouldn't. You see, that night at the Trocadero let us all behind the scenes a little. Yes—I must speak, it's been trembling on the tip of my tongue for weeks past, but, somehow, you always put me off. I believe that daddy could explain it all."

"There is no necessity for explanation."

She looked very stern, very severe; but Julia was minded to speak, and when Julia was minded to speak she generally had her say.

"You are quite a different woman to what you were when Maudie was married. You're not fretting after her, that's certain—an outsider might think so, but I know better. You've never told daddy a word about our having seen him at the Trocadero that

night. You didn't notice him very much, you resolutely kept your eyes away from him. I had no such delicacy of feeling, I watched him very closely. That woman is nothing to him. I don't know why he was dining with her, I don't know why he didn't tell you about it, but he was bored and annoyed. He was trying to pull something off, and he couldn't get what he wanted. If she ever had any sort of hold over him, that hold has long since ceased to be an attractive one—he was bored to death with her. I don't know that Maudie wasn't right."

"You have discussed it with Maudie?"

"I have, or rather she has discussed it with me. She was all for going down and tackling daddy right away, and I believe her instinct was right, and that daddy would rather you knew he was there."

"And Maudie thinks—?"

"Maudie? Oh, Maudie's mind works in quite a different way to mine—always did. Maudie thinks it is just an ordinary affair of that kind, and left alone she would have gone down and taxed him with it, but Harry wouldn't hear of it. But daddy was there and she was there—and a horrid-looking brute she was—but whoever she was, and whatever she may be, I am perfectly sure there is not the slightest occasion for you to worry about her, one way or the other."

"I don't—" Regina began, but Julia promptly cut her short.

"Oh yes, darling, you do. You were quite a changed woman after that night—ah, and before that

night, too. I know perfectly well that you are worrying, I could burst out crying sometimes to see the look on your face, and poor old daddy is quite unconscious, he hasn't the least idea why you are so quiet and so unlike yourself. He asked me quite anxiously the other day if I thought you were overdoing the treatment with Dr Money-Berry."

"I believe," said Regina, who, before all things was loyal to her Alfred, "I believe that all persons inclining to stoutness would be better in health, and in mind too, if they would take means to keep themselves to proper proportions. Oh, Dr Money-Berry is quite right in saying that fat is a disease, and should be treated as such. I have been to him once or twice lately because I was not sure that my symptoms were desirable. I am really going to him to-day to say good-bye for the second time. Don't worry about me, darling child, and don't discuss your father with Maudie. I have never entered into details of business and I never intend to. Your father distinctly told me that he was dining with somebody on business; it would be intolerable for him, placed as he is, if his wife were to worry him to death every time he spoke to another woman. Dear little girl, you'll be marrying one of these days, and you'll have a husband of your own, then you will realise that between husband and wife discretion is truly the better part of valour. And I wish you would put that incident right out of your head—regard it as a business matter—and not think of it every time you think I am not looking as gay as usual. You know, my darling, I have many

thoughts busying to and fro in my brain. I have never been a mere machine for ordering dinner, and although I have given up public life, I have not given up all my thoughts—I still have an intellect. Your father is the best and noblest man I ever knew. One of these days he will explain what, so far, he has only told me in part. But I must be going, I am rather late already. Tell me, are you occupied all day?"

"Yes, that is to say, I am lunching with Maudie, and then I am going on to my club."

"No, come and have tea at mine. I shall expect you between half-past four and five."

"Right you are, mother."

And then Mrs Whittaker went out, passed down the tessellated covered way and turned her face towards the station, conscious that she had that day graduated as a first-class liar. Well, if she had lied, she had lied in a good cause. If she had succeeded in restoring the faith of her child in husband and father, she had lied to some purpose, and surely the recording angel would drop showers of tears over the spot, and it would be blotted out for ever. Her thoughts had reached this point when she reached the ticket office. She had to stand and wait for some time while two ladies fumbled with their purses, and while they discussed whether they would travel first or second.

"First-class to Baker Street—oh, yes, it's horrid on that line, I always go first to Baker Street—and, my dear, if I didn't meet him the very next day, walking along with a creature—oh! Twopence more? Thank

you, I'm so sorry to give you so much trouble—yes, I met him walking with a bold, brazen hussy, and I never saw a man looking so crestfallen as Mr Whittaker did when he saw me."

There was a little waiting-room hard by the ticket office, and Regina turned sharply round and took refuge in this dingy little retreat.

"My dear!" said the lady who had been listening to the one who had mentioned Mr Whittaker's name, "you have done the most awful thing you ever did in your life. Mrs Whittaker was standing just behind you, and she heard every word you said."

"Poor woman! Did she really? I *am* sorry! Well, I never believe in making mischief between husband and wife, but it's a shame, and I do think that a man who is carrying on a double game ought to be found out."

CHAPTER XXXII

WISE JULIA

There is a certain class of woman who loves a *fracas* of any kind.

THE waiting-room at Northampton Park boasted of no attendant, so Regina was able to sit down by the bare mahogany table and wait until the storm which possessed her had passed by. Poor Regina! The first thought that came to her was that after all she had lied to no purpose. It was no small thing to a woman of her sturdy and open mind that she had spun a perfect tissue of lies to her own child. She knew that she had lied in a double sense, for she had not deceived Julia, and she knew now that others were on the track of Alfred's wrongdoings. She was shaking now, shaking like a leaf, and as she sat there, her sad eyes roaming over the customary literature that one finds on the table of a suburban waiting-room, she wished she had been left in her fool's paradise. She realised with a great shock the truth of the old saw, "If ignorance is bliss, 'twere folly to be wise." Yes, she would rather have been left in her fool's paradise! But there, since the outer world was already talking of Alfred's doings, it was small wonder that she had lit upon the truth also.

Her talk with Julia, and the little incident that had caused her to take refuge in the waiting-room had made her hopelessly late for her appointments, but that, Regina felt, could not be helped. She turned, when she left the waiting-room, and walked across the green into the Post-Office, where she sent off a couple of telegrams, and then she took the next train to London and went straight to her club, where she lunched by herself. I need not go into the details of her day. She kept her appointments, behaved herself in a perfectly rational manner, and went home, poor woman, with a heart as heavy as lead. When she got home a terrible shock was waiting for her. Mr Whittaker had come home, inquired for her, and gone off with a portmanteau and left a note for her on the dining-room mantelshelf.

"The master was so put out," the intelligent parlour-maid declared, looking quite reproachfully at Regina, "he came in at five o'clock, of course there wasn't a soul at home. I knew Miss Julia had gone to Mrs Marksby's, and I told master so, and he went to the telephone to speak through to Miss Maudie — I mean Mrs Marksby, but the young ladies, they were gone out somewhere or other, and Mr Harry wasn't in, and I'd no idea where you was. Master *was* put out! He had a cup of tea, and packed his bag and he tramped up and down the road, and then he said to me, 'Margaret,' said he, 'I must go or I sha'n't catch my train, but I've written a note to the mistress and be sure you

take care of her whilst I am away.' Those were his last words, 'be sure you take care of her whilst I am away!'"

"Well, well," said Regina, who did not believe in giving way in the presence of servants, "well, well, your master has had to go away on business, no doubt. His letter will explain everything."

Her exterior was calm, but her heart was beating fast as she turned into the dining-room and took the the letter off the chimneyshelf. She felt that the fatal moment had come and that Alfred was gone. Alfred *was* gone, but not in the sense in which her doubting heart had feared.

"DEAREST QUEENIE"—the letter ran—"I am dreadfully upset not to find you at home as I 'phoned up to you directly I knew that I should have to go away on most important business. I am just off to Paris. Just imagine my going to Paris without you, dearest! It seems preposterous. If I get my business through in a day or two, perhaps you will join me there? If I don't get my business through, I may have to go on elsewhere, and I could not drag you about, on what may be a wild-goose chase, half over Europe. I could have given you an outline of the story if you had been at home, but I haven't time to write it. When I think of myself, a respectable British householder, tearing off on this mad errand, I feel inclined to pinch myself to make sure that I am awake. Till we meet.—Your fond and devoted ALFRED."

Regina sat down and gasped. What did it mean? Surely the hussy was not at the bottom of this. Just then Julia came in, having run across the road to speak to one of the Marksby girls whom she had seen standing at the gate as they came towards Ye Dene.

"What's this Margaret says about daddy?" she asked.

"Nothing, my dear, nothing," Regina rejoined, quite airily. "Your father has had to go away on business for a few days."

"Oh, I thought, from Margaret's demeanour, that daddy had gone away for good and all."

"Julia!"

"Well, Margaret seemed to make such a mouthful of it."

"He came home very much fussed not to find us at home, and I suppose Margaret imagined that something serious had happened. It's nothing at all. Here you can read the letter."

"Paris!" said Julia, when she reached that point of information as she read her father's good-bye note. "Well—how nice! If you do join him you will have a lovely time—a little honeymoon trip. Perhaps he will ask me to go too—that would be lovely. How silly of Margaret to be so mysterious about it! Well, I'll go and tidy for dinner."

Mother and daughter were quite cheerful as they discussed the evening meal. At about nine oclock there was a sound of electricity and Julia lifted her head from her book.

"I believe that's Harry and Maudie; it sounded like their brougham."

Then there was a peal at the bell and Julia ran out into the hall.

"Maudie, is it you?" she asked.

"Yes, we thought we would come out and see you. How's mother?"

"Oh, all right. I thought you were going to a theatre?"

"Yes, we did think about it, but we changed our minds. Julia, has anything happened?"

"No—at least, only that daddy has gone to Paris for a few days. We came home and found he had been here, fussed because mother wasn't in, packed his own bag, and left a note to say where he has gone and to say 'good-bye' and—*voilà tout.*"

"But it isn't all," cried Maudie," it's only the beginning of it. My dear, daddy's gone to Paris with *her!* It was by the merest chance we knew. Harry was coming up the Strand—walking—he came up with a man in his cab as far as Charing Cross because they wanted to talk business, he got out at the corner of Villiers Street and as he crossed over to the entrance of the station he saw daddy drive up in a cab with a portmanteau on the top. Immediately after he saw a four-wheeled cab with *her* inside."

"What—you mean the woman we saw at the Trocadero?"

"Yes—he was so struck by the coincidence of their both being at Charing Cross with luggage at the same time that he just walked quietly in and saw them both go off together."

"Not together—Maudie!"

"Together—in the same carriage—a reserved compartment. And Harry says he bought a sheaf of papers and positively threw them at her."

"It's a mystery!" ejaculated Julia, blankly. "His letter to mother was everything that a letter could be. He laughs at himself ever so for going away on a mad errand, suggests that she should join him in a few day's time, and signs himself, 'till we meet, your fond and devoted Alfred.'"

"I tell you what it is, Ju," said Maudie, dropping her young married woman air and becoming Maudie Whittaker once more, "I'm sorry to say it because he's my father, but between you and me, daddy's a regular bad lot."

"It does seem so," said Julia, "and the curious part of it is that he looks so respectable. Mother won't believe it, you know. I was talking to her only to-day, she won't believe a word against him."

"Well, so much the better for her, that's what Harry says, but we came to tell her—"

"Not to tell her—?"

"Oh no, I wouldn't tell her for the world. Let her go on believing in him as long as she can, the awakening will come soon enough."

"Then what did you come for?" asked Julia, practical as usual.

"My dear, I thought if daddy had gone off and perhaps left mother a letter to say that he was never coming back, she would want somebody to stand by her—and Harry and I are prepared to do that."

"And where do I come in?" asked Julia, a little scornfully.

"Oh, Ju, darling, you are always the practical common-sense one, you are a tower of strength, and many are the times I have leaned upon you; but if the worst had happened you might have been too stunned yourself to help mother very much. I think a woman needs a man at such a crisis of her life."

"There isn't going to be any crisis," said Julia, quite prosaically, "there isn't going to be any crisis. But it was nice of you to come, and I do think you and Harry are two dear things. There's an explanation to all this. There's nothing of the real bad lot about daddy, and as for mother—there's no doubt about it, he worships her. Don't tell me that when a man is tired of a woman he brings home dark sables without so much as a hint that they will be welcome—it isn't human nature, at all events it isn't man nature."

CHAPTER XXXIII

GRASP YOUR NETTLE

There is a wide difference between grasping your nettle and rushing in where angels fear to tread.

SEVERAL days had gone by and still the anxiously-looked-for summons had not arrived from Alfred Whittaker to his wife. To outward seeming Regina was as calm in the face of this new development of events as if no trace of cloud had ever arisen to come between her and her noble Alfred, but in her heart of hearts she watched every post with an anxiety that was absolutely at fever heat. At night, poor soul, she seemed to have given up sleeping, and Regina was a woman who needed, and had always taken, a fixed amount of time in bed—when I say that I mean of actual, sound, solid sleep. She was one of those persons who, docked of sleep, show the signs of wear and tear with fatal rapidity.

During the greater part of the week she did not go out of the Park, but left word with the sympathetic Margaret, who was perfectly aware that something out of the common was on foot, that in case of a telegram she was to be fetched from such and such a house. Then Maudie came gliding along in her motor brougham, full of sympathy, and, I must

confess, at the same time, full of anxiety as to her mother's condition.

"How is it you are coming to the Park every day now?" Mrs Whittaker asked on the sixth morning when Maudie arrived about lunch time.

"I was anxious about you, I thought you were not looking very well," Maudie remarked.

"I am perfectly well."

"Are you, dear? I fancied you were not quite yourself."

Julia was safely out of the road, or perhaps young Mrs Marksby would not have said so much.

"I do wish, dear, you would get out of this depressing neighbourhood. I assure you I feel quite a different woman since I was married and got away from this depressing place."

"One generally does when one gets married," said Regina, with a slight smile.

"Yes, I know, dear, but it takes a month of Sundays to get here even with a motor. I wish you would persuade daddy to come and live in the West-End."

"It is not at all unlikely that we may do so, dear, a little later on. Oh—what's that?"

"That" was nothing more important than the knock of the postman.

"I will go," said Maudie, and Maudie did go. "Two letters for Julia and four for you."

"One from your father?" said Mrs Whittaker, with an eagerness which, for the life of her, she could not suppress.

"Nothing in daddy's handwriting," said Maudie.

"Mother dear, have you heard from daddy since he left home?"

"Oh yes, darling."

"Every day?"

"Not every day," said Regina, "no, not every day."

"Before I was married," said Maudie in her most severe tone, "on the few occasions when daddy went away without you, he made a rule of writing every day."

"He's on business," said Regina, feebly.

"Yes, darling, but he was on business then. You *have* heard from him?"

"I have," said Regina.

"Oh, mother—I may as well tell you what's in my mind."

"I think you had better not," said Regina, faintly.

"I'm sure I ought to do so. I can't bear to go on deceiving you any longer."

"Deceiving me?" said Regina. Her tone was feeble but questioning.

"Yes, deceiving you," cried Maudie. "Daddy—daddy's not gone away in an ordinary manner on business—oh yes, he calls it business, but he's gone away with that woman."

"Maud!"

"Harry saw them go away together, and you are watching for letters that never come—my poor, crushed darling," Maudie cried.

"Harry saw them go? Them? You mean that person, that creature we saw dining with daddy at the Trocadero?"

Then Maudie burst forth with the entire story as she had told it to Julia.

"And that is why I come every day. I knew you would want some support, and as I am a married woman, I knew I should be more support than Julia, although she *is* so farseeing. It's a bitter blow, darling, but bear it like the martyr you are. Of course, Harry will be awfully angry with me; he says you never ought to interfere between husband and wife, even when they are your own father and mother."

"I would rather know the worst," said Regina; "it is no kindness to keep a woman of my calibre in the dark. I can't discuss it, Maudie darling, even with you. If your father has really left me for that other person I will bear the blow and face the world with what dignity I can. You—you had better not tell Harry that you have told me the truth, we will keep it a little secret between ourselves. I shouldn't like to feel that because of your sense of justice to me the first little rift had come between yourself and your husband. You are lunching with me to-day, dear?"

She turned the conversation into a conventional channel with a skill which was truly admirable, and Maudie, who was inclined to take her colour from another, took her cue on that occasion from her mother and answered in the same strain.

"No, I'm lunching with Harry's mother. I'd rather stay here with you, darling, but if I don't go now and again without Harry the old lady is inclined

to be a bit cranky, and I want to keep in with her, you know."

"Certainly! Most wise of you! By all means keep in with your husband's people, there is nothing to be gained by not doing so," said Regina. "Then you and I will say no more just now, darling. You will come across before you go back?"

"Yes, mother dear, I will. I have ordered the brougham for four o'clock."

"Engagements in town?" said Regina.

"Yes, one or two things on," Maudie answered. She talked as if their conversation had been all along of a most unimportant and trivial character.

"Then I shall see you again," said Regina. "Good-bye, dearest."

She sat just where Maudie had left her for some little time after young Mrs Marksby had disappeared into the ancestral mansion across the road, a dozen schemes revolving in her active brain. What should she do? Should she sit down meekly and tamely under this new revelation and let Alfred deal with their lives as he would, or should she make a determined step and meet disaster face to face? "Grasp your nettle" had ever been a favourite saying with Regina, and she felt very much like grasping her nettle now. Then Margaret came in and told her that luncheon was served, and Regina went into the dining-room and thoughtfully helped herself. Appetite she had none. Now, let me tell you, when Regina's appetite failed her, then indeed she was in a distinctly bad way.

"Something has happened in this 'ere house," said Margaret in the confidential atmosphere of the kitchen. "Missus have had no lunch to-day, not enough to keep a fly alive. Just look at this plate, and that little dish you tossed up is one of her favourites. Why, she hasn't even picked the mushrooms out of it."

"Lor'! she must be bad," said the faithful cook. "Poor missus! I wonder if it's true what they be saying, that master's gone away for good and all. Six days he's been away and only one post-card has he sent home. Why, generally he writes home every day and sometimes twice. Ah, men! they're all alike, not a pin to choose between 'em. Now, the last place that I was in, I only stayed my month, for the lady she had fifteen servants in one year and she only kept two, so you can guess what sort of a place I had lighted on. Master, he carried on something shameful, not that I blame him, for a man what comes home and can't get his meals regular and never knows whether missus will be in or out and everything else in the same way—well, you can't expect a house to be run what you can call comfortable, at least it never is, and this was a poor, feckless thing that didn't understand how to order a dinner for a gentleman, and didn't understand how to let the cook make a suggestion. All the same, the way that man carried on was fair disgraceful. Now, master here, has kept his doings dark, and indeed if it hadn't been for what you overheard Miss Maudie that was tell Miss Julia, I don't know that we should have been

any wiser than we were before. But there, men are all alike. Look at Bill Jackson, he kept company with Annie Hodgkinson for five years and a half, and then he up and fair jilts her for the sake of a little bit of a girl that doesn't know one end of a ham from the other. Of course he's miserable and he doesn't deserve to be anything else."

"For the matter of that," retorted the fair Margaret, "neither does she; she knew well enough what she was doing when she set her cap at Bill Jackson. Don't tell me that those innocent eyes don't see more than they pretend to, nasty little hussy! I'm sure, whatever happens in this house, missus has my profoundest sympathy, and that's more than I'd say for any missus, and as for master, he's like all the rest of them—fair disgraceful, I call it."

"Me too," said the cook, "me too."

Meanwhile Regina was sitting pecking, I can call it nothing else, at a dainty little pudding. Her thoughts were very bitter and her heart was full of a stern resolve. Yes, she would grasp her nettle, she would remain in doubt not a single day longer. She would just take a handbag, as Alfred had done, and she would leave a note for Julia and she would go off to Paris by the night boat. She would grasp her nettle; she would, at least, learn the worst. If Alfred were no longer hers—well, she would shape her life accordingly. There should be no half measures, it should be all or nothing. Truly she had given all that she had to give freely. She had, as

she believed, accepted and valued the whole of her husband's love. There should be no betwixt and between, it should be her or the other one, Regina or the hussy. And then Regina remembered that to carry out her scheme she must at once put on her things and go to the bank and get some money.

CHAPTER XXXIV

A TRENCHANT QUESTION

When months of doubt have been crystallised into one simple question, how easy the way seems!

MRS WHITTAKER laid her plans for leaving Ye Dene with the skill of a diplomat and the secrecy of a detective. She determined that she would take nobody into her confidence. If there was going to be a hideous scene with Alfred when she got to the end of her journey, she preferred to have it without witnesses, especially either of her own children. She went down to the bank and drew out sufficient money to cover all expenses and a little over, and then returned home in order to prepare for her journey. She chose her plainest frock, a rough brown tweed, tailor built, according to the advice and under the direction of Madame d'Estelle, who did not make tailor gowns herself, but introduced clients to a gentleman in that line, and generally supervised the taste of her customers. On her carefully arranged coiffure she wore a toque to match her dress—when I say "to match her dress" I mean it was a creation of brown velvet, with a strip of sable, some gold buckles and a twist of yellowish lace. Over her shoulders she put the dark sables which

Alfred had given her, took the muff upon her arm, and then she went down to her own desk where she wrote a letter to Julia:—

"DEAREST"—she wrote—"I am going to join your father in Paris. I leave you ten pounds; if you want more money than this before I return, which is not very likely, here are a couple of signed cheques for you to use. I know that you won't mind being left alone for a few days. If you do, you might go and stay with Maudie. I am leaving by the Calais-Dover route and will let you know as soon as I arrive in Paris.—Your fond and loving MOTHER."

Then Mrs Whittaker called the servants in one by one, paid their wages, told them to look after Miss Julia, and said that she was going to Paris to join the master for a few days.

"Which it's very funny," remarked the cook to Margaret, a few minutes after Mrs Whittaker and her small portmanteau had gone off in a cab to the station, "which it's very funny. Missus have had no letter from master since the day after he went away, when she had a post-card which I took in myself and likewise read, saying, 'Arrived safe. Hope all well at home. Writing later.' Which he never have written later. There was no telegram for missus to-day?"

"No," said Margaret, "there's no telegram come to this house to-day."

"Then, you know, missus might have been rung up on the telephone from the office."

"She might, but I've not heard her on the telephone all day, and I've not heard the telephone go once. Anyway, missus she have gone to Paris to join master, and I'm sure, poor lady, I hope she won't find a pretty to-do when she gets there."

It was barely half an hour later when Maudie Marksby's motor brougham came spinning up to the door of the house opposite.

"There's Mrs Marksby's carriage," said Margaret, craning her head over the muslin blinds that shrouded the doings of the kitchen from the passers-by. "I wonder if missus told her she was going to Paris. Oh, here she comes."

Maudie herself, with her gait of swimming importance, came mincing across the road. Margaret went down to the outer porch to meet her.

"Is my mother in, Margaret?"

"Lor'! Mrs Marksby, missus have gone away!"

"Away! Where?"

"She's gone to Paris to join master."

"Did she have a telegram?"

"No, miss—I beg your pardon, I mean ma'am."

"Oh—oh—she's gone to Paris, has she? Well, it's no use my waiting then, is it?"

"What did she look like?" said the cook.

"She looked struck all of a heap," said Margaret. "It's my opinion that missus has taken French leave, and she's going to steal a march on them both."

Meanwhile Regina, full of her stern resolve, was already on her way to Dover, not being minded to wait for the regular boat train, and perhaps risk a

scene from one or other of her daughters, finding her on the platform and attempting to dissuade her from taking the fatal step.

"I must be firm, I must be resolute, I must know exactly what I'm going to do," she told herself as the luxurious train whizzed past the suburbs. "I will have a good dinner when I get to Dover; I wish to arrive in Paris as calm and unmoved as a rock."

Now, take it all round, this was extremely sensible advice to give herself. Regina had a cup of tea on board the train. She made a valiant effort to read one or two magazines which she had with her, and arrived at Dover, she went on board the steamer, chose her berth, and then went into the town to seek a suitable place for dinner. I feel that it is much to her credit that she chose the best hotel in the town. And yet it was a very haggard and sad-eyed Regina who reached the terminus at Paris. Still, she never turned from her resolve. She chartered her *fiacre*, and involuntarily, as they drove down the Rue Amsterdam, her eyes turned to the wonderful bazaar in which in former days she and Alfred had spent some money and a certain amount of time, experiencing at a very small cost the delirious joy of shopping in Paris. So on, through the bright Paris streets, already teeming with life, and down into the heart of the city where was situate the hotel from which Alfred had written. It was not one at which Regina had ever stayed herself—no, it was small and unpretentious, with a quaint little courtyard adorned

by a few shrubs in square wooden boxes painted a brighter green than the leaves.

"Yes, M. Vittequere, he is staying in the hotel," so the handsome and voluble landlady informed her.

"With a lady?" Regina asked.

"Well," she admitted, there was a lady, but she was not staying in the hotel, she was not Mr Whittaker's wife, on the contrary, she was a client, and madame had found her an excellent lodging in an adjacent house, one, in fact, belonging to the mother of madame herself. "And she is a Frenchwoman, she knows her Paris well."

"A Frenchwoman?" Regina echoed. "And monsieur, he is risen?"

"If monsieur has risen he is but just descended from his bedchamber."

She called to a passing waiter, and demanded to know whether M. Whittaker, *numero treize*, was yet descended.

"Monsieur is at breakfast with madame," was the man's reply.

The Frenchwoman, who had taken in the situation at a glance, and knew from Regina's general appearance, and perhaps especially from her sables, that this was the legitimate Madame Whittaker, frowned at the man, who, as Regina plainly saw, cast about mentally for a way of retrieving his mistake.

"Show me the way," said Regina. "No, it is not necessary to warn monsieur, I know him extremely well. Ah, in the *salle?* I will go by myself."

"*Polisson—bête,*" hissed the Frenchwoman in the

waiter's ear. But abuse wa worse than useless, for Regina was already sailing, head up, in the direction of the dining-room. She made her entrance without being perceived. Alfred was, indeed, turned three-parts away from the door by which she had entered, and he was leaning over the table studying some papers. Knowing him so well she perceived by his attitude that he was thoroughly engrossed by business. His companion, who wore a hat, and who was much smarter and more Parisian in appearance than when Regina saw her at the Trocadero, was steadily eating her breakfast. At last, Alfred Whittaker put the sheet he was reading down on several others like it, and patted his hand upon it as much as to say, "That is settled and done with," upon which Regina went forward. She gently laid her hand upon her husband's shoulder.

"Alfred," she said in a very quiet tone. I am bound to confess that Alfred nearly jumped out of his skin.

"My God! Queenie, is that you? Oh, my dear, what a turn you gave me. I'd no idea you were within a hundred miles of me. What's the matter?" He sprang out of his chair and held her by both her elbows. "If anything's the matter tell me at once, don't break it to me."

"Nothing's the matter, I will explain it to you afterwards — I wanted to come to Paris, and I thought I might as well join you. Who is this lady?"

The noble Alfred drew a long breath of relief,

gripped his wife's elbows very hard indeed, and then bent forward and touched her lightly on either cheek.

"This lady is a client of the firm," he said. "Let me make her known to you — Madame Raumonier."

The Frenchwoman sprang to her feet, looking the very image of guilty surprise. "This is madame your wife?" she said, speaking excellent English.

"This is Mrs Whittaker, my wife. Sit down, Queenie. *Garçon, garçon,* breakfast for madame. They make an excellent omelette *aux fines herbes* here, Queenie. Fresh coffee for madame. Sit down, Madame Raumonier, sit down."

"You would like to be alone with madame your wife?"

"Not at all, I shall be alone with her presently, when you have finished breakfast." He turned back to Regina. "Queenie," he said, "I can't tell you how glad I am to see you. This just concludes the business which brought me over to Paris. I've had the greatest difficulty and trouble to get things settled. It's such a disadvantage to a man in my position not to speak French well, and I am in the position of not speaking French at all, so I have had to do everything by means of Madame's translations, and she does not see the legal aspect as I should if I could read French as well as she can. I was going to telegraph to you this very day to beg you to come over. Some wave-thought

must have warned you that I was thinking of it."

"No," said Regina, deliberately sitting down by the table, and beginning carefully to peel the gloves off her hands. "No, Alfred, I do not think it was a wave-thought. I wanted to come to Paris, and I came."

"They are all well at home? You brought Julia with you?"

"No, I did not bring Julia; she can come across in a few days by herself."

"Ah, yes, we can talk of that later."

Then Madame Raumonier made another effort to escape.

"I am sure you would like to be alone with madame your wife. I have quite finished breakfast. If you wish to see me will you intimate through madame the landlady? May I wish you good morning, madame?"

Regina rose and ceremoniously shook hands with the Frenchwoman, Alfred bowed, followed her across the room, stayed a moment talking, bowed again, rubbed his hands, and came back with that curious air of a conqueror with which a man meets a woman who is much to him on all occasions after a parting.

"Queenie, my darling, thank God that woman's gone. I must apologise to you," and here he put his hand over hers and held it very close, "I must apologise to you for having, of necessity, made her known to you. She is not a person for you to know, she's—she's a woman with a history."

"Then, Alfred," said Regina, not moving her hand, but looking at him with eyes which were like the eyes of the angel with the flaming sword. "Then, Alfred, if she is not fit for me to know, what does she do here with you?"

CHAPTER XXXV

THE END OF IT ALL

A woman who can prove herself generous and wide-minded is the woman who gets the greatest advantage in every circumstance of life.

"How is it," said Regina, "that she is here with you?"

The words dropped out one by one. There was a world of torture and suffering, tinged with reproach and bitterness, in Mrs Whittaker's tones. Alfred Whittaker gave a great start, and drew his wife down to her seat.

"Queenie," he said, "you haven't had it in your mind that that creature is anything to me?"

"I'm afraid I have," said Regina, and under the comfort of the word "creature" her voice took a softer tone.

"That mixture of fire and vulgarity! Oh, my dear!—Come, come, you've been travelling all night, you must have your breakfast. Here is the finest omelette in Paris. I say, waiter, *garçon*, try if you can't get madame a few strawberries to follow the *biftec chateaubriand*.—I'm sure, Queenie," he went on as the waiter whisked the cover off and betook himself away, "that a good breakfast is more important to you at this moment than even the state of my morals. You see, I've had my breakfast, so you

can hear all about Madame Raumonier while you are taking yours. Now, what could have put it into your head, since you knew I was over here on her business—"

"But I didn't," said Regina.

"Then what made you come?"

The omelette was good and hot, and Regina took two mouthfuls before she answered.

"Alfred," she said, "this has been going on for a long time. I know everything."

"Then you are a clever woman. Now, what do you know?"

"You bought her a bracelet."

"I? I've never bought a bracelet for anyone but you in my life."

"Well, Templeton told me so."

At this Alfred Whittaker burst out laughing. "I *did* buy a bracelet, you are quite right, but it was for Mrs Chamberlain."

"You gave a bracelet to Mrs Chamberlain?" said Regina.

"No, no, no, I didn't do anything of the kind. I bought the bracelet for Chamberlain to give his wife. Chamberlain had been in an extremely ugly corner for some time past. I didn't tell you anything about it, because I thought it more than likely that Mrs Chamberlain might come round pumping you. If you didn't know anything, I felt you wouldn't be able to tell her anything."

"Surely you might have trusted me?"

"It isn't that I couldn't trust you, for I can and

always have done. As it happened, Mrs Chamberlain was, as you know, by way of being an heiress, and Chamberlain was ridiculously in love."

"Can a man be ridiculously in love?" put in Regina.

"Yes, very much so. When I married you I told you everything that had happened to me, good, bad and indifferent — Chamberlain didn't, and Mrs Chamberlain is possessed of a demon of jealousy. She got fixed in her silly little head that Chamberlain had been a sort of King Arthur until she met him. A moment's reflection would have told the silly little fool that the less she inquired into her husband's past the better, and Chamberlain was so much in love with her, and in such a hurry to catch the little heiress, that he did not completely sever ties that he had contracted previously, and trusted to luck to go on shelling out to this Frenchwoman who had had an affair with him lasting some years before his marriage. The French lady did not like being put on short commons, still less did she like being pensioned off, and she began to make herself unpleasant. Poor old Chamberlain got himself into an awful muddle, and confided everything to me. I thought him a fool, and I told him so very plainly; but he's my partner, and I couldn't refuse to help him out. The day that I went to Templeton's and bought that bracelet, Chamberlain went in quite a different direction to have an interview with Madame Raumonier, and try to bring her to reason. At that time Mrs Chamberlain used to make stringent inquiries as to how he

had spent every moment of his time. As a matter of fact she had come to the office for him that very day, and was told that he had already gone. When he got home she was told some necessary and harmless lies to the effect that he had been to Templeton's to buy her a bracelet. Heaven only knows what would have happened if she had found out that Chamberlain had never been near Templeton's."

"But why were you dragged into it?"

"Oh, I was trying to get a settlement."

"Why did you bring her to Paris?"

"Well, it was like this. Chamberlain and I finally agreed between ourselves that the only way to get a settlement of the affair was to provide Madame Raumonier with an income sufficient to live upon for the rest of her life. He didn't grudge that, he's not a mean man, and he offered to settle five pounds a week upon her on one condition: that she cleared out of England and never crossed the Channel again."

"Oh, I see. But why did you have to come to Paris to settle that?"

"My dear child, Madame Raumonier is no fool. She had no notion of being cut adrift from Chamberlain and left stranded at her age—she must be at least five-and-thirty—without the certainty of a provision being made for her. I took her out to dinner one night—dined at the Trocadero—"

"Yes, I saw you," said Regina.

"What!"

"I was there."

"You were dining at the Trocadero the night I took Madame Raumonier there?"

"I was."

"And you never told me!"

"No, Alfred, I never told you." Regina finished the last bit of omelette with relish, and sat back in her chair and waited for the rest of the story.

"You never told me!" repeated Alfred. "You cooked it up—you mean to tell me that you thought I was dining with her on my own account?"

"What else was I to think?"

"Who were you dining with?"

"I was not dining with a gentleman, at least not by myself," said Regina. "Julia and I were dining with Maudie and Harry."

"And they saw—?"

"They did."

"And they thought—?"

"They did."

"That I was dining on my own with that creature! I never felt so insulted in my life."

"Insulted, Alfred?"

"Insulted, Queenie. When I take to dining ladies on my own, they shall be women who are something to look at. Damn it all!" he went on, "I've been accustomed to taking a smart woman about. This creature wasn't even amusing, and what's more, she's the least French of any Frenchwoman I ever came across in my life."

"Well, go on. You were telling me—?"

"Oh, I don't know what I was telling you—I don't know what I was telling you. Oh, well, I know, I was telling you about dining her at the Trocadero. Yes, she was willing enough to have the settlement, she was willing enough to go back to her beloved France, she hated London and everything in it—didn't know why she ever left sunny France. But, like all Frenchwomen, she was a woman of business, and she didn't mean to leave go her hold upon poor old Chamberlain unless her settlement was perfectly secure. My dear, if she had been a lawyer fifty times over she couldn't have been sharper at her job."

"I don't blame her," said Regina, "I never blame a woman for getting the better of a man."

"Yes, I know, my dear, you always held that opinion. But the long and the short of it was that she would accept nothing but a definite settlement in Paris, and I can tell you, even when you come over with the money in your hand, it's not such a simple matter as it would seem, to arrange a bit of business in this land of liberty, equality and brotherhood. From the way these people have spun it out one would have thought that I was getting something out of them, instead of making an ample settlement on one of their countrywomen. And the funniest part of the whole thing has been that every one of them thinks that Chamberlain and I are one and the same person. Gad! You thought so too! My dear," putting his hand on the papers again, "this is the final note, this will be signed this afternoon, I shall hand Madame Raumonier

bank-notes for a hundred pounds, and then I shall wash my hands of her altogether for good and all."

For a moment Regina did not speak, but applied her attention entirely to the very excellent biftec on her plate. Then she looked up at her husband with penitent eyes.

"Alfred," she said, "I really feel I ought to apologise to you."

"Apologise?" said Alfred, "apologise? Nay, if any apology is needed it is from me to you for having apparently given you cause for uneasiness, but, thank God! Queenie, there is no need of apology on either side. There's been a little misapprehension, but it's all over now, and we are as much together again as we were when we set out on our honeymoon. Did it make you very miserable, Queenie?" He laid his hand on hers as he spoke, and Regina looked up at him with shining eyes.

"I've been so miserable, Alfred," she said, "that I almost wished I could die, and I think I should have died or put myself out of the road—or something—if I hadn't resolved to win you back at any cost."

"But you are satisfied now?"

"Satisfied! Oh, I'm so happy—so happy. I'll never let such a cloud come between us—next time I'll tell you the very first suspicion that crosses my mind."

"There isn't going to be a next time," said Alfred. "Poor old Chamberlain! he's come to the end of his tether now."

"Alfred," said Regina, after a long pause, "I

don't think I would waste any pity on 'poor old Chamberlain'; it seems to me that he has met with more than his deserts. If I have any feeling of pity for any of the three it is for the unfortunate Frenchwoman who trusted him where he was not fit to be trusted. These people in the hotel thought I was going to spring a mine upon you, I saw the landlady frown at the waiter when he said you were breakfasting together. I have always been a wide-minded woman, Alfred, and I am a very happy one this morning. Let us ask Madame Raumonier to join us to-night by way of celebrating the settlement of her affairs."

For a moment Alfred did not—indeed, could not—speak.

"Queenie," he said, "I have always admired you, I have always loved you, but this morning, at this moment, I feel that, compared with you in your benevolence, your real wide-mindedness, I am a mere worm."

"My noble Alfred!" said Regina, "my noble Alfred!"

THE END

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