A NAME TO CONJURE WITH

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A NOVEL

BY

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CHAPTER I

COOKE THE MILLIONAIRE

> When we fall from riches into poverty, it should not be cast as a reproach at old friends that they are not quite the same to us as they have been in the past. Their lives and actions are controlled by circumstances, just as are the lives and actions of those who may appear to be more gifted with memory.

MRS. LESSINGHAM was a plucky woman, there was no doubt about it. To those who knew her history, it seemed as if Fate had for years been playing football with her, and had thoroughly enjoyed the process, for her ups and downs had been many, and the stages of her not very long life had been as varied as the circumstances of any woman's life very well could be.

She had been born into the world, if not actually in the purple, at least in what nearly approached thereto. Her father was a man well known as Cooke, the millionaire, and there are many people still living who will bear me out when I say that some thirty years ago the name of Cooke, the millionaire, was but another name for that god of most English people—money. She had thus been reared and had passed the golden days of her youth in what, without any exaggeration, I may call an atmosphere of unbridled

luxury, and if, when she was eighteen, any one had asked her what was the most unlikely thing ever likely to happen to her, she might well have replied that she should ever know the actual want of money.

Yet at thirty years old Mrs. Lessingham was not only poor, she was poverty stricken, the wife of a prematurely broken-down man, the daughter of a ruined and bankrupt father, no longer capable of providing himself with even the bare necessaries of life, the mother of a family of small and delicate children. And there was also the prospect of her having another mouth to fill in the immediate future.

And this is how it had come about. When Mary Cooke was just two-and-twenty, something happened to her father. Some said that his head had suddenly given out, the wonderful head which had for years been the admiration as it had been the envy of all classes of business men. In talking over the failure which followed, most men said that poor Cooke had for years been using up his vital force at a rate which no human brain or constitution could possibly stand. They explained to each other and to the uninitiated, who have no knowledge of the extraordinary net-work of bills and cross-bills by means of which a gigantic business is carried on, that Cooke could, in the ordinary course of events, no more have failed than he could have flown; but of course, as no one else could possibly understand or arrange his bills, things could not go on, and stoppage was the inevitable result.

As a matter of fact, Cooke's head never did get right again, in spite of many predictions that in six months' time he would be as rich and as powerful as ever. He always said himself, that as soon as he was rested he meant to start again; but somehow he never got rested enough, and he never started again in business of any kind.

So time went on until Mrs. Cooke, who had ill borne the transplantation from her South Kensington palace to a

shabby lodging at Clapham, sank under her troubles and privations and died, which, under the circumstances, poor soul, was the best and wisest thing that she could do. The expense of the poor lady's illness and burial proved a heavy drain on the limited resources of those who were trying to help the ex-millionaire through the worst of his troubles, and after a very few months had gone by a very serious question arose as to how a roof was to be kept over poor Cooke's head, as to how food, be it ever so plain and humble, was to be found to put in poor Cooke's mouth?

And, mind you, I am not trying to cast the very smallest reflection upon those who had at first so liberally responded to the call, when the word went round that Cooke the bankrupt, once the millionaire, stood in need of help—no, not a bit of it. There are probably no men in all the world so truly and lavishly generous as business men—those whom we are accustomed to class in a lump as 'City men.' But as time goes on, and the months go by after a catastrophe has first startled a community, circumstances change for many, if not for most people. It had been an easy thing for those who were interested in 'poor Cooke,' as every one called him, to make what they called a little purse among themselves, 'just to keep the dear fellow going, you know, until things right themselves a bit,' and to prevent his realizing too bitterly that the world shows one face to a millionaire, and another of a very different expression to a pauper. But, later on, when three years had gone by, those who had been accustomed from time to time to gathering subscriptions with which to replenish the purse, found that the way was not as easy as it had been heretofore.

First, the good friend who had acted as secretary to the little fund was no longer with them, but had gone into that other world where, let us hope, there will be no more trouble as to the ways and means, no more funds, and no recipients of charity. Another of the old circle had likewise gone the

way of all flesh; a third was lying on a sick-bed, and was more than half suspected of being in Queer Street besides; while the affairs of the most generous one had passed into the bankruptcy court, and were, in a word, hopelessly involved.

It was with a rueful air that the friend who had undertaken the management of the purse, having more than doubled his own donation, went down to the little house at Clapham which had, after the death of Mrs. Cooke, been got together as a final refuge for the ex-millionaire, and broke to his daughter the sad truth that times were bad, friends less able though quite as willing as heretofore, that some were gone, and that the purse was not nearly as full as it had been at previous times of replenishing.

'My dear girl,' he said to her, 'we had all, every one of us, hoped that things would be different by this time with your poor father. We had all, every one of us, hoped and believed that, after a rest and a little time of freedom from anxiety and business worry, he would have come back among us, and that he would have carved out a new position for himself, and that he would have been independent of everybody.'

Mary Cooke shook her head.

'Mr. Allen,' she said sadly, 'my poor father will never be independent again. He is done for. There is no getting back from the state that he is in now. He knows those who come to see him, but that is all. He never asks a question, he accepts things just as they come, and I don't think he even realizes that his daily bread and the roof which covers him are the generous gifts of his old friends.'

'But what are we to do?' cried Mr. Allen, in very real distress. 'Oh, my dear girl, what a pity you did not marry when he was in a position to make a settlement upon you! What a pity you did not take one of the many chances you must have had!'

'I never had the chance of a man I could care for,' she said very simply, 'and although the last three years have been hard—*hard*, not bitter, for our friends have been too kind and too generous for me to feel that—I have never regretted not having married.'

'But what are you to do?' Mr. Allen cried, in real distress. 'I am twenty-five pounds short of what I brought you last time. You must live, you must eat.'

'I have not been quite idle during this last year,' she said, with modest pride. 'If it were not that my poor father is not fit to be left for so much as an hour at a time, I should have put my shoulder to the wheel long ago. But where would be the sense of my going into an office, or a shop, or getting teaching to earn only as much as I should have to pay some one for looking after him during my absence? I have felt all along that I must be doing, that I must be helping in some way, but the difficulty was in what way could it be which would enable me to stay at home and work under our own roof. I tried sewing, but I am no good at that'—with a sad smile. 'And then I answered advertisements; but I did not find any of them the very smallest good. And then it occurred to me one day that possibly I might make a little by literature—that I might write little simple stories such as young people and children would care to read, and—and—well, I have had some success, enough to make me keep on in the hope that some day I may even earn two or three hundred a year by my pen.'

The millionaire's old friend got up and walked to the window.

'My dear girl,' he said. Then he looked out of the window again, trying, if the truth be told, to hide from her the fact that her words had filled him with horror. To think that the daughter of 'poor Cooke,' who in his day had thought nothing of turning over hundreds of thousands

in the course of a few hours, should be hoping and praying for a success which would enable her some day to make two or even three hundred a year. At last, however, he pulled himself together and went back to his chair again. 'My dear girl,' he said kindly, 'you have your father's old grit in you. God bless you, my dear, and keep on, and when you've got a novel ready to bring out, come to me and I'll finance it for you. There, that's a bargain—isn't it? In the mean time I will do all that I can for my dear old friend and will stand by you as long as I live. I like to see the plucky way in which you've faced everything; yes, that I do. It's your father's old spirit. May it bring you good luck, my dear, and if John Allen can help to do it, he will right willingly. There's my hand on it.'

'You are too good, Mr. Allen,' said Mary, her face breaking into a charming smile. 'But don't forget that I am no such wonderful creature, and that I may get on no further than I am now.'

'Nonsense, nonsense; you'll do—you've got the right stuff in you. And remember, when the time comes for bringing out that novel, you come to me.'

'Thank you a thousand times,' she said. 'But that will not be yet awhile. I have only done some short stories for magazines as yet.'

'Well, well, you must learn to crawl before you can run, of course,' said Mr. Allen, kindly. 'I have never believed in reputations made without trouble or work in a moment. They are like a bubble, and apt to burst like one. Then, my dear girl, I will give you the money, and then I'll go and see your poor father.'

She took the notes he handed to her with simple gratitude and thanks, and, having locked them away in her little writing-table, she led him into the small dining-room where her father habitually sat at the window watching the few

passers-by who went up or down the dull suburban road. He did not turn his head as the door opened, nor did he perceive his old friend until his daughter drew his attention to the fact of his presence.

'Mr. Allen has come to see you, dear father,' she said gently.

'Ah, Allen, my dear old friend, is that you?' the ex-millionaire exclaimed in pleased accents. 'And how are you? How is business going? Anything fresh in the City? Dear, dear, I don't know when I shall get back again. Everything must be going to rack and ruin.'

'Not at all—not at all. The most important thing is to get your health re-established,' replied his friend, falling in with the poor broken old man's humour. 'Rest a little longer, my dear old friend, and we shall soon have you back among us as strong and as energetic as ever.'

'Yes, yes; I am only resting for a time. A man of my stamp could never stay idle, could he? I only want rest—rest. Mary, who is that coming down the road?'

'I don't quite know, dear,' Mary replied. 'I think it is the young man at No. 10.'

'Yes, yes; the young man at No. 10. I take an interest in him. I think he will do well. I shall offer him a berth when I am back at work again. A good son to his mother. I always like to encourage a young man who is a good son to his mother. Ah, we never have but one mother—we ought to take care of her. I take great interest in the young man at No. 10, for that reason.'

So he rambled on, his conversation growing no more lucid or interesting. In vain did his old friend remind him that if he took interest in the young man at No. 10 because he was a good son to his mother, he should take a greater interest in Mary, because she had proved herself to be such a very excellent daughter.

'Yes, yes; I'm saying nothing against Mary,' he replied

testily, 'nothing at all. I never complain of Mary. Who said that I did?'

In the end Mr. Allen went out of the little shabby room shaking his head.

'My dear girl,' he said gloomily, 'he will never do an hour's work again as long as he lives. His brain is gone—quite gone.'

'I have known it all along,' said Mary, simply. 'It is that, Mr. Allen, which has spurred me on to try to do something for myself and him.'

CHAPTER II

COOKE'S DAUGHTER

> One of the most wonderful things in human nature is the way in which a woman will endure misfortune, privation, and poverty, for the sake of those she loves. Often she does more than endure—she glories in her endurance.

TEN minutes later, Mr. Allen went down the dull suburban road on his way back to the nearest cab-stand. He was feeling very sad, for surely no sadder sight can present itself to a man of affairs who is himself getting past the meridian of life, than to see a colleague who has had the misfortune to die first a-top. He mused as he drove back to town on the great and terrible change which had come over the once alert and powerful Cooke since the fatal day when his head had given out under the strain which he had put upon it. How much better it would have been, his thoughts ran, if poor, dear old Cooke had been content to withdraw from business life, when he could honourably have done so with a comfortable income of five or six thousand a year! For ten years before the last great pressure—the period which followed on the great Rothheim smash, which had broke more firms than any failure of modern times—he had been in a position to have done this; but his ambition had been to make his only child the richest heiress in England, and to marry her to—well, if not a duke, at least very high in the social scale. And all his ambitions had ended in the

little house at Clapham, and the girl who was destined to marry a peer had to earn her father's living by her pen. What a mockery! Of course it was true that Mary Cooke had not yet found herself either under the full need, or in a position, to earn the whole of her father's living, yet, in the not very distant future, that was what she might have to face. What a pity it all was—what a pity! And then his thoughts ran on the folly of crying for the moon. Mary Cooke was a charming girl, brave and steadfast, not perhaps very much to look at, but there was something about her that was, after all, better than mere looks. He did not say that Mary Cooke would not have graced a high position in life, not at all; but surely a little less ambition would have landed her in a safer and better place in the world, than ambition had done. Then he remembered that she herself had said that she had not taken one of the chances she had had, because she had not been asked by a man whom she could love. Silly romantic girl, and romance had landed her high and dry upon the desert shores of Clapham. Silly romantic little fool! And yet, what a good little fool she was, and how full of courage, and how uncomplaining of the lot, which must be full of bitterness and misery to her during every minute that she lived! Well, at all events, if the child should keep on at her novel-writing, and should want to bring out a regular full-blown book, he would be as good as his word, he would give it a good start. Masterman, the author of 'Ripe Cherries,' would act as his guide, philosopher, and friend, and he would spare neither trouble nor expense to bring it out in a first-class style, and let the brave young author have every chance of making a good thing by her efforts.

Meantime, Mary Cooke was alone in the sitting-room of the little house at Clapham, thinking out her plans for the immediate future. She, poor girl, was indulging in no fond dreams of future greatness. Her father had gone to sleep

on the couch in the dining-room, worn out by the unwonted excitement of his old friend's visit, and Mary knew that he would not stir for at least an hour and a half. So she had a quiet time, during which she could think out what she could do for the best to make their scanty hoard spread out over the next three months. She had hoped, as she had something beforehand of her own, that she would be able to launch out a little, to buy a few extra luxuries for her invalid, to indulge herself in one or two feminine fripperies, which poverty had not completely blinded her to the joy of possessing. Well, it could not be. True, her gloves were so shabby that she was wearing a muff in May, so as to hide their age and condition. Her boots were on their last legs or soles, and her hat—but there, she must not get thinking of her hat, or she would never get through the next few months at all. She shut the lid of her desk with a sigh, and turned the key with a strong thrill of compunction shooting through her heart. After all, her father's old friends had stood by him splendidly. They had never let him feel the sting of real poverty. They had kept a roof over his head, and they had put daily bread in his mouth, and he and she had never been made to feel the pain of alms-taking. Help had always been given as if, after a little while, everything would come all right, and every penny would be paid back again; and never, until this very day, had Mr. Allen, or any of the others who came to see their old comrade from time to time, ever hinted that his collapse had no possible end but one.

She sat there by the little desk, and thought of what Mr. Allen had said about her not having taken one of the many offers that had been made to the daughter of Cooke, the millionaire. And she had spoken truly when she had said that she had never regretted that part of her past. She did not mind poverty so much—not at all for herself. It mattered little whether her hat was shabby; her boots, to

use her old north-country nurse's favourite simile, at their last prayers; it mattered less whether she had gloves to cover her hands or not. At least, not as compared with the greater wretchedness of being tied to a man whom she did not love, especially when there was—when there was somebody whom she did.

So the truth is out at last. It was that no man whom she could love had asked her in marriage during the time that she had ranked as her father's heiress, it was perfectly true. Yet there had been one, a mere nobody in their world of money, who had stood afar off, and had not ventured so much as to lift up his eyes unto heaven—and yet—and yet—had he done so, rich or poor, Mary Cooke would right willingly have laid her hand in his for all time. He had been one of the first to seek them out when the great crash had fallen upon them.

'I'm only a poor journalist,' he said to her. 'And you may think little or nothing of me, you may think it's like my—my—my cheek to come to you now; but if I can serve you, let me do it.'

Mary Cooke looked at him fixedly. As yet, she had not in any way felt the sting of poverty; it was, so far, only a name to her, and rather a romantic one at that, so she was in no way flurried or upset by his words.

'Mr. Lessingham,' she said, her blue eyes seeking his straight, 'what made you come to me? What——'

One look at her was enough for him.

'Oh, my darling,' he cried, 'if I could only bear this burden for you, if——'

'You love me!' she exclaimed, in a strange, loud tone.

'With all my heart, with all my soul,' he replied. 'I did not dare to speak when you were so rich, but I——'

'Then,' she said, holding her head up very proudly, and putting her two hands out to him, 'then, if the loss of our

money made you speak, I am glad, right glad, that we have lost it.'

It was in this wise that Mary Cooke, once the heiress of the millionaire and destined to marry into the Peerage, became betrothed to Hugh Lessingham, the poor journalist. It was a union of hearts, of souls, of tastes, of aims, and ambitions; it was a meeting of twin natures, the coming together of two halves, which would in fulness of time become one perfect whole. From that moment they were both absolutely, almost deliriously happy. Their prospects were next door to *nil*, their hopes were all in the dim and distant future, their stock of patience both knew full well must needs be large. For they had before them no less than years of waiting, and they knew that, so long as the ex-millionaire should live, they would probably not be able to think of marriage. And yet they were happy. It was for this reason that Mary Cooke was able bravely to defy time and change; it was for this reason that she never looked back with regret to those bygone days of wealth and luxury, or pined for the palace which had once been her home, for the servants who had waited upon her, for the horses that she had ridden and driven, for the pride of place and power which had once been hers.

Her engagement to Hugh Lessingham was never announced, for there was no one to whom such news would be welcome, and Mary shrank from receiving condolences on what any of her old friends might consider her imbecility. Of the girls whom she had known in her younger days, each had uttered the same cry as her father's old friend, Mr. Allen, had done, when he said that it was a pity she had not taken one of the many chances of marriage she must have had as the millionaire's heiress, and every one of these Mary knew would regard with eyes of the most profound pity, and would ever after look upon her as a fool who did not know when she was well off. And being, in

spite of her poverty and her losses, in spite of her troubles and anxieties, perfectly assured and happy in the main lines of her life, Mary did not feel like running the risk of drawing down unnecessary sympathy upon herself. She never even told her father, for he, poor man, was in no condition to take in new ideas, and the knowledge that his only child was determined to follow a life which must be one of struggle and endeavour from first to last, might have made his poor clouded brain yet more confused and distressed than it already was. So she kept her own counsel from all the world, and went first to the shabby lodging, and then to the tiny Clapham house without let or hindrance, the only person who ever knew the secret between them being the poor mother, who had proved herself but as a frail reed before the wind, and whose weak hold upon life did not long stand up against the sea of steady misfortune which had overtaken the Cooke family.

At first Hugh Lessingham used to fret and rage that he could not make sufficient headway in his profession to enable him to provide for a wife without any longer waiting. Over and over again he called himself the hardest of names that he had been so foolish as to follow his own way in life, rather than going on the lines which his father had planned for him.

'If I had done as my dear old dad wished and had gone into the Church,' he said over and over again, 'I should have been holding a comfortable living now, and I should have been able to give you a charming home, with a fair income to keep it up with. Your poor father could have ended his days in peace, and who knows but what country air and scenery would have made him his own man again?'

'Dear Hugh, you would never have known me at all in that case,' she said, smiling at him. 'What is is best. Try to think so, and you will make me braver. Never think on

the past—it does not pay, dear, not for anybody. If we had all done just differently to what we have done, we should all be just different people to what we are. It would not be the same at all.'

'I cannot help thinking of it,' he declared vexedly. 'I was so headstrong, so determined, and I was so cocksure that I knew better what was best for me than my father did. But, you see, every word he said then to me has come just true. "My dear boy," he said, "Heaven forbid that I should force you or any of my children in any way as to the line you should follow in life. Life is hard enough for all of us, and I have always believed in boys, ay, and girls too, having as free a hand as is possible. It seems a pity that a good living should go begging; but if you definitely refuse it, I shall offer it to one of your uncle Bob's lads. Dick wants to be a parson, and this will be a godsend to him. Only you will remember, Hugh, that when I have finished you off at Oxford, I shall be able to do little or nothing more for you."

'"I can always earn my own living, sir,"' I said, like the young ass I was then. And so we left it. I came to London and took up journalism—took it up,' he cried, with a bitter laugh. 'I ought to have said that I tried my hand at journalism, and that I made about as bad a fist at it as ever a fool did in this world. For three years I starved on it, when all the while my people thought I was getting on splendidly, and that I was quite a great man in my own way. My God, when I think of the lies I actually told, and the others, thousands of them, that I implied, I can only hope He will forgive me hereafter, and that they may all be entered in the Big Book under the heading of "Pious Frauds."'

'I think they are forgiven long since, and that your father, both your own father and your Heavenly One, understand and honour you for your struggles with fate,' said Mary, softly.

It was after this, and by reason of her continual association with him, that the idea came one day to Mary that she too might win something in the path of literature. I cannot say that she then thought of such a possibility as being likely to lead to any great things, that she had any high-flown ideas about fame and laurel-wreaths, not at all; but she honestly thought that she might, by dint of industriously keeping her pen and her fancy at work, be able to do a little towards filling the two empty purses which would have to be filled before she and Hugh could dare to dream of being married. In extreme diffidence she broached the notion to him, and he at once bade her try what stuff she had in her, promising that when she had anything to sell, he would do his best to place her manuscript. Thus encouraged, she set to work and wrote a short story, no great thing of a story, though the style was fresh and the theme, if well worn, was tenderly treated. In fear and trembling she gave it to her sweetheart and waited for the result.

Of course, as Lessingham was known to a large number of men on the press as a journalist and a man who might arrive at any moment, the little story was read with more attention and greater celerity than would have been the case had Mary sent it herself to any magazine. After a very short time, though it seemed long to her, he one day brought her a proof, and in due course she received a cheque for two guineas.

Mary was almost wild with delight. From that modest cheque she built up such castles in the air as all her father's thousands in the days of his opulence had never enabled her to do. What would she not accomplish—even an income of two or three hundred a year! Yet when she came to spending every spare moment that she had at her desk turning out short stories one after another, she found that there is no royal road to success in the world of letters.

After a time Hugh Lessingham seemed to have placed her stories in every opening that he knew of. She had made a little money, but there she seemed to stand still. And so, by the time that Mr. Allen went down to Clapham with the news that he had less for her than he had ever had before, Mary had given up building castles in the bright air of literature, and then had no greater ambition than that one day she might make a small regular income by her pen.

CHAPTER III

ON THE STAFF OF THE 'SPOKESMAN'

> The good and ill of life is always comparative. To some of us the prospect of existing on an income of three or four hundred a year would seem like poverty of the deepest dye; to others the chance of such an amount coming in yearly would open out prospects of the most unalloyed delight.

It was only a few days after this that Hugh Lessingham went to Cedar Avenue—for such was the name of the dull little road in which the Cookes lived—and burst into Mary's presence, having about him all the marks of uncontrollable excitement.

'Mary, Mary, my love, my own darling! I've such news for you. Guess—but no, I won't torture you by keeping you in suspense. My dearest, the time of waiting is all over. I've got a regular appointment. We can be married as soon as ever you will."

She turned deathly white with the shock of the news.

'An appointment, Hugh?' she cried; and even to herself her voice sounded as faint and far away as a voice heard from the other side of a mountain. 'What sort of an appointment?'

'On the staff of the *Spokesman*,' he cried exultantly. 'Five pounds a week, and all manner of fees beside! Only think of it, five pounds a week regular income! Mary, I

nearly collapsed when old Elliott told me—at least when he offered me the post.'

'And what did you say? Did you tell him anything?' she asked.

'Not a word. I pulled myself together, and tried to look as if my whole life wasn't hanging in the balance, and I told him that I would do my best, as I had always done in the past. And then we had a drink on it, and parted the best of friends.'

'Five pounds a week,' she said in a musing tone; 'it's not——'

'It's not the money—that's a mere nothing,' Lessingham cried. 'Any journalist can make that—it's a mere flea-bite. But it's the position—the leading to other things. Nobody but a fool would refuse it. It's such a pull for a journalist to be on the regular staff of the *Spokesman*. Only picked men ever get there, and old Elliott makes it his boast that he never takes on a man who is not a public schoolman, a 'Varsity man, and a gentleman.'

'And you are all these,' said Mary, looking at him with fond, proud eyes; 'and you are a brilliant journalist, and—and——'

'And what?' he asked; for she hesitated, and looked almost shyly at him.

'And you are my sweetheart,' she said, with an adorable expression.

Lessingham caught her to him with a passionate cry.

'Oh, my love, my love, you are that, God knows—the very light of my eyes, and the joy and hope of my life! Only I am afraid that will never avail you anything, either with the world or yourself. I'm a poor sort of a bargain for you to pick up; and yet when I have aught to lay at your feet, it is there.'

'I don't like to hear you say that,' she said quite solemnly. 'I am more proud of you this minute than I

ever thought I could be of any living thing. If you were set close all over, like a coat of chain-armour, with gold and diamonds, I should not be more proud of you or value you half as much as I do now. Never again say anything in disparagement of yourself; you are all the world to me.'

He held her close to him.

'So long as I am that,' he declared, 'and so long as we have bread to put into our mouths, I am and shall be content.'

So, poor fools! they talked on in their paradise, and heaven and earth seemed to them to be one great blaze of glory. Love is a wonderful thing, a great transformer, a mighty alchemist who changes all that he touches to pure gold. Sometimes, though, Love, the Alchemist, is given to playing tricks on those who are his most earnest worshippers. He throws a subtle powder in their eyes, and blinds them to the truth, making them believe that he has used his golden wand, when the baton which he holds in his hand is only one of tinsel. And by-and-by they awake to the stern reality of the truth, and know that the love they thought so real is no more than worthless imitation. And then they cry, 'Ichabod! Ichabod!'

How happy they were, these two! Long, long they sat talking over their plans—the plans they had discussed in the past at least a thousand times. But now that the time was nigh at hand, all the plans of the past seemed futile and foolish, and they must needs talk over a fresh act, for there was no fancy about these—they were destined to be carried into effect almost immediately.

They naturally did not propose to wait very long. They had waited so patiently and so bravely that now every moment seemed like a year.

'We will be married at once; we won't wait to set our house in order,' he said.

She looked at him.

'Hugh,' she said, 'you know that I can never leave my father.'

'Why should you think of it?' he asked quietly, so quietly that the words came as balm to her heart. 'He is no more fit to be alone than he has been all along.'

'But you said something about setting our house in order,' she replied, 'and I thought for a minute that you meant me to go away from Cedar Avenue——'

'Don't you think it would be better?' he said. 'We shall want a little more room, for I must have a den of my own, and you must have a larger drawing-room than this. You see, you are a woman of letters now, and your work must be considered as well as mine.'

She almost shrieked aloud in her depreciation of his words.

'Hugh! Hugh!' she cried, 'you make me feel ashamed of my poor little efforts when you take them so seriously. As if I should ever have got a line taken or paid for without you to push it!'

'Nonsense! Don't let yourself think that,' he replied quickly. 'In the world of letters there is very little that goes by favour—a real success, never, never. Those stories of yours that I placed were sold on their merits pure and simple. And even if they had done so—if you can go on writing them, and I can go on selling them, it would be, as we are not exactly in affluent circumstances, more than foolish to stop writing them or selling them, because it is proved two heads are better than one. What I want you to feel is this, dearest. It is no use our waiting apart while we find ourselves a house exactly suited to our requirements. Let us get married at once, and look out at our leisure, so that we may get exactly what we want. Of course, you will have to give a quarter's notice here; but I am not going to wait three months for my wife—I have waited three years too long already.'

So she consented. She broke the news to her father,

and for once he seemed to have gone back to his own self again.

'It is not the marriage that I hoped for you,' he said; 'but now that circumstances have changed so much, it is better that you should be married to a man like Lessingham rather than go struggling on alone, for a woman is terribly handicapped in the battle of life. I really don't know, Mary, how you have managed so long to do as well as you have done, and without troubling me at all. But when I get back to work again, I will make it up to you, my darling. Your old father will never forget what a brave girl his daughter has been, nor that a rising young fellow wooed and won her when she had not a penny to her dot.'

'You must not forget Mr. Allen, dear father,' said Mary. 'He has been so kind, so good, so considerate.'

'Ah yes, Allen's a very good fellow. I did him more than one good turn in the past, and City men never forget, my dear—they never forget. I'm glad Allen has always stood by you, and given you advice when you wanted it. It's so hard for a woman to manage money affairs without a man's head to guide her sometimes—not that I would cast the very smallest reflection on you, my darling—not for one moment.'

'Mr. Allen has done much more than advise and guide me,' Mary began. She thought that now she would have a chance of making her father fully understand all that his old friends had done for him, and she drew still nearer to him, and looked at him eagerly, to make sure that he was following her words. The old man's attention had, however, been attracted to something in the road.

'There is the young man from No. 10,' he said eagerly. 'I take great interest in the young man, Mary. I should like you to have married him. Did you tell me just now that you were going to marry him, or did I dream it?'

'Father dear, I don't even know the young man at

No. 10,' Mary said gently. 'I am going to marry Hugh Lessingham.'

'Hugh Lessingham? Ah yes, yes—I forgot. A nice pleasant young fellow, and a gentleman; though I doubt if he will ever make his way in the world. So you are going to be married? Dear, dear! and to think it was only yesterday that you were toddling about, tumbling down every minute!'

His eyes wandered to the window again, and Mary gave a sigh, for she realized that it was all but useless to explain her engagement or anything else to him. The brain was clouded, and never again would he be able to take an intelligent interest either in her affairs or even his own. And he had been cherishing some idea of bringing about a marriage between her and the young man at No. 10; and that was the meaning of the efforts which he had made from time to time to attract him, and to get up an acquaintance with him. She smiled tenderly as the idea crossed her mind, for it told her that her poor father had—in spite of his brain being dazed and clouded so that he was, to all intents and purposes, a mere child, with scarcely a child's power of will and energy—yet been troubled as to her whom he had been used to call 'his little girl.' And the thought was a comfort to her.

A couple of days later she went into the City and sought Mr. Allen in his office.

'I hope your father is not ill,' he exclaimed, as she was shown into his presence.

'No, my father is as well as usual; in fact, he is just the same. There is never any change, except that he does not seem to grasp events quite as clearly as he did,' Mary replied. 'No, Mr. Allen, I did not come about my father, but about myself. I wanted to tell you, before it was known to any one outside the house, I am going to be married.'

'Are you really? Well, that's good hearing, my dear girl. I offer you my best congratulations,' Mr. Allen cried warmly. 'I am indeed glad. My dear girl, I have not heard of anything to give me so much pleasure for many a day. And who is the gentleman?'

'You know him,' said Mary. 'Indeed, I feel sure you have met him at Cedar Avenue more than once. His name is Hugh Lessingham.'

'Lessingham—the journalist? Oh yes; I know him. I have met him both at your house and elsewhere. So that was why you—oh, I begin to see light!'

Mary blushed a beautiful rosy red.

'He—that is—I mean that we have been engaged ever so long, since just after my father was first stricken. But we said nothing, because we were both such paupers that it seemed too silly for us to even be thinking of getting married,' she said rather confusedly. 'But now he has been offered a regular post on the staff of the *Spokesman*, and the way is clear.' She could not help the thrill of pride which ran through her tones as she proclaimed the fact of her lover's promotion.

Mr. Allen, who was a City man immersed in affairs of business pure and simple, received the announcement with a calmness which came as a kind of a shock to the girl. He thought in his heart of hearts that it was a thousand pities that the poor girl had not had the good fortune to pick up some business man with a good balance at the bank, for, like many other men dealing in large commercial lines, he held but a poor opinion of journalists, and privately thought them a beggarly lot—necessary evils to be endured with the best grace possible, but not to be thought of for a moment as possible factors to a marriage.

'And when is it to be? Will your poor father be able to go to give you away and all that kind of thing?' he asked. Because, you know, my dear girl, if I can

be of the very smallest use to you, you have only to command me.'

'If you would be so very kind as to give me away,' said Mary, 'I should be most grateful. I don't think my father can do it; he is so uncertain. And you have been so good to us both that I am sure that you have the best right of any one to take his place.'

So they arranged it. The wedding was fixed for the first day of the approaching month, and the pair arranged to take a very brief holiday, the old cook, who had lived for years in charge of the millionaire's kitchen, being fortunately able to take Mary's place for a few days, so that she might have no anxiety as to her father's welfare. And thus the two laid their modest plans; and the girl who was to have married a duke went out from the tiny Clapham house one fine morning, and, without fuss or the smallest attempt at show, became the wife of Hugh Lessingham, the journalist.

CHAPTER IV

WEDDED

> Why is it that it is given to us poor mortals, when we look ahead, only to see the brightness, and seldom to see the rocks which lie just below the surface?

In after-life Mary Lessingham often looked back upon the first year of her married life as being the very happiest period of her whole existence. To many young wives it is not the happiest time that they know; the cares of housekeeping press heavily upon them, the claims of relations are many, and the trials caused by them are often no small part of a young wife's troubles. And in these respects Mary Lessingham came off very easily. In household management she was by force of circumstances an adept, and understood thoroughly how to make every penny go to the uttermost; of relations she had but few to think of—no near ones of her own, excepting her father, who, poor man! did not count for much, excepting as an ever-present anxiety and care. As for Lessingham's kith and kin, they gave the newly married pair a very wide berth, thinking them a foolhardy young couple, who would be best left strictly to their own devices. For this, Mary, and Lessingham also, were not at all sorry. They knew from the very outset that life could not be to them a bed of roses, but a passage in which real hard work would be the most

prominent characteristic, and, as they put it plainly to each other, they had no time for much family intercourse; so that the less they saw of each other's relations the better.

As soon as they could arrange to do so, they left the little house in Cedar Avenue, and took up their abode in a domicile of a larger size at West Kensington. And it was then that the old woman who had been cook so long in the South Kensington palace made them a proposal.

'Don't you think, Miss Mary—at least, I should say Mrs. Lessingham now — ma'am——' She broke off in confusion.

'It does not in the least matter, Nannie,' said Mary, laughing; 'you have known me so many years as "Miss Mary" that it must be as hard to you to say my new name as it would be to me to call you Mrs. Tood. But what were you going to say?'

'Well, miss—I mean ma'am—I was going to make a proposal to you. Don't you think you had better let me come back to you?'

'Oh, Nannie, I wish I could!' Mary cried, with a sudden rush of colour to her face. 'But we cannot possibly afford a cook like you. I only wish we could.'

'Well now,' said the old woman sensibly, 'it's not so much a case of affording, nor altogether of obliging anybody but myself. It's true, ma'am, that I've had my fifty pounds a year ever since we parted, just as poor master always gave me. But I'm not what I was, and, to tell you the truth, ma'am, I don't feel myself capable of managing a big kitchen as I used to do. Of course if poor master had kept his health'—for that was the polite fiction which obtained in the household—'it would have been very different. I knew master's ways, and the other servants knew mine; and if I'd needed extra help, I could have had it without more fuss than the trouble of asking for it. But nowadays I feel that a dinner of twenty-four weighs on my

mind just horrid; and if people pays their cook fifty pounds a year, they naturally expect to have her services handy at all times. And so, Miss Mary, I don't think I shall take another heavy place; and yet I'm not what you could call dead-old—in some ways I'm as good a woman as ever I was. I've really enough to live on, one way and another, but a life of idleness would not suit me at all. So, my dear Miss Mary, what if you were to take pity on me and let me end my days with you? I could do very well with a bit of a girl under me; the bit of cooking would be but child's play, and I could keep poor master company at any time that you and Mr. Lessingham was out. Now, Miss Mary, don't you think it would work?'

Mary drew a long breath. 'Well, of course, Nannie, it would be a lovely arrangement for me, and you would be as completely mistress of the situation as ever you were in the old days. But what about wages?'

'Oh, as to that, give me just what you would give to an ordinary girl, and I shall be contented with it.'

'But I told the registry-office people only yesterday that I could not give more than fifteen pounds a year for the kitchen servant,' Mary cried. 'Nannie, think of the difference between fifteen pounds a year and fifty!'

'Oh yes; but think of the difference in the work,' the old woman replied. 'Half my time I shall be helping poor master to look out of the window.'

Eventually the matter was fully arranged between them, and old Nannie became mistress of the kitchen in West Kensington, with a young person of sixteen, whose knowledge of most things was *nil*, as her sole *aide de camp;* and her old master was indulged in dinners such as he had been used to enjoy in the old days, when his likes and dislikes had been her sole thought and care.

It was then, for the first time since her father's misfortune had come upon him, that Mary Lessingham began to really

enjoy the very fact of living. With the old woman always at hand, she was much more free than she had been at any time since her mother's death, and was therefore able to go about with her husband to such festivities as came in their way—to 'first nights,' when he could get two tickets, to private views and artistic reunions, such as both their souls loved. They were supremely happy, these two, going from place to place in the humble 'bus, and trudging cheerfully to the end of the street to catch it.

Sometimes it seemed to Lessingham as if his wife must now and again yearn for the luxuries in which she had been reared; but if ever he put the question to her, she always declared, and with evident truthfulness, that she never gave such things a thought, and that she would not change her lot with that of any other woman in the world.

'To tell you the real truth, Hugh,' she said one day, when they had walked rather a long way without finding a 'bus in which there was room for two, 'I used to feel oppressed sometimes by all the pomp we went in for at Mellingham Gardens. One could not move without treading on a servant, and I was expected to have a maid trailing after me, or, what was worse, a footman, if I ventured out on foot; and the dinners were so long and so dull, and there was such a fuss about everything we did, that I used to feel that I should certainly do something to break out of bounds; and if a change had not come when it did, I believe that I should have done some very desperate deed. Yes, I do indeed.'

He pressed the arm that rested on his more closely to his side. 'My poor darling, you were in an atmosphere that cramped you. I know how horrible it is. But all the same, dearest, it would have been quite possible to live a Bohemian life and yet keep a brougham.'

'We'll have one some day,' she declared stoutly; 'and meantime the 'bus does us very well.'

And yet it was not very long before the useful vehicle, the gondola of the London streets, began to fail her, for there was a prospect of a little bird in the nest, and Mary was not so strong as she might have been. And as autumn came on, and there was less need to go townwards, Mary went out less and less, and occupied herself by much stitching of tiny garments, and by writing, whenever the house was quiet and Hugh safely out of the way.

Probably never did any aspiring young author work for fame so unobtrusively and with such utter abnegation of self as Mary Lessingham. Her creed held that her husband was the main bread-winner, and that he must find his home a real home. She thought so little of her work that she only regarded it as a means of making a little extra pocket-money—a means to provide her own clothes without troubling her husband to find the money therefore. She attempted nothing ambitious; but having got accepted on a popular family journal as a writer of whose work they could use as much as she could write, provided that she wrote up—or I should more truly say down—to their peculiarly domestic style, she did not often tell Lessingham more than that the *L.P.*, as they always called the periodical between themselves, had taken a couple more stories.

'Really,' he said to her one day, 'you never told me that you had anything out. What sort of a story is it?'

'Oh,' she replied with extreme indifference, 'I don't think it's up to much. There's no artistic satisfaction in writing for the dear old *L.P.* So much beauty, very young and very unversed in the ways of the world; so much description of dress, usually of the most uncomfortable kind; a little mild spooning; and a few mistakes which a child of two would see through and put right in five minutes; a heartbroken thing of sixteen sitting alone in the firelight singing—

"Wad ye come back to me,
Dugless—Dugless,
In the old likeness that I knew,
I would be sae happy, sae blissful, Dugless—
Dugless, Dugless, tender and true."

And while she is singing of her "Dugless, tender and true," with a real Heiland accent, the live one comes back and catches her, and—oh, but you know all about it. The *L. P.* pays twelve pounds for a story twenty thousand words long, and pays it down on the nail; and, on my word, it is just as much as it's worth.'

He looked at her tenderly.

'My dear girl,' he said, 'you ought to get out of that ruck and turn your mind to better things. It's all very well talking about the money being safe, and being paid down on the nail, but that is not everything. You know that you can do good work, and it's wicked to neglect your talent.'

'By-and-by,' she cried, with a laugh; 'I'm serving my apprenticeship as yet. Remember, I have not gone through a regular training as you have; I am learning my profession; and I believe in working one's way up from the bottom.'

'To the very top,' he said, with a smile of indescribable tenderness.

'Ah, I shall never be there,' she cried, but the blood flushed up to her face at the very thought of it.

So she kept on still writing innocuous love-stories for the journal for people, which formed the mainstay of her personal income; and the days crept on until there was a small babe sleeping beside her, a wee velvet-headed thing, with her own eyes looking out of Lessingham's face, a feeble little life in which Mary Lessingham was wrapt up as only a mother can be. And as the days went over, and Mary got about the house again, it was no use their trying to blind their eyes to the fact that Baby was as frail as a child very well could be to be kept alive, and that only by the

closest care and hourly attention could they hope to rear her. After this, Mary gave up all the pleasant expeditions which she had found so delightful, and such functions as private views and first nights saw her no more. Just at first Lessingham fumed and worried a good deal that he could not afford a thoroughly experienced nurse to take charge of the child; but that was manifestly impossible, as their resources were strained to the uttermost by the needs of Mr. Cooke, who daily grew more and more dependent on the good offices of those around him. And so he got into a way of going about alone, and Mary stayed at home and tried to feel that her duty was quite the same satisfaction to her as her pleasure. Not that she grudged anything of the care and attention that she bestowed on the baby at this time, or was foolish enough to try, or even to wish, to keep Lessingham away from the haunts of men because it was not possible for her to go with him. Too well she knew that all advancement in his profession would come from his being seen here, there, and everywhere; that it was, in fact, all-important that he should show at all places where journalists do congregate. But, of a truth, it was very dull for her to be left night after night alone, for the old man was now no company for any one, and, indeed, invariably went to bed about eight o'clock.

Still, the child's life was hanging in the balance, and the long hours of loneliness kept Mary at her literary work as she could hardly have been kept under any other circumstances; so she schooled herself not to repine, but to forge through until the happy day should come when the little Coralie should be as strong as any ordinary child, and her mother would be able to go out with her husband as she had been used to do.

And about this time, that is when little Coralie was about nine months' old, and was not likely to be the only child, Mary Lessingham began to feel that there was something

more in her than was necessary for a favourite author in the *L.P.* In following this feeling she wrote four or five short stories of such power that Lessingham was filled with enthusiasm when he read them, and predicted that the day was not very far distant when she would be one of the most brilliant stars of the literary firmament. These stories he placed in good magazines, and brought her the welcome news that he could place as many more as she could find time to write. But Mary did not find that her ideas were as ready as she could have wished. She could always write such stuff as was welcome in the *L.P.*, although such work bored her to extinction and was only a means to an end. She was also of great service to Lessingham in certain parts of his work, taking off his hands all the book reviewing and a good deal of paragraph writing, for which he merely provided her with the rough notes.

Then came the birth of a second child, a boy this time, and in physique, unfortunately, a match for his sister. So while little Coralie was daily outgrowing the delicacy with which she had been born, the new baby's hold upon life was so frail that Mary had to go through the same system all over again, and all idea of going into any kind of society was as impossible as it had been since the birth of her first child. It is true that Lessingham was going steadily ahead, and was making a very respectable income—an income which would have been ample for themselves, but which, when saddled with the care of Mary's father and weighted with two delicate babies, was sadly insufficient, and left no margin either for saving or for any indulgencies.

By this time Mr. Cooke was almost wholly helpless. With Mary's marriage, his City friends had, naturally enough, ceased to provide him with the means of living, although one or two of them came duly and truly to visit him, and would often send him little presents of game, salmon, or of fruit. By her attention to him, the time of

Nannie was almost entirely taken up, and Mary found it absolutely necessary to start a nurse to help her with her babies. She was herself still a complete slave to her children, but the advent of the nurse, who was a good-natured and willing girl, made it possible for her to be always free to be with Lessingham when he was at home. That, of course, was not very often. The greater part of his work was done at night, and as he always walked home, unless the night was very bad, he usually reached West Kensington in the small hours of the morning.

In the early days of their marriage Lessingham had been used to press Mary not to sit up for him, but as time passed, and she was seldom or never able to go out with him, he would have seen little of her if she had not so arranged her work as to be always awaiting him when her night's work was done. One of her rules was that she had always ready some light supper dish, such as could be eaten with impunity at that time; and as she had herself been working till she was weary, and had then taken a rest of a sofa until the time for his arrival, she was equally ready to share it and to enjoy it. It was, in truth, the brightest and most pleasant time of the twenty-four hours, and neither of them would have missed it on any account. They always had a cup of tea then, such tea as they both declared they never tasted at any other time, and then they would sit by the fire, while Lessingham smoked a last pipe, and would talk over all the doings of the day.

Still, it was a hard life for both—a life of many anxieties, of continual suppression of self, of unending endeavour. And as the expenses grew—and with an increasing family it is impossible to keep expenses from growing—so did Mary Lessingham toil at her pen as a galley-slave may toil at his oar, and turned out stories with such regularity that, at last, she sometimes said in jest, she could have written them with her eyes shut.

'I'm afraid,' she cried one day to Lessingham, when he was deploring that she should have to work in such quantity to make so modest an amount—'I'm afraid, dear boy, that fame is never at all likely to come my way. I am the kind of author which is analogous to the poor souls who turn out match-boxes by the thousand in the East End—they get through a certain amount of drudge, but better sort of work is beyond them.'

CHAPTER V

THE SUNKEN ROCKS OF MISFORTUNE

> The most grievous misfortunes to bear are not those which are inevitable, but those which we feel might, with a little care, forethought, or even with a little difference of circumstance, have been avoided. There is no sting in the inevitable, but the sting of the avoidable remains for all time.

FOUR years had gone by since Lessingham and Mary had become man and wife. They still lived in the house in West Kensington, although it had grown very much too small for them. They had now three children—Coralie, Nevill, and a baby, who was called Olive.

Mary was now eight-and-twenty, but looked years younger, having, as some women do, in spite of her many troubles and her increasing cares, retained the calm and youthful look which had distinguished her as a girl—the look which had so impressed her father's old friend, Mr. Allen, when he went down to Clapham, carrying the wherewithal with which to replenish their scanty purse.

She was not a beauty, and yet to Lessingham she had the sweetest face in all the world. Her hair was of a rich golden brown, and lay thickly upon her low forehead, and grew prettily about her ears and at the nape of her white neck. Her brow was broad, her eyes serene, her nose

rather small, and her chin as firm as a rock. Her teeth were white and even, and her smile charming, so charming that one forgot that the mouth was a trifle wide, and that it was somewhat irregular. Her figure could boast of the *juste milieu* between the fat and the thin, her hands were composed and capable, and she possessed the rare quality of being able to sit perfectly still whenever she chose to do so, or when she was not actually occupied.

I do not know whether you have ever noticed, my reader, how rare a quality this is in a woman? Women there are in plenty who have so schooled themselves to waste not a moment of their day that, when it is polite or absolutely necessary that they should repose themselves, they find it impossible to do so. Have you ever seen them, these capable, energetic, housewifely women, who seem as if they realize every moment of the time that there is a dreadful truth in the well-known line, 'Satan finds some mischief still for idle hands to do'? If a friend goes to see them, they must needs be busy with sewing or knitting, and when they go to see a friend, and sewing or knitting is not a feasible occupation, how restless and fidgety they are! They are for ever worrying the ends of their gloves, or settling some detail of their costume, or showing in some way their lack of ease and reposefulness. The woman who can fold her hands, and yet be neither idle nor sluggish, is a joy to all with whom she comes in contact; and Mary Lessingham, who could and did get through more work of all kinds than any woman of her acquaintance, had this gift to perfection.

During the years of her married life, Mary Lessingham had acquired much dignity of manner, and the intensity of her aims and ambitions had tended to take away any girlishness of voice and gesture. Yet her face was very young-looking, and nobody would have taken her for more than five-and-twenty years old. One reason for this was

that she was never free from grave anxiety. Her father was a continual source of care and dread, for he was now quite childish, and although he could still creep about and, indeed, would not be restrained or kept to his own room, he was wholly incapable of taking care of himself. Then, too, though the baby, Olive, was a stronger and more healthy child than her brother and sister, yet the strongest and least troublesome infant is always an extra care to a mother. As for the other two, they were pretty, dainty, sunny-haired mites, the kind of children that most people want to get hold of and make much of, and yet their mother had to watch them by day and by night, and a single puff of wind was enough to put her into a fever of anxiety about them.

It was when the baby Olive was about seven months old that Lessingham came home one night complaining of feeling, as he put it, very seedy.

'I've got a bad cold on me, Mary,' he said, with a shiver, which he tried hard to repress. 'I've had to see the paper through—the *Censor*, you know—and I fancy the hot printing-office has taken it out of me. No, I can't eat anything.'

'Oh, but do try!' she cried. 'I dare say you are thoroughly overdone, and that a good night's rest will make you feel yourself again. It is stewed oysters, dear boy'—touching the edge of the little covered dish with a tablespoon.

To please her, he tried to eat a little of the portion which she put before him; but it was evident that he was really ill, and Mary watched him with her heart in her mouth.

'Hugh,' she said at last, 'I don't think you ought to go on with the *Censor*. It is taking too much out of you, and it will never be worth its salt.'

'Don't say that, Mary,' he cried.

'Dear, I cannot help saying it, for it is what I think,' she replied anxiously. 'You have never been the same

since you took it up, and, working as hard as you do, it is not fair that you should have to see the paper through in addition to everything else.'

'Somebody must do it,' he said wearily. 'And poor old Mackworth has been seedy for several weeks past.'

'Dining out,' retorted Mary, cynically. 'But, be that as it may, you are completely done up, and rest you must have.'

'Oh, I shall be all right in the morning. I'll take it out and stay in bed till afternoon, till I have to go up to the office.'

Between themselves, the term 'the office' stood for the office of the *Spokesman*—always, with Lessingham, the premier part of his work. But neither to the office of the *Spokesman* nor to that of the *Censor* did poor Lessingham go again for many a long day; for when morning came, he was desperately ill, and Mary sent for the doctor as soon as it was daylight, and the doctor looked very grave indeed. Well might he do that, for Lessingham was tight in the clutches of typhoid fever, and, of a truth, his chance of pulling through was very small. For he had for years past been using up his strength very much as his father-in-law had done before him, and at the time the illness had seized upon him, his nerve-power had been reduced to its lowest ebb. Then followed a time of the most cruel suspense and fear, until at length the patient slowly struggled back to safety again, and began to talk feebly of getting back to work a week or so later.

'My dear fellow,' said the editor of the *Spokesman*, on the second occasion that he was allowed to see him, 'it's of no use to talk of getting back to work for a good long while yet.'

'We have to go on living,' put in Lessingham, weakly; 'and illness is not a cheap luxury, as you can well imagine.'

'Don't you worry about that,' said the great man genially.

'I can't help worrying about it,' Lessingham burst out. 'I lie here and worry every hour, nay, every minute that I am awake. You forget I have a wife and three children and my poor old father-in-law to think about. It's no fault of his, poor old chap, but the burden is just the same as if it were.'

'Your wife and I have arranged all that,' said the other, in easy assured tones. 'You know, my dear fellow, we Press people don't let our comrades drop out of the ranks for want of a little timely help. Your screw on the *Spokesman* is paid, and will be paid till you are really fit for work again, and there are other sources about which you really need not trouble yourself; you have only to rest quietly there, and get up your strength as best you can, and think of the nice little holiday you are going to take before you attempt to get into harness again.'

'That is sheer nonsense,' said Lessingham, irritably. 'I can take no holidays. I must get back to work, and the sooner the better.'

'You need hardly tell me, at this time of the day,' returned his chief, 'that a more obstinate fellow than Hugh Lessingham it would be difficult to meet with in a day's march. However, for once in his life, that same Hugh Lessingham is going to take his orders from those who know better than he does on this particular point. So, my dear chap, it is quite useless to argue the point with me, and I am sure it will be equally futile to do so with your wife, who knows exactly what the medical men think of your case.'

'Who is going to pay their fees?' Lessingham burst out.

'Tut, tut. Who talks of fees in such a case as yours?'

'Doctors mostly live by taking fees, and pretty big ones, don't they?' demanded Lessingham. 'I don't know who those two old chaps were who came down and tried to look wise over me, but I guessed they were pretty big wigs by the way the man here played up to them.'

His chief burst out laughing.

'Then you were not as bad as we imagined that day,' he cried. 'Why, my dear fellow, I was sitting downstairs waiting for the verdict, and we were all under the impression that you did not know a thing that was going on around you. What a fraud you were all the time!"

'Who were they?'

'One was Dr. Dillory and the other was my good friend Sir Fergus Tiffany.'

'I thought Sir Fergus Tiffany was a surgeon.'

'So he is; but he knows as much about typhoid as most men, and he is a great friend of Dillory's. In fact, they were dining with me the evening before, and Dillory was talking about your case when he got your own man's letter saying he would like him to see you again. Dillory asked Sir Fergus to go down with him.'

'And you paid for both,' Lessingham put in.

'Not a bit of it; neither I nor any one else paid them a penny. Your wife's thanks were enough, as they both told her.'

Thus, with great difficulty, Lessingham was persuaded that it would be worse than folly if he attempted to go back to work a day earlier than his doctors gave permission or without taking the holiday that he so sorely needed. As soon as he could move, therefore, he was sent off to Bournemouth in charge of his nurse, for it was impossible for Mary to leave her children to the care of her young and not very efficient young maid. I think that Lessingham fumed over this decision more than anything else.

'It's too hard,' he exclaimed, almost reduced to tears in his distress, 'that I should be sent away in such luxury, while you, who have borne the brunt of everything, and who need a change ten times more than I do, should be left here to get through as best you can. How can I be expected to get well when I am positively fattening on such gross injustice?'

'Dear old boy!' she cried, dropping on her knees beside him, and putting her arms about him, and her soft cheeks against his thin flushed ones. 'Please don't talk such rubbish as that. You never did and never will do me an injustice in all your life. It is necessary that you should go away, and I cannot leave those poor children to Hannah, though she isn't half a bad sort of a girl, and does her best according to her lights, which are very limited. Darling, I would rather go, of course I would; but we can't afford to take the babies, and—and you will go to please me, and think no more than just to wish that I could be with you.'

Poor Lessingham, he was weak and feeble and worn by illness and worry, but he promised in very truth he would do his best to have a real holiday at Bournemouth and to get as strong and well as even she could desire. Alas, poor Lessingham! alas, poor Mary! for although his holiday was prolonged to a much longer time than had been at first agreed upon, he did not pick up his strength, and came home with all the marks of what he had gone through plainly stamped upon him.

'You have come home too soon,' said his chief, when he presented himself at the office. 'You had better go back again. You want another fortnight at least. It is most penny-wise to have cut your period of convalescence short in this way. If it is a question of money you have only to let me know, and——'

'Do you know how long it is since I did an hour's work?' Lessingham demanded.

'Yes, I do, and I know that in the army when a soldier has had a good go of typhoid fever, he is not considered fit for full duty for at least four months. You had better go back and write your leaders by the sea if you cannot make up your mind to stay entirely idle any longer.'

To this, however, Lessingham absolutely declined to accede, and insisted on starting work again on just the

same old lines, having all the same promised his wife not to do any work for the *Censor*, except what was actually literary.

'I would go back,' he said irritably to his chief, when that gentleman tried to press him into consenting to return to Bournemouth, 'because you have been awfully good to me, and if I stay on the staff of the *Spokesman* for twenty years, I shall never be able to repay you for what you have done. But, to speak plainly, you must know how it is with my wife. She has borne the brunt of all this illness of mine, and I can't leave her to face her bad time without me.'

His chief's reply was brief and to the point.

'Good heavens,' he cried, 'I had no suspicion of it.' And then Lessingham had left him, and he had stared at the wall opposite for full five minutes with eyes filled with the direst dismay. 'Poor little woman,' he said at last, 'that must make about half a dozen. Good Lord, it's appalling. Poor little woman. By Jove, I don't wonder that poor Lessingham has almost fretted himself into his grave.'

CHAPTER VI

THE RELIEF OF HARD WORK

> Many a woman does her very best work by trying to escape from the sadness of her thoughts. I knew one once who, after the death of a little child, scrubbed the floors of her house in a vain attempt to win sleep.

It seemed to the genial editor of the *Spokesman* as if Lessingham's long illness and enforced rest from work, so far from rusting his pen, had made it shine with renewed brilliance. After having expressed his determination to get back to work again without delay, he appeared at the office with unfailing regularity, and the work that he turned out was certainly infinitely superior to anything that he had ever done before. Perhaps the feeling that he had lost several good openings by his absence—for in the case of long illness, many editors are neither willing nor able to keep the ranks open—made him desperately anxious to retain his hold upon his chief, and, you know, in spite of all the high-faluting stuff that is written and talked about the purely artistic mind which must not be driven or work to order, and whose ideas can only float in a sort of golden channel of ease and luxury, there is, in the life of a real man of letters, no such spur to doing good work as that of stern necessity, there is no such hastener of ideas as a first-class commission. With poor Lessingham the necessity

was stern enough and real enough, and he worked with heart as well as brain that his wife might not too cruelly feel the fresh burden that was to come upon her.

Needless to say they were in debt. There were heavy bills here and there which had steadily accumulated during the long weeks of his illness, and though the various tradespeople have hearts and feel for unexpected troubles among their customers when they know that the troubles are real ones, yet the bills were there and they would have to be paid some day. Up to this time—that is to say, the time of Lessingham's illness—Mary had contrived always to pay ready money for all her household expenses. It had not always been easy—indeed, I should speak more correctly if I were to say that it had never been easy—but still she had kept to her rule, and when she could not afford to pay down the money for a certain thing, she had resolutely gone without it. But when her husband's life was hanging in the balance, this rule was perforce relaxed, and once broken, it was difficult, nay, almost impossible, to get into a ready-money basis again. For when money came in, it had to be used to pay something towards the bills, and the provision of the moment was of necessity obliged to run on into another account. And as Lessingham was making much less, and the expenses of the household tended to increase rather than decrease, so did the bills thrive and grow apace, and all Lessingham's toil and all Mary's ingenuity could not keep up with them.

The new baby came, and it proved to be a girl, and so feeble and frail a hold had it upon life that, after a struggle of nearly three months, the thread suddenly snapped and the innocent baby soul slipped away to that haven where privations and struggles have no place. Just at first Mary Lessingham was almost crushed with the blow, but, after a few hours, she forced herself to be calm and to accept the fiat of heaven as heaven sent it. For one thing,

Lessingham, who was passionately attached to his children, took the loss of the little life as badly as a man could do; and to spare him, Mary put her own grief aside and threw herself heart and soul into a new story, the idea of which had come to her in the dark and quiet watches by the sick child's little bed. None but herself knew the relief that it was to sit and work at this story. It was almost as if she was writing for the dead child, as if the story was a part of her; and then, too, it kept her from dwelling too much on the inscrutable ways of Providence, which could see the wisdom of bringing a tender young life into the world to work out its little unconscious span in continual pain and suffering.

Poor baby! its short life and early death had but added to the already heavy burden which lay upon its father and mother; for death, especially when it comes to those dwelling in great cities, is a costly thing, and let the last offices be made ever so simply, they must be paid for in ready money. There is no running a bill with a cemetery.

So Mary Lessingham worked with a fervour which she had never been able to put into her stories for the *L.P.*, and toiled by day and by night to get ideas safely down on paper while they were red-hot, and before something, anything, should happen to distract the flow of her thoughts.

'Hugh, I believe there is something in it this time,' she said to him one night, when he had walked down from town, and had eaten the modest supper that was awaiting him, and had filled his pipe. 'I would like you to read it when you have time.'

'I'll read it in the morning,' he said. 'I have nothing particular to do to-morrow. I was going round some offices to see if I could not find something to fill the place of the *Tally-Ho* work. I'll use it to read your story, for if it is

as good as you think, we must not waste it on any half-and-half sort of a house.'

'It might suit Winkelmann,' said she, thoughtfully.

'So. What length are you making it?'

'A hundred and twenty thousand, at least.'

'And how far have you got?"

'Close on the hundred thousand,' she replied. 'And oh, Hugh dear, if only it is good enough to catch on——'

'If it is good we can do a great deal to make it catch on,' he replied. 'There's not a man on the Press who would not give it a leg up—that is one of the small advantages you get by being in the swim'—with a sad smile.

Accordingly, the following morning, he began to read the manuscript as soon as he was awake, and so absorbed in it was he that he made no attempt to rise, but asked her to send his lunch upstairs to him.

'Not because you are feeling ill, Hugh?' she cried, her quick mind jumping at once to the worst possible conclusion.

'Not in the very least, dearest,' he replied. 'Only I am so desperately interested in this,' touching the manuscript as he spoke, 'that I cannot leave it while I dress. Besides, it isn't a bad thing to have a day in bed, now and then. It seems to rest one's bones.'

At last he had read as far as she had gone with the story, and then he got up and dressed, his head all the time being filled with what he had just read.

'Mary,' he said, when he went downstairs to where she was just pouring out the tea for the children, 'I lay my homage at your feet. Your story, so far as I have gone, is simply magnificent.'

She flushed all over her face, a bright rosy red.

'You are not saying this because it is mine?' she cried. 'You really think so?'

'Yes, I really think so,' he replied, and there was no mistaking the sincerity of his manner. 'It is magnificent.

It is a great work, something to be proud of. I always knew you had it in you, if only you had time to give yourself to it. It maddens me to think of all the wish-wash you have turned out because of our needs. But, unless I am very much mistaken, that day has gone by for ever. You will be able to write to please yourself when once this book is out. See if I am not right.'

'With all my heart I hope so,' she cried gladly. 'For that would mean money, and money, if there were only enough of it, would mean a new life to both you and me.'

'There is enough money in that book to satisfy all your wishes,' he said hopefully. 'Not in the actual book itself, of course, but in the name and place it will bring you.'

'God grant it,' she said reverently, as if such good fortune was impossible to come to her, except by special dispensation of the Almighty. 'God grant it.'

It was with renewed hope and courage that she set to work to bring the story to an end. She had all faith in Lessingham's judgment, and his opinion seemed to give her nerve to make the conclusion of the story in accordance with her own artistic instincts, rather than to wind it up happily and conventionally, after the fashion which obtained with the readers of the *L.P.*, that highly respected family journal, wherein, for the sum of one penny a week, those who read may learn astonishing things of the ways and doings of persons very highly placed in the world, wherein dukes and duchesses are as common as blackberries on a bramble-bush.

It was not by any means a story of high life, but it was human and it was fresh, it embodied a new idea, and it was treated in a way that was all Mary's own. It was with a wholly new pride that she laid the finished manuscript on Lessingham's study table, and left him to read the ending at his leisure. She felt as if she had given birth to a new child, as if she had reached a new epoch in her life, as if

they had come to a fresh starting place in their world's journey, and as if, after a little while, everything would be different with them.

As for Lessingham, he was, if possible, more enthusiastic over the ending than he had been about the beginning. The very next day he carried off the story to town, and took it to the great publisher, Winkelmann, begging him not to put it through the usual course, but to read it himself.

'I shall take it as a personal favour,' he said. 'I have no particular opinion of the judgment of publishers' readers, and I have immense faith in your judgment. It is the most remarkable book I have read for years, if not the most remarkable book I have ever read. I want you to read it.'

The great publisher could not help being impressed by the earnestness of Lessingham's manner.

'Of course, I will read it myself, and at once, without a day's delay,' he replied. 'I'm sure you know the value of my time too well to ask me to waste it over trash. And you say the author is a friend of yours?'

'Yes,' replied Lessingham simply, but without giving any further information.

'And it is a first work?'

'A first book,' he answered quietly. 'But you need not look at me like that. I did not write it, I can assure you.'

A few days later he received a note from the publisher.

'When you are in town, and passing my office, I would like to see you about the manuscript you were good enough to leave with me. I have read it. It is certainly a very remarkable book, though whether it will take with the not always discerning public it is difficult, or rather impossible, to say.'

Lessingham went down at once, being infinitely more keen on losing no time in bringing it out than Mary herself.

'Is it not all I said of it?' he demanded eagerly.

'Yes,' replied the publisher, who was too big a man to try to depreciate the value of any work he was willing to bring out. 'It is a very extraordinary book; it ought to do exceedingly well.'

'It will do well if you produce it,' said Lessingham, promptly.

'And you have full power to make arrangements with me, or shall I have an interview with the author?'

'I have full power to act. The author knows nothing of publishing matters, and would prefer to leave it entirely in my hands,' replied Lessingham, who began to feel, somehow, that he was in for a big thing.

'Good. Then, this is what I propose to do.' And then Mr. Winkelmann entered into an explanation as to treaties and royalties, such as Lessingham had never known of in all his life before. 'So, you see, if the book fails I shall only lose a certain amount, while, if it is a success, the author will have a fair share of the profits. If I were like some publishers, Mr. Lessingham,' he said, smiling, 'I should offer you fifty or a hundred pounds, perhaps, for the book, body and soul, and stand or fall by its failure or success. As it is, I prefer to do business in the only honest way—no success, no profits.'

'If you will have the agreements made out, the author will sign in accordance with what I have agreed for her,' said Lessingham quietly, 'and I must thank you very much for the frank and candid way in which you have met me.'

'We will have a glass of wine on it,' said Winkelmann, touching a bell on the table beside him. 'Brookes, will you put out the sherry and the biscuits? Yes, that's the one. That will do. Thanks.

'Now, my dear sir,' he said, pouring out a glass of sherry as the boy left the room, 'this is as sound a glass as you will find in London. Here's to the health of your friend's first book. And, by the way, is the authorship a secret?

You told me the other day, I think, that you did not write the book.'

Lessingham took up the wine-glass, and sipped the sherry, which was excellent.

'Success to the new author,' he said, with such a ring of triumph in his voice that the publisher looked at him in amazement. 'No, there is no secret about it, or I should say that there need be none. The story was written by my wife.'

CHAPTER VII

UP ONE STEP, DOWN TWO

> The Book says: 'Whom the Lord loveth, He chasteneth.' Then truly He must love some folk much more dearly than others.

It seemed to Lessingham that he could never get home fast enough to carry the good news to Mary. He even went the length of taking a cab from Earl's Court station, because he had just missed the train to his own station. And when he arrived at Finisterre Gardens, he literally flung himself out of the vehicle and into the house.

'Mary—Mary, where are you?' he cried impatiently.

She came running down the stair at the sound of his voice.

'Yes, what is it? Is anything the matter?'

'I want you,' he said, and drew her into the little drawing-room. 'Dear heart, I have the best of news for you. Winkelmann is delighted with it. He is going to bring it out as soon as it can be got through the press.'

She reeled, and would have fallen if he had not caught her in his arms.

'And will he pay for it?' she whispered timidly.

'Pay for it! why, of course he will pay for it,' he replied. 'You don't suppose I gave it to him, do you? But, oh, my darling, what a brute I am to tease you about it, even for

a moment. Winkelmann is going to pay a small sum down, and afterwards you will have a royalty on every copy. So if it is a blazing success, you will reap the benefit to the very full.'

'And if it is a failure?'

'It won't be a failure. With such a book, and Winkelmann, to say nothing of all that I shall be able to do to push it along, it could not be a failure; the thing is out of the question, not to be thought of for a moment. You should have seen Winkelmann's face when I told him that the author was my wife. He nearly jumped out of his skin. And then he leaned across the table and caught hold of my hand and said, "I congratulate you doubly in that case. Trust me to do my best to pull off a big success for us all."'

It was then getting towards the end of July. When Lessingham again saw Mr. Winkelmann, he told him that, owing to several causes, the past season had been a very bad one for the world of fiction.

'You see, all these Royalties coming and going have to be entertained, and people have to spend such a lot of money entertaining them, and all the lesser people have to spend a lot to seem to be in the swim with them, and all the smaller fry have to strain every nerve to make it appear that they, too, were having an extra gay season, even though they never any one of them came within a mile of a Royalty in all their lives, so none of them have any money to spare for buying books, and most of them have no time to read them even if they got them for nothing. So the book-market suffers horribly, and we poor publishers and authors have to grin and pretend that we are all such blazing successes that we hardly know how to invest our money.'

Lessingham laughed outright, thinking of the very excellent sherry with which Mr. Winkelmann had seen fit to regale him the last time he made his appearance at his office. The

publisher, fortunately, however, did not know what was passing through his mind, and went on speaking, blandly unconscious that his visitor had taken his words as literally as he had done.

'I have been thinking if we publish about the middle of October,' he said, 'that will give us nice time to get it up in good style, and it would give your wife plenty of time for revising.'

'Not till October!' exclaimed Lessingham, not a little blankly.

'It is the very best time of the year,' Mr. Winkelmann replied. 'We never bring out any book of importance during the summer months, or in the silly season. It would be cruel to do that.'

'Ah, yes, I forgot that. Of course, you must bring it out when it seems best to you to do so.'

Lessingham saw, of course, the wisdom of the publisher's remarks, and broke the news as gently as he could to Mary, who had not, unnaturally, expected that her literary babe would see the light during the long August days.

'I cannot tell what I could have been thinking of, Mary,' he said half-vexedly. 'I have been writing reviews of books all these years, and I ought to know by this time just when they come out, and just which are the best seasons for publishers. I felt such an ass when Winkelmann explained it to me, as if I had been some greenhorn from the provinces. I could have kicked myself. You know, Mary, my head is not what it used to be before I was ill. I seem so often fogged about something or other nowadays. I don't know why it should be so, but it undoubtedly is.'

'Nonsense. You are overworked and worried almost to death,' she declared sensibly. 'And if this book of mine does chance to turn out a success, we will use the first money we have after we have paid up, in taking a real holiday together. I could well leave poor Father here with

Nannie, and we would take the children with us; poor little things, they have never had a change in all their lives. If only the book is a success.'

As to that, they could but wait and see what time would bring forth. The weather was intensely hot, and that convenient wilderness of bricks and mortar, which they call West Kensington, was as stifling as an oven. Lessingham dragged up to town each day, and did his tale of bricks for the *Spokesman;* and Mary crawled out along the blistering pavements, with one or both of the elder children with her; but it was a mere existence for them all, and they only lived through it in hope of a better time coming, both as to climate, and as to prosperity. And then Mary, in sheer desperation for want of occupation, began another book, although she had declared that she would wait till 'Day-dawn' was out before she would put pen to paper again.

This book she kept a close secret from Lessingham, for she was afraid that he might insist upon her leaving her work, as she had originally intended. So she only sat down to her desk when he was safely away in the evening at the office of the *Spokesman;* and though she did not get on with it very quickly, she yet felt that it was not a going back for her, but a distinct advance on the book which had won such golden opinions from Mr. Winkelmann, and from Lessingham himself. And so far from doing her any harm, the work was a real relief and benefit to her, and occupied her just enough without in any way over-taxing her brain.

At this time, although she had the prospect of a better day to come, she was yet very full of anxiety. Her father was a source of continual and constant trouble. He could not be left for a single moment alone, and steadily grew worse, without showing any signs of his approaching end being near at hand. He did not now know his oldest friends, and took very little notice of any one excepting his daughter and his old servant. It is more than probable

that he only knew them because on them he was dependent for the actual necessaries of life, and not for any particular affection that he had for either of them. In health he was fairly well, and ailed but little, only his poor dazed brain seemed to grow gradually more and more clouded, and he seemed able to do less and less to help himself in any way.

Then she was a little uneasy about Lessingham, who did not recover his strength as he ought to have done, and as probably he would have done had his life been an easier one, and his anxieties less pressing. He was able to keep up to the collar so far as the *Spokesman* was concerned; but even that was collar work, and was most times done utterly against the grain. At times, when he was looking utterly fagged and haggard, a great agony of fear would overcome her, and then she would fall on her knees in a great terror of supplication to God that he might be spared to her, that the book might be a success, that he might before long be relieved from his most pressing cares. She had always loved him, but, at this time, it seemed as if her love had become a religion. She forgot her own worn nerves, her troubles and sorrows; she choked down many a sigh lest it should distress him, and add one more burden to that which he already carried so uncomplainingly for her. She thrust back every feeling of self in a resolute spirit of abnegation such as only a good and brave woman is ever able to do. She counted the days, and almost the hours, to that on which the book was to deliver her out of bondage would first see light. She lived during those few weeks a very lifetime of apprehension and suspense.

As for Lessingham, he never for one single moment, either in his own thoughts, or in his conversations with her, allowed that the book could be anything but the most signal and brilliant success.

'Don't talk to me,' he cried one night, about a week before the book was due, 'don't tell me that the British

public does not know when a thing is good, and when it isn't. The British public isn't to be gulled by a lot of careless or interested critics, and it don't always take on what we recommend. But the public knows, bless you, it knows, and it uses its own judgment, and small blame to it. Still, when the stuff is good, you have only to secure skilled production and plenty of publicity at the outset to be tolerably sure of success. I think I have paved the way for the publicity, and I know the book will do the rest.'

It was on the very day after this that Lessingham's health showed signs of breaking down once more, and his wife's fears all came up to the surface of her heart again.

'Hugh, you are not well!' she exclaimed apprehensively, as he came in from his usual night-work.

'That's true enough. I feel awfully seedy to-night,' he replied, trying hard to keep back a shudder.

A dozen questions came tumbling to her lips at once.

'How? Is it the same as before? Have you pain?' were those which she allowed to escape her.

'Yes, I've got screwy sort of pains all over me. I suppose I've taken a chill. I'm a wretched broken-down crock, and it's no use trying to shirk the truth,' he cried bitterly.

'I will get a hot-water bag and put it in your bed; and you had better have a hot bath before you go to bed, and something very hot to drink.' She was nervously eager in a moment.

Lessingham put out a hand which, if not the hand of a robust man, was still the tender one of the man she loved.

'I only hope, my darling, that you are not in for another bad time with me.'

'If I am, it does not matter for me,' she retorted stoutly; 'it is only your pain that I care for.'

He looked at her fixedly for a minute or so.

'They say,' he said slowly, 'that it is quite a common

thing for such women as you to stick to the most worthless kind of men. My God! how can a man ever find it in his heart to ill-use a woman who loves him?'

'Such men as you don't ill-use the women who love them,' she said softly. 'But I will go and see how I can boil and steam that pain out of your bones. I won't be more than a few minutes.'

Poor Mary Lessingham! It did indeed seem that the Lord must love her very dearly, for truly affliction seemed to have marked her for its own. By the time the morning came Hugh Lessingham was fast in the grip of rheumatic fever, and was already in the depths of extreme illness. Oh, it was a sad household, for the shadow of death lay heavily upon it, and Lessingham seemed as if he could not resign himself to letting all the world slide by, so as to keep all his small store of strength for battling with the grim King of Terrors, who stood just beside the bed and flung the darkness of his wings over sick and sound alike.

'It's no use trying, doctor,' he said on the third day, when the doctor who had attended him before proposed another opinion. He had spoken in a mere whisper to Mary; but the sick man's quick ears had caught the words. 'It's no use, doctor; I shall not weather the storm this time. I feel that my last chance is over.'

'My dear fellow,' said the doctor, 'you simply have no choice in the matter. You've got to weather the storm, whether you like it or not. And your wife and I are going to make you do it. Only if you give up hope yourself, you will make our task just twice as difficult as it would otherwise be. And you lessen your chance too. So, my dear chap, for the sake of your wife and your children, you must try your level best to help us by keeping up your heart and resolutely trying to pull round again.'

'I've got no try—no pluck in me,' Lessingham persisted. 'I haven't got the grit to shake this horrid pain and

weakness off. I only want to be left alone, to die as quickly and as quietly as I can.'

'Hugh!' Mary burst out in a voice of agony.

'I never ill-used you,' he said wearily, 'and that's about the only thing one could say for me. Three little children, and not a penny between you and starvation. My God! why did you let me live to do so much harm in the world? Things are badly managed down here, doctor. You and I could arrange everything very much better.'

The doctor made a sign to the nurse, and forcibly led Mary out of the room.

'My dear soul,' he said, using the familiar term very kindly, 'you mustn't give up heart about him because he is a bit down about himself. He is in pain, and he feels desperately ill; but it isn't half as bad as if he had got let in for another go of typhoid. Then we should have need to look skew-wise at his condition.'

But Mary, poor soul, was almost beyond comfort.

'Oh, doctor!' she cried; 'I've seen it coming. I've seen it for weeks past, and I was so powerless to prevent it. He will never get over it. I am certain of it.'

'Then you know a great deal more about it than I do,' said the doctor, dryly. 'But as neither you nor our poor friend is in charge of this case, I shall take the liberty of bringing down Dr. Dillory to-morrow, if I can get hold of him.'

'Oh yes, yes, do so; and I will work my fingers to the bone, if need be, to repay you and him too!'

She was for the moment more like a mad woman than the calm and collected Mary Lessingham, whom the doctor knew best. He put his hand on her shoulder and patted it kindly.

'Now you had better have a glass of wine before you go upstairs again, for you must calm yourself and show a cheerful face; half the battle will depend on that. What!

you haven't any? Then just sit down there till I go across to my house and fetch some.'

He was gone out of the house like a flash, and returning in a few minutes with a bottle in his hand, poured out a generous glass of port, which he held imperatively to her lips.

'When you have drunk that,' he said, 'and you have pulled yourself together a little, you will be able to go up again. And remember that on your face and manner very largely depends his getting better or worse.'

It was in this atmosphere of anguish that Mary Lessingham received the early copies of her first book; the literary child on whose advent she had counted so much; of whose coming she had hoped such great things; for whose welfare she had sent up such earnest and heartfelt prayers to heaven. And now that it had come, now that the moment of her expectations had arrived, all her hope and joy and pride was turned to dust and ashes, so that she did not care even to untie the string which secured the parcel. Poor author —poor Mary Lessingham!

CHAPTER VIII

A RENT IN THE CLOUDS

> Have you ever noticed that, when the circumstances of life seem to have got to their worst, they begin to mend? Sometimes this is evidently in accordance with the laws of nature, which decree that after the darkest part of the night shall come the dawn. But sometimes nature has nothing to do with it, and we see only the all-powerful hand of a merciful God.

NONE of the people in the household at Finisterre Gardens ever quite knew how they dragged Lessingham through that terrible illness. They did drag him through after many weeks of dire pain and weariness, bringing him back from the very brink of the grave, a gaunt and feeble shadow of his former self.

'I shall never be good for anything again,' he said, on the first occasion when his chief was allowed to see him. 'They had better have let me die. I should have cost no one any more trouble then.'

'Nonsense! nonsense!' the other cried. 'You've had a very bad time; but, even if you feel that, you ought to choke it down for the sake of your wife, who has the pluck of a real Englishwoman and the patience of an angel.'

'I was thinking of her,' said he, simply; and he turned his poor worn face to the side on which there was some

shadow, so that his chief might not see the tears which were streaming down his cheeks.

'My dear fellow, you are very weak and ill as yet; but—but it has pleased the Almighty to bring you through the dark valley, and you must trust Him to know what is best for you a little longer. I predict that very different times are in store for you, and that when you have pulled your strength up a bit, you will feel another man altogether.'

It was years since the editor of the *Spokesman* had given utterance to a religious sentiment—since, indeed, a religious thought had come into his head. Now it seemed natural, although he was just a little shy of giving voice to it.

'I wish I could feel like that,' said Lessingham, in his weak, resentful voice. 'But I can't. It cannot be best for a weak woman to be saddled with care and trouble as she is.'

'She isn't a weak woman,' cried the editor, promptly. 'No, by Jove! Mrs. Lessingham has more grit than any other woman I ever heard of. And, if only for her sake, my dear fellow, you ought to try your level best to pull through. Make up your mind that you will get strong and well again, and you will find that it will help you to do so. And remember that your place on the *Spokesman* is always open to you, and will be, even if it takes you a year to come and fill it again.'

'You are more than good,' said poor Lessingham, in a choking voice; 'and if ever I can do anything for you, I will. It's not that I funk clearing out, or particularly mind my illnesses; it's the thought of my poor girl that almost drives me mad.'

'I rather fancy when you have had a little talk to her that you will see things in a different light,' said his chief, in such a hopeful tone, that Lessingham turned his head and looked at him eagerly.

'Something out of the common has happened,' he said. 'What is it? Is her book out? Is it a success?'

'My dear fellow, your wife is the most-talked-of woman in London at this moment. I have brought down a bundle of notices for her; I told one of the press-cutting people the other day to collect what has appeared about her, and—but there, I am forestalling her news; and it will be a pleasure to her to tell you herself, after all she has gone through. So good-bye, Lessingham, my dear fellow. Give all your mind to getting better, and bear in mind that wisest of wise sayings, "There is nothing so successful as success." Your wife will need all your help and counsel, and all your common sense, if she is to get the full benefit of the boom that has been started in the last few days.'

'I'd like to see her. Where is she?' said Lessingham.

'I'll send her. Good-bye, my dear fellow.'

'Good-bye,' returned the sick man. 'God bless you. You've been a good friend to me.'

A few minutes later, though they seemed like hours, Mary came quickly upstairs and into the room.

'Oh, Hugh!' she cried. 'You'll think I'm a fool—a complete fool! I have never even opened my book. Well, I wanted you to do that. But I have never looked at a paper—and that was sheer cowardice—for I was so afraid I should come across bad notices. It wasn't until Mr. Elliott came this morning, and brought this great sheaf of notices, that I dared even to think of it at all.'

'Let me see them. Are they good? Elliott says you are the most-talked-of woman in London this day. What did I always say? Did not I swear the book would be a success?'

He raised himself eagerly in bed, but was compelled to lie back again, for they had not yet got all the pain out of his bones; and he was still so weak that the smallest exertion served to exhaust him.

'No; I can't sit up. I'm as weak as a rat still. Read them to me, darling; and don't miss out a single word.'

'Won't you see the book itself first?' she asked. 'I had not the heart to open it while you were so ill. I wanted to open it together. There! Do you like it?'

She took a volume from the parcel and gave it to him. It was a bulky book, gaily bound in stripes of purple and gold, the upper part of the top cover being of plain purple, with the words "Day-Dawn" boldly printed in gold across it.

He turned it over in his feeble, swollen hands, and tried to read a few words here and there.

'It's no good; I'm not up to that yet,' he said. But his tone was a different one, and was satisfied enough.

She took the book from his hands.

'Can you read one thing?' she asked. 'I will hold it up for you.'

She held the volume in front of him, so that he could see the dedication.

'To my loving and much loved Husband
I give, with all my heart,
this my first book.
MARY LESSINGHAM.'

For a moment he could not speak.

'You did that without my knowing,' he said. 'Oh, Mary, my darling, my darling, I—I——'

And then he began to cry weakly, for he was still very, very ill, although the worst danger was over.

She drew the book away from him, and put her head down against him.

'Nay, dearest,' she said; 'if my being with you upsets you, they will not let me come in here again. I thought it would be such a pleasure to you to see my book, and to know that it is a success. I wish I had not opened the parcel. I wish I had put it behind the fire.'

He pulled himself together almost at once.

'Don't think me too weak,' he said. 'I am not a man

any more, but a miserable wreck; and I have lain here and thought and thought what would become of you if I was taken, till I have been nearly mad. And now the relief of knowing that you have a royal gift in your hand is too much for me. I can't help crying over it, but only for very joy. There, I won't frighten you any more, poor little woman. I'll behave myself properly, and—— What do you say, nurse?'

'I said nothing more than beef-tea, Mr. Lessingham,' said the white-capped nurse, who had entered the room softly.

'All right. I'm going to get well straight away now. I've had good news this morning, and it has made almost a man of me.'

'That's good hearing; only don't get well in too much of a hurry. I believe in the old saying, "Make haste slowly." There's a deal of wisdom in it.'

'I'm going to have everything in strict accordance with the letter of the law,' Lessingham declared, as he drank the last drops of the beef-tea.

'And to begin with a good dose of the newspaper?' asked the nurse, smiling.

'No, no; Mrs. Lessingham is going to read me only the reviews of her book,' he replied. 'No; it's no use your looking alarmed. I should simply go mad if I could not hear them.'

'And is that according to the strict letter of the law, too?' she asked, still smiling. 'Well, if Mrs. Lessingham reads what you want to hear, you must have a long spell of sleep, or, at least, rest, afterwards. And, meantime, I may as well go and get my walk.'

'Yes, do, nurse,' said Mary, cheerfully. 'I will take great care of him, I promise you.'

Once left alone, she took up the batch of notices and began to read. And as she read one after another, so did Lessingham get more and more interested, until at last

Mary began to feel that it must be bad for him, and to urge upon him the necessity of rest.

'Oh, don't fidget!' he cried. 'Let me get it all over at once. I shall have a new lease of life after this. I shall have nothing to think about but getting well, and trying to realize what a wonderful woman you are. "The author of 'Day-Dawn,'" I see they have begun to call you. Oh, my dear, my dear, may the day have dawned for you, and last for ever.'

She read the notices through to the last, and then, after giving him certain food which the nurse had left ready, she resolutely closed the curtains, and insisted that he should rest.

'I don't want nurse to come back and say that I can write a book, but that I can't nurse my husband for half an hour,' she said gaily.

And so she sat down and kept very quiet, and, after a few minutes, he dropped off to sleep, and so stayed for hours, resting as he had not done for many and many a day.

After this, the course of his convalescence was regular, and as easy as it could be after so severe an illness. And Mary's heart was light as it had never been before, excepting during those first few months after their marriage. There is nothing so successful as success, than which truer words have never been written. It seemed, in spite of the struggles and trials of the past, to have come to her so easily, and with so little effort; and so far from being puffed up and elated by her laurels, she was almost too timid and too shy of the praise which she received.

'Do you think I shall be able to keep it up?' she asked him anxiously, one day when he was so far advanced towards recovery that he was able to get down into the drawing-room.

'Yes, of course you will. The brain which could write "Day-Dawn" is capable of anything. But you mustn't

rush your next work. You must resist all tempting offers, and take care that your next is not a going-back on your start. If I were you, I would not even let myself think about it until we have been away.'

'But I have let myself think about it. I have another book nearly finished.'

'You have? And when did you find time to do it?'

His tone was so full of astonishment that Mary laughed outright.

'Well, I did not tell you because I thought you would say I was a goose not to take a rest after finishing "Day-Dawn." I wrote it in the evenings. It was so dull doing nothing.'

'My dear,' he said, with a tender mingling of pride and admiration in his tones, 'you are made of different stuff to the disciples who could not watch one hour. I have always thought I was a good worker, and could slog with most men. I'm not in it with you.'

'Ah, no; don't tease me,' she cried. 'There is nothing at all out of the common about me. I happen to have caught a trick of effective writing, that's all. Shall I give the new story to you, as far as I have got? Would you like to see it?'

'Of course I should,' he replied.

So Lessingham occupied his days of convalescence in reading Mary's new book, and he pronounced it to be an immense advance even upon 'Day-Dawn.'

'We won't hurry to place it. Of course, we must let Winklemann have the first chance of it; but, if he knows it is nearly ready, he will want to rush it out on the top of the other straight away. I have always thought that the most short-sighted policy, both on the part of authors and publishers. If there is a real demand, let the public yearn for a thing before you give it to them. Then they will appreciate it at its true value.'

'You must do as you think best about that,' said Mary. 'I can write the books, but I should never be able to arrange all the details of publishing them. I should forget half the most important things, and should make the most terrible hash of it. I would rather not mix myself up in the business part of it at all. I don't want to be known at all. I want to keep right in the background.'

'My dear girl, you have been so long in your shell that you are almost shy of coming out of it,' he replied. 'But don't think that the author of an important book is at all likely to be left very long in obscurity. Before many months have gone by, you will have been sought out and lionized, and I shall soon be trotting round at your heels in the capacity of Mrs. Lessingham's husband.'

'Nay,' she said seriously, 'for you will always have your own position as one of the principal men on the *Spokesman*. I should think that most people will say how very lucky it is for Mrs. Lessingham to have a husband on the press, and they will attribute the greater part of my success to your influence.'

'Then they will only show those who know what arrant fools they are,' he said brusquely. 'But I have always said the world knows the British public is no fool. It knows.'

CHAPTER IX

THE BEGINNING OF A BRIGHTER TIME

> There is a lower depth than the need of rest. The over-wrought man or woman who can thoroughly enjoy a holiday, has still a large fund of nerve-strength left. The poor souls who are so tired that they cannot sleep, who cannot settle to repose, are most to be pitied.

WITH what different feelings Lessingham left London for change to the last time, when he went very reluctantly and miserably without his wife, I can hardly describe. Then all the world had seemed dark and drear, and the future with hardly a ray of hope, the past like a hideous dream. Now everything to come was bright and encouraging, and even the darkness of the days that were gone by had faded somewhat into a softer light—into what I might call a dim grey time of sorrow, rather than a hideous picture of rayless wretchedness.

They were leaving no particular troubles behind. That eminent and far-seeing man, Mr. Winkelmann, had made Mrs. Lessingham a large advance on account of 'Day-Dawn,' and she had gone round to all the tradespeople to whom they owed anything, and had paid to each either their whole account or a considerable part thereof. To each she had said some special word of thanks for their goodness in not troubling her to pay in a hard and fast way, and had promised them to pay the whole in a very short time.

'It is imperative that my husband should have a change of air at once,' she said to the butcher, to whom the largest amount of all was due, 'or I would not have dreamt of going away leaving a single penny owing.'

But the man of meat would not hear a word more on the subject.

'If all my customers were as scrupulous as you are, Mrs. Lessingham,' he said bluntly, 'I should have retired on a fortune long ago, and I should not be serving you with meat at this moment. I quite understand how it was. When illness comes, we have to do the best we can, and hope for better times. It's when one's customers shoot the moon, after taking all one's sweetbreads and nothing but one's primest joints, that one feels inclined to cut up rough and be disagreeable. But don't you trouble about the account, ma'am. When it's convenient to you will suit me right enough. And I wouldn't say as much to all as deals with me.'

'I'm sure you have been most good,' said Mary. 'I shall never forget it, and if I can ever do you a good turn, Mr. Polson, you may be sure that it will give me the greatest pleasure to do it.'

The butcher watched her as she walked away.

'Now, that,' he said to his wife, who sat within the desk and took the orders and signed receipts—'that is what I call a real lady. There's no half and half about Mrs. Lessingham. She's got the real stamp upon her, and it's a downright pleasure to be able to do something to oblige her; yes, that it is.'

'She's a sweet-looking creature, and so ladylike,' remarked Mrs. Polson, reflectively. In truth, she was thinking how wonderful it was that Mrs. Lessingham should have so ladylike an appearance, seeing that her gown was a well-worn one, which she had known for many and many a day, and which had not been a particularly good one to

begin with. 'I suppose,' she said, after a minute or so, 'that's the style she has. It's just as Miss Symmington always says—style carries off such a great deal.'

So they went off to Bournemouth again, partly because the doctors strongly recommended it for Lessingham, and partly because he wanted to avenge himself for having been so miserable there when he had gone without Mary. They were fully equipped for the holiday. Lessingham had got a new suit, and a good new overcoat, and Mary a smart tailor-built gown of blue serge, and a thick cloth coat of irreproachable cut; while the children were more smartly clad than they had ever been before in all their lives. And they went to good lodgings, and fairly revelled in the sunshine and the fresh sea breezes; and little Coralie and Nevill learned to play on the sands, and to dig and delve as if they had been used to doing it as the most ordinary occupation in the world.

So for a whole month Mary Lessingham did absolutely no literary work; indeed, she spent the time in taking a holiday from all possible occupations. She was troubled with but little letter writing, for her correspondence was small. Every two or three days she wrote to the old woman who was left at home in charge of her father, and once or twice she wrote to Mr. Allen, when she heard from Nannie that he had been down to see the poor childish old man, who benefited so little, except in an indirect way, by his going. Still, these letters did not take up much of her time, and she drank in the fresh air, and felt that she was recuperating herself from all the exhaustion and nerve-strain of the past ten years, and that she would be able to go back to face the working-time, which lay before her, in splendid health and the best of spirits.

Lessingham, too, was daily throwing off the effects of his two illnesses, and had got bronzed and strong-looking, stronger in appearance than he was in reality, for although

he was seemingly his own man again, there was left behind a weakness of heart, to say nothing of a weakness of constitution which would probably stay with him as long as he lived. But he was no longer the invalid, and Mary Lessingham's heart rejoiced when she watched the big, brown, good-looking man, as he lay smoking and reading in the sunshine, or played with the children, building them wonderful castles in the sands, such as filled their young souls with joy and delight. It was a perfect time, that month by the sea, and when at last they went home again, and Lessingham first made his appearance at the office of the *Spokesman*, he was greeted all round with shouts of astonishment at his healthy look. His chief, indeed, told him plainly that it would be absolutely useless for him to try to get up another illness, for nobody would believe in it.

So Lessingham, with contentment and satisfaction, announced that he was ready to go back to work again, and told his chief that he was at his service that very evening if he chose. The editor told him that he need not begin until the following evening, he having already arranged for that night's work. And then he put aside his chaffing tone and asked him seriously if he felt as well as his looks betokened? Lessingham replied that he never felt better in his life, barring that he now and then had a twitch or two in his heart—just enough, as he said, to warn him that he had to be careful.

Then his chief turned to yet another subject.

'That is a very remarkable success of your wife's,' he said.

'A very fortunate one for us,' replied Lessingham.

'Under the circumstances, yes, that is true. But, apart from that, "Day-Dawn" is a very remarkable book. I have read it several times, and I have not half grasped its points even yet. By the way, did you see what the *Classic* says about it?'

'No, I did not know it had been noticed in the *Classic*. I suppose they have slated it.'

'Quite the contrary. Indeed, Dwyer has a signed article on it, which is bound to do the book a lot of good. Here it is. Read that.'

He handed a paper, or rather a journal, to Lessingham, pointing to the place at which he should glance. And Lessingham took it with eager hands that shook a little, in spite of himself and the success which had already attended Mary's first book. The article was headed only with the words 'Day-Dawn,' and the title was made the text of what followed.

'"Day-Dawn,"' it said, 'is an ideal title for the first book of a new author, who writes under the name of Mary Lessingham, for it not only serves as a title for the book, but it points to the day-dawn of a new era in literature, to the birth of a type of writing which is as far removed from the shameless and loathsome style which has obtained in these latter days, when the knowledge that a book is the work of a woman is enough to mark it as unpalatable and unfit for the eyes, not of the young person, but of the grown man. In "Day-Dawn" we have a novel of exceeding power, a story that is bright and fresh, a style that is at once earnest and convincing, overflowing with brilliant and epigrammatic phrases. Here is a specimen of this new author's witty and brilliant sayings—"It is but poor pinchbeck sort of virtue which can only find standing-room on the sins of others." Only nineteen words, and yet how much wisdom and knowledge of human nature do they not show. We have all of us known of those highly virtuous people who can only find standing-room on the sins of others, but it is given to few of us to be able to express our knowledge in nineteen words. All thinkers will take "Day-Dawn" to their hearts, and will place Mary Lessingham high in the front rank of living authors.'

Lessingham drew a long breath.

'Take it home to your wife,' said the editor. 'Higher praise, or praise more valuable, she will never have again. She should be a proud woman this day.'

Lessingham looked up.

'I assure you, Sir John'—for his chief had been included in the last list of New Year Honours—'I assure you that she has less pride than any woman or man that I knew in my life. She says that she has caught an effective trick of writing, that's all, and there is nothing in her.'

'Let her go on thinking so,' said Sir John, bluntly. 'And when the gay world has sought her out, she will be as popular personally as she is now by her pen. By the way, are you going to stay where you are?'

Lessingham looked up in open-mouthed astonishment.

'Why, Sir John,' he burst out, 'I wouldn't give up my post on the *Spokesman* for any money.'

Sir John laughed.

'Oh, I didn't mean that. I meant are you going to live where you are at present?'

'Oh, I see. Yes, for a few months longer. We must give six months' notice, unless we take another house from the same landlord, which we may decide to do. We don't want to launch out. We both feel that it is best to take things as quietly as possible, and there are still some odds and ends to be straightened before we should feel justified in making any important change. Everything went so terribly against us at first, and we have got behind a good bit. We mean to have everything fair and square before we go a single step out of our way.'

'My dear fellow,' said Sir John, 'I honour you both more than any words can tell. You know I have always taken a deep interest in you personally, or I should not have offered you your post on the *Spokesman*. I felt very much for you when you were so handicapped with your

illnesses, and what I saw of your wife during that time did not, I need hardly say, tend to lessen my interest in you or her. So that I am the more glad that you are both so sensible and so unspoiled by your wife's success, which is pronounced enough to have turned the head of most women. Of course, you will have to come out of your shell—a genius so bright as Mrs. Lessingham cannot be left very long in obscurity. Society will claim her for its own sooner or later.'

'Yes, I dare say it will; but my wife has already drunk pretty deeply of the social cup, for her father was a very rich man, who lived in tremendous style.'

'Cooke, of Mellingham Gardens, wasn't he?'

'Yes, that is he. Poor old chap, he is in a sad case now —quite childish.'

'You don't say so. Then he lives with you?'

'Yes, and will always do so. Yes, Sir John, you may well look like that. My wife has had care and trouble of all sorts.'

'She has, indeed. But now all money troubles will be over for her, and only those which are unavoidable will remain. She will have to work to keep up her reputation; but that kind of work is a pleasure, and never kills. So, good-bye. We shall have you back to-morrow?'

'As usual—to-morrow,' Lessingham replied.

'Good. And remember that when your wife is prepared to go out and let the world see her, I shall expect her to come first of anywhere to me.'

And it was just a month later than this that Sir John Elliott sent out invitations for an evening party at his house in Queen's Gate, and in the corner of the cards was printed —'To meet Mrs. Lessingham.'

CHAPTER X

IN THE GAY WORLD

> All really brilliant persons love the society of their fellows. It may be expedient that they do not indulge themselves over much in this form of recreation lest they be sapped of vitality which they should keep for their work. But they mostly love it, all the same.

FROM the moment that Mrs. Lessingham first set foot in Sir John Elliott's beautiful house in Queen's Gate, her social success was as assured as her literary fame. For the purpose of introducing her to the world no better place could have been found. Sir John Elliott was a bachelor, the owner as well as the editor of the *Spokesman*, and invitations to his entertainments were very eagerly sought after by those who aspired to an acquaintance with Upper Bohemia. His parties were also duly and truly attended by those who make Bohemian society so desirable a circle.

Just at first Mary was a little shy of her new position in the world, and as she looked charmingly youthful in her new gown of dead white silk, cut so as to show her neck and arms to the utmost advantage, she created an enormously favourable impression on all those who had come to see the new celebrity.

Without doubt, it was rather an ordeal for any woman to go through. She stood for hours by Sir John's side while several hundreds of people whom she had never seen before

were made known to her, each of whom made some civil or gushing or honestly admiring comment on her book. At first she tried to answer every one according not to his or her folly, but in something like sympathy with their remarks; but at last the crowd got so great and her head so confused with new names, faces, and voices, that she was reduced to a smile and a bow such as might mean anything or nothing.

'I'm sure you've had enough of this,' said Sir John at last, seeing that she was getting more and more vague in her answers. 'Let me take you down to have some supper. You have really earned it.'

'I have got so confused—so many strange faces,' said she. She made no attempt to disguise the fact that she was dead tired, and that supper would be a great relief.

Sir John gave her his arm, and led her away at once. As they passed through the entrance hall, he stopped for a moment.

'Here is Philip Lavender, come ever so early for him. Lavender, my dear friend, come straight in to supper with us. And you shall sit next to Mrs. Lessingham.'

Mr. Lavender's start and bow showed plainly that he had expected Mrs. Lessingham to be a very different kind of person to this well-favoured young woman, in her pretty white frock.

'And are you really Mrs. Lessingham?' he asked, as he settled himself into a seat on her right hand.

'I am,' she replied. 'And, tell me, are you *really* Mr. Lavender? Oh yes, I've seen you "on" many times; but to be sitting by you! Is it really you?'

He laughed as he replied—

'Ah, Mrs. Lessingham, you have turned the tables upon me so completely that I can be under no doubt as to your identity,' he said. And then they fell to talking of many things such as interested them both—of novels, of theatres,

of the world of art. 'Of course I know your husband, Lessingham of the *Spokesman*,' Mr. Lavender said presently. 'He always comes to us on a first-night. The next time that we have a production, I hope you will come with him.'

'Oh, I should love to do so!' she replied. 'I have been to a good many first-nights, though not quite lately. I—we—that is, we have been very poor, and I could not leave my children. But now all that is over, and I am more free. But I have never been to a Coliseum first-night.'

Mr. Lavender pulled down his cuff and wrote something upon it.

'To remind me that your name is added to the list,' he said, as he raised his eyes. 'Mrs. Lessingham, let me say that it will give me the greatest pleasure to see you at my theatre. I feel that you must be an absolutely sympathetic audience. Nobody could have written "Day-Dawn" without possessing the rare gift of sympathy in a very high degree.'

'What? You have read it—you?' she cried.

'I do read a novel sometimes; not very many, I must admit,' he said quietly. 'But I have read "Day-Dawn" more than once. It is a marvellous book. No, I am not saying it for flattery; I am too busy to flatter. I mean it.'

'You have made me a very proud woman by telling me so,' she said rather nervously.

'But why?'

'Because—oh, well, because I am so new to all this. I have not been to a party for years, and I feel—shy and diffident, and I never thought you would even know my name, much less have read my book.'

'More than once,' he put in. Oh, truly Philip Lavender understood the art of real flattery as well as any man in London.

I find it hard to tell how intensely Mary Lessingham enjoyed the rest of that evening. Before she rose from the

supper-table, she had promised Philip Lavender that she would go to see the play then running at the Coliseum before she was a week older, and then he made a point of seeking out Lessingham and offering him his special congratulations on his wife's great success. And then Mary insisted that Lessingham should take her home.

'I am tired, Hugh,' she said, 'and I do not want to talk any more. I have made friends with, or at least made grimaces at, all sorts and conditions of people, and I have had one real talk. So take me home before any more people come and spoil it.'

'I think you are wise,' said Lessingham, 'for Lavender is about the top of the tree, and there will be no one more interesting than he is. Here is Sir John. We have come to bid you good night.'

'You are going? Oh, you cannot go yet. It is perfectly preposterous,' cried Sir John, in most decided tones.

'I am not used to this kind of thing,' said Mary, who, having made up her mind to go, had no intention of being persuaded to stay. 'I am thoroughly tired, and my poor head is so confused by speaking to so many people, that I feel quite in a whirl. You must let me go.'

'But Miss Warrener has but just come, and she specially wishes to see you,' Sir John cried vexedly. 'You cannot leave yet—this party was specially given to meet you. It would be—oh, you cannot leave. Miss Warrener would think, especially as you have talked so long to Lavender, that you had some reason for not wishing to make her acquaintance.'

'You can do nothing else,' said Lessingham; so Mary was perforce obliged to abandon her intention of slipping away, and to remain more than an hour longer.

It was wonderful how, during that hour, Sir John contrived to present so many persons to the new star in the literary firmament. He brought them up in shoals, until, when at

last the Lessinghams did get away, Mary was almost ready to cry with sheer weariness.

And, after that eventful night, the Lessinghams were soon swept into the whirlpool of fashion, and invitations of all kinds were poured in upon them.

At Lady-day they left the modest house which had seen all their darkest days, and moved into a larger domicile in a more fashionable quarter. It was in one of those semi-private streets just on the south side of the park, and rejoiced in the name of Effringham Terrace. It would have been impossible to find a house in a more retired spot—to be in a populous part of London, that is to say. Mary had a large and airy room for her work, and Lessingham a den which communicated with it by a little passage. There were large and lovely reception rooms, and in these she was to be found at home on one Sunday afternoon in the month, when, after a short time, all the most notable people in London might be seen at some part or other of the afternoon. Without doubt, Mrs. Lessingham was a success, and any details concerning her life and work were eagerly snapped up and retailed in all sorts and conditions of journals. Probably no woman was so beset with requests for interviews; she was entreated to give sittings for all manner of portraits, from paintings by Royal Academicians to pencil sketches by artists for certain journals, and every description of a photographer. She was besieged by autograph hunters and by letters from aspirants to literary fame and emolument. She was asked to open bazaars, to preside at meetings for the advancement of various feminine causes, to allow her name to be used for conferring distinction upon all sorts of articles in daily use, and various dramatists were anxious to try their luck at making a play out of her first book and great success. In fact, had it not been for Lessingham, who had time to spare in the day for getting through all these minor details,

Mary must either have let her various correspondents go unanswered or have entirely neglected her own legitimate occupation in order to attend to them.

But, as a matter of fact, her real work was such as to keep her more than fully occupied. From all sides came inquiries for stories, and if she had had half a dozen hands all able and willing to write conjointly, she could easily have placed such an amount of copy. Lessingham, however, kept a singularly clear and level head through everything, and distributed his wife's work with most judicious parsimony; the result being that she was only to be read in the very best mediums, and that there was as keen a competition for work by the author of 'Day-Dawn' as had ever been known within the memory of man.

After mature deliberation, and a long and earnest talk with Sir John Elliott, Lessingham finally decided that he would, in the future, seek for no more work than that for which he was responsible on the *Spokesman*. He kept his position there partly because the pay was good, the work such as suited him, and the place which it gave in the world was beyond reproach. But, as he said to Sir John, it amounted pretty well to this—that if he went on for severe journalistic work such as he had done before, he would make three times as much money as his pay on the *Spokes man*, while somebody else would get the main part of the benefit from his wife's conspicuous success. While, by doing a limited quantity of journalistic work, he would retain his influence, keep his health, and be able to look closely after Mrs. Lessingham's interests. Sir John strongly advised him to follow this course, and as Mary had always insistently urged the same thing, he felt that it was the wisest line upon which he could possibly decide. So, when Mary went out into the world, she had always, or nearly always, the society of her husband to make the pleasure double. To her it was the most delightful change in the

world, and sometimes she used to wonder how she had ever lived through those first dreary years when she hardly saw him, excepting in the small hours of the morning, when his night's work was done, and he was oftentimes too tired to enjoy the little supper she had prepared for him, and too jaded even to talk.

She ruled her house with the regularity of clockwork. At a certain hour each morning she might be seen at her desk, and there she sat until the luncheon-bell rang at half-past one. After this, unless she was writing at white heat, she knocked off work for the day, and spent the remaining part of it at other literary pursuits. Even then she had hard work to get through her multitudinous engagements, and many a dawn saw them just driving home from some party which had been too good to leave at an earlier hour. For Mary Lessingham was as popular personally as she was in her books, and if the truth be told, now that the way had become smooth and money was flowing easily into the treasury, she had flung herself heart and soul into the new and brilliant life which had opened itself out before her, the more, perhaps, that she had for more than eight years been cut off from all manner of social enjoyment. It was perhaps a little weak in a woman so distinguished, possessed of such rare genius; but Mary Lessingham loved the atmosphere of distinction. It was sweet to her soul to see a stir in a crowd when she approached, to have strangers jostling each other to get a glimpse of her, to note that others were quite nervous when she spoke to them, and to receive every time that she showed herself an offering of homage and adulation. One evening at a first-night she heard one woman, indicating Lessingham, say to another—

'Oh, who is that?'

'That,' was the reply, in quite an awed tone, 'is Mrs. Lessingham's husband.'

And such homage as this was very precious to her. I

think it was a good deal owing to this love of Mary's for the delicate flattery of worship that the Lessinghams went out as much as they did; and as they went out, so did they naturally receive at their own house.

After a couple of years had gone by, the Lessinghams' dinners and the Lessinghams' evening receptions were so eagerly looked forward to and sought after, that Mary had to draw the line much more closely, out of sheer inability to accommodate such numbers of people. Her at-home days were always crowded to excess, and her triumphs were so many that they had almost ceased to be a pleasure to her.

'You ought to come to New York, Mrs. Lessingham,' said a well-known American lady to her one day.

'Oh, but for why?' Mary asked.

'To show yourself. It would do you a great deal of good with your American public. But you must come soon.'

'Perhaps some day we may run over,' said Mary, laughingly.

'Some day won't do at all,' declared the American lady, seriously. 'The Americans are verry hospitable, verry lavish, verry fond of celebrities; but they are verry fickle. You must take the crest of the wave, or you will come too late.'

CHAPTER XI

'THE EVERLASTING MRS. LESSINGHAM'

> I have always found that there is a great deal of wisdom in the sayings of poor and homely persons. I once heard a woman, who was grieving over the loss of a baby, say to a friend who was trying to show her the bright side of the picture: 'Ay, it's easy work burying other folk's bairns.' In the same way, there is nothing so easy as to tell those smarting under a shaft of venom, that it is beneath them to take any notice of it. We are none of us above personal feeling.

'OH, Mary!' said Lessingham one day when he went home about half an hour before dinner, 'I just met Coxwell, William Coxwell, of the *Royal*. He wants you to do him a story.'

'Does he really?' Her tone was a little astonished, because William Coxwell, the owner and editor-in-chief of the *Royal*, was a man of very deep prejudices, and had openly declared against the craze for Mrs. Lessingham. '"When Mrs. Lessingham brings a novel to me,"' she quoted, '"I will consider it as I would consider the novel of any unknown writer who applied to me. But to go hat in hand and beseech Mrs. Lessingham to write at exorbitant terms for the *Royal*, is what I have not the smallest intention of doing."'

Lessingham laughed.

'Oh, well, well, you mustn't think anything of that; and remember, there might not be a word of truth in it. I

never believe half of what one's dear friends repeat of what people have said about one. A little twist, a turn of a word or two, a different inflection of voice, and mischief is done that is never undone again in this world. All you've got to think is that William Coxwell has asked you if you will do him a short story, and he is willing to pay your terms for it.'

'Good!' said Mary. 'I will do him the story with pleasure. Are there any conditions?'

'One or two. The first and most important is that he shall have it within three days.'

'Absurd!' cried Mary. 'Did you not tell him so?'

'Well, I did not,' said Lessingham, quietly. 'I saw the man was hard pressed and really eager for it, and I thought, even if you had to put yourself out a bit to do it, it would be worth it, if only to confound the wiseacres who predicted that never a line of yours would be seen in the *Royal*.'

'Who said that William Coxwell had said that Mrs. Lessingham might soar to what giddy heights she liked, but never a line of hers would ever be seen in the *Royal*,' corrected Mary. Then she suddenly turned and caught hold of her husband's hand. 'Oh, Hugh! Hugh! you are so wise, so far-seeing; you always gain in the long run, just as I should fail. I should have said, "No; let Mr. Coxwell get one of his own authors; he can do very well without Mrs. Lessingham." But I should have been wrong, and I'll do the story. There.'

'I'm sure you would make an awful mistake if you did not,' Lessingham said, keeping hold of her hand.

'I will. Any more conditions?'

'Well, it is to be on the same lines as "Day-Dawn."'

Mary Lessingham looked at her husband. 'Oh, I see,' she remarked sarcastically. 'It's to be a sort of boiled-down "Day-Dawn," but, remember, not a boiled-down price.'

'He will give five and thirty pounds for it,' said Lessingham.

'Body and soul?' she asked.

'Serial rights only,' he replied. Then he looked up. 'Of course, I have made no definite promise for you. In fact, I threw every doubt on your being able to do it. I told him you were head and ears in work, but said that, being for so well-known a journal as the *Royal*, you might be tempted to lay aside your other work and oblige him. He said he would be immensely obliged if you would do it, and I promised him that I would let him know for certain by to-night's post. There, that is all.'

'Oh, I'll do it. Any other conditions?'

'It is to be illustrated by John Martin, to be about four thousand words long, and in your usual style.'

'As if I could write in anything else!' remarked Mary, in profound disdain.

Lessingham laughed.

'Poor old Coxwell has put your back up, which was just what our dear friend Mrs. Starlight most wished when she repeated to you what he had said of you,' he said. 'I don't believe that a word of it was true. But, if you feel that you would rather not do it, it is quite easy for me to write and say that you are not inclined to undertake a story at such short notice.'

'No, no,' Mary exclaimed. 'Why, Hugh, you must think that I have taken leave of my senses. Of course, I will do the story. I would rather have had a few days longer to do it in. I hate scurrying over my work; but I'll do my best, and let those who knew so much about Mr. Coxwell's opinions see that I am as welcome in the *Royal* as elsewhere.'

Accordingly, she settled down at her desk, full of the desire to produce such a short story that the editor of the *Royal* would see the necessity of speedily having another

from the same pen; but somehow or other the pen, usually so facile and easy, obstinately refused to flow, and ideas seemed to be conspicuous by their absence. All the day she struggled and wrestled with her truant thoughts, but to no effect, and when four o'clock arrived, and she was due at a very smart afternoon party, she was no nearer to the goal than she had been at the beginning.

'Hugh,' she said despairingly, 'I haven't an idea in my head.'

'Never mind. Get dressed, and let us go. You'll probably get one during the course of the day. Any way, don't force it. Better let it slide altogether than that.'

'Let it slide!' she echoed. 'Why, dear boy, did I ever let a commission slide? Anything else?'

'I know. But it is foolish to force yourself, because you cannot do good work under such conditions. It's utterly impossible.'

'Yes, I will knock off for to-day,' she said. Then she stretched her arms wide. 'I am so tired—as fagged as if I had worked for a week without stopping at all.'

'Have a cup of tea, and then get dressed and let us go out,' he suggested.

'Then ring the bell, will you? Oh, here is the blessing. I forgot you were going to a party, darling. How very smart Camille has made you both!'

The two elder children came in to show themselves. They were going to a juvenile party, and were as lovely a vision as could well be seen. Mary had long ago forgotten that her children had ever been without their French maid, their pretty clothes, their own little social swim. They were very, very smartly and daintily garbed on this occasion, but to Mary they did not seem at all out of the common.

'And where is Cissy?' she asked. She sometimes spoke of the youngest girl in this way.

'Cissy has gone to Maud Heriot's birthday party with Miss Day. Miss Day would not let her come in to show herself. She said she was sure, as you were staying in your room so long, that you were busy. She did show herself to Gou-Gou,' replied Coralia, who was now six years old, and as dainty a little miss as one might see in a day's march. 'Gou-Gou,' by-the-bye, was the children's name for Mrs. Lessingham's father.

'All right. I dare say Miss Day was quite right; nay, I am sure she was,' Mary cried. 'So go off to your party, darlings, and be sure you enjoy yourselves very much. Good-bye, my sweet hearts.'

She was as cheerful as ever by the time tea came; but when she had drunk it, she hesitated about going out.

'I don't think I ought to go,' she said doubtfully. 'I might get an idea if I stopped in quietly by myself.'

Lessingham took her by both hands, and drew her to her feet.

'You will get ten times as many ideas by going out with me and enjoying yourself,' he said masterfully. He kissed her a great many times, and smoothed the heavy brown and gold hair away from her low forehead. 'I hate to see you fagging yourself over an idea that won't come,' he declared.

'Yes, but you like to see me going preening round as proud as any peacock,' she cried quickly.

'Ah, that I do; for then I know that the whole world sees what you are, and puts nearly as high value on you as I do.'

'You are very foolish about me, Hugh,' she cried.

'Perhaps I am. Oh, here is the tea! Now, see if it will not make you something like yourself again.'

As they drank their tea, and ate the dainty little cakes which had come with it, she quite forgot her struggle with brain, and became her own laughing gay self again. And

then she dressed, and they went off in a hansom-cab to their party, where nobody was more adulated and admired than Mrs. Lessingham.

They had a dinner of some importance to go to in the evening; but, before midnight, Mary insisted on going home, in order that she might find herself fresh and bright for her next day's work. It was always her habit to read for a little while after she was in bed, as she said that she might free her head of any ideas that were floating about, and insure a good night's rest. A table stood beside the bed, and on this were always to be found a syphon of aërated water, a glass, and any books and magazines which she had not read. On this evening she took up a little weekly journal, devoted to some woman's cause, and carelessly glanced down its columns. She read over one or two pages with but scant interest, until presently her own name caught her eye—'the everlasting Mrs. Lessingham.' 'The everlasting Mrs. Lessingham!' What a strange phrase! It occurred in a paragraph of but moderate length.

'We understand that the new institute at West Hackney will be opened, on the 10th inst., by Mrs. Lessingham, the author of "Day-Dawn." While congratulating the committee of the West Hackney Institute on having secured so popular a personage for their opening ceremony, we cannot help asking ourselves, in view of Mrs. Lessingham's multitudinous engagements, when she finds time to write the novels which have been so successfully boomed during the last two or three years. Mrs. Lessingham is certainly a very wonderful woman. By-the-bye, we heard her spoken of, the other day, by a flippant young person of the modern school, as "the everlasting Mrs. Lessingham," and we are still asking ourselves whether it was a good shot or merely a chance bull's-eye.'

Mary Lessingham read the paragraph over and over again. What did it mean? She glanced over to Lessingham's

bed; but he was already asleep, so she resisted the desire to arouse him that he might read the curious and rather ambiguous notice. 'The everlasting Mrs. Lessingham!' How the phrase stuck in her mind and worried her, like a gnat-bite or an almost infinitesimal splinter of wood in the hand! She tried to read; she did her best to put the absurd thing right out of her mind, and to think no more about it. 'The everlasting Mrs. Lessingham.' There it was, a phrase which, if it happened to catch on in other people's minds as it had fastened on hers, would be quite enough to damage her reputation beyond all hope of repair. 'The everlasting Mrs. Lessingham.' And yet she could not exactly tell whether it was malicious or only meant to be poking a little fun at her popularity. It was a phrase which might be read in a dozen ways, both complimentary and the reverse. 'The everlasting Mrs. Lessingham.' Yes, there was a sting, and a real nasty one too, and yet it was a difficult one to define. As she lay there thinking it over, a ridiculous riddle came into her head—

> 'I went to the wood and I got it;
> As soon as I got it, I sat down to look for it;
> The longer I had it, the less I liked it;
> And I took it home with me, because I couldn't find it!'

'This is too utterly absurd,' said Mary Lessingham, putting all her papers straight with a resolute hand. 'I will go to sleep and think no more about it. It is really too silly of me.'

She poured herself out a good drink of syphon water, turned out the electric light above her head, and settled herself comfortably among her pillows. But she could not sleep. The phrase, 'The everlasting Mrs. Lessingham,' and that absurd riddle kept coming back again and again to her mind with a persistence that was fatal to any chance of sleep. 'The everlasting Mrs. Lessingham,' and 'The

longer I had it, the less I liked it;'—such was the thread of thought which kept running through her head. And how silly it was for any one of distinction to be influenced by a wretched little rag which sent its flimsy copies broadcast! The *Woman of Sport*—what was the value of such a journal? Why, simply nothing. And then there came another thought, that a gnat is not an insect of any value: quite the contrary, in fact; and yet the gnat can make itself felt, its bumming buzz can keep the weary from sleep, and its tiny poisoned sting can make a rankling fester which will, under favourable conditions, last for months. So with the *Woman of Sport*. It was a rag of a journal, but that phrase was one which could sting. 'The everlasting Mrs. Lessingham.'

She turned on the light again at last and tried to read. But though her eyes followed the printed page, her mind refused to take in the ideas which it was intended to convey, and went ever and again back to the *Woman of Sport*, and the paragraph about 'the everlasting Mrs. Lessingham.' So the weary hours of that wretched night wore slowly away, and, at last, morning dawned to find her haggard and tired, and no more fit to begin a story over which she was even more anxious than usual, than she was fit to fly.

CHAPTER XII

BRICKS WITHOUT STRAW

> It is doubtful whether those employed in merely mechanical pursuits ever understand the deadly qualms of absolute fear which overtake those who follow the arts. Art is a fickle mistress, generous and loving at times, but capricious and intensely difficult at others. Art, when she is led, is generally docile and tractable enough; when one has the wish or the need to drive her, she can kick like a mule.

As soon as Lessingham was awake, Mary gave him the paragraph to read. He, man-like, took a less distorted view of it than she did.

'It's a wretched little rag,' he said; 'and that was written by some one who is dead jealous of you.'

'But why should any one be jealous of me?' she cried, almost piteously. 'I never lord it over any one; I am always as sweet and nice to every one I meet as I know how to be. I hate celebrities who go about with their noses in the air, and look as if they were sniffing at the rest of the world. I never do that sort of thing.'

Lessingham laughed.

'No, you have committed a much more unpardonable sin than that, for you have not only been successful, but you have managed to keep your place. Heaps of people, who would never grudge a woman a success over a single book, would like to rend her limb from limb when she goes on

having success after success, each bigger and more assured than the last.'

'But why?' she exclaimed.

'Why? why? Why are there people who would rejoice if Philip Lavender were to break both his legs to-morrow? Because his shine would be diminished for a time. Not his real shine—nothing could ever dim that—but his actual show. You must not forget that you have succeeded where hundreds have failed. They none of them think that they have failed because they cannot write, or that you have succeeded because you can: not a bit of it. No; in their mean and narrow minds, it is all a question of luck, good luck and ill luck, and that is all the difference that they see or acknowledge between you and them. And those are the people who hate you, who would like to have your blood, who would rejoice if only you would compromise yourself in some way, if only you would get cross with me, or go bankrupt or blind, or something horrible to crush you down and take the life and heart out of you. And what do you do? You go smiling along, handsome, happy, prosperous; you want nothing of anybody but a fair exchange for what you give; and all these insects can do is to hate you, to try to besmear you with a little of their own superabundance of venom. Bah! it makes me sick to think of women like you ever knowing that their innocuous spite has been aimed at you.'

'You frighten me, Hugh,' she said; and she looked frightened.

'My dearest, that is the very last thing that I wish,' he cried tenderly. 'What I do want to do is to imbue you with such a contempt for these creatures that you would be able to read a thousand of such cheap bits of journalism without even a wince, with no more comment than a smile.'

'I've been awake all night,' she admitted.

'For a thing like that!' he cried contemptuously. 'Never let a soul but me know it. It would rejoice the creature who wrote it beyond everything.'

Accordingly, Mary Lessingham did her best to put the obnoxious paragraph right out of her mind, and, as the influence of her husband over her was very strong, she succeeded fairly well. The effect of her sleepless night was, however, most disastrous to her working power, and lunch-time again found her as far off an idea for the *Royal* as she had ever been.

'I really don't know what I shall do,' she said hopelessly to Lessingham. 'My head is like a boiled potato, and has just as much in it. And I must get an idea from somewhere or other. Hugh, do you think I'm getting used up—worn out?'

Her tone was one of awe, and Lessingham could not help laughing at her.

'Not a bit of it,' he replied. 'I do think that you have let yourself run down a bit; and when you have got through this story, or when you have given up trying to do it, we had better run down to Brighton or over to Paris for a few days. Possibly it would not be a bad idea to do both—a week at Brighton, and then across by Newhaven and Dieppe for a week in Paris.'

Unfortunately, although she resolutely stuck at her study table until the first bell rang for dinner, she found herself no nearer to the goal of her desires and necessities.

Lessingham met her as she slowly mounted the stairs to her bedroom.

'Well, what cheer?' he asked, though he saw by her face that she was still in the depths of vague wandering after something definite.

She fairly groaned.

'Look here,' said Lessingham, sensibly; 'it isn't worth it at any price. You are thoroughly run down, and want a

bit of a change. You had better let me write to Coxwell, and tell him you are not well enough to do it.'

'Such a paltry excuse—he would never believe in it,' she said, in a tone of despair.

'What matter for that?' cried Lessingham. 'Why, if you force yourself when you are evidently fagged out, the consequences may be most disastrous. Better, far better give it up altogether. After all, five and thirty pounds is no very important commission.'

'It is five and thirty pounds,' said Mary, sensibly; 'and to throw it up is like throwing it away. At all events, Hugh, leave it until the time is up. I feel that it will come still. I do, indeed.'

She quickly made her toilette for dinner, and they went down together when the second bell rang.

'You had better have a little fizz to-night,' said Lessingham. 'After the grind you have done all day, a glass of that *Brut* will pick you up better than anything.'

She did not demur. Indeed, she was so fagged out that she was ready to do anything that he told her, excepting to throw up the commission from the editor of the *Royal.* He poured her out a glass of the bright sparkling wine before she touched even her soup; and Mary made a far better dinner than she could have thought possible. By the time it was finished, she was even cheerfully prepared to give up all idea of trying to get the story, and she sat back in her chair, feeling very much in accord with Hugh, that, after all, five and thirty pounds with the *Royal* thrown in, might be bought at too dear a price.

'Have a chartreuse,' said Lessingham, as he took his coffee-cup from her.

'No, no, dear, I would rather not,' she said.

'Well, you have been bending over your desk all day,' he said, 'and that *vol-au-vent* was rather rich. If I were you I would take a *liqueur* as a matter of principle.'

'Oh, well, perhaps you are right. Yes, it was rather rich, but very good. I have enjoyed my dinner immensely. I think a real good hard grind does make one appreciate one's dinner beyond everything.'

He poured out a glassful of the fascinating green liqueur, and she drank it with more than one grimace—for, of all things, Mary Lessingham was a really temperate woman, and had no love for strong drinks of any kind. The chartreuse acted like a charm upon her. It seemed to run like fire through her veins and go straight to her head. She sat quite quietly, considering the new sensation, and wondering if real hard drinkers felt—or liked to feel—this curious sense, as of molten lead being poured down their throats.

'How can people drink such stuff for their pleasure?' her thoughts ran. Then she got up.

'Hullo, where are you going?' said Lessingham.

'To the drawing-room,' she replied. 'I am too tired and done-up to go anywhere to-night. I will go and sit quietly, doing nothing; and I will try and forget that I am in want of an idea at all.'

'I will finish my cigarette,' he said. 'I have to go down to the office. Won't you go with me, just for a drive?'

'I'll see. Is the carriage ordered?'

'Yes, in an hour's time from now. If you remember, I was going to drop you at Lady Francis L'Estrange's.'

'Oh yes, so you were; and then you were coming back for me. Well, I may change my mind and go, after all. You might look in there and see if I have changed my mind.'

'All right. I think, if I were you, I would make an effort and go. It is not good to stay at work too long at a spell. You pay too dearly afterwards.'

'I dare say you are right. But I must have an hour's quiet and rest before I make up my mind. I feel as if I were going to sleep as I stand.'

She went away then, passing up the stairs to the drawing-room, a large double room, beautifully furnished and decorated in softest shades of willow-green, with great quantities of blue china, and a few rare engravings. The windows overlooking the street were open, and the fresh summer air came in between the filmy lace curtains, giving a refreshing coolness after the great heat of the day.

'It is the overpowering heat which has made me feel so languid and unlike myself,' said Mary, as she settled herself on her favourite seat, a low and very cosy settee, which stood close against one of the windows. She leaned back, idly watching the lights dwindling away into the distance as the street turned and joined the main road above. Her mind was in a pleasant state of uncertainty, or rather of vagueness. She had forgotten that she had been wrestling in vain during two whole days with a fugitive idea, which remained a fugitive still; she was a little sleepy, a little mixed in sensations, and a certain curious haziness seemed to have taken complete possession of her, blotting out all that had pained and worried her during the past eight and forty hours. She felt like a lotus-eater 'resting weary limbs at last on beds of Asphodel.' It was not the blessed weariness such as follows a task well done, a battle won, a deed accomplished; no, it was rather a resting on unaccustomed waves of buoyant water, with a sense of exhilaration, mingled with a cessation from strife—it was a dream of the lotus-eater over again.

She had not moved when Lessingham came in to tell her that he was off to his work.

'My poor darling,' he said pitifully, 'you are tired out. I wish I had never seen or heard of Coxwell, or thought for a moment of your trying to do his beastly commission.'

'No, no, Hugh,' she returned; 'I am all right now, and quite rested. I shall most likely go to Lady Francis's party after a while. I believe it would do me good. I am not

going to worry about the story any more. If it comes, well and good; if not, you must see Mr. Coxwell and tell him that I cannot manage it this time. I dare say he won't think any worse of me that I cannot write to order always, as if I were measuring out yards of tape.'

'Very likely not. Well, then, I will look in at Cadogan Square and see if you are there.'

He kissed her and went off. The next moment she heard the door of the brougham shut, and then the sound of wheels on the well-kept road reached her. She was undecided whether she should dress for the party, or go to bed and try what a good night's rest, a long night's rest, would do towards the accomplishment of that story in the morning. For Mary Lessingham had no notion of weakly giving up the chance of confounding her enemies, who had predicted that, no matter what triumphs might be hers, a show in the pages of the *Royal* would never be one of them. And then she began to think about the story, the story which was to be in her usual style, and to be on the same lines as 'Day-Dawn.' How tired she was of the lines of 'Day-Dawn'! Did editors and publishers, and the public, think that two good things could not come out of the same brain? Did it stand to common sense that because she had had one enormous success with one book, every other book she should afterwards write must be that book and water? Why should an author be cursed with his or her success in such a way as to be obliged to turn out every after-story on the pattern of the first? Not but what 'Day-Dawn' was a good book, and she knew it. Her thoughts ran on for some little time, going over the story of 'Day-Dawn,' and of how she had not been quite sure whether to treat a certain part of it in this way or that; and, as she sat there, thinking over the past, there came to her, like a sudden flash, an inspiration—the idea for which she had been seeking for two weary, hopeless days, the scheme of

just such a story as was wanted for the pages of the *Royal.*

She crossed the room and rang the bell.

'Firman,' she said to the servant who came in answer to the summons, 'I want a cup of tea made at once and taken into my study. I have some work to do.'

'Anything to eat with it, ma'am?' asked the maid.

'Oh, you may give me a biscuit or a sponge-cake,' Mrs. Lessingham replied. 'And turn the light on for me and draw the curtains. I shall want nothing more to-night of any one.'

A quarter of an hour later she was sitting at her desk and hard at work. She never hesitated as to the lines of the story. It was as easy to her as if some one else had been sitting there quietly dictating to her from a printed book. She wrote rapidly and clearly, never waiting for a word or the turning of a phrase; and when Lessingham, feeling not a little anxious about her, came in at a few minutes past three o'clock, she was just writing the concluding lines.

'Why, you are at work!' he cried in amazement.

'Yes; sit down, and don't talk for a few minutes. Smoke. Go up to our room and make me a cup of tea. I shall be done in ten minutes.'

She bent her head down over the table again, and Lessingham, with a heart on fire with admiration for her grit and pluck, went quietly off to their bedroom to make the cup of tea which she had asked for. It was a fad of Mary Lessingham's to always have a cup of tea the very last thing before she went to bed. Lessingham always said that it was a relic of the old hard days, when she had been used to sit up for him with a bit of supper half prepared by her own hands—the only meal they ever really enjoyed together without the presence of others. So in Mary's bedroom, now that a little supper in the small hours was an unnecessary thing, there was to be found a dainty little

tea-service for two, with a silver tea-caddy, and a neat little kettle, which stood over a small spirit-lamp, and in which the water could be brought to boil in the course of a few minutes. Lessingham had just filled the little teapot when Mary came up, carrying the manuscript with her.

'There, it is done. I am too tired to correct it to-night,' she said, stretching her arms wide. 'Oh, you have the tea ready, dear Hugh!' she said. 'I never enjoy any tea like yours.'

He poured it out for her at once.

'You are the most wonderful woman that ever lived,' he said, bending down, as he put the cup beside her, to kiss her fondly. 'When I went out you seemed to me perfectly exhausted and good for nothing. And yet, you could rouse up and write a story. You are simply a wonder.'

'And it's a good story, too,' she said, stirring her tea and speaking with complete frankness, as she always did to him on the subject of her work.

'I'll just read it straight away,' he returned. 'I suppose you are too tired to sleep just yet?'

'Dear boy, I am going to have my tea, and to play patience for half an hour, and then I shall get into bed and sleep like a dead woman,' she replied.

So while she drank her tea, and then sat turning the little patience cards over and over, Lessingham read what she had done.

'It is a shame to waste all this on a short story,' he burst out at last.

'Not at all,' she replied coolly. 'Where that came from there is plenty more like it. I was in a great fright yesterday and to-day, lest my stock should be getting exhausted; but, you see, such a fear was quite groundless. I am only wanting a bit of a change, that is all.'

'How came you to get the idea, after all?' he asked.

Lessingham was always deeply interested in his wife's

work, and found no detail thereof too small for his attention.

'It came while I was sitting where you left me,' she replied. 'It was the dinner, or the champagne, or an inspiration, or my good fate, or something. At all events, it is done, and the *Royal* is safe, and Mr. Coxwell will be satisfied, and all my enemies and detractors will be put to shame; so I am well pleased with myself and every one else.'

CHAPTER XIII

THE OLD MANOR HOUSE

The longing to be alone is ever that of a jaded and over-weary spirit. To get away, to shake off the shackles of ordinary life, to make a fresh start, is the besetting desire of those who live by the inmost sweat of their brows.

> 'Oh, for the wings, for the wings of a dove!
> Far away, far away would I rove.
> E'en in the wilderness build me a nest,
> And remain there for ever at rest.'

In spite of her splendid resolution and courage, Mary Lessingham was a wreck the following day. Her head ached to distraction, though it was not the kind of headache which is benefited by staying in bed. Her face was drawn and pale, and her eyes looked strained and as if she had gone through some violent stress—as indeed she had.

'My poor child,' said Lessingham, as he first noticed what poor looks she was in. 'Do let me beg of you to take life very quietly for the next few days. How soon can we get off to Brighton?'

'There is Philip Lavender's dinner to-morrow night,' she replied. 'We must go to that.'

'I suppose we must. If we didn't, nobody would believe we had been asked. But after that?'

'Bessie Germaine's wedding——'

'We can chuck that,' said Lessingham, who took no particular stock in Bessie Germaine.

'Yes, of course we can. But the next day we are promised for Mrs. St. George's evening party; and it will be a good one.'

'We could get off that on the score of absence from town,' replied Lessingham.

'But we did not go to the last one,' objected Mary; 'and she was not a little upset about it.'

'Oh, well, we don't want to quarrel with Mrs. St. George,' said Lessingham, sensibly; 'so we had better not miss her blessed show. And after that?'

'Well, there are all sorts of things,' replied Mary, wearily; 'but nothing very important—nothing we could not get off.'

'Good! Then we will decide to get off to Brighton the day after Mrs. St. George's party, and let nothing stand in the way of it. And you will promise me that you will not touch pen or paper again until we come home?'

'Oh yes, willingly. Indeed, Hugh,' she replied, 'I am just as done up now as I can very well be. I shall be only too thankful to feel that I can take a bit of a rest without feeling that I am wasting time, and throwing so much money away.'

So the two made their arrangements, and left London for Brighton on the day following Mrs. St. George's party. The weather was fearfully hot, and Brighton proved to be anything but a land of Goshen. So they crossed over the silver streak, and put in a few days at Dieppe; and Mary began to feel that she had never ailed anything in all her life, and that the nightmare of those two days—during which she had felt helplessly stranded for want of an idea—had been, in very truth, a nightmare and nothing else. They ran up to Paris, and Mary did a good bit of shopping to great advantage; and then they went back to town, and began to plan out what they should do with themselves during the autumn months.

As Mary very sensibly said, it was useless to think of

accepting the many invitations which they had received. To stay in half a dozen country houses would mean having a very large increase to her wardrobe; it would mean doing no work of any kind; it would mean being more or less on the rack from morning till night, and being thoroughly used up in nerve-force, by the continual draw that would be made on her conversational powers, and on her genius for amusing a crowd of people. The idea of going to a fashionable seaside place, where she would have friends calling on her at all hours, after the considerate manner of friends who find themselves a little out of their usual bonds; where her life would certainly, after the first few days, degenerate into a series of more or less smart afternoon parties, picnics, and little unceremonious dinners, into much changing of garments, and, in short, to be simply a reflex of her usual London life,—did not in any way agree with her ideas of a real holiday.

'It won't do, Hugh,' she said, with much decision. 'I must have some place where I can be quiet and let alone. Let us try to find some dear little house in the country, near to some sea-coast village, where we can vegetate, and wear the same suits from breakfast to bed-time.'

So Lessingham set about finding such a place; and he and Mary, with profound secrecy, made a series of small excursions for the purpose of inspecting the various quarters which the house-agents represented as exactly suitable to their needs. These little excursions were always planned on the same lines—a railway journey timed to land them at their destination by the luncheon-hour at the best hotel or inn in the place, or, where there was no railway within five or six miles, at the nearest town. Then a drive or walk to the place under consideration, and after that, usually a few sarcastic remarks from Mary, and a journey home again. And then, at last, they unexpectedly lighted upon just the very place for their needs—a house that was half farm, half

villa, with a dream of a garden, an orchard, a pleasaunce, a most fascinating stable-yard, and a duck-pond. The house was a long rambling concern, with many low-ceiled rooms which ran one out of the other, scarcely any two being on the same level. It stood right away from the high-road, and was sheltered from all dust by a thick grove of trees; a fine tennis-lawn stretched along one side of the house, and a couple of meadows gave a sense of freedom, which is unattainable by any other means. Over the house grew all manner of creeping-plants and trees. Ivy clambered up one side, and Gloire de Dijon roses twined themselves about two of the drawing-room windows. Wild honeysuckle, clematis, French ivy and jessamin, all seemed as if they were vying with each other as to which should have the ascendency.

'But how did such a place come here?' Mary cried to the country-woman who was acting as their cicerone. 'I mean, how came a place to be so well cared for in this far-away little place? You are more than a mile from the village, and five from a station. The land is not enough to farm—it is a pleasure-house and nothing else.'

'I'll tell you, maam,' replied the good woman. 'It happened like this. The late owner was an old gentleman of over eighty years of age, and his good lady was only a year or so younger. He was very well off; and, as they had no children, and he got to be too old to be out in all weathers, as a farmer must be, he decided to leave the place—and, in fact, to sell it. However, he chanced to find out that Mrs. Hinkley was fretting her heart out at having to leave the house that she'd been married to; and, just then, he had an offer from the squire for the land. So he took it, only keeping the house and the bit of land that you see. I mind well how delighted the mistress was when she found she would not have to leave her garden, for she loved every stick and stone of the place, and every tree and shrub, and every

flower that she'd planted with her own hands. Master, he pulled down all the cow-sheds and all the outbuildings, and made it a bit more ornamental-like; and they both made up their minds to pass the rest of their days where they'd spent so many happy years together. They lived a good twenty years after the master gave up farming, and all there was to remind them that there had ever been a farm here at all was the poultry-yard, which was the mistress's joy to the last.'

'And to whom does the place belong now?' asked Lessingham.

'To the squire, sir. Mr. Hinkley left it to him just as it stood. And the squire, who was always very fond of poor master and mistress, could not find it in his heart to break the pretty place up. So it's to let to a suitable tenant, and one that meets with the squire's approval.'

'And where does he live?'

'Just seven miles from here,' the woman replied.

'That's far enough. We could go over and see him, I suppose?' said Lessingham.

'You'll always find the squire in about two o'clock,' the good soul replied. 'Your nighest way is to go back to Rolwyn Station, and take the train from there to Thorpeness. The hall is not ten minutes' walk from Thorpeness Station.'

'And the squire's name?' Lessingham asked.

The woman rather gasped to think that people could exist who did not know the name of the puissant Squire of Thorpeness, but recovered herself after a moment, and said that the Squire of Thorpeness was Sir Edward Harborough. Whereupon Lessingham presented her with a broad piece of silver, and they hied them back to Rolwyn, with a view to running the Squire of Thorpeness to earth as soon as possible.

They found him without difficulty, and the result of the

interview was that within a week they were the occupants of the Old Manor House, as the place was called, at a rental of one hundred pounds a year.

'It's a regular find,' said Lessingham, as they journeyed back to London. 'It would have cost a lot to have furnished a place for ourselves, no matter how small it might be; and all furnished houses I have ever seen have a certain look about them which would drive you out of your mind in about a week. This place is a home, and carries the stamp of it in every room. I am sure it is one of the wisest moves we have ever made. And, being so home-like, we can run down here for a few days whenever we want to be by ourselves.'

'Oh yes! it is a sweet little place,' said Mary, who was all excitement at their new venture. 'And we won't let anybody know where we are going, but will just give ourselves up to work and fresh air. I simply must get that novel done for the syndicate—and I must get all the air and rest I possibly can. And how lovely it will be for the children and for poor Gou-Gou! And being all in such beautiful order, we can go off as soon as ever we like.'

So they left town, keeping their destination a profound secret, and making every preparation for such a time of quiet and rest as neither of them had enjoyed for a long time. Of course they took down the victoria; and then, after a few days, they discovered that it was not very good for the carriage—a smart London turn-out—to be at everybody's beck and call for all the fetching and carrying that were necessary for a large household; so Lessingham looked out for a smart little cart and a good sturdy pony, which would do the main part of the station and village work, and so allow the smarter carriage to be treated with more care and consideration.

And then Mary Lessingham settled herself down to a spell of real hard work, usually going for a drive with

Lessingham in the early morning; or, if not for a drive, for a stroll round the place, the charms of which she was never tired of extolling.

'It's a gem of a place, Hugh,' she would cry when they had wandered arm-in-arm in and out of the little demesne, and had, so to speak, made the grand tour; 'and we were real lucky to light upon it. I don't think I shall ever want —really want—to go back to London again.'

'Oh yes, you will,' he replied. 'To live here always would be nothing short of social extinction; and it is not to be thought of for a moment. That is why you like it so much, because it is such a contrast to your London life. But to live for always among these village yokels, who don't know a line you have ever written, and who think no more of you than they did of the poor old lady who lived here for so many years, would be a living death. Besides, you will get through this place after a while, take my word for it, and will be wanting to have as many visitors as the house will hold.'

'That I never shall,' she declared.

But therein time very soon proved that Mary Lessingham was wrong. Before ten days more had gone over their heads, a shabby cab unexpectedly appeared on the neatly kept carriage-drive which led from the main road up to the house. And in the cab sat a young man, who got out and applied himself pretty vigorously to the knocker, which, up to this time, had seemed to Mary as but an ornament to the front door, and not a thing for use in everyday life. He made inquiries for Mrs. Lessingham, and was shown into the long, low, dainty drawing-room, where he sat down and made himself comfortable and quite at home.

'You will think it most unceremonious coming down upon you like this, Mrs. Lessingham,' he said, when Mary joined him. 'I have brought an introduction from Mr. Coxwell

of the *Royal*. To tell you the truth, he is rather in a hole, and he wants you to help him out of it.'

'And what does he want me to do?' asked Mary, with a smile.

'Well, you were good enough to help him out of a difficulty the other day,' said the young gentleman, 'and at very short notice.'

'I cannot always be depended upon to fill up gaps at very short notice,' put in Mary, who had no notion of allowing even so important a person as the editor of the *Royal* to think that he could do what he liked with her.

'No, no; it is not quite a similar case. The fact is, that the two proprietors of the *Royal* are about to start a new venture—a lady's weekly journal, which is to outshine everything that has ever been done in that line. Mr. Coxwell has not forgotten how gallantly you came to his rescue when he was in difficulty the other day; and as he has the need to make arrangements at once for the story with which to begin the new journal, he would like to have one of yours for that purpose.'

'Then where is the difficulty?' asked Mary.

'Ah, well, it is just this. A certain author claims that Mr. Coxwell ought to take one of—of—let us say *its;* and Mr. Coxwell is not of the same opinion. He does not want to say plainly that he won't have this author at present, whom, between ourselves, he does not think strong enough to start the journal; and he wants to be able to reply by this evening's post that he has definitely arranged for one of yours.'

At this Mary laughed.

'Well, Mr. Street,' she said, with just a glance at the card which she still held in her hand, 'I think I had better call for my husband. I never talk business, for it is my business to write books, not to sell them. My husband will settle the whole matter with you, if it is to be settled; and,

meantime, I will let them know that you will be here for lunch.'

'You are most kind,' said Mr. Street. 'Then may I tell the coachman to put his horse up? I really am so sorry to inflict myself on you in this way, but I cannot get back until the three-o'clock train, as, even if I could get my business with you finished in ten minutes, there is no train earlier.'

'Don't think about it,' said Mary, hospitably. 'We are delighted to have a fresh influence for a few hours. We have been here already a month, and we have scarcely seen a soul. No one, indeed, excepting the vicar, who is not especially inclined to be friendly with us—or, for the matter of that, we with him,' she added, in a tone of one who has neither part nor lot with the religious side of life.

At this moment Lessingham, in his easy grey tweed clothes and with a pipe in his mouth, came leisurely in.

'You wanted me,' he began; then he saw that his wife had a visitor. 'Oh, I had no idea that you had any one with you,' he said.

Mary introduced their visitor and briefly explained the object of his visit.

'And while you are talking business, I will go and show Mr. Street what a good housekeeper I am,' she said graciously.

She went away, leaving the two men together. Lessingham promptly proposed a drink and a cigarette, and, while they were discussing them, which they did in the big conservatory which led out of the drawing-room, and which Mary had almost cleared of plants, and had made into a most luxurious smoking-room and lounge, they quickly came to terms; and Lessingham had promised that his wife should write the first story to appear in Mr. Coxwell's new journal for women.

By that time luncheon was ready, and the three discussed it in pleasant and friendly fashion. The young man, who

was a journalist and a great favourite of Mr. Coxwell's, who was noted for having as many young men of position as possible about him, was charmed with his brilliant hostess; and Mary, not having had any one outside her own home-circle to talk to for more than a month, was seen at her very best and brightest, so that the time for the young man's departure came all too soon for them all.

'You must come down and see us again,' said Mary, as she took his hand in farewell.

'I should like it immensely,' was the ready reply.

'Come down the first Saturday you are free,' put in Lessingham, who had revelled in a chat with one of his own kind.

'But wouldn't that be taking you by storm?' Mr. Street inquired.

'Not a bit of it. We've got several spare rooms, not one of which we have, up to now, attempted to fill. So whenever you like to come we shall be ready to receive you, and be extremely glad of your company.'

'I could come down on Saturday week,' the younger man began rather diffidently.

'Agree to come then, and let us look upon it as settled,' cried Mary.

'Saturday week. There's a train leaving town at two o'clock, which lands you here in time for a cup of tea and a good game of tennis. Or, if you like, we can go over to Lowborough, and have a turn over the golf-course there. It's rather a good one.'

'I'd rather say tennis,' said Street. 'You see, I go down to golf every week of my life. Tennis and lounging will be a far greater change for me.'

'All right. Then Saturday week. Good-bye.'

And then the old cab lumbered off, and their new acquaintance was carried out of sight.

CHAPTER XIV

IN A PITIFUL PLIGHT

> I have never yet known the artistic temperament which was not, in one sense, the same as every other nature of its kind. I mean in the longing for the attainment of the definite, in the yearning to get the whole of life planned out on certain lines. The artistic temperament will lay out the most elaborate schemes for pinning itself down in some particular direction, and when these plans are all completed, the fettered soul is never satisfied until it has broken through every one of them.

THAT unexpected visit of young Street to the old Manor House proved to be the breaking of the ice for Lessingham and Mary. Up to the day of his arrival, they had both been perfectly content in the elaborate network of isolation which they had surrounded themselves with. Neither had expressed, or indeed felt, the very smallest desire for the society of other than their own immediate circle, neither had even suggested that house-guests would be desirable or advantageous; and yet, after that one young man had been down to the old place on a mere Saturday to Monday visit, they found themselves quite naturally feeling and saying that it was a thousand pities to have such a sweet place and to selfishly keep it to themselves, that if young Street had enjoyed his short stay so much, so would many others among their friends to whom they owed so much help or kindness.

'And as we have three nice spare rooms, to say nothing of the front attic—which we could make quite nice with very little trouble,' ended Mary—'I don't know if we could not give some of our friends more pleasure than by entertaining so much in London.'

'Oh, one doesn't need a house of one's own for that,' cried Lessingham, with a laugh.

'No, true; for how many lunches and dinners and suppers have we not been to in restaurants, to say nothing of tea-parties at the Excelsior or at smart some pastry-cook's!' she rejoined. 'But, to ask people down to such a gem of a place as this, that would be a little out of the common, and would be better for us in the long run.'

Being thus agreed that a few visitors would be both pleasant and advantageous to them, the Lessinghams set about arranging a few house-parties. It was easy enough—the only difficulty they found was in not having sufficient room for all whom they wished to invite. You see, they did not want to ask celebrities who would have each from a dozen to twenty invitations to divers smart houses, or who, if not inclined to use their holidays in such manner, would either have taken places of their own, or would have gone off for a free spell in foreign countries. No; their idea was to invite as many journalists as possible—those to whom they owed attention, those who would be exactly of their own way of thinking, who would enjoy just the same things that they enjoyed themselves, who would not look for grandeur, but would take the place as they found it—a modest country-house, and the hostess for what she was—a woman with a profession to carry on, a name to keep up, who would have to spend so many hours of every day in real hard work, and, knowing this, would make the best of it.

The result of this plan was that from the week following the visit of young Street, the old Manor House was kept

well filled with guests right up to the time that Lessingham decided that the country was very dull in late autumn, and that a return to their warm London house would be a desirable thing. The effect upon Mary was little short of marvellous. Her power of work, which had flagged a good deal during the time that they had been quite alone, seemed to have revived and to have acquired a fresh impetus. For one thing, their household bills were almost doubled, for they found living in the country extremely expensive—as most people do who are not born to the manner thereof. There was a kitchen garden, in which all manner of nice and charming things grew and flourished exceedingly; but, somehow or other, they never grew just when they were wanted, and the patriarchal old gardener, whom they had taken on with the place, had an old gardener's rooted objection to cutting any kind of fruit or vegetable until it was almost too old to use. So, as the old man usually declared there was nothing but a cabbage to be had that day, and as Mary usually had as many to feed as her table would hold, the end almost always was that the pony and cart were sent hustling off into the nearest town in search of some kind of provender for the evening's meal. Now, all this was delightful, and she generally got the best of everything that was going in the neighbourhood; but the process was a distinctly expensive one. However, she was doing brilliant work, and, although Lessingham saw that the money was pouring out like water, yet he did not like to check her when she seemed so happy and in such thoroughly good working trim. So things went on until they went back to London, where every one who had been down to the old Manor was full of compliments on the general success that the place had been to them.

'We have had a lovely time ourselves, and, although we may have spent a bit more than we meant to do when we left London, yet I am convinced that we shall have it back

a thousand times over,' said Mary to Lessingham, on their way from the very first function at which they had shown themselves. 'It is the very best move we have ever made.'

Yet, although they had entertained at the old Manor House with the full intention of curtailing their entertainments in London, they did not find it practicable to cut off anything in that way after they found themselves once more in the full swing of their London life; and they, as it were, wiped off the autumn expenses, and determined that their best course was not to spend less, but to make more.

And, if possible, they went out even more than they had done beforetime, and Mary was more and more worshipped by the crowds of people who day by day came in contact with her. But the day of reckoning was yet to come; for no woman, be she seemingly as strong as a horse—which, by the way, is one of the most grossly libelled of animals in that respect—can afford to go on as she was doing, literally burning the candle at both ends, and not give out sooner or later. As a matter of fact, Mary Lessingham was living a dual life—one half of which was exhausting head-work, which was slowly and steadily sapping the life and vigour out of her brain and nerves; the other was a veritable treadmill of pleasure—not a mere round of party-going, but a continual draw on her vital forces. And, truth to tell, between the two the woman suffered, although she herself had not yet found it out.

And at last the day of reckoning dawned. Not a full summer dawn, but just a little streak of light, almost imperceptible, except to such as might be watching for it. You remember the old story of the Aged Man and Death, who promised to give him three warnings before he should tap him on the shoulder with the final summons? How the Old Man complained that Death had not kept his word. Whereupon the King of Terrors exclaimed, 'What! are you not blind, and deaf, and lame? surely those are warnings

enough for you. Here, come along: I've no more time to waste over grumblers like you.' After which he gave him a rap on the head, which settled his account without further delay.

Sometimes, of course, people recognize the warnings, but they cannot alter their course. I once said to a woman who was looking very ill, and truly more fit for her coffin than for a gay London assembly, 'My dear soul, why don't you go home and go to bed?' 'If I were to do that,' she made reply, 'I should never get up again. My only chance is to keep going.' But this is a digression, for which forgive me, I pray.

As I said, the day of reckoning dawned. There had been a faint hint that it might come on a former occasion, when Mary had suddenly been commissioned to write a story at very short notice for the *Royal*. At the time, she had been rather scared by the feeling that it might be a warning that she had been drawing too mercilessly on her mental resources; but the change of air and scene suggested by Lessingham had proved so beneficial, that she had made a fresh start from the moment of getting away, and had afterwards forgotten that any warning had been given to her. You remember her words to Lessingham, when he declared that it was a shame to waste so much material over a short story: 'Oh, as to that, there is plenty more where that came from.' So she had gone on in her superb strength and recklessness, never dreaming that a day might come when she would bitterly regret some of the force of which she had been so lavishly prodigal.

About this time Mary knocked off work a good deal, not because she had no work to do—although the rush after her copy was over, and it had become necessary for Lessingham to arrange for her work, that is to say that he had found it necessary to find good openings for her, where before they had found themselves. But she was strangely

disinclined to sit down resolutely and get through so much by a given time, as before she had prided herself on doing. And she was dissatisfied with the little that she did, and destroyed a good deal of such as did not please her. Fortunately, of old matter she had not a page by her, or the last stage of Mary Lessingham, the author, might have been worse than the first.

'I really don't know what is the matter with me, Hugh,' she said to Lessingham one afternoon, when she came down to tea with a worn and jaded air.

'You've been overdoing it,' he replied promptly. 'Upon my soul, dearest, I don't see that it is necessary to live such a treadmill kind of a life as we do. Suppose we don't go out anywhere for a week.'

'Oh, Hugh!' she cried.

'Yes; I know,' he returned with a laugh. 'It's always the same. But when one knocks up, what will any of these people do for us?'

The conversation, short as it had been, had the effect of making Mary silent as to her feelings; and she pulled herself together, and declared that what had ailed her was mere fancy, and that she must have had the megrims. But, all the same, she knew perfectly well that what she felt was no fancy, but a slow exhaustion of her nerve-force. She was a plucky woman, and worked off the ill feeling with a will of iron; so that even Lessingham, who flattered himself that he could read her like a book, was completely deceived, and believed that a passing indisposition had been all that had ailed her.

It was a few weeks after this, when the year was fast passing to summer-time, that Lessingham was taken ill. Since his long and serious illnesses, several years previously, he had never fully recovered his old strength. It was not often that he spoke or thought about it, but, in his heart, he knew full well that his wife's fortune as an author had arrived

in the very nick of time to save his life. For as long as life was left, he would have gone on trying to win enough to keep the home together; and he knew equally well that he would have failed hideously—not from lack of will or want of merit, but from sheer physical inability to comply with the conditions under which a journalist in full work must pass his life.

This illness was, as it happened, a very long and serious business. They never knew how it was contracted; but one sharp evening, towards the end of May, he complained of feeling unwell, and said that he was in for a heavy cold.

'Have a hot bath and then a hot drink,' suggested Mary.

'Yes, I will,' he replied with a shiver.

But, alas! they had not dined at home, and evidently the kitchen fire had long been left to die out, so that the bath water was barely more than lukewarm.

'It has not done me much good,' he said, when he went back to his bedroom.

'Well, it won't have done you any harm,' returned Mary. 'And I have the water boiling and ready to make you a perfectly scalding drink.'

She had also filled a bag with hot water, and Lessingham certainly ought to have been all in a glow within ten minutes. Unfortunately, he never seemed to get warm during the whole night, and towards morning began to complain of a pain in his chest, which, by the time the doctor arrived, had developed into a very serious attack of pneumonia.

This was the beginning of a time of terrible anxiety for Mary Lessingham.

'It would seem as if the Fates were against me,' she cried in her distress, when it was broken to her that typhoid fever had supervened upon the first illness. 'How shall I get through all that lies before me? There is work which must be done, work arranged for which they will not wait.'

'You had better have a second nurse,' said the doctor.

'Yes, yes, of course,' she cried, with feverish haste. 'But that is not all. That is but a small part of the trouble. It is that I can do nothing for him myself—I must work, work, work, and——'

The doctor was a prosaic man, who did not at all understand such a nature as Mary's.

'Well, as to that, my dear lady,' he remarked, 'I don't of course want to hurt your feelings, but your husband will stand a much better chance if you leave the nursing of him entirely to skilled professional persons, who thoroughly understand what they are doing, and who will not be worried or upset by their feelings. Believe me, half the bad cases would go, if it were not for the nursing we are able to command nowadays.'

'Yes, yes!' said Mary, impatiently; 'you don't understand what I mean. How should you? I will get in another nurse at once, and a third if necessary.'

In truth, she was thinking of other things than of how Lessingham should be nursed. He, however ill he might be, was not a fool, and would quickly realize that his best chance lay in the way in which he was tended. She was just as devoted to him as she had ever been, and he knew it. Left to herself, with nothing to think of but what she was to do, she would have nursed him with the utmost care, and would have stayed by him night and day, just as she had done once before. But there was that novel for the *Carlton*, to be done within three months. The *Carlton* was going to pay a whacking price, and Lessingham had only pulled it off under great difficulty and by the help of a due amount of finesse and diplomacy. And how was she to do it when her husband, her dear unselfish Hugh, was lying at death's door? It was true that he was not at death's door yet; but she had a feeling that, if he should get through this illness, it would be by the skin of his teeth, so to

speak. She had a strange foreboding that, if the very worst did not happen, it would be by a miracle. And yet, work she must, for the date of the appearance of this novel was fixed, and, if she were alive, it must be delivered by a given time. So far, she had not an idea of any kind in her head, her brain was as blank as it had been during those two days when she had been trying to write for the *Royal.*

'Hugh dearest,' she said to him on the first morning after the second nurse arrived, 'you won't think me unkind, but I must go on with that work for the *Carlton.*'

'You'd better chuck it,' he said feebly.

'No, no; we shall want the money. If you miss me, dear boy, you will know why I am not here, that it is only that I am working.'

'All right; but don't overdo it,' he said wearily.

So she set out, with what seemed like the presence of death in the house, to write a novel which was to appear in one of the most prominent magazines of the day. It was a heart-breaking situation for any woman; and when Mary Lessingham found herself alone at her familiar desk, and realized what a plight she was in, her fortitude utterly gave way, and she wept until she was fairly worn out.

'I cannot do it!' she sobbed passionately; 'I can never do it. Oh! why does God afflict me like this? Am I so wicked that He wants to humble me down to the very dust of the earth? What shall I do? What shall I do?'

CHAPTER XV

A TRY BACK!

> Has the intense cleverness of the devil ever struck you? How carefully he works, how judiciously he throws out a suggestion here, heightens an effect there, and completes the downfall of the poor human soul before the subject realizes that he is under the spell! We sometimes hear of men and women who are 'struck' to take a good course, but never does the devil work in that manner. His portraits are never taken by an instantaneous process; his method is silver-point.

A WHOLE week went by, and Mary Lessingham was no nearer to the beginning of her novel than she had been at the commencement of Lessingham's illness. She had come to be like a woman distraught. She found, to her horror, that their balance at the bank was very low, and Lessingham was, by that time, far too ill to be asked any question requiring a lucid answer. The expenses of the household were growing with terrible rapidity, and all were such as Mary did not, at such a time particularly, see her way to curtailing. For instance, there was the attendant who looked after Mr. Cooke, who had long been quite childish, and who could not be left alone a moment day or night; there were the governess and maid for the children; the cook, dear old Nannie, who had come to them in their darkest times, and who could not now be turned out or be expected to do without a first-class kitchen-maid. Then

what house of any position, especially in London, could be run without a first-class parlour-maid and a couple of housemaids? And, then, there was the coachman and his young assistant. Hitherto, Mary had thought herself most moderate that she had done without an indoor man-servant, and James most reasonable that he, having so very much night-work, had undertaken two horses without the help of a regular groom, rather than a mere boy as young Joe was. Of course the wages of the old gardener down at the old Manor House was an item of expense, though they paid him no more than fourteen shillings a week. And his daughter, who saw to the windows being opened at regular times, and who kept an eye on everything in the house, had also to be paid something, though of a truth her emolument was so small that it was hardly worth reckoning. Still, it was something, and it must be paid, and the general wage-list amounted to nearly four hundred pounds a year. The housekeeping for a family of fourteen persons was very heavy, and it was necessary that they should entertain somewhat freely, or, I should rather say, that they believed it to be expedient, if not actually necessary, though, as Mary well knew, the author of the 'Four Cross-Roads,' a book which had made the great sensation of the season, was a misanthrope, and never asked a single soul to cross his threshold. Besides that, they had got into a way of doing it, and to knock off such expenses all at once would be a positively dangerous policy.

She need not have thought of any of these things just then; and, if she had been wise, she would have given all her mind to the two things which were at that time the most important in her life—the recovery of her husband and the writing of her novel. But her mind, poor soul! was in that state when it would brood over anything rather than the one most necessary of all, when it could turn and twist and conjecture and worry about wholly unnecessary

trifles, while it was actually neglecting those which were needful and imperative. So she spent a whole week in thinking over the situation, which did not help matters at all. Then it suddenly came home to her that time was going by, that she was no nearer to her goal than she had been a week before; and that if she did not soon make a beginning, there would never be an ending, and the novel for the *Carlton* would never be done.

So she once more pulled herself up sharp, and set herself to think out her scheme, and to get the new story all ship-shape in her own mind. But all her resolutions did not bring any ideas along, and her thoughts remained in a tangle, apparently far too chaotic for any coherency ever to be evolved from it.

'What am I to do?' she said to herself over and over again. 'This illness of Hugh's will cost endless money, and I shall have to devote myself entirely to him later on. I must get the story done somehow, but I can't think how.'

She cast about in her own mind as to how she could sufficiently reduce her brain in order that she might plan her story. Then she thought she might find a thoroughly good stenographer, who would take it down from her dictation. True, she had never dictated a line in her life, and was by no means sure that she would be able to avail herself of such a means of lessening her work. Still, the very idea seemed to give her courage, and she wrote off to a great typewriting firm, and asked to have the best stenographer they had, sent to her house the following morning.

In due course a young lady arrived, to whom Mary, being utterly overwrought and excited, at once took a most violent dislike.

'I don't feel as if I could say a single word,' she said apologetically.

'Would you like to try?' suggested the girl, who was

bright and quick and capable. 'Plenty of people feel like that until they have tried.'

But it was no use. She tried her best, her level best, but she was still without any scheme, and she could not overcome her dislike to the girl. So she paid the fees for the morning's time, and told her it was no use; that she must try again later on, when she was not so upset and disturbed as she was just then. And when the girl had gone, she sat down and wondered what on earth she should do next.

By that time, Lessingham's illness had almost reached its worst. He was far too ill to ask her any questions, and, indeed, Mary, who had been warned by the doctors in charge of the case that she must withhold from him everything of a dispiriting character, had got ready a neat little lie, in order that she might quiet his mind, supposing that he should suddenly ask her how the new novel was getting on. He never did ask the question, however, his mind seeming to have become a perfect blank to all worldly affairs. He still knew her, though he showed no sign of recognizing any others of those about him; and Mary, while she paid many anxious visits to the sick-room, passed the greater part of the days at her desk.

Then the most violent characteristics of the illness abated, and they knew that with care Lessingham would live. He was gaunt and worn to a skeleton; he was weak almost to death; but he was alive and, with care and good luck in the course of his convalescence, he would live. 'I shall get my idea now,' cried Mary in her own heart, as she received the news.

But the rest of that day went by and no idea came to her—her mind was blank, her imagination seemed to have gone to sleep indefinitely. She spent all the afternoon turning over the half-dozen books in which she kept her jottings. It was a curious medley. Here was a page of likely titles; there were a few scraps of conversations;

descriptions of epigrammatic writing, mingled with quotations from poems, from the Scriptures, from the Koran. Then, after a few blank pages, she would come across schemes for short stories, for complete sets of connected stories, for longer ones, and perhaps a few odd-sounding names which she had put down with a sort of notion that some day or other they might come in useful.

'How odd it is,' her thoughts ran, 'that whenever I put anything down, it always seems to make it perfectly useless to me. Here are half a dozen schemes, all good enough in themselves, but I could not make the very smallest use of them. I declare I will not put down another idea, or even a title, as long as I live.'

She was still imbued with a feeling that, before she went to bed, she would have got the main scheme for her book; but dinner-time found her as far off from that delectable state as ever. Nevertheless, she could not wholly feel wretched. Lessingham was better, and, if he had but ordinary good luck, the worst was now past.

'After all,' her thoughts ran, as she discussed a bit of chicken with more relish than she had known for weeks—'after all, he is on the mend now, and when the storm gets to the very worst, the clouds generally lighten. I found it so before, anyway, so I must have faith and patience that they will come so again.'

She remembered how they had had a *vol-au-vent* for dinner on the memorable occasion when she had so nearly stuck fast over the story for the *Royal*, and how Lessingham had insisted on her drinking two or three glasses of champagne, with a chartreuse to follow. It would not be a bad idea to do the same again; then, perhaps, she might get an idea in the same way.

'Put me out a small bottle of champagne,' she said to the parlour-maid who was waiting on her. 'Yes, the Brut. Thank you.'

She drank the first glassful down greedily, and filled it up again. After all, Hugh had known what he was talking about when he said that it would pick her up as nothing else would do. Why, she felt like a new woman already. Not that she liked it—it was too sharp and sour for her taste; it seemed to catch her breath as if it would choke her. Still, it had a revivifying effect, and it seemed to put life into her, and, after all, what did mere taste matter when the consequences were so precious? So she drank down the second glass, and took the bottle in her hand to pour out a little more. Then she stopped.

'Oh, it is so nasty!' she said to herself. 'I can't choke another drop down. Ah, how nasty it is!'

The maid had left the room for a few minutes, so Mary got up and looked for the cork, carrying it back to her place and trimming it with care, so as to cork the little that remained as closely as possible. Just as she was doing this, the maid returned.

"Won't you have the cork Mr. Lessingham uses, ma'am?' she asked.

Mary started.

'Oh, has he a special one?—Why, of course he has. Yes; give it to me, please. I don't want to drink any more of this, and I may want it afterwards. I am going to work to-night.'

She did not need to tell the maid to put out the liqueur-stand, for she was a methodical young woman, who liked to do her work by line and rule, and what she did as a regular thing when the master was at dinner, so she did for the mistress when she was alone. So she arranged the table as usual, served the coffee, drew the dessert near so that Mary could help herself, and set the liqueur-stand within reach. As soon as she had left the room, Mary poured herself out a glass of green chartreuse. See drank it down with a shudder and a gasp.

'It is filthy stuff!' she exclaimed aloud; 'and if I were not really desperate, I would throw it into the fireplace.'

It had very much the same effect on her as before—almost immediately it mounted to her head and brought with it those same half-hazy, half-sensuous sensations, as on that memorable night when she had almost given up the story for the *Royal* as a thing impossible for her to accomplish.

'If I were not desperate,' she said to herself again, 'I would not dare to play with such stuff, horrible as it is to the taste. I suppose men, ay! and women too, take to it, not for the love of the thing itself, as for the sake of the effect it produces.'

She sat quite still in her place, trying to think herself into the much-to-be-desired frame of mind. Several times she was on the point of touching the right motive, of being able to get up and say, 'I have the germ of my story—all the rest will be easy.' Yet, over and over again she was just on the point of grasping it, and yet each time did it elude her in the same tantalizing and mysterious way. At last she began to feel that the effects of the strong spirit were passing off, and that she was no nearer to her goal. In her desperation she seized hold of the liqueur-decanter and hastily poured out another glass of the chartreuse, gulping it down by a single effort, and almost choking herself by doing it. 'It is the most horrible stuff,' she said within herself, 'and if I were not really desperate——' Then her thoughts broke off, as it were with a snap, like the speech of a person stricken suddenly dumb with surprise.

'I have it!' she cried aloud, and her voice rang out in the large, quiet room like a shout of triumph. 'Dear Heavens, I have it!'

She lost no time in getting to work. Without waiting for her thoughts to develop themselves further, she went off to her own room, and set to work with a will, writing at

express speed, with all her blood at fever heat and her nerves at the highest point of tension. She was so deeply interested in her work that she forgot all else—the hour, the period of intense mental strain through which she had just passed; she even forgot that Lessingham was still very, very ill, and that the smallest slipping back, the least pressure, the most apparently unimportant risk, would, in all probability, cost him his life.

CHAPTER XVI

THE THIN END OF THE WEDGE

> One of the devil's most favourite tools is called 'Moderation.' It is one of the surest in all his chest of appliances. With it he overcomes those whom he could never reach by any other means.

MARY LESSINGHAM sat at her desk far into the night, and when, at last, she went to bed, the whole scheme of her new book was as clearly sketched out in her mind as if she had elaborated it slowly, and with many days of close thought and annotation. She was dog-tired, and if she had not been imbued by the idea that to-morrow was nigh at hand, and that on the morrow she would have to work, and to work to some purpose, she would have flung herself down on the sofa and slept there till morning. As it was, she was just awake enough to know that such a course would effectually prevent her from doing a single stroke of work on the following day, and so she nerved herself to creep quietly upstairs to her own room—or rather, to the room adjoining that in which her husband was lying. As she passed the door, she listened for a minute or two.

'All quiet, thank God!' she said to herself.

In less than a couple of minutes she had slipped off her clothes and had crept into her bed, and there she slept like a log, or a dead thing, till the maid came in the morning with her tea and toast. In reply to her eager inquiry for

the invalid, she learned that he had passed a fairly good night, and that he was better, decidedly better, than he had been the previous day. She received the news with a sigh of contentment, and a dim sort of feeling stirring in her mind that, after all, God was very good—for Lessingham was better, and she had made a good start at her work. So she lay back among her pillows with a pleasant kind of sensation that she need not hurry to get up, because her work was all practically cut-and-dried, and that she needed to husband her strength in such a way as to parcel it out until the story was finished, and Lessingham able to go away to recruit after his illness.

Still, during the time which followed, Mary's life was by no means plain sailing, and she passed through many an hour of doubt, anguish, and almost despair before Lessingham was fairly out of the wood. It was, of course, only what both doctors and nurses expected and looked for, that a man who had been previously so sorely tried by severe illness and overwork, should have, during the course of this one, very many ups and downs, very many fluctuations—including some such as made them, time after time, almost give up hope and look for the very worst to happen. To-day he would be better, to-morrow sunk down again in the depths of extreme and dangerous illness. It was only natural that each relapse should serve to take the heart out of his wife, and to make her feel—not that the Almighty was merciful, and would not try her more than her strength could endure, but that there was up yonder rather some cruel and vengeful power which was taking an actual delight in torturing her to the verge of madness.

Now, although such times as these may tend to ennoble the human character, it is certain that they are not the best influences under which those who write novels can turn out their best work. Anxiety is the murderer of art, and, under the pressure of bitter, breathless, overpowering fear as to

whether Lessingham would live or die, Mary's power of work slowly but surely oozed away, and she over and over again found herself stuck fast, with no will left to force her pen to write so much as a single word. It was at this time that she began to feel the need of a stimulant, of a something to brace up her nerves, to steady her brain, to give a certain degree of vitality to her jaded mind. A great dread possessed her of any specially prepared nerve-tonic. She had always heard that such things, once begun, cannot be afterwards dispensed with; she had always been told that, when such things had been taken for a little time, they ceased to act, and the unfortunate consumer must increase the dose, until at last the preparation ceases to act at all in the manner first intended; and that the poor creature then finds that the life of the brain has been slowly sapped away, and that the last state is indeed worse than the first.

'Much better to take something harmless,' she told herself, when she realized that a tiny glass or so of green chartreuse was enough to oil the joints of her mind, as it were, and to send her pen spinning along with as little effort as if all things were going smoothly with her. 'And it isn't as if I liked it; then I should be afraid to use it. As it is, it is so disgusting that I shall never be tempted to take it for its own sake.'

And after all, she argued, it was a natural thing that she should find herself in need of some slight stimulant during such a period of pressure and anxiety. Never in all the world could there be found a more really and consistently abstemious man than Lessingham, and yet, when he had seen her thoroughly overdone, his first suggestion had always been, 'Have a glass of fizz. It will pick you up better than anything else.' She had found that, after extreme brain exhaustion, a glass or so of 'fizz' did pick her up better than anything. But it was certainly not the best tonic to write upon; it did not seem to have that

curious power of oiling the wheels of thought, and making the hard way easy. So when she was stuck fast, she took a dose of her 'medicine,' as she had come to call it, and the novel for the *Carlton* went triumphantly along.

That terrible illness of Lessingham's, and the fact which, as he drew towards health and strength again, gradually crept out that, during the whole of that awful time, Mrs. Lessingham had been hard at work on a new and important novel, served to give her a fresh interest in the eyes of the public. The novel itself was a strange contrast to her previous work; it was brimming over with brilliant ideas; it teemed with witty writing; it was passionate, daring, and intensely clever; and the great generous world, which knew her for the most devoted wife in Christendom, took the book to its great heart and made much of it.

'I can't think how the dickens you've done it, dearest,' said Lessingham to her, as he read the last words, and laid the long slips of proof down again. 'Nurse Winifred tells me that you never wrote less than thirty telegrams and postcards a day when I was at my worst. And you seem to have got through all your business matters just as well, or better, than I should have done. And yet I never missed you.'

'You were too ill most of the time, dear old boy, to know whether I was near you or not,' she replied. 'I used to come in and out a good bit, but I never made the very smallest attempt at nursing you myself. I had to send wires off, and such things, every day, for ever so many people used to send them to me ready addressed and stamped, so that I could just write a line with the latest information. The world has been very anxious about you, Hugh—almost as anxious as I have been myself.'

'Only because I am your husband,' he said smiling. 'Still, the interest served to give you more work than you would have otherwise had, and I rather grudge it.'

'It kept the world from forgetting us,' said Mary, 'and it has given the world a special interest in my new book. I fancy the *Carlton* is doing very well with it, from their intense civility when I went into the office the other day.'

'I dare say it is doing very well,' returned Lessingham. 'For one thing, it is utterly unlike any book you've ever done. It is written in quite a fresh style, and is not a bit like your work. This will enable you to make a fresh groove, and so you won't be cursed by having to keep on carving out all your future books on the same pattern as "Day-Dawn;" and that, my dear girl, is about the greatest piece of good luck that could have possibly happened to you.'

'Yes, I suppose that is so,' said she.

She spoke rather doubtfully, and Lessingham, who was inclined to be garrulous in his convalescence, went on eagerly—

'Why, of course it is. Think how many times you have groaned when editors have insisted on a story written on the lines of "Day-Dawn." Every author feels the same. There's Geraldine de Pascal, with her fluffy-headed, insipid brainless little girls, every one of them sixteen years old; every one of them heiress to millions; every one of them married to ill-conditioned sulky men, titled and unwilling; and the fancy of the reader is tickled by the way in which the sulky young nobleman is won over to the fluffy-headed thing of sixteen, even when she is pitted against all the smartest young married women of his set. There is always the same offensive young man, with a preposterous nick-name, by which everybody calls him; there are always the same hateful children who ask improper questions at the most awkward times, and whose theology is of that very familiar and primitive order which obtains in the "mam-ma" —"ikkle dickie-bird" stage of infancy. You can't suppose, for one moment, that a clever woman like Geraldine de Pascal is not capable of doing better and more versatile work than

that? No, she chanced to make her first and very pronounced hit with a set of characters after this style, and she has never had a chance of getting away from them, and breaking fresh ground, from that day to this. She has to keep on, poor soul! and to turn out her fluffy-headed heroines although her soul loathes them, and she would like to have them come to life just that she might have the pleasure of kicking them, or of breaking their heads, or even of being able to tell them what odious little brutes they really are, and so to keep them from getting above themselves. It's just the same with Edward Hawkesley; he made a hit with "French Eighteenth Century Life," and if he tries his hand at anything else it's no good. There's the author of "The Minister of Blair Gowrie;" he has probably caused more tears to be shed than anything since Philip Lavender played for three hundred nights in "The Old Soldier," and tears were mopped up in the theatre every night with a mop kept for the purpose; yet he got so sick of reproducing stories in a quaint mixture of Heiland and Lowland dialects, all on the same pattern as "Blair Gowrie," that he determined to break new ground, and tried his hand on a real society story, with a dash of the Riviera and Monte Carlo thrown in. What was the result? Why, the blessed public wouldn't have it at any price—they laughed at him; and the editor who had announced a story by the author of "Blair Gowrie," and advertised it, was flooded with letters from angry readers who wanted more of "Blair Gowrie," and would not be satisfied with anything else. He could hardly say that he had ordered the story and only received it at the last minute, and that he had cussed its author up hill and down dale, and himself, for not having thought of binding him down to giving it on the usual pattern. But the author of "Blair Gowrie" has never tried society matter since, and probably never will again.'

'You are perfectly right,' said Mary, laughing at his vehement descriptions of her fellow-craftsmen. 'It *is* a grand thing to be able to strike out a new line, and so keep one's self from getting stodgy. But, all the same, I wrote that story under very peculiar circumstances, and I may never be able to touch the same vein again.'

'Fiddle!' exclaimed Lessingham, with huge disbelief.

'Ah, it is all very well to say "fiddle!"' she cried—'any one could say that; but the truth remains to be proved just the same. I don't feel at present as if——'

'You would ever be able to write another line for love or money,' he ended for her: 'And I do hope that nothing will tempt you into even trying to do it, until you have had a good long rest and change.'

'Oh, I am not silly,' replied Mary. 'I know the value of husbanding my strength as well as any one; and I am not at all anxious to start work again, I can assure you.' And then they fell to talking over their plans for the future, and of what they would do on the holiday that they meant to take together.

To an outsider it might have seemed as if, without intending it, it was always necessary for the Lessinghams to go to work in the most expensive way possible. In this case, it was pretty sure that if the invalid, who had so much to recoup, and Mary, who was so sorely in need of complete change, went away with the accompaniment of a large household, neither would derive the same benefit as if they went by themselves. So they decided, after much careful thought and deliberation, that they would send the children, the old gentleman, and the servants—in charge of the governess and old Nannie—to the old Manor House, and that they would go quite away by themselves on a long foreign tour. It was by this time excessively hot weather, and the children were sadly in need of change, but hitherto Mary had felt afraid, until Lessingham was fairly beyond

all danger of yet another relapse, to send them out of sight, lest the worst might happen during their absence, or Lessingham ask for them, and his wish not be possible to gratify without a delay, which might have the effect of proving fatal, by reason of his being unable to bear the strain of seeming contradiction.

But now that he was able to sit up during a great part of each day, and had seen a few very intimate friends, without any harm following on such excitement, she very quickly hustled them off to the fresher, purer air—the old gentleman in charge of Nannie and his attendant, the children with their governess, and with three servants to look after them. The kitchen-maid, the parlour-maid, and the coachman she kept in town, to stay until their master should be fit to travel, which was not till August had sweltered its course away and soft September had come in. Then, after a brief visit to the Manor House, she and Lessingham started off on their travels, and Mary began to feel that the past had been but a hideous dream, and that all would in the end be well with them both.

CHAPTER XVII

A TURNING POINT

In the lives of most, if not of all, married people there comes a moment when one may safely say that high-tide has been reached. Now, nobody is ever able to stay at high-tide—the whole evolution of nature is against it. Sometimes, when men and women have safely thus got to the crest of the wave—whether it be the wave of domestic happiness or that of social position, professional distinction, or indeed, any other situation—they may find themselves swimming higher than they ever have done before; but on the crest of the wave they will not, cannot, remain. In the case of marital happiness, this turning point usually takes the form of keeping back some thought, word, or deed. It is always dangerous, generally avoidable, and invariably a pity.

When Mrs. Lessingham, after two months of wandering, found herself once more in London, she also found that her new story, then running in that most high-class of magazines, the *Carlton*, had brought her into fresh prominence, and had given her name a new lease of life. The whole world of letters had been quick, as it always is in the case of real merit, to recognize the extraordinary change of style, of standpoint, the entirely new outlook from which this story had apparently been conceived and written.

'We have,' said one journal, in noticing the magazines of the current month, 'always been inclined to look upon Mrs. Lessingham as unsurpassable in her own particular

line. But we may as well confess that we have hitherto believed her to be a writer with limitations. In the face of the story now running in the *Carlton*, we are fain to admit that Mrs. Lessingham is apparently subject to no limitations whatever. The future of such a woman is beyond foretelling, the future of such a pen is neither more nor less than a mystery.'

Now, this was but one of many similar reviews; and the immediate effect of this outburst of opinion—of favourable opinion—was that a flood of commissions was poured in upon Mary, and, within a month of her return to town, she had booked enough work to occupy her for two years. It was work too which would bring her the highest prices, and, as her new fame had been on the score of her versatility, it was, with one or two small exceptions, untrammelled by any conditions as to style or *genre*. So once more everything ahead seemed to be fair and smiling, and, as Lessingham said—

'If I can only keep myself in decent health, you will build up your position higher and higher than it has ever yet been, and without any particular effort to yourself, dearest.'

But in that Lessingham spoke, as even the most far-seeing men sometimes do, without being very sure of his ground. Of a truth, he knew his wife as well, or better, than any other living being; he thought that he knew her thoroughly, and that he could read her, as the phrase goes, like a book; but in that belief he was altogether wrong. As a matter of fact, during the course of his last long illness, there had come a great change over Mary Lessingham's temperament—a new factor had come into her life, although she herself was not fully aware of it. Indeed, she gaily went off to her writing-den on the morning after their return home, in order that she might, as she put it, have a good long think over the work to which she had pledged herself

previous to leaving London. She was not in any way conscious that she was altogether a different woman to what she had been at the time of her marriage. She did not get to work that day; but, then, that was not very surprising after so long an absence—indeed, it is a state of mind very common among those who want to get into harness again after a long spell of freedom from collar-work. Therefore the circumstance did not worry her, and she cheerfully spent the morning at her desk, enjoyed an excellent lunch, and afterwards went out and showed herself at a couple of 'afternoons,' looked in at a private view, and dined alone with Lessingham—going with him afterwards to a theatre. But when nearly a week had gone by, and she found that, although she had begun a new piece of work, she was unmistakably on a wrong tack, her heart failed her somewhat, and she was not quite so cheerful and contented as she had been since her home-coming.

'Hugh,' she said to Lessingham, when she had come to the conclusion that she was merely wasting time by following her present lines, 'I have torn up all that I have done since I started afresh.'

'Good Heavens! But why?' he exclaimed.

'Because it was such rubbish—arrant drivel,' she replied, with uncompromising plainness. 'I shall have to try back, and let that idea slip altogether. It's a pity to have wasted a week of precious time, particularly when I'm pledged so closely; but it cannot be helped. I can't turn out stuff which I know to be rubbish. It would be like cutting my own throat.'

'Of course it would. I wasn't suggesting that you should have done otherwise. I don't believe any one is such a real judge of your work as you are,' he said promptly. 'Well, I wouldn't force it; you aren't so hard pressed as all that.'

'No; I will not,' she replied.

She turned the conversation then, and Lessingham naturally took the cue, and troubled no more about the matter. Himself, he hated to be worried about work, and nothing annoyed him so much as to have the natural workings of his mind interfered with. It was, perhaps, from this peculiarity of his that he proved to be so congenial a companion to Mary. A husband less understanding of such small matters would probably have chafed and fretted a delicately organized brain like hers beyond all endurance; as it was, it was to Lessingham that she instinctively turned for sympathy before all the rest of the world. But, for some unexplained reason, she did not carry her thought to him in the difficulty which beset her when she once more set herself to think out a new idea for the promised story.

'It's no use worrying Hugh about it,' she said to herself. 'He cannot help me, and he might be upset if he knew I was so hard pushed for an idea.'

So she battled on alone, and, although ideas came, yet they went without in any way fixing themselves on her mind. Ideas she had and to spare, but nothing new—nothing in the least out of the common, nothing in any way worthy of the author of 'Day-Dawn' and of 'Born in the Purple.' The days passed on until she felt that, even could she begin at once, she would be positively pinched for time; and the position began to assume a very serious aspect.

'It is bound to come,' she told herself. 'It has always come before, even when I have been almost mad with anxiety. I suppose no woman could go through all that I have done, and be as fresh and spontaneous as when she first began. Well, I am glad of it. It gives me a decent excuse for knocking off a bit.'

She went down to the dining-room, to find the governess and the children already assembled at the table. They always dined at this hour, and Mary usually thoroughly enjoyed their innocent prattle about what they had done in

the morning, and what they were going to do in the afternoon. The old gentleman never took meals with them, but was served in his own sitting-room, as he was by this time quite beyond any enjoyment of such intercourse, and was, in truth, not fit to be at table with others. The children were very gay that day, full of anticipation of a *matinée* to which they were going, and of wonder as to whether the good-natured actor-manager would know that they were there, and remember to send them some chocolates to eat during the performance. Lessingham was out, having gone to lunch with a man on some business of Mary's. And so it happened that Mary found herself alone almost before the meal had come to an end—the governess and youngsters having asked to be excused, lest they should be late, and so miss a portion of the play.

'How I wish I could feel quite like that still!' Mary's thoughts ran, as she sat alone at the head of the table. 'But, alas and alack! I doubt me I shall never get to that delectable stage of freshness and enthusiasm again. Now, if only I had an idea——'

Her reflections broke off short, as a vague germ of a scheme came into her mind. She sat quite still for a minute or so, positively holding her breath, lest it should slip away and be lost to her. It was there, and yet she could not quite grasp it—could not quite take firm hold of it and rise up with her new novel conceived in her soul, and only waiting to be brought, by long labour and infinite pains, to the birth. And as she sat there thinking deeply, she stretched out her hand mechanically for the silver-mounted decanter which held the green chartreuse, and actually, without being aware of what she was doing, she filled her unused sherry-glass almost to the brim and steadily drank it, exactly as if it were a dose of medicine.

Even then she was as one who did not know what she had done. She wiped her lips with a wry face the while,

and shuddered slightly as she felt the burning liquid slip down her throat; but she went on thinking intently, trying with all the power of her brain to grasp the elusive something that was floating about in her mind like a very will-o'-the-wisp. And presently, while the strong spirit that she had drunk still held her brain in its power, she gave a sort of gasp, something between a sob and a sigh of relief, for she had got it. In the sense of newly born strength which came over her, she never realized that she had not of her own self created this new combination of thoughts and situations; and she went off to her den, and began to work there and then.

'I can't think,' said Lessingham, when she told him that she was on the right road at last, 'how you manage to arrive at your understanding with yourself. Your best ideas always come to you when you seem to be nearest to desperation. You never sit down and plan a story out, sticking a scene in here, a character in there, taking care to have a complete set of puppets—a serious lover, a comic man, a nice girl, a fast girl, a smart elder woman, and all the rest of them. You seem to get your scheme in a sort of flash, and the rest grows as it will.'

'I cannot begin until I have the right sort of flash,' she replied. 'It's just the same as when one wants to light a candle. It is easy enough to buy a candle, but if the match won't light, one cannot use one's candle. I look upon my characters as I look upon a packet of candles; but it is the match which sets the candle alight. Some writers seem to worry so as to what particular kind of candle they will have; but if you want a light, it does not very much matter whether you have one kind of candle or another,—the match is the great essential.'

'Well,' remarked Lessingham, with a laugh, 'you seem to have both candles and matches; and though sometimes you cannot find a match just at the moment when you want

it, you always manage to light upon it in the nick of time. Mary, I really do regard you as the most wonderful woman of the age.'

'I have no such opinion of myself,' said Mary.

'You would have every right to have just such an opinion of yourself,' said Lessingham, speaking with perfect sincerity. He stretched out his hand to her, and held hers tenderly. 'Of course it is only natural that I should think you so,' he said, in a deep, tender voice; 'but what is the most wonderful to me of all is, that such a woman as you should feel towards me as you do. After all, you passed your youth in an atmosphere such as would naturally make you look upon a poor struggling journalist with scorn. Yet you had already in your heart chosen me out of all the world as the man you could love. I have never forgotten what you said to me when at last I ventured to break the ice between us—"If it has made you speak, I am glad, right glad that we have lost our money." Surely, never did any woman pay a man such a compliment before.'

'Well, you have never abused it,' said Mary, smiling.

'Abused it—hardly,' he exclaimed. 'Nor, for the matter of that, have you ever abused your great position, as you might be forgiven for doing. Do you know, dearest, it still fills me with wonder to think that I am really your husband, the sharer of your life, the recipient of your every thought.'

A dull, burning flood of colour rose to Mary Lessingham's cheeks at his words, for it came home to her, as nothing had ever done in all her life before, that her heart was not quite such an open book as Lessingham believed. Of late there had been thoughts which she had never imparted to him—thoughts which, by a strange, curious instinct, she had kept to herself. And beside such thoughts, there was—her cheeks burned red and dull, her eyelids drooped, her hands trembled, in spite of herself, and in spite of the consoling suggestion which flashed into her mind, that it was no use

worrying him with something now past and gone—something which had come to her in a terrible hour of trial, a circumstance which——

'Oh, don't pay me any more compliments, Hugh!' she exclaimed, breaking her thoughts off short, and trying hard to speak lightly and unconcernedly; 'they are very, very bad for me. I am no saint, and still less of an angel, though you try hard to make me think myself both. I am but a very extraordinary kind of woman, and the best part of me is that I really love you with all my heart and soul.'

'You really do?'

'Have you ever doubted it?' she cried reproachfully. 'Oh, Hugh, dear boy, you never have. Why, why, you are my very life.'

As the new book progressed, Mary Lessingham found herself less and less able to cope with the work that was required of her. In spite of the long holiday she had enjoyed—and enjoyed under circumstances most favourable to her mental state—she could not settle down to steady work, notwithstanding that she had lighted on a wholly new idea, such as was bound to put her yet further up in the world of letters than she had even been before. Her brain seemed jaded, her pen fagged and uncertain, and day after day, in sheer desperation, she had recourse to the help of that harmless little pick-me-up, green chartreuse.

'I must not get into the way of taking it,' she said over and over again to herself, 'that would never do. But just now, while I am feeling so queer, so empty of ideas and vitality, it is surely better than flying to really dangerous drugs, which would grow upon one.'

So she went on her way, working regularly enough, so long as she had the help of her 'harmless' stimulant, and day by day increasing the size of the dose, which she found necessary to enable her to start her day's work. Mind you, she had not yet realized that this stimulant was so necessary

to her; she still looked upon it as just a slight tonic which would give her just the fillip she was in want of, until her well-trained brain should have accustomed itself to working as it had worked aforetime. She took it without the very smallest attempt at concealment, usually going to her desk straight from her bedroom, and trying honestly to work just as usual. Then, when she found that her brain was disinclined for work that day—which happened almost invariably—she would get up and go down to the dining-room, sit down at the table, and there take a glass of chartreuse, and slowly eat a biscuit with it. Then, with the fire of the liqueur running through her veins, she would feel the glow of a newly awakened imagination stealing into her brain, and the work would go merrily on. Several times Lessingham came into the dining-room while she was thus occupied, and he too sat down and shared her taste.

'It is a queer thing that you who drink water should take chartreuse when you take anything,' he said to her one day.

'I don't care about it,' she replied.

'Don't you? Then why don't you have a little good port instead?' he inquired. 'You would really like that, and it would keep up your strength, and do you a lot of good.'

The next day she found that he had decanted a bottle of good old port, and that it was set ready on the table when she went down for her morning potion. She felt obliged to take it, and, as she filled her glass, loving thoughts of his goodness and unfailing consideration towards her flooded into her heart. She really liked it better than the chartreuse, though that was not saying very much for her appreciation of the port, which was very old and extremely good. She ate the biscuit and gulped down the wine, and then she went back to her den to take up the work that would not flow without some kind of help from outside.

And there she sat, feeling stupid and stultified, not stimulated in the very smallest degree. True, the old wine had got into her head, but it was not helping her—she could feel that. Her brain was in a whirl, and she felt oppressed and thirsty; she took up her pen, but she could not see the lines on her paper; and so she sat for a long, long time, until the fumes of the unaccustomed wine had cleared away from her brain, only to find that she was as far off any power of work as she had been in the beginning. She went back to her bedroom, and bathed her face and temples with cold water; she poured some strong scent on her hands, and rubbed it on her forehead. Then she brushed back her hair, and felt somewhat restored to herself again.

'That is horrible stuff,' she said. 'I have always heard that it was horrid and dangerous. I will never touch it again. I ought to have told Hugh that—that chartreuse helps me——' She broke off short, and sat thinking like one turned to stone. Then she suddenly flung out her arms with an exceedingly bitter cry, 'Oh, my God! I cannot write without it. I dare not tell him. I have sold myself into bondage. Oh, my God! what shall I do? what shall I do?'

CHAPTER XVIII

SINGLE COMBAT

> The Book says—*Greater is he that ruleth his own spirit than he which taketh a city.* No truer words are to be found, even though one search the great Book from cover to cover. There is no outward glory attending the fiercest battles ever fought by men or women, for they are fought in silence and secrecy. Their battle-ground is the weak human heart. There is no glory, no glamour, little of honour and credit, for the worst encounters with the devil are seldom known to others than those who meet him in single-handed combat. Yet, day by day, men and women meet the arch-enemy, and challenge him, having no other weapon than their own sense of what is right and wrong, and of what shame or pride teaches them. These weapons are not always sufficiently keen-edged to ward off the skilled thrusts of the devil, and the idle and flippant world sums up what it knows of such warfare in a well-turned phrase—'The road to hell is paved with good intentions.'

I SCARCELY know how to describe the anguish of mind through which Mary Lessingham passed, when it came home to her that the pick-me-up of a green chartreuse had become an absolute necessity to her. 'Anguish' is but a poor word with which to try to express the mental pain and torment which fell upon her. She loathed herself; it was bitter as gall and wormwood to her to feel that she, Mary Lessingham, the darling author of the day, so proud and

self-reliant, should have fallen a victim to a habit so low, so common, so disgusting as—as—oh! even to her own soul she could not frame the hideous word, though she, in all her pride, in all her satisfaction of place and fame, had actually become the hideous thing whose name she would not speak or acknowledge even to herself. In that hour she passed through the first of her Gethsemane, suffering a long desolation of shame and remorse, which she could carry to no living man or woman for help or sympathy, and, least of all, to that one who had sworn to be her shield and helper through life.

'If I could only tell him!' she cried, in the anguish of her heart. 'But, no! I never dare let him know; he would despise me, loathe me, hate the very sight of me. How well I remember that night when Mrs. D'Arcy was—was—a little queer at supper, and he said then that she ought to be put in the lethal chamber at the Dogs' Home—he would say the same of me. No, I never dare let him suspect it. I have let myself go—I, who always thought myself so strong, so far above all ordinary weaknesses, and I must carry the burden of my hideous secret alone—alone—alone!'

For hours she stayed in her chamber, raging thus with herself. The maid came to tell her that luncheon was served; and she replied that she had a violent headache and would not go down.

'Tell Miss Day that I am not coming, and bring me up a cup of strong tea,' she said. 'Oh, is your master in?'

'No, ma'am,' the maid replied. 'But there is a note on the table. I will fetch it; I forgot to bring it up with me.'

The note, which had been brought by hand, proved to be from Lessingham, and said that he would not be at home till late in the afternoon, as he was going to lunch with Greville Stewart, that they might talk over the details of a novel of hers to be run in the *Piccadilly Review*.

Now, it happened that the *Piccadilly Review* was at that

time one of the most exclusive magazines, or rather weekly journals, in existence; and to have a novel running through its columns was at once a cause and proof of the extremest distinction. At any other time her heart would have beaten high at the prospect of such an obvious step upward, but to Mary the news now came with only an added sense of her own crushing failure.

'More commissions,' her bitter thoughts ran; 'and how am I to cope with them? I, who cannot even start my slightest story without having recourse to that hideous help?'

There was a large and luxurious couch in her bedroom, and, when she had taken several cups of tea, and her head felt more clear and like its own self again, she lay down, partly that she might, if any one chanced to come in, be left alone to think out what she could best do to face the new strain that had fallen upon her. And then, too, she wanted to have come to a clear understanding with herself before Lessingham should return home full of his news of the new story, and all unknowing that a deadly, disgraceful, horrible secret had crept in between them. Yes, she felt that she was using the right word when she described the secret as having 'crept' in between them, for surely never did any poor woman acquire such a habit with less desire or more unwittingly. And out of this particular thought there came in her hour of shame and misery a grain of comfort and of consolation. For even though she had seemed unable to write, or at least to start work, without the help of this special stimulant, yet she had no love for it. Surely, surely, there was safety in that! No love for it! Why, she positively detested it; the very sight of it served to send a shudder through her whole body; she disliked it so much that even the pretty colour was hateful to her—and it had once been her favourite combination when mixed with either white or pink. After all, she was as yet in no danger of

falling a victim to drink—there, the word was out at last! Oh no, no; there was not the very least fear of that. People who drank, who were real drinkers, always loved the stuff for its own sake. She hated it. She had never, never taken so much as one drop because she even tolerated it. No, it had been her help, that was true; but nothing, nothing else. So, it would be a comparatively easy thing to give it up, to find some other tonic that would help her and yet never steal insidiously over her senses and make her feel that she was a shamed thing, unfit to look her husband in the face.

So she made up her mind that she would give it up, that she would make a great effort and never again allow herself to feel that she could not work without it. After all, she had only done it in moments of desperation, and for Lessingham's sake—his and the children's. But now, now that the tide had turned, when all that lay before her was fair and smiling and prosperous, when good fortune had been pleased to give her a new lease of fame, a favour so rarely granted to poor authors, she would only need to have a certain amount of courage and resolution, and this horrible danger would pass completely away and be no more to her than a mere shadow of the past. There could be, there was, no need to tell Lessingham anything about it; it would only worry him and make him anxious and uneasy about her. It was not as if she liked it—in that case the entire situation would be wholly different.

So she argued her fears away, and became almost at rest. She knew full well that there would be a struggle; but it would be a struggle with her brain, not with her heart, and by the time that Lessingham returned home, she was outwardly calm and quiet, and showed but few signs of the hours of terrible pain of mind through which she had just passed.

His first words were of tender inquiry.

'Why, dearest,' he exclaimed, 'haven't you been feeling well? Carter says you have had no lunch.'

She stretched out her hands to him.

'Nothing that need worry you, dear old boy,' she said, in as natural a voice as she could call up. 'I had a most dreadful headache.'

'You!' he exclaimed, in a tone of genuine surprise; for Mary was not much given to small feminine maladies.

'Well, to tell you the truth,' said she, and she felt that she was blushing her deepest crimson, 'I took a glass of that port you put out for me, and it went to my head, and made it fit to burst.'

'You don't say so? Well, I am sorry. I thought it would just be the thing for you—a little nerve tonic, and give you strength too.'

'I don't think, Hugh,' she said, and the shame in her tones seemed to her to ring out with clarion clearness, 'that my nerves need any tonic. I would rather not touch it again. It has made me waste a whole day.'

Lessingham laughed.

'Poor little conscientious woman!' he said soothingly. 'One would think that you were like Israel in Egypt, bound to deliver your tale of bricks every day. With work such as yours, there must always be days when the mind is gray, when the words won't run, when the creator is stuck fast.'

She almost screamed when she heard his words. She longed to call out that it had come to her of late, that the days were always gray, that her mind was gray, that her thoughts refused to run, and she was always stuck fast. She longed to fall down at his feet and confess that of late a horrible temptation had come into her life—a temptation to which she had almost but not quite fallen, to entreat him to be strong for her in the days that were to come, to help her to overcome this deadly and insidious foe, this devil, whose approach had been so carefully contrived that

she had almost been caught in his toils ere she had even recognized the danger of his presence. If he had happened to look at her then, she would probably have been strong enough and weak enough to have unburdened her heart of what was weighing upon it so sorely; but Lessingham was just striking a match, that he might light the gas for her, and the moment passed and was gone by for ever. It was natural, poor woman, that she should, when the first impulse for gaining sympathy was gone by, shrink from saying that which would, which must, inevitably lower her in the eyes of him who was all the world to her, that she should hesitate from giving him a new idea of her, a base idea, too; and she hesitated, the moment was lost, and the secret between them remained a secret still.

Having lighted the gas, Lessingham went and sat down beside her on the sofa.

'You don't ask me what news I have,' he said.

She started a little, in spite of herself.

'You mean about Mr. Stewart,' she said. 'Well, what did you arrange with him, or did you arrange anything at all?'

'Yes, I have arranged for a story to be delivered this day twelve-months—to run twenty weeks, and the price to be fifteen hundred pounds.'

'Any conditions?'

'None whatever, none. I specially bargained for that. Indeed, I told him if he wanted a first-class story out of you, he must leave you absolutely unfettered by conditions of any kind. He had his ideas as to the sort of thing he wanted, but he had the good sense to see that I knew you better than he did, and he gave in on that point without so much as a single murmur.'

Mary did not speak for a minute or so. It seemed as if every word Lessingham uttered was as a sharp sword piercing her heart through and through. If he only knew,

if only the editor of the *Piccadilly Review* could know, that the book which had brought her so prominently before the world again had been entirely written under a condition which she had forsworn for ever! Well, it was no use thinking about that now, she must keep her own counsel, she must do the best that she could and trust to a beneficent Providence, and perhaps a little to a too-partial public, that the difference in her last work and that which was to come would never be too closely marked.

'Fifteen hundred pounds, Hugh!' she said at last, making an effort to break the silence. 'It's a very big price.'

He looked up quickly.

'You are not half so pleased about it as I thought you would be,' he said, in rather a flat kind of a tone; 'and yet it is a very fine thing to be in Greville Stewart's paper. He is at the very top of the tree.'

'It is a very great responsibility,' she replied gravely.

'Well, in a way that is so,' he said carelessly; and goodness knows, the man would have felt but little of carelessness if he had known of the varying emotions that were seething in her heart at that moment. 'But you always manage to come up to the scratch somehow or other, and I have no doubt that you will do the same again. I don't know myself,' he went on, in a reflective tone, 'that I care so very much about those people who are always cocksure about every mortal thing they do. The best actors and actresses are always the most nervous on a first-night.'

'Yes, I suppose so,' she returned. 'Any way, I am always more or less possessed of an idea that I shall fail to please either myself or my public the next time, and I am feeling it very much just now.'

'Oh, that is because you are such an artist,' he cried easily. 'I only wish I was as sure of your future in other respects as I am that you will always contrive to fulfil your literary engagements.'

Her heart was in her mouth in a moment.

'My future!' she breathed. 'Why, what do you mean?'

'Well, that I may have my health, for one thing,' he replied, in his tenderest tones. 'How you have got through as you have done, I can never fully realize; and you can't think what it is for me to feel that in some ways I am more of a hindrance than a help to you. However, I have quite made up my mind to one thing, which is that my last illness shall be my last. By Jove, I take as much care of myself as if I were heir to the throne, and the line would become extinct in my person. I sometimes laugh at myself to think how little I am worth it.'

She got up from the sofa with a quick sigh.

'I am glad you take care of yourself, dear boy,' she said. 'And as for me, I dare say I shall get through in the end all right. I am feeling rather down and depressed to-day, and out of sorts altogether. I shall be all right again by to-morrow.'

Her tone was so unlike her own that he sat there staring at her as she went across the room to the dressing-table. Something both in her tone and in her looks struck him as strange, as pertaining to some one whom he did not know very well, rather than to the wife whose every thought and mood lay open before him. He opened his mouth to speak, then shut it again with a feeling that he must not worry her if she was not as well in health or spirits as usual.

'I've grown to think of her as having no nerves,' he said to himself. 'It is so easy to forget that she is a nervous, delicate woman, just the same as every other. I suppose something has happened to upset her. She will tell me about it by-and-by.'

So Lessingham dressed himself for dinner, and did not say a word to Mary on the subject of what had struck him as strange about her. She talked as usual during the

course of the meal; but he was conscious that there was a difference in her.

'I would have a glass of champagne to-night,' he suggested. 'Carter, get——'

'No, no, not a drop,' cried Mary, quickly.

'Not to drink Greville Stewart's health?' he urged mildly. 'My dear girl, you are thinking of the port that upset you this morning. I assure you there is not a headache in that Brut.'

'Not for me, I entreat you,' Mary cried. 'I am not well. I could not touch it.'

Her tone was so unmistakably in earnest that he made a gesture to the maid to countermand his first order.

'As you like about it, of course,' he said. 'But all the same, I am sure that you do not take stimulant enough for one always at head-work as you are.'

'I am never the better for it,' she replied vehemently.

He laughed outright.

'Well, far be it from me to coerce you one way or another,' he remarked, with a smile. 'Not that there is any chance of my having to coerce you the other way, for you are certainly the most abstemious creature it has ever been my lot to come across.'

And at the other end of the table Mary Lessingham sat, with an attempt at a smile frozen on her face, while in her heart black and grim despair crouched brooding and dark as night.

CHAPTER XIX

THE FORCE OF CIRCUMSTANCES

Very few people realize how much the force of circumstances has to do with the making or marring of our lives. The turn of an eye, the changing of a habit, the wasting of a few moments, may serve to undo or to upset the carefully cherished plans of years. This is especially so with the keeping or breaking of resolutions. I have known a person whose whole life was changed by a word dropped by chance. A weak person, you will say—yes, but the world is not made up only of those who are strong and firm of character. We have always to deal with the weak and the wicked, and we have yet to find the man or woman who is without weaknesses.

A WHOLE week went by, and still Mary Lessingham had not begun work. Time pressed, for her engagements were many, and the holiday had taken a good solid slice out of her year's calendar. All day long she wrestled and fought with her refractory brain, and strove as only a woman of spirit could have done, with the ideas which would not come. It seemed as if fate were determined to break her proud spirit and to crush her down under foot to the very dust of the earth. Hour after hour, day after day, she sat there thinking and thinking, until her brain felt like to burst, and her heart grew sick and oppressed as by a heavy cloud of weakness and weariness.

'I can't get a start,' she said each day when she went down to join Lessingham at meals.

His answer was always the same.

'It's not of the least use to force yourself; you've always got your best ideas when you have determined to let everything go. Come out now, and try not to think about work at all until your idea comes of its own will.'

On one or two days she followed this advice, but when she went back to her desk again she found herself as far from making a beginning as ever she had been.

'I don't know what I shall do,' she said at last, in despair, to Lessingham. 'What day is the thing promised for?'

'The end of December,' he replied.

'I shall never get it done,' she said desperately.

Lessingham looked at her.

'Do you know,' he said, 'I think you are letting your art get too much possession over you. I am sure it would be better to write yourself into a story and let the public take what comes, rather than wearing yourself to fiddle-strings in the effort to have the thing so very much out of the common, as you do.'

'My anxiety has kept me at the top; it has kept me in my place,' she said reproachfully.

'I know that; but it does not do to get so fastidious that you cannot work at all. There is no such very broad line between proper artistic feeling and over-sensitiveness. You want to have the one; but you don't want to topple over so far that you cannot get back again. If you will take my advice, you will just sit down and begin a story, not minding in the least whether it is a wholly fresh idea or not, write yourself into it, make yourself do it, and don't let yourself be turned either to right or left. I believe a brain is very much like a high-mettled horse; you must keep a good firm hold over it, so that it doesn't get a chance of running away with you.'

'You think that I have let myself get fanciful?' she said.

'Not exactly that; but I do think you may slip into that way if you don't take care,' he replied. 'You see, dearest, it is like this. You have done such exceptional work under such exceptional circumstances, that the world naturally looks for great things from you now. You are still sufficiently young to be extremely interesting and to go much higher than even you have already gone. But it won't do to harp on that idea too persistently. I mean, it is better for you to go quietly along on the level rather than making great efforts to go one better than your last. I have always thought it the greatest possible mistake, that going one better. I've seen ever so many first-class novelists ruined by it.'

She was silent for a minute or so.

'I see what you mean,' she said; and as she spoke a great weight, as of lead, seemed to settle down upon her troubled heart. She knew that he was utterly at sea in his ideas, that he was quite ignorant of her real trouble; and yet she could not bear that he should imagine her to be over-sensitive and fanciful, for she had always specially prided herself on being above all petty feminine weaknesses. It was with a heavy heart that she went back to her study and sat down at her desk. There clung about her an atmosphere of blame, an aroma of fault-finding, than either of which nothing was really and truly further from Lessingham's intention. She sat there, resting her elbows on the table, and her chin upon her hands. Her spirit was sore and oppressed—she felt as if Lessingham had begun to see flaws in her character, as if he had begun to see that there might be feet of clay beneath the mantle of her genius.

In very truth, Lessingham looked upon her, as he had always done, as the very grandest and noblest of women, and with each fresh effort that she had made, his love and trust, admiration and wonder, had grown and grown apace.

But Mary Lessingham did not know this, at least it might more truly be said, did not realize it, and as she sat at her desk, she felt that not only the whole of her literary future, but also the whole of her life's happiness depended upon the way in which she was able to grapple with the difficulty which confronted her at that moment. And besides that, easy and affluent as the circumstances of fate had proved themselves to be since the altogether unlooked-for renewal of public interest in what came from her pen, she knew all too well that it was absolutely necessary that she should be to time with the story promised for the last week in December, and also that the work she should put out then should be such as would tend, if not to increase her fame, at least be such as would not compare unfavourably with her last book 'Born in the Purple.' Yet the germ which was so essential would not come; there was not even one spark of conception in her mind—she was dried up, stuck fast, stranded.

The day went by, as so many others had done before it, and slowly and surely did despair settle down upon Mary Lessingham's soul, until she was sick with the bitterness of hope deferred, and was worn and weary with continual and fruitless mental stress and effort. And at last, when the time had grown so short that it was only by working during the hours that she usually devoted to rest and recreation, she could possibly hope to keep the engagement she had made, the desperate alternative came to her that there was one way out of the difficulty, one road by which ideas always came to her, one course which had in the not very distant past saved her several times. She might just once more coax her poor brain with food which had before proved itself helpful and congenial to it—she might just go downstairs and take a single glass of that hideous green liqueur which she had, in all good faith, forsworn for ever.

At first she recoiled from this thought, and in her own

mind rejected it with scorn and self-reproach. No; she would rather starve, she would rather come to want bread than she would knowingly lower herself to do a thing which in her heart she knew to be debased and sinful. Better, far better, the degradation of social extinction than the degradation of sinking herself down below the level of the beasts. It was only another wile of the devil, the devil of drink, to get her into his toils, and she would be strong, and not yield to the temptation, no matter with what alluring guile it might present itself to her over-wrought and anxious mind. So she argued with herself as she went down to the drawing-room, where her dainty little afternoon tea was awaiting her.

'Every time I feel that suggestion coming over me,' she resolved, as she went down the stairs, 'I will order a cup of strong tea at once, and I will drown it; see if I don't.'

Of a truth, the strong and fragrant tea did serve to refresh and sustain her, and she poured out a second cup with a feeling that in this beverage at least she had a panacea for the expulsion of unholy thoughts, if not a tonic by whose help she would be able to work as well and as easily as heretofore. She was sipping that second cup when the door opened, and Miss Day came into the room.

'Oh, Mrs. Lessingham, are you very busy?' she asked.

'No, my dear; I am having my tea, that is all,' Mary replied. 'Have you had yours? or will you have a cup with me?'

'No, thank you; I shall have mine in half an hour with the children,' the girl replied. 'I came in to ask you if you had forgotten about their dresses for the ball on the 18th?'

'The ball—what ball? Oh, Mrs. Lesley's fancy dress affair. Are they very much set upon going?'

'Yes, they are. Indeed, it is the last thing they think about at night, and the first thing that they speak about in the morning.'

'Oh, well, I suppose they must not miss it, then.' Mrs. Lessingham's tone was not enthusiastic, for her brain was troubled by more important matters than fancy-dress balls at that moment. 'Have you any ideas? Do the children wish for any particular frocks?'

'Nevill is set upon going as *Pierrot*,' Miss Day replied. 'And Blanche declares that she knows where to get a pattern and can easily make it, so that it will only cost a few pence. Coralie would like to go as a violet. Blanche says that there is a regular pattern to get for that, and that her dress will be quite as easy to make, though it naturally costs a little more than Nevill's. It is arranged so that the petals are cut out in violet silk, shading to the palest heliotrope underneath. The bodice is wreathed with shaded violets, and a small wreath of the same is worn on the hair. The stockings should be of delicate green silk, and the shoes exactly to match.'

'A pretty dress,' said Mary, absently. Her thoughts had wandered away like a flash of light to the fact that if she could not, did not, do something to make herself work again, there would be very soon no chance of her children enjoying themselves at any such festivities. 'And Olive?' she asked, bringing herself back with an effort to the question in hand.

'Olive is not so keen about hers as the other two; but then, of course, she is not as old as they are, and does not know so much about it,' Miss Day said. 'Her only idea is to wear a dress like the little fairy they saw in the pantomime; that was white and silver, with a great many silver stars powdered all over it. She should have a silver star set upright in her hair, and she should carry a silver wand with a large star on the top. It will be the easiest dress of all to do, Mrs. Lessingham, only, if Blanche and I are to do them, we ought to have the materials and get them in hand at once.'

'Yes, of course you must have time to get them done without being too much pressed,' Mary said. 'Yes, Miss Day, if you will see about them at once. I had better give you some money: they will cost ever so much less if you get them where you see the things cheap than booking them all at Winnington's. I will give you five pounds, and please do not let them cost a penny more than is absolutely necessary to make them look smart and nice. Do you think that will be enough?'

'It ought to be,' Miss Day replied. 'But if not, I can let you know. Blanche has made out all the materials and quantities she will require. I really think that you will be surprised when you see how little they will cost.'

She went away then, leaving Mary if possible more depressed than she had been before. Perhaps the need of her children, or, if not their need, at least their wish for these dresses had shown her, more clearly than anything else could have done, that she must, unless she would see her domestic life shorn of all its graces, contrive by some means or other to make money and plenty of it. The means were there and to be had on one condition—could it, would it be wrong if she were to yield and take the only way to using those means which was open to her? After all, it would not be for her pleasure that she would use this—this—*medicine;* it would be for the sake of her husband, her children, her old, almost imbecile father; it would be for her home, her name, her honour, her very life. Under these circumstances, could it be, would it be wrong? Surely not! surely not!

She rose from her seat and went slowly, heavily, unwillingly, down to the dining-room. She descended the stairs step by step as she might have gone to execution. The long sideboard of carved oak was entirely bare, not a single thing stood upon its polished surface. Several old silver tankards and cups, together with some rare blue pots

decked the upper shelves, but there was no display of silver upon the sideboard itself. She turned the key in the lock of the cellarette as if she were committing a theft, and drew out the handsome silver-mounted liqueur-stand. There was a little cognac in one of the bottles, some Kümmel in another, but the third one, which usually held the chartreuse, was empty. She looked into the compartment to see whether there was still some which had not been decanted; but there was none. Then she drew a long breath and closed the door again. Surely this was a sign from above, from Heaven or Fate—or *God*—that she was not to yield, that she was to hold on yet a little longer, that she must be strong and give battle with the powers of evil still.

CHAPTER XX

A PLUNGE

> Have you ever noticed what a strange fearsome calm seems to settle down upon one who has finally made the plunge into some forbidden way? Just at first, there is a certain sense of restfulness in doing what we know to be wrong.

THREE more days went by, but still Mary Lessingham had not made a beginning of her story. She had not touched anything to help her to begin, and with her meals she drank, as usual, some simple aërated water, persistently refusing all Lessingham's suggestions that she should try the effect of a little fizz.

'Have you made a start?' he asked, as they sat at the luncheon-table on the third day.

The children had just left the room, and they were quite alone.

She shook her head.

'No, not yet.'

Lessingham raised his eyebrows, but said nothing. In truth, he knew something of what was raging in her mind, though he had not the very smallest suspicion of the cause of the tumult, and he did not make any comment, because he was anxious not to say or do the very smallest thing which would tend to disturb her more.

'I am—I am ever so late as it is?' she said.

She put the words in a questioning way, though she knew just as well as he did what her fixtures were.

'Well, yes, you are rather late; but then if you send in the first part they won't chuck up the story because you have not let them have it all at once. Have you any idea yet?'

Mary shook her head desolately again.

'Nary one,' she replied.

The term 'nary one' was one of their little private jokes, and she made use of it then in a great effort to try to be just as usual with him.

'I'll tell you what I would do,' said he. 'You have let yourself get a great deal too anxious over this new success of yours. Take my advice, go out, amuse yourself, try to forget that you ever will have to touch a pen again. Then get to work and answer all your letters, and, take my word for it, that you will find yourself fixed up with an idea before you can say "knife."'

'My letters?' she said doubtfully.

'Yes, your letters. Why, my dear girl, have you been under the impression that there are no letters for you to attend to?'

'I thought you had answered them all,' she said lamely.

'Yes, the ordinary run, those I get through well enough; and, of course, Miss Day finds the invitations easy to deal with; but the personal letters—no one but you can reply to them.'

'What are they?'

'I'll fetch them,' he replied. He went out of the room and soon returned with a thick bundle of letters, all marked and ready for her attention. 'One, from humble admirer who wants your autograph. Two, the same, encloses special card, etc. Three, from little woman with eight children, who thinks writing may be a very pleasant and easy means of supporting them, and wants you to tell her how to do it. Four, from honorary secretary of village

lending library, who wants you to send a few copies of each of your books, as they are too struggling to pay for them. Five, six, and seven, from ladies desirous of interviewing you. Eight and nine, from gentlemen wishing the same thing. Ten, from Donald Lindhurst, asking you to write your biography in three hundred words, for his book on "Men and Women of the Time." Eleven—oh, that's from a chap in South Africa, three sheets full of rapturous admiration of your books, doesn't ask you to answer, only wants you to know the effect of your pen on an exile who is hundreds of miles up country, etc.'

'I remember that letter,' said Mary. 'I meant to write to him at once; but last week slipped by, and——'

'And three months have vanished into the limbo of the past since you received it,' said Lessingham, with a laugh. 'Then there is one from Herbert Donne, asking you to do something for a little *protégée* of his, and sending a little story of hers for you to see. That's called "A Simple Story." Promising title, eh?'

Mary Lessingham flung out her arms with a sudden gesture of impatience.

'Are there any more?' she cried, in a desperate voice.

'Any more?' he echoed. 'Heavens, yes, over a hundred of 'em, and they all ought to have been dealt with weeks and weeks ago.'

She fairly groaned.

'I can't deal with them,' she declared. 'I'll write to the man in South Africa, he was alive and sympathetic, and he didn't even ask me to write to him in reply. I'll write to him before I go out; but all the others you must help me with, dear boy. Write nice sweet letters, such as you know so well how to write, and leave me free. I am going to begin my new story to-morrow.'

Lessingham looked up.

'Have you got your idea yet?'

'No; but I shall have it to-morrow.'

Her tone was confident and fully assured, and Lessingham, who never worried her when she was in train for work, said no more.

'Then you will go out and take all the fresh air possible to-day?' he said. 'Or I should say "fresh atmosphere," not "air." All the same, I cannot go with you this afternoon. I have an appointment in the City.'

'All right. You won't forget that we are dining at the Willy St. Legers' to-night at eight o'clock; and the last time we dined there, we were late?'

'All right, I'll take care to be in early,' he replied. 'By-the-bye, I shall have to go on to the office from there, so, if you have anything more to do, you must manage without me. Are you going anywhere this afternoon?'

'Oh, there are one or two things on,' she replied carelessly. 'I have to go to the Stores, and shall probably look in and see the Harold Newtons, as they are so near.'

He left her then, his appointment being for an early hour; and Mary, as soon as he had left the house, rang the bell and asked the maid, who came in answer to the summons, to tell the coachman that she would want the carriage at half-past three. Then she went upstairs to her den, and wrote a long and charming letter to the unknown friend in South Africa, telling him what pleasure his letter had given to her, and begging him, if ever he found himself within reach of her, to make himself personally known to her. And then she sat back in her chair and gave herself up to thought. She felt like another woman, she felt she had passed the Rubicon at last, that she had taken the step which of all others would, indeed must, influence her whole life and make her a wholly different being from what she had been up to that moment. For, by one of those strange and curious flashes which are so potent to move the human mind, she had, while Lessingham was recounting the details

of the pile of letters which lay awaiting her attention, resolved to stand hesitating on the brink no longer, but to take the only course which seemed to lie clearly before her. She had made up her mind that since she could not write without the aid of chartreuse, she would despise it no longer, but that she would accept it as a means to an end, and use it sparingly and with due regard to the danger which lay in using it.

It was characteristic of the woman that, having once made up her mind, she never looked back; no, she had in her mind put her hand to the plough, and she hesitated no longer. She dressed herself with care and went out, going to the Stores in Victoria Street, where she ordered several things, among them a large bottle of green chartreuse. This was the only order she gave in that department, and she told the man to pack it carefully.

'Put it in a box, if you can,' she said.

This was easily done, and she went out to her carriage, carrying her parcels with an air of everyday custom which entirely belied her quickly beating heart. When she arrived at home, she carried the chartreuse straight up to her own little den, and locked it away in the oaken cabinet in which she kept her store of paper and the most private books pertaining to her work. She breathed a great sigh as she turned the key in the lock again, and knew that her secret was safe. After all, it had been very easy, as easy as if the bottle were nothing but a bottle of scent. There was a curious sense of guilt about her when Lessingham came into the room to speak to her ere he went to dress for the St. Legers' dinner; and Lessingham, who was very quick to take notice of the smallest change in her, while he was somewhat puzzled by her manner, yet could not think of any cause for it, but that she was struggling with her new idea. The dinner-party passed off well enough, and Mary, when she was once within the influence of the presence of

strangers—strangers, too, who would expect something of her—quickly threw off her feeling of oppression, and shone out in her most brilliant and vivacious way, proving herself the life and soul of the whole entertainment.

They did not leave until after eleven o'clock, and Lessingham, when they reached the hall, said good-bye to her, and told her to get to bed early.

'Nay,' she replied. 'I am going to drive you down. I shall sleep better for not going straight home.'

Lessingham was naturally nothing loth to have the pleasure of her company to the door of his office, and so, chatting gaily together, they drove away from the house of entertainment down to the depths of Fleet Street. There they parted, and Mary was driven quickly home. She felt strangely calm and settled in her mind, and her actions were as quiet and methodical as if she was about to do the most usual and everyday thing. Once in her bedroom, she let her maid undress her, and then, telling her that she was going to work for a while, she put on a warm loose gown, and bade her make her hair ready for the night.

'Then do you go to bed, Loisette,' she said.

Loisette obeyed, and in a few minutes Mary was left alone with several hours of quiet before her ere there was any ordinary chance of her being disturbed. She took her little silver lamp and went into her writing-room, where she turned on the electric light and then opened the cabinet in which she had hidden the chartreuse. She must draw the cork, and she would have to go down to the dining-room to fetch the corkscrew and then down again to replace it before Carter should miss it, or in case she should forget it and leave it upstairs.

'When I go to the Stores again,' she said to herself. 'I must get myself a corkscrew. I can keep that in the lower part of the cabinet, just the same as the chartreuse.'

She fetched the corkscrew and drew the cork; but she

locked the door of the room and turned the handle, so that she would be quite secure should any one chance to seek her, than which a more unlikely thing was hardly likely to happen at that hour of the night. And, at last, the way was clear, and she poured out a sherry-glassful of the bright green liquid and drank it down almost at a single gulp. Having put it away and locked the cabinet again, she sat down in her chair, ready to seize the first gleam of invention which should come to her.

The effect of the fiery spirit was the same as usual. She sat at the table and waited, and presently, when a few moments had gone by, she felt that her brain was beginning to work, and before a quarter of an hour had passed she was writing for dear life, and the new story was as good as finished, for, with her, well begun was considerably more than half done. So Lessingham found her when he reached home towards three o'clock.

'Why, my dearest,' he exclaimed, when he opened the door of the den, 'are you actually hard at it? I thought you were brewing some mischief or other all the evening.'

'I——' she began. It was on her lips to say something, to repeat the word 'mischief;' but she stopped short and tried to laugh. 'Oh, I was not very sleepy,' she returned, 'and I thought I might as well be here as doing anything else. Are you not back earlier than usual, dear boy?'

'On the contrary, I fully expected to get a most frightful wigging for being extra late,' he said, with a laugh.

She laughed, a genuine laugh this time, for the idea of her giving him a wigging at any time was extremely amusing to her.

'I won't do any more to-night,' she said, putting her pen away, and setting the papers on her table straight. 'But I did not know that it was so late. I thought—oh, well, I have been busy, and did not hear any clocks strike. There, I have done.'

So they went to the bedroom, and the first step of Mary Lessingham's deliberate act of secrecy had been taken. She was then outwardly calm and composed. In her heart there was a certain fear, but she had taken the step, and there was no hesitancy, no desire to draw back. She felt like a person who had just committed some deadly crime . . . as if nothing could undo what had been done, and therefore the only thing left for her to do was to hide it from ken of mortal eye.

CHAPTER XXI

A FLUTTER OF FREEDOM

> It is always a toil and a struggle to climb uphill; but when once over the edge of a precipice, how easy it is to keep on going downward! It is exactly the same whether the down grade be moral or physical; the descent at first may be slow, but once fairly started, the impetus gains with every moment, until at last it is beyond the power of the traveller, unless some outside help be at hand, to stop falling.

MONTHS went by. The year faded, and the new year came in, the bleak winds of spring gave place to the lovely days of June, and the Lessinghams were once more thinking of going off to the old Manor House, there to live an idler, freer, more lazy life than was ever possible to them in London. Mary Lessingham, the author, was still at the top of the tree, and seemed likely to remain so, and she had so arranged her work, that when she went to the old Manor House, she would be able to take a real holiday.

In truth, Mary Lessingham was at this time not a little work-worn and weary. I have already said that after the great and unexpected success of 'Born in the Purple,' Lessingham had booked enough commissions to keep his wife fully occupied for two years to come; but that was, of course, allowing for the holidays necessary to keep her in good health and spirits. At this time, with the exception of a few days at Easter, when they had gone to Paris, Mary had, since her long autumn holiday, worked almost without

ceasing, and by the time that the season waned, she was, as I said, beginning to feel very weary. Not that she ever grumbled at her work; she loved it, she loved to catch the first transient flame of an idea, to seize hold of it, and then to see it gradually fixing itself on the white paper, to see it slowly shaping itself in her mind, until every character and every incident was as plain and clear before her as the persons among whom she mingled every day of her life. But love of work does not, however, prevent a writer from becoming physically weary, or the nerves from being exhausted, and Mary was suffering from both troubles.

Socially, she had cooled off a good deal, and did not go out a tenth part as much as she had done aforetime. It is a very common phase with people who draw largely on their nerve force for their income and their place in the world, and in Mary Lessingham's case she found, after a time, that the feeling of benefit which she had once derived from mingling freely with all sorts and conditions of people, wore off, and what had once been a relaxation, afterwards became a bore. Yet, though Mary and Lessingham did not go to as many parties of sorts as they had done before, they did not find by their partial withdrawal from general society that their expenses were in any way decreased, rather, indeed, the change was conducive to the contrary effect, and their expenses became more heavy. Formerly they had gone out a great deal among those who had never looked for any return of hospitality, but as Mary grew more and more fastidious, so did it become necessary for them to entertain in return. The change had advantages and disadvantages, and the disadvantages were predominant, inasmuch as they had now entered upon a life in which giving played quite as prominent a part as taking.

I can hardly say with what a sensation of relief Mary Lessingham wrote the last words of the story that she was under promise to deliver before she should find herself back

in London again. It was a good story, of that she was fully assured, it was new in conception, strong in treatment, vivid in colouring, and fresh as the morning. She sat looking at the neat pile of manuscript, possessed by a blessed sense of restfulness and repose. She was proud of the good work done, and if—if—there was a row of 'dead men' at the bottom of the cabinet, where she kept her stock of paper, and—and—other things, why, it was but as a means to an end, and she felt herself justified in making use of it. Yet did she? Well, I ought more truly to have said that she felt herself almost justified in the use of what had once filled those tell-tale 'dead men' at the bottom of the cabinet.

Of late—that is to say, during the course of her work on the novel just brought to a triumphant and successful conclusion—she had been so deeply interested in the actual story that she had found it write itself, so to speak, and she had not been forced to take her 'medicine' whenever she went to work, indeed, she had only had recourse to it now and then, when she had been more than usually tired, or out of working order.

Down at the old Manor House there would be no need to think of provision or precaution, for she had fully determined that she would not put pen to paper until she was back in town again. She meant to have a long, luxurious, restful summer, and to be as idle as even the children would be—idle from all manner of actual work, though busy enough in all country ways such as she well knew how to occupy herself with.

Contrary to her usual custom, she sent all the servants down to the house in the country before she herself left London. Her general habit was to send down in advance all but two, and herself to go down by the same train as they did, after they had established the old caretaker in the carefully prepared London house. This time, however,

she changed her plans, and sent the servants by an early morning train, telling them that she and Mr. Lessingham would follow so as to be at the old Manor House in time for dinner. Having got rid of the servants, she asked Lessingham to go down as far as the Stores for her, and as soon as the house was free, she set to work and carried downstairs to the basement all the 'dead men' hitherto safely reposing at the bottom of her paper cabinet, and deposited them, with a few other empty bottles, in the place where such things were kept. She did not count them, but, in spite of her only having used her 'medicine' *some*times, there was such an accumulation that her cheeks burned with shame to think what would have been the verdict if, by accident, the cabinet had been opened, and her secret discovered. As it was, fortune or fate had favoured her, and she had put the last one out of sight before the caretaker arrived to enter upon her duties.

'Good morning, Mrs. Barker,' said Mary, when she opened the door in reply to the old lady's knock. 'I am all alone; the servants have all gone. But you will find everything ready for you and just as usual. By the way, I am not quite sure whether there are coals enough to last you; if not, I must order some in for you.'

She went to the coal-cellar and looked in.

'Lor, yes, mum, there'll be plenty and to spare,' exclaimed the old woman, looking past her shoulder. 'I'm never much of a one to roast my eyes out. There'll be enough for me.'

'All right,' said Mary. 'I don't want to be ordering coals for the mere pleasure of it, I can assure you.' As she spoke she opened a door hard by and looked in. 'Oh, Mrs. Barker, all those bottles do look horrid,' she said carelessly, or, I should say, with seeming carelessness. 'I do wish you would have them all cleared away. Do it at once.'

'Very good, mum,' returned Mrs. Barker.

'And now I am going out to get my lunch, and I shall be in again for a few minutes before we go to the train, but I shall not want anything.'

'Very good, mum,' said Mrs. Barker; and then Mary went upstairs and dressed herself so as to be ready when Lessingham should come back from executing her commissions at the Stores. She felt able to breathe once more in safety, for she had made her secret secure, as thoroughly secure as a secret could possibly be. There was comfort in the thought that, if this summer's rest and change should strengthen and fortify her, she might lay aside the use of that particular help altogether. And if such good fortune should be hers, no living soul would ever know how nearly she had fallen a victim to the most hideous of all habits. Alas, poor Mary Lessingham! the devil does not often let loose his hold of those on whom he has once set his mark; the grip of his cruel hands, when once fixed on a quivering human soul, is only loosed by one power—by the blistering pain of a continual Gethsemane. In the case of Mary Lessingham, this hope was but as a string tied about the leg of a captive bird, which flies or flutters a little way, and fancies how with a little care in getting beyond the sight of the point at which the string is held, that freedom can and will be found. Alas, poor bird! alas, poor human thing! the case of each is equally hopeless and forlorn. For Mary Lessingham had not been three weeks down at the Old Manor House before she was urged to break her holiday and to accept a commission which, as she said to Lessingham when he demurred as to her undertaking it, would have been madness to have refused.

'It means the complete loss of your holiday,' he said vexedly.

'Yes; but it means good money and a good opening,' she retorted. 'I would very much rather do it, Hugh; yes, indeed, I really would.'

She had her way, although he pressed her hard to say No; but in some ways she was extremely obstinate, and in this instance she insisted, and would not hear of saying aught but Yes.

So, long before she was rested from her season of hard work, she started out again, and her life, though in the country, was in every respect that of a woman sore pressed for time. And she was strangely unfortunate in her state of mind just then. You see, she had fully decided that she would have a certain period of rest, and when this advantageous commission came, and her courageous spirit would not allow her to refuse it, her courage and sacrifice of self were not enough to give her also the necessary vitality which were essential to her at this point. It was therefore not surprising that when she resolutely set herself down to getting through so much copy a day, she should find herself with a blank mind, and utterly unfit to cope with the task which lay before her. I feel that I need not go further into the details of how she came to start this new story. It was but a jerk of the string, it was yet but one more time that the devil held to her lips that cup which seemed to make the way smooth, the burden light, the difficult task easy to accomplish.

She had found, when she had turned out that cabinet in her den at the town house, that she had left by her about three parts of a bottle of chartreuse. This she had packed carefully in one of her dress-boxes among her lace-edged handkerchiefs and such-like things. On reaching the old Manor House, she had been careful to slip it away out of sight, hiding it, as she had done before, in the large old-fashioned cupboard in which she kept her paper and other matters, such as medicines in case of accident or childish ailments which might require treatment ere the doctor, who lived seven miles away, could be summoned. To this she had recourse, and the story was started without very much

delay, for Mary did not nowadays struggle and fret over her ideas when she had always at hand a help so potent and so efficacious. But, it was one thing to set to work when living a regular workaday life, and it was altogether a different matter to sit down and keep the mind fixed to the end of a pen when both mind and body were crying out for cessation from all manner of toil. It was hard when the birds were singing, the bees humming; when the thousand and one country joys were each and all calling loudly for her presence and her attention,—it was hard to sit down and think of men and women who were but creatures of imagination. So it came about that, during the time when she was engaged on this particular piece of work, she had more need than ever of her 'medicine,' and in her desire to keep her promise, she let herself go, and took it whenever she found herself at all working against the grain.

Being in the depths of the country, she had no small difficulty in supplying herself with it, and she used to drive herself into the nearest market town, and take with her the last empty bottle, bringing back with her a full one with which to replace it. Just at first, she used to contrive that she went alone, but after a time, as the need for replenishment grew more pressing, she grew much more bold, and even careless, and merely contrived that Lessingham should be out of the way when she actually went into the grocer's shop to purchase it.

Possibly in the whole of her life she had never worked with such a will as she did during that autumn. For one thing, in spite of her renewed and continued success, she felt very keenly that they had need of all the money that they could make, for with Michaelmas the season's bills came flooding in with terrible rapidity. Their expenses, even though they had not been going out socially as much as before, had, as I said, increased instead of decreasing, and though she was making over five thousand a year, she

was yet spending but little less than that amount. So she never allowed herself to think longingly of the green fields, of the mushrooms growing in the meadows, of the blackberries dotting the hedgerows, or of the long delicious drives in the early morning to some pretty spot a dozen miles away, there with a few congenial friends to spend a long luxurious day, and forget that such a fever-spot as London had any existence, and that any such person as Mrs. Lessingham, the author, lived and had her being. And as she worked, so did she help herself along by that devil's crutch so cunningly placed beneath her arm.

'I wish to Heaven you had never undertaken that novel, Mary,' said Lessingham, one evening, when he had just come down from town. Lessingham's holidays were over then, and he was taking his chief's place on the *Spokesman* for a time, and so was only able to get down to the old Manor House for the week-end.

'Oh, don't say that,' she responded quickly. 'I know what you would say, that it has taken my hard-earned holiday, and that you cannot bear to think of me grinding away, when I ought to be getting all the fresh air and sunshine, and all the rest of it. Yes, but when I planned out my holiday, I did not know that Sir John would want you to be most of the week in London, and so it is just as well for me to have something to do while you are away, for I should not half enjoy myself without you.'

'I was not thinking of that,' he said, scanning her closely. 'But this extra strain is beginning to tell upon you most fearfully. You don't look like the same woman you did. You are beginning to show the want of rest. You look as if—as if—oh, I don't know what; but all your freshness is going, and that's absurd at your age.'

'I'm getting on in years,' she said quietly, and showing by her manner nothing of the horrid fear that was knocking at her heart.

'Pooh, getting on in fiddle-sticks!' he cried, almost crossly. 'You little more than a girl; how absurd! You are overdone, and as long as you go on taking everything out of the strong box and never putting anything in, you will soon come to an end of the store. It makes me wild to see you looking as you do now, jaded and strained, and —and——'

'And what?'

'Well, as you do. By Jove, if any more commissions come in, I'll refuse them without saying a single word to you about them.'

'Oh, I will have my holiday when I have got through with this,' she said, in as gay a tone as she could put on.

'I will take care that you do,' he retorted.

CHAPTER XXII

THE FLY ON THE WHEEL

> The losing of a burden does not always give immediate relief to those who have borne the greater part of its weight. Indeed, I am not sure whether just at first the loss of a burden is not more trying than the loss of a joy. When one has laid down for ever a long-carried burden, one almost feels a sense of emptiness, a sense of chill, a sense of something wanting. It is significant of this that those who are very suddenly bereaved seldom show as much grief as those who have watched through the course of a long and hopeless illness.

MRS. LESSINGHAM was about three parts of the way through her extra story when something happened at the old Manor House, which threw the whole family out of their regular course; for the old gentleman, Mr. Cooke, suddenly took a turn for the worse, and after lying between life and death for a few days, slipped quietly out of this world into the place of shadows. His end was calm and peaceful, and, to every single person about him, came as a great relief; for years he had been quite incapable of taking the smallest interest in what went on around him, and had been a heavy burden, such as only the memory of what he had been could serve to carry with ease. Mary was a good deal upset when the end came, but there was no grief in her heart such as she would once have felt. Still, sometimes, when a burden unexpectedly falls from off the shoulders which have grown

used to carrying it, the feeling of relief is scarcely sufficient to outweigh the sense of loss. It was just so with Mary Lessingham, and though she did not grieve for the old man, she yet missed him, and was full of distress when finally all was over.

They carried him up to London, that they might lay him in the same grave in Brompton Cemetery where his wife was buried. This meant the loss of more time than would have been the case had they laid him quietly away in the little God's Acre which surrounded the quaint little church half a mile from the old Manor House. Lessingham did, indeed, suggest that they should follow the latter course; but Mary would not have it so.

'No,' she said, in decided tones; 'we cannot do that. He always used to say that, no matter how poor he was, he would be able to lie with dear Mother at the last, and I should not feel easy if I were to disregard his wishes, because he has not been in a state to remember them very lately.'

'It must be just as you wish, of course,' said Lessingham.

So the poor old man, who had once been so powerful, and who had lived so much longer than his brain, was duly carried back to the London that he had loved, and was laid away to his long rest with all proper and suitable ceremony; and Mary found that she was yet further pressed in consequence of her loss, than she gained in being spared certain social duties by reason of her mourning. For all the world saw that Mrs. Lessingham's father was dead, and all the world, even that portion of it which had never cast eyes upon him, hastened to call at the door of the Lessinghams' London house, and to leave their messages of condolence, all of which would naturally require a separate reply, for Mary, like all good-feeling people, had a horror of paying a shilling or two for an advertisement in the morning papers, announcing that she had been inundated

by so many letters of condolence that it was impossible personally to reply to them all, and that, therefore, a three-line advertisement would be expected to do duty for her in that respect. But, in truth, the poor old man's death was a great interruption to her just then, and by the time that all was decently over, she found herself retarded in her work by at least a fortnight—time which she was not sufficiently advanced to be able to spare. So, being utterly thrown out of mental gear, and also troubled by many small details, such as letters, mourning, and other arrangements which must be made by her, and her alone, she found, when she got back to her desk again, that it was only by the help of continual doses of her 'medicine' that she was able to finish the story at all.

Lessingham was almost beside himself at her looks.

'Mary, I do wish you would chuck that story up,' he urged, on the second day after she had resumed work.

'Oh no, I can't do that,' she replied. 'I am really better at work than I should be if I were idle. Of course, I have been very much upset and bothered by all sorts of things; but I shall be all right now: see if I am not.'

'Well, you don't look all right or anything nearly all right,' he persisted. 'You look——'

'I dare say I look a bit ill,' she rejoined quickly; 'it's the black. I never did look well in it.'

'It's the complete change in you,' he said anxiously. 'You don't look fresh and clear as you used to do and as you ought to do. I don't like letting you go on. It's cruelty—nothing more nor less.'

'Oh, well, wait till I am through with this, and then we will go off for a real holiday,' she cried soothingly. 'I really do want it; of that there is no doubt at all. And now,' with a quick, sharp sigh, 'I shall have one anxiety less to leave behind than I had before.'

Lessingham could say no more, and he feared to worry

her by seeming too anxious about her, but, in his heart, he thanked God that the old man had been taken to his rest, and his wife eased of one portion of the burden which she carried so bravely and so uncomplainingly.

Left alone, Mary rose from her seat, and going to a large pier-glass, which stood between the windows, she scanned herself closely. Yes, he was quite right; the change in her looks was very marked and terrible. In former days she had never been a beautiful woman, but she had been remarkable for her fresh and clear look of almost childlike youthfulness. Now the heavy gold-brown hair seemed too young for her face, and her eyes had a worn and weary look, which had not been there aforetime.

'My complexion has gone,' she said to herself. 'I must take to some wash or powder, or something of that kind.'

That was easily done, and that very day she bought herself a bottle of sweet-smelling lotion, warranted to restore the most faded and bloated complexion to its pristine freshness and youthfulness of appearance. The smooth-voiced young gentleman of whom she bought the mixture strongly recommended her to buy also a box of powder, which was, he said, a sure preventive against the ravages which a long sojourn in London makes upon a delicate skin. He also suggested that she should step upstairs and submit herself to the ministrations of a lady highly skilled in face massage, and he wound up his remarks with the information that very few persons really understood how to wash their faces clean, or how to keep them clean when they had got them so.

'The charge is only seven and sixpence, madam,' he said in conclusion; 'and I am sure you would be pleased with Miss Jervis, who is a physician's daughter.'

So Mary, who was glad to catch at any straw to help her just then, consented to go upstairs and to interview the physician's daughter, whom she found to be a small,

lady-like woman, no longer young, but very brisk in air and voice.

'Your complexion has been ruined,' she said, when she had closely examined Mary's face under a large magnifying-glass; 'late hours, over-strain, bad washing, and wrong eating and drinking.'

Mary gave such a start, that it was useless to deny that one, at least, of the little woman's shots had gone fairly home.

'I certainly have never taken the smallest care of my complexion,' she said, almost apologetically.

'Evidently not. But I assure you, madam, if ladies would take as much care of their complexions as they do of their pearls or their laces, there would be no such thing as a bad complexion, excepting in cases of severe illness.'

Mary laughed.

'Well, Miss Jervis,' she said, 'I want you to do the best you can for me, and to make me look as young and as beautiful as possible. How long will it take to restore me?'

'I should like you to come three times a week for a short time,' the complexion-specialist replied. 'And after that, it will be only necessary to come to me now and then. I will tell you what lotions to use between my treatments, and you should have a special soap also.'

'I will have anything you wish,' said Mary, eagerly.

The result of this visit was certainly to freshen her looks and to send her away with a skin which was a very different one to the skin with which she had gone in. Lessingham remarked on her improved looks the moment they met, which was, as it happened, before she reached home.

'You are looking ever so much better,' he said, as she stopped the carriage that he might get in beside her.

'I am feeling so,' she replied.

Her first instinct was to tell him where she had been and all about her visit to the lady complexion-restorer; but the

next moment she had choked down the words on the tip of her tongue, and just said quietly—

'I am feeling so.'

'Ah! you have had a lot to try you of late,' he said gently. 'And, of course, the poor dad was an anxiety for long enough.'

'A terrible anxiety, with nothing to relieve the burden,' Mary rejoined. Then she slipped her hand into his as they drove along. 'I wish you would not worry about me so, dear old boy,' she said. 'It fidgets me, and makes me feel wretched to think that you are watching my looks as if I were a barometer.'

'So you are—the barometer of my life,' he replied, smiling down upon her.

She felt a good deal comforted by his solicitude, and she had no small hopes that the new treatment and the rest which she would have as soon as her novel was finished would serve to freshen her looks, so that Lessingham would not so keenly notice the passage of time and the effect thereof upon her appearance.

'After all,' her thoughts ran, 'it is no use disguising the fact that I am getting older with every day. Other women do not go on year after year looking fresh and young and pretty, so why should I expect to do so?—I, who was never a beauty to begin with?'

The effect of Miss Jervis's treatment was sufficiently marked as to lull Lessingham's suspicions to rest during the time that Mary was occupied in bringing her story to an end; but the effort by which she did bring it to an end was, in truth, beyond all previous effort that she had ever made, and it was only by having continual recourse to her 'medicine' that she was able to keep herself to it at all. At last, however, the final words were written, and Mary, with a splitting headache, found herself sitting staring blankly at the pile of paper which represented just as

many fractions of her downward course as there were sheets in the pile. She sat for a little while all huddled up in a lump; and then she pulled herself together and stretched out her arms in a long effort.

'Dear Heaven,' she said within her own heart, 'I have run myself too close this time. I believe that madness lies that way. I wonder—I wonder if—if—I shall go like my poor father one day! Oh, my God, not that—not that, I pray!'

CHAPTER XXII

THE MOTH IN THE GARMENT

One wonders how, in days gone by, wise men could ever have believed in a material hell, for the tortures of the mind are infinitely worse than any tortures which can be inflicted on the body. Physical pain in time brings its own relief, but agony of mind knows no such calm, and is unalleviable. It is for this reason that men confess murder years after it has been committed, and for this, too, that ruin long fought against often brings a happier time than that which went before.

THERE is a vast difference to be noticed among those who take more than is good for them. The hard drinker who drinks for the sheer love of the thing itself, is a widely different person from the one who drinks in spells, and who only indulges in fits of more or less hard drinking. As a rule, the man who drinks in spells of drinking, holds out very much longer than the steady drinker, who keeps the system soaked in strong spirit, and whose tissues soon get used up, because they are given no chance of recuperating themselves. I knew a man once who was a confirmed gin-drinker. He drank everything that he had, everything that he could lay his hands on, everything, down to his wife's wedding-ring. Had his means been sufficient, he would have finished himself off in a few months, but fate willed otherwise, for, by reason of means failing, he was enabled

to drag out his miserable existence during a long course of years, simply because he had not money enough to drink himself to death by keeping on at it without intermission. I believe he would have gone on till now if fortune had not smiled upon him in the shape of a legacy, which gave him the means of saturating the already well-soaked system, and so bringing his inglorious career to an end.

In the case of Mary Lessingham, she had no personal love of drink to contend against. She really, honestly, and genuinely loathed and detested it; even the smell of it, in passing a drinking-saloon or a public bar, was sufficient to turn her sick and faint. Willingly she never touched a drop of any wine or spirit, and it was only on account of its curious effect upon her work that she ever touched anything stronger than water, or some natural water, such as Vichy or Apollinaris, which she sometimes took as a change from the Adam's ale which constituted her ordinary beverage. If her income had been sufficient for all her needs, without having to trouble about her novels, I believe she would have altogether given up writing rather than have yielded to a habit so utterly foreign to all her instincts and nature; but it was useless for her to struggle against the power of the hand in which she was gripped at that time. The devil is very clever, very cunning and crafty, and he knows, far better than we poor short-sighted mortals do, the joints of our human harness, the points at which we are vulnerable, and exactly how he can take advantage of our weakness and of our necessities. He had fixed upon Mary Lessingham, and he struck her not through her physical weakness, not through her appetites, not through her desire to indulge herself, but wholly and solely through the best and noblest aspirations and instincts of her heart and life. A woman less good, a woman less strong, would have been led gently and quietly along the path of physical weakness and self-indulgence, until she

found herself a hopeless and confirmed sot; but upon Mary Lessingham, with her great noble heart, her entire absence of selfishness, her lofty ideals, and her great pride in herself, the ingenious enemy of man worked by other means, and in a far more subtle fashion. He never attempted to eliminate her sense of right and wrong, only he set two paths before her, leaving her, as it were, a free choice in the matter. On the one hand, he drew the picture of a noble and stainless woman; on the other, one of a man whose constitution, shattered by severe illness, prevented him from doing the work in the world of which his brain was more than capable. Beside him were the forms of three little children, none of them robust in health, children who had been reared in wealth and luxury, children on whom a sudden diminution of income would fall very cruelly. And having put these two pictures before her, the great arch enemy asked a question of the luckless wife and mother.

'Is it more to you to be a white-robed stainless woman than to see these loved ones die for want of your sacrifice?'

Not, mind you, that this came all at once. No, no. The enemy was too clever by far to leave such an issue on a choice so definite. No; he drew picture after picture, and held them before his victim's uncertain eyes. The first showed how, as time went by, she would assuredly be able to free herself from the toils into which she had temporarily fallen, the foreshadowing of a time when she would once more stand up straight before all men and say, 'I have fought the good fight;' a time in which this secret would be still, and for ever a secret, locked safe in the depths of her own warmly beating heart.

And yet, I cannot longer deny that by the time old Mr. Cooke had been sleeping for two years in his quiet grave with Mary's mother, the drink-fiend had got a firm hold of her, and she could not write at all unless her brain was

distinctly under the influence of chartreuse. And just as she had feared and dreaded, supposing that she had taken to avowed brain tonics, so did she find, when a certain time had gone by, that it was necessary for her to take more and more of the deadly stuff ere it had any perceptible effect upon her powers.

Time and again did she reason out the situation with herself, and time and again did she determine that, be the cost what it might, she would break free of this peril which, after a time, might prove to be the ruin of her body as of her soul, which might bring her fame to a heap of dust, and her literary career to ashes. But fate was too strong, too hard for her, and time after time when she tried to write without help, she found the work turned out was mere vapid rubbish, and wholly unworthy of the great name that she had carved out for herself.

I think that at this period of her career, Mary Lessingham would, or at least might, have let her life slip which way it would, had not Lessingham worried so continually about the great change which came over her appearance.

'Mary, you don't take exercise enough,' he said to her one day, when she had descended from her study to the lower part of the house.

'I am very tired to-day, Hugh,' she said in reply; and truly, poor soul, her voice sounded weary enough.

'Yes, I know; but you are always tired, dearest, and it is not a state of things that can go on quite unchecked and unnoticed. You look—well, on my soul, so unlike yourself, that even I, who am used to seeing you every day, sometimes hardly know you. Why don't you try cycling?'

'I don't know whether I have nerve enough,' she returned.

All the same, the suggestion came to her as a blessed relief. If she were to find the same exhilaration and recreation in cycling that other hard-worked men and women seemed to do, it was quite within the bounds of

possibility that it might so tone up her nerves that by its aid she might shake herself free of her present bondage.

'I don't know whether I have nerve enough,' she said.

Lessingham laughed outright.

'Oh, my dear girl,' he cried, 'you have nerve enough and to spare. I will go to-day and make inquiries as to the best place for learning and the best man to teach you; and the best machine to buy when you have got over the initial stage. I believe it will be a perfect boon to you, and bring the clear look back to your cheeks and the light to your eyes.'

'Do I look so bad, Hugh?' she asked. Her heart was in her mouth, and she asked the question as one would ask a question concerning the issues of life and death.

'Well, you do,' he said bluntly. 'Your skin is blotched, and your eyes are blood-shot, and your hand is not steady, and——'

'And what, Hugh?'

'Well, you are all to pieces,' he returned.

In truth, he did not like to say, he did not like to give utterance to the real thought which was in his mind at that moment, that if he did not know her to be as nearly an abstainer as well could be, he might be forgiven for thinking that she was drinking, and drinking hard. They had from the very first days of their marriage been on perfectly open and familiar terms with each other, and it was almost the first time that he had kept back a definite thought from her for fear of wounding her feelings. Mary, however, was quick to note the hesitation and to divine its cause.

'I believe I am looking hideous and fagged out,' she said, with as fine an air of coolness as she could assume. 'I have used myself very badly of late, but I will turn over a new leaf, and see if a little less work and a good deal more exercise will not pick me up again. Only, you must not forget, dear boy, that I am getting older every day, not

younger, and that I live a life in which I sell my vitality daily—at a good price, it is true, but it is always on sale, nevertheless. If I were a novelist who only wrote pretty love stories, with lots of dress and many descriptions of pretty faces, long kisses, and other gay and lightsome subjects, I should probably scarcely feel the strain of covering so much paper any more than an ordinary woman feels the strain of sewing so many white seams or mending so many pairs of stockings every week. But my work is not like that, it is written with my heart, with every fibre of my being; it is just so much taken out of my actual body day by day, and it is bound to leave its mark, its indelible mark, upon me. I have to pay for my place in the world of novel-writers, and sometimes, Hugh, I feel as if the price, great as the prize is, is too heavy for me.'

She spoke with such fire and passion that Lessingham looked up in amazement.

'I wish to Heaven I could do something more than I do to take a part of the burden off your shoulders,' he said regretfully. 'But it is your own mantle, and would fit no one else.'

'I don't mind bearing it,' she said gravely; 'only I cannot pretend that it is not heavy, or that wearing it does not leave its traces upon me.'

Lessingham stretched out his hand to her.

'My poor girl,' he said tenderly.

'I know what you are going to say,' she interrupted quickly. 'But it is no use to say it. If you were a millionaire to-morrow, I should not be relieved in the least. I have made my name, and it is very precious to me; it would break my heart to lose it now. But I do think your idea about cycling is a good one, and I will see if it will not do something to rejuvenate me, and to make us all believe I am not more than twenty years old. I will begin as soon as you like—only I have no time to spare

from my working day. You must arrange that I shall go to be taught after five o'clock.'

So Lessingham left her. He was satisfied that nothing ailed her but overwork and want of exercise; and being, especially in these later days, buoyant enough of disposition, he was ready to accept any feasible reason for existing circumstances. And Mary sat quite still just where he had left her, her heart beating hard, her soul crying out that she was just one step nearer to the inevitable discovery which would, which must, one day come upon her!

She had seen, as plainly as if he had put his thoughts into plain words, that Lessingham had been on the point of saying that she had the appearance of a woman who drank; she had been quick to recognize that he had hesitated, and had then held back the obnoxious suggestion. Yes, and the truth would out. She might, by great efforts, by going duly and truly to complexion-specialists, by devoting a good part of her leisure time to cycling and other out-door and health-giving pursuits, put off the evil day and keep the skeleton safely locked in his cupboard for some time longer; but, in the end, her secret would betray itself, and Lessingham would have to know. Her heart quaked as the thought of such a day came across her mind. It would be the ruin of her life, the desolation of her love, the bitter, burning end of her martyrdom.

She got up from her chair and went to where a pier-glass was hung between the windows, and there she scanned herself closely. How often since this bondage had come upon her, had she done the same thing, poor soul! and always with the same result, with always the same dread conviction forcing itself upon her, that most assuredly the deadly drink to which she was in thrall, was beginning to show its handiwork, to dig deeper lines, to paint in coarser colours, almost to proclaim her for what she was, a woman who could not live without drink!

'And he sees it—sees it just as plainly as I do,' her wretched thoughts ran. 'My God, how long? how long? He is like a man learning a new language—he sees the words, and he thinks they are familiar to him; but he is not quite sure, and he does not like to acknowledge that the meaning of the words is just what they seem. But one day he will know—and then—oh, my God, my God, what shall I do? How shall I face him?'

CHAPTER XXIV

'ALL YE THAT LABOUR AND ARE HEAVY LADEN'

> I have often heard of poor sinners who have suffered the deepest distress because they had forgotten or had never learned how to pray; poor wretched beings, to whose unaccustomed lips no words in proper set phrase would come. What needless anguish! what useless and unnecessary distress! The most pathetic prayer that the world has ever heard is but in three words, 'Lord, help me!'

It cannot be said that Mary Lessingham proved herself a very apt pupil to the gentleman who undertook to make her a proficient cyclist. She lacked nerve and real desire. Her only object in wishing to cycle was that she might benefit physically—and in her heart she would have gone on for years without making the smallest attempt to do so, had she not had this definite end in view.

'It is not the least use, I can see that,' she said, in disheartened tones, when she had finished her fifth lesson, and was fain to confess that she was no further advanced than she had been on the first day.

'You should persevere, madam,' replied the instructor, who had in his day taught many and strange pupils. 'One of these days it will come all in a moment, without your knowing it, and, after that, you will go straight ahead, and you will enjoy it as you have never enjoyed anything in your life.'

'Never,' returned Mary, with conviction.

The instructor smiled with a smile of superior knowledge.

'If I might suggest it to you, madam,' he said quietly, 'you come much too late in the day.'

'I am always busy in the mornings,' Mary cried hastily.

'With head-work,' he said significantly. 'And so you come to do something which is difficult to you, something which requires all the nerve and strength that you possess, when you are mentally and physically tired out. It is not the way to learn cycling quickly, Mrs. Lessingham, I can assure you.'

So Mary changed her plans, and took her lessons in the morning; but even then she was no great credit to her teacher, and made but little progress.

'I cannot struggle with it any more,' she cried vexedly at last. 'I will give it up; it is hopeless for me to waste my time like this. I shall never be a cyclist.'

She got off the machine as she spoke and came heavily to the ground.

'Madam,' said the instructor, 'you should never dismount like that. You might have sprained your ankle badly or even broken your leg. Why, Mrs. Lessingham, you are faint,' he added hastily; and truly Mary had grown as pale as a sheet, and was clinging blindly to him for support.

'Jim,' shouted the instructor to one of his assistants. 'Here, quickly. Take the machine and get some brandy-and-water for Mrs. Lessingham. Not too weak, mind.'

He helped her to a seat at the side of the track, and the boy, who had run into the house, came back with the brandy-and-water which his master had asked for. He took it and held it to Mary's lips.

'Take a good drink of this, madam,' he said, in reassuring tones. 'It will soon pull you together again.'

She did not move, and he forced the glass gently against her teeth, causing them to open, and then she drank as

obediently as a child. She gave a shudder of disgust as the last drain trickled down her throat.

'What horrid stuff!' she exclaimed.

'Nay, madam, it is excellent brandy, and has brought you round already,' was his reply.

Mary drew herself up.

'I was quite faint,' she said, trying to smile, though at that moment she felt more than a little inclined to indulge in a downright good cry. 'How very silly of me! Oh, I am quite well now. Don't be alarmed. I shall be as right as possible in a minute or so.'

She sat on the seat for a few minutes, and presently the strong spirit began to mount to her head, to run like fire through her veins, and, indeed, all the early sensations which she had first experienced from green chartreuse began to steal over her.

'Mr. St. Maur,' she said breathlessly, for an awful thought had come into her head, 'I should like to try if I could not succeed now. I feel as if I could go alone without any difficulty.'

With any other woman the instructor would have tried every power to dissuade her from attempting to mount the machine again. In the case of Mrs. Lessingham, however, whom he was most anxious to teach, and to teach quickly, he did not hesitate, but at once called to the boy to bring the machine back again. He gave her some simple instructions as he mounted her, and Mary felt that she had all at once got the right balance and the right control over the machine.

'I am going better,' she said anxiously.

'You have been round the track alone, madam,' replied the instructor.

Mary came to grief at once.

'Oh, I did not know that I was going alone,' she cried, as she reached the ground.

'You would have fallen off at once, madam, as indeed you did,' he replied, with a smile. The ways and weaknesses of tyros in the art of cycling were not new to him, and he smiled indulgently down at Mary, knowing nothing of the seething tumult in her heart. 'You have got over the worst now, Mrs. Lessingham; all the rest will be perfectly plain sailing. Will you try another round?'

'No, not to-day,' Mary returned. 'I am tired, and I have done as much as my strength will let me. To-morrow, perhaps, at the same time. If I am prevented, I will telephone.'

She walked away from the school, which was situated on the north side of the Park, and, refusing several offers of cabmen who were loitering about waiting for fares, she went slowly along, trying to grasp the new knowledge which had come to her. She glanced at her watch—it was just twelve o'clock. She was free for an hour and a half. If she could only get into some quiet place where she could think undisturbed! But she was far from the museums and a good way from the Park, and besides, she had never in her life sat in the Park, excepting on a penny chair when she wanted to talk to a friend. The Row was the last place in all wide London where a well-known woman could be sure of a quiet hour.

In all her life, in all her sore temptation and secret trouble, Mary Lessingham had never been so hard set as she was on that day. For the knowledge had come to her, and, moreover, had come with a fearful plainness and reality, that she was more firmly in the clutches of the drink-fiend than she had believed. Very soon she would be able to do nothing unless she was more or less drunk. Ah! there was a church: perhaps it was one of those churches whose door stood open all the day, and she might find a haven there. She passed in at the iron gates, and went with faltering footsteps up to the door. Yes, it

yielded to her touch, and she went from the broad and glaring light of morn into the hushed and solemn shadows of the House of God.

There were no pews in this church, only rows and rows of chairs set facing the high altar, which was bright with many flowers and made gorgeous with all that wealth and loving care could bring together. She stood for a moment at the end of the edifice, hesitating as to whether she should stay or go. Then she summoned up her courage, and, walking up the aisle a little way, she sat down facing the altar. Here, at last, she had found a place of peace; but there was no peace in her soul. No, for her soul and her poor heart were torn afresh by other wounds than those which she had borne before. Oh, it was bitter and galling to her, this new discovery. To think that she, Mary Lessingham, should have been brought to this point of degradation; to think that she should have become a slave to this vile and loathsome bondage; to think that she, who had once been so proud, so self-reliant, should be unable to carry out any of her plans, even one so unimportant as the learning of a mere amusement, without the aid of a potent and deadly spirit! Oh, it was bitter, bitter and galling, and as she sat there alone, or seemingly alone, in the dimly lighted church, the full weight of her misery and desolation came home to her with a terrible and cruel actuality.

She wondered whether, if she were to pray, she would find herself freed from this bondage? She had never been in any way a religious woman, and the religious life was as a sealed book to her. She had heard of men and women who had gone to the stake for the Cross, and she had thought of them with a strange kind of pity, as one would think of misguided folk who throw away the substance for the shadow, and who yet seem to find a half-glorified, half-hysterical pleasure in so doing. In her childhood, she had said her prayers night and morning, and she had gone

to church with her governess, and afterwards when she had been at a smart finishing school, but since that time, she had done so but seldom. She had never known her father go to divine service; he had always called it 'waste of time.' Her mother, she remembered, used always to have a little pile of devotional books on a little table beside her bed, but she had never seen them used, and after Mrs. Cooke's death, Mary had noticed that they were as fresh and clean as if they had just come from the bookseller's where they had been sold.

Then she left off saying her prayers, for it always seemed to her that God had either forgotten her or that He had heaped misfortunes so thickly upon her that He could not possibly take the smallest interest in or notice of her prayers. And so she had never said them any more, indeed, she had never seemed to have time to do so. Moreover, her way had not been cast among religious people. Those with whom she had been brought into contact had always seemed to her very narrow and uninteresting. She had looked with a fine pity upon a few ladies who would not accept an invitation on Sunday, because it was the Lord's day and they regarded pleasure-seeking on that day as a sin. With such she had felt neither sympathy nor any fellow-feeling. They were outside her set; they followed other lines of life than her own; they were dowdy and dull, and knew little or nothing of what made up her existence.

But it came home to her, as she sat in the quiet calm of the silent church, that perhaps hers had not been the better part; that perhaps these simple dowdy folk, who passed all their lives between set lines of conduct, had chosen more wisely than she, were perhaps more blessed in their narrowness than she had been in her freedom; that perhaps they would have been stronger than she, and that their set faiths would have upheld them where she, trusting only in her own might, had failed.

She tried to pray, but, somehow, she could think no prayers. Her mind wandered off to all and every subject but that of telling God just what troubled her. She found herself thinking of the flowers on the altar, of the coloured lights which streamed in through the stained-glass windows, of the sounds which came from without, of anything and everything rather than that which was at that moment her deepest and gravest interest in life.

Then, almost as if in answer to her thoughts, some one began to play on the organ, concealed behind a screen. It was not for a service, but only some one practising, and the player was evidently in a dreamy mood, for the sweet soft strains which came stealing through the quiet church were to Mary like a message sent straight to her from heaven. She sank on her knees, and buried her face in her hands. The tears came freely now, but her lips were dumb, for she had never learned how to pray.

A thousand conflicting thoughts came surging through her brain, wild resolves rose up and pressed themselves upon her, urging her to stand up straight and to face the monster which had so insidiously got her in thrall; vague hopes, passionate wishes, instincts of driving a bargain with God Almighty, so that she should in the end be delivered, —all presented themselves before her; but no real prayer came to her lips, no way was shown by which she could with certainty escape. It was an hour of conflict with all the powers of evil, and the poor human soul, set defenceless in the midst, had eyes so blind that they could not see the way which lay straight before her, even though the Cross was raised on high just before her earthly vision, and gleamed down upon her from above the flower-decked altar at the end of the church.

She raised her streaming eyes as she knelt, and fixed them upon the Cross and the words painted in gold above the great east window—'Come unto Me, all ye that labour

and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.' Truly, she was weary and heavy laden; truly, she was in need of spiritual rest. The music of the words touched her and soothed her, but they conveyed nothing more. They were only music, and her beaten perplexed soul needed something more definite, more material, than sweet sounds and the sensuous help of coloured lights, solemn stillness, and the tones of the organ pealing from its place above.

At last she rose from her knees, and stood up where she had knelt.

'I have found a sanctuary, a place to come and weep in,' her thoughts ran, as she stood facing the altar. 'But there is no religion which can help me. If I could only pray, if I could only believe all that,' fixing her eyes upon the Cross, 'I should be a happy woman again. But I have no faith—no faith and no hope—I have never had those simple, foolish creeds, which seem to comfort others because they believe them and trust to blind fate that, however much they may suffer in this world, God will make it up to them in the world to come. It is a good belief, but one has to believe it. I will go home.'

CHAPTER XXV

THE TOUCHSTONE OF SYMPATHY

> We often think and speak of our bodies as being, in the words of Scripture, 'fearfully and wonderfully made;' but how much more wonderful is the working of that which we call our minds! There is nothing tangible, nothing to lay hold of, nothing to see; and yet a word, a look, a breath, can take effect upon our curious mental machinery, and can thereby change the fate of nations, to say nothing of individuals.

MARY LESSINGHAM, when she found herself once more in the street, realized how much she had taken out of herself that morning.

'I must take a cab,' she thought to herself; and so she hailed the first one that came crawling along, and bade the cabman drive her home. The fresh air served to revive her somewhat, but she did not guess how little, until she walked into the dining-room, where Lessingham was already awaiting her.

'Why, dearest, what has happened to you?' he exclaimed, as soon as his eyes fell upon her.

Mary turned crimson.

'Happened!' she repeated. 'Oh, nothing at all. Really, dear old boy, you have the eyes of a lynx. I was a little faint this morning, that was all. But—I have learned to go alone, and, really, the knowledge has quite taken it out of me.'

'You had better have a glass of fizz,' said Lessingham.

'Not for worlds; I detest it, as you very well know.'

'You ought to have something,' he persisted.

'So I have had. Mr. St. Maur forced some brandy down my throat, and almost burned the skin off. Champagne on the top of that would complete my destruction.'

She sat down as she spoke, and tried to look just as usual. But all the self-control of which she was capable could not hide the fact that she was trembling, and that she was looking utterly fagged out.

'Upon my soul, I don't believe that cycling suits you,' Lessingham burst out, after watching her anxiously for a minute or two.

Mary laughed, a genuine laugh enough.

'Well, of all the unreasonable creatures, you are the very most unreasonable,' she cried. 'You chivvy me into beginning cycling, and the first time I look a bit fagged you want me to cry off. No, my dear Hugh, I began to learn cycling to please you, and I will go on with it to please myself. Dear boy,' she added, in a different tone, 'don't worry so about me. It only makes me try to put off little things to which I ought to give way. Don't watch me so closely. Let me alone to feel that I may look as old and as ugly as I please.'

'Why, my dearest,' he exclaimed, 'you don't surely think that I would——?'

'Oh, dear old boy, I think nothing,' she cried. 'Don't talk about me any more. What have you been doing to-day? Have you any news?'

So she guided their conversation away from purely personal subjects, and skilfully kept him interested and amused, as none knew better than she how to interest and amuse him. And as she ate, so did the worn look die away from her face and the haggard, hunted expression pass out of her eyes. She was always stronger and less

despondent when she was with Lessingham, and as that day the children happened to be all out for luncheon, they were quite alone together.

'You are not going to work?' he asked.

His tone was anxious; and Mary looked up quickly with a half fear that she had failed to hide her real self from him. His next words, however, reassured her.

'You are looking more like yourself again,' he said. 'And I am sure you ought to take it easy for a few days. Come out with me and drive somewhere or other.'

'Lady Emily——' she began.

'Yes, I know,' he broke in impatiently. 'She has a party, and she made a point of "dear Mrs. Lessingham" being at it. Your going would make her stupid party a success; but will her stupid party do you any good? That is the question.'

'I was not thinking of working,' said Mary, listlessly. 'And I will drive anywhere that you like. Only, Lady Emily Bourne might be of some use, as it happens, because her party is to meet Beriçon.'

Lessingham laughed.

'Oh, well, if she has got such a celebrity as Beriçon, I withdraw my remarks about her ladyship. But do come out with me for a long drive before you venture into any hot rooms or exhaust yourself with much conversation.'

'I will, with pleasure,' she replied.

Lessingham went away well satisfied, telling her that he would order the carriage to be ready in half an hour. And when she found herself alone, Mary Lessingham drew a long breath, and let the muscles of her face relax as they would. It was well for her that Lessingham did not see her then, for, of a truth, she did indeed look woe-begone and terribly wretched. She had spoken truly when she had told him that she was not thinking of working that afternoon. She had no wish to convince herself twice in one day that

she could not work without help—the wrong kind of help. As she sat there, idly crumbling a bit of bread between her fingers, she wondered whether the day would come when she would not be able to do the smallest thing of her own strength? Should she be obliged to take a potion in the morning before she could rouse herself to rise and dress for the day? Oh, horrid thought! She sprang up and went hurriedly to the window, that she might change the current of her ideas.

'I must not let myself get thinking such things,' she told herself. 'Ten minutes of such horror will make me look worse than I did this morning.'

It is impossible for me adequately to convey what Mary Lessingham suffered at this time. By day and by night she was haunted by the dread that Lessingham would find out everything, and by the still worse fear that she would one day get so completely under the influence of drink that she would be able to keep no hold over herself. Hers was a pitiable condition, like that of a strong man in the folds of a boa constrictor, or of one whose feet were set in a morass from which no mortal power could extricate them.

It was with fear and trembling that she again went to the school of cycling at which she was being taught to ride. Her hopes ran high that she might find herself able to go alone, as she had done the last time that she had taken a lesson, several days before. Surely, her thoughts ran, she would be able to take the task up where she had put it down; surely, now that the crucial point, that of keeping her balance, had been reached, she would find herself able to make the same progress as if she had not found any difficulty at the beginning. In truth, she had kept away for fear of proving the contrary.

The instructor met her with solicitous inquiries as to her health.

'I was afraid you were ill, madam,' he said. 'Indeed, if

you had not come to-day, I should have sent round to inquire after you. I hope you feel no worse.'

'Oh, no; I was a little over done, that was all,' she said in reply. 'We people who take it out of our brains all the time never have too much strength to spare, you know, Mr. St. Maur. But I suffer as little from any form of megrims as any one very well could, so I must not grumble that I do not sail straight away on a cycle as if I had ridden for ten years.'

And then she began her lesson, and, alas! she found that it was beginning it all over again, and that she was as helpless on her machine as if she had never been mounted on one before. Poor Mary Lessingham! She went away from the school at the expiration of her hour, feeling worn and jaded in body, and broken and hopeless in mind. Her feet took her along the same quiet road and towards the church where she had sat so long on that previous morning, and where she had found peace, where she had found a place in which to sit still and try to collect her thoughts, to try to get some grain of comfort, to gather, as it were, the crumbs from the Master's table. Almost unconsciously she turned in at the iron gates, and entered the sacred building, and she sank down in the same seat where she had sat before, and sighed as if she had indeed found a temple of peace and rest.

She was not torn by quite the same feelings which had swayed her before. Then she had been full of acute distress, of bitter burning shame, tinged by a certain sense of the utter injustice that such degradation should be forced by fate upon her. Now her whole being was filled to one dead level of blank despair. What, she said to herself, was the use of trying any longer, what was the use of struggling against fate—fate that was altogether too strong for her to fight against? She would be conquered in the end, so would it not be best, for the sake of the husband and the

children, to let fate have its way; to make all the hay that she could while the sun was shining; to gather in her harvest, and so provide against the night, in which no man can work—the night which would not mean, in her case, the quiet rest and darkness of death, but a period of semi-imbecility, during which she would be an object of scorn to the whole world, and of loathing to those for whom she had sacrificed herself, her womanhood, her very soul? At this point, Mary Lessingham broke down and began to weep, not noisily and stormily, but with floods of scalding and bitter tears, which served to shake her very soul to its inmost depths. By blind instinct she fell upon her knees, and hid her face in her arms. There was not a soul in sight, and yet she felt that she must hide her misery from all the world—nay, from God Himself.

No thought of prayer came to her, no hope of help from the cross shining at the end of the church; she was wholly possessed by a dull aching wretchedness which seemed to swamp every other thought from her mind.

'If I wished to do this horrid thing,' her thoughts ran, 'then it would be so different; then I could understand, I could——'

'You are in trouble,' said a soft voice at that moment at her elbow. 'Can I help you?'

Mary Lessingham started as if she had been shot. She rose to her feet and faced her interlocutor.

'You are very kind,' she stammered; 'but why should I trouble you?'

'It is no trouble to do my Master's work,' the other replied, with an inflection on the word 'trouble,' which clearly marked it out from the rest of the sentence. 'I am here; it is my office to serve those who need counsel, help, or advice. Can I not help you? I am sure that you need it sorely.'

Mary turned her head away, and began with a trembling

finger to trace an imaginary pattern on the back of the chair in front of her.

'No one can help me,' she said.

The clergyman, for he was such, moved a step nearer to her.

'You think not,' he said; and a slight smile overspread his countenance. 'But my message to you to-day is from One who has power to heal all wounds, to comfort the sorest hearts, to help all those who are in distress.'

'He will not help me,' said Mary, dejectedly.

'Perhaps you have not asked Him.'

'I have, oh, I have; with all my heart, with all my soul, with every fibre of my being.'

'Is it something that—I mean, do you desire that God should give you something which you ought not to have, something wrong, something impossible to grant?'

Mary opened her mouth to speak. The priest, seeing that she hesitated, went on speaking, believing that he had touched the right chord.

'My daughter,' he said, 'the world is very evil, the desires of humanity are very weak——'

'You do not understand,' Mary cried impatiently. 'But how should you? You never saw me before; I am an utter stranger to you.'

'Quite so,' rejoined the priest. 'Therefore, it would be wisest if you were to confide the whole state of your heart to me, that I may give you such counsel and help as lie in me. Come into the vestry. We shall be undisturbed there, and you can speak with me fully, and without fear of interruption.'

He led the way down the church to a little door beneath the organ loft, which led into the vestry. Then he opened a second door, disclosing a small room fitted up as a kind of sitting-room.

'This is my private room,' he said, as he closed the door behind her. 'I use it for purposes of this kind, for I find

that many who are in trouble can open their hearts here as they cannot do in the open church. Sit down.'

He motioned her to a seat placed at right angles to a much larger chair set against the wall. Both of these had small kneeling-stools set in front of them, and as he seated himself in the larger chair, he put up his left hand so as to screen himself from her gaze.

'Now, my daughter, unburden your heart of what is troubling it so sorely,' he said. 'You can speak as freely as if you were telling it to God. Remember that you are telling your trouble to Him through me, His instrument.'

Mary Lessingham sat silent.

'Well, my daughter,' said the priest.

'Must I tell you my name?' she asked at last.

'Certainly not, unless you wish, or unless it is material that I should know it,' he replied. 'Remember, my daughter, that I am possessed of no curiosity, that I am moved by no personal feeling in trying to win your confidence. I am the servant of God, through the merits of His beloved Son, who died for us that He might redeem our sins, and, as such, I am eager and willing to serve you. Further interest in you I have none.'

For the very life of her she could not have helped giving utterance to the words which fell from her lips.

'You look upon me as a doctor would look upon a case,' she said.

'Quite so,' he returned.

Mary rose at once.

'Sir,' she said, 'I am very sorry to have troubled you, but I cannot confide my sorrow to you. I ought not to have let you bring me in here. I can only offer my regret.'

The priest rose too, and took her hand.

'My daughter,' he said, 'I beseech you do not go away unrelieved of your great trouble and distress of mind. I can see that you are borne down with some secret sorrow

which now you have an opportunity of confiding to one to whom your confidence is inviolable. Such an opportunity may not again arise. Think, before you cast it aside. Beware, lest you refuse the Lord's comfort.'

His tone was earnest, his manner, though very formal, was full of anxious solicitude; there was no misunderstanding the eager wish of the man that the moment of grace should not slip by. Mary, however, resolutely shook her head.

'I am sorry,' she said; 'I cannot talk about myself to-day.'

She had almost blurted out that she could not speak of herself to him, but she drew back the word and substituted the phrase 'to-day' instead.

'You will come back?' the priest asked.

'I do not know. I came into the church to rest and think, but with no idea of *confessing*,' she replied simply.

'My daughter,' he said, 'you have misunderstood me. I have not asked you to *confess* to me, but to confide your trouble to me. Between the two there is a very great difference. I spoke to you because I saw that you needed help. It is my office, my privilege, to give all the help in my power to those who are hard pressed in the battle of life. Have I not seemed sympathetic towards you? If so, I have not brought myself clearly in touch with you as I wish, and as it is my duty, as a clergyman and as the vicar of this church, to bring myself in touch with any grieving soul to whom my counsel might prove a help. Come, my daughter, unburden your mind, tell me what is troubling you, and then let us seek help and comfort at the one Fount of Grace, at the foot of the Cross on which the Light of the World died that we might be saved to life everlasting.'

For a moment she was touched. Then she clasped her hands together and looked at him with frightened eyes.

'Not to-day,' she said. 'I cannot—I cannot. Oh, sir, pray for me—pray for me, for I am a most unhappy woman, and I have never learned to pray for myself!'

CHAPTER XXVI

'I HAVE FOUGHT THE BATTLE OF FAITH'

> Why, why does an idea that second thoughts are best hold good with so many people? How very often do we regret not having followed our first impulses! For they are usually the kindest, noblest, and most generous, while second thoughts are often cold, cautious, and even cowardly.

MARY LESSINGHAM, when she found herself out in the open air once more, drew a long breath of intensest relief. What an escape she had had! for she had been on the point of revealing to an utter stranger all that was tormenting her soul and making life frightful and hideous to her. She got into the first empty cab that she saw, and told the man to drive very slowly across the Park. And then she gave herself up to thought. Yes, she had actually been within an ace of telling that man, whose very name she did not know, with whom she might be paired off at the next fashionable dinner-party to which she was bidden, the secret that was eating her very heart out. What an escape! What a merciful thing that he had, by two words only, chanced to put her off the almost irresistible desire in some way or other to give vent to her trouble!

And it had taken but two words to do this. He had twice replied, 'Quite so,' to a question of hers, and that had been enough. Her face burned with shame to think how nearly she had given herself away, to think how foolish

she had been, to think how nearly she had committed an act of utter folly for which she might have been bitterly sorry during all the rest of her life. He had been kind—oh yes; but there could not possibly be any real comfort in such a man as this. He had glibly given forth a little string of platitudes, and had one by one brought out his scanty store of cut and dried sayings, each of which would have fitted the case of almost any one. Oh, it was no use seeking relief from such a source as this for such a burden as hers! This man would only prove helpful to weak and conventional beings, whose lives had never gone out of the beaten track; whose lines had been cast in quiet and uneventful places; whose wounds might be healed by a few gently spoken platitudes, since they were wounds that could be but skin-deep—mere abrasions which would, in due course of time, heal of themselves without the aid of any such time-worn remedies as this man had put forth for her acceptance to-day.

She sat upright in the cab as they reached the Park gates, and, putting her hand up through the door, told the driver where she wished him to go. And then she straightened herself and told herself with severity that she was a weak fool, and must, for the time, have taken leave of her senses. For the future she would, nay, she *must*, do differently; she must pull herself together; she must be strong and conquer this stupid weakness that had laid hold of her; she must fight this devil, ay, and fight it to the death. It was manifestly absurd that a woman of her capacity, of her strength of mind, of her mental acumen, should find the smallest difficulty in completely getting the better of such a habit; or, stay, it had not yet come to be a habit, so she must draw those words back and reconstruct her thoughts. Well, it was absurd that she should not be able to give up drink altogether, and do without it as she had been able to do before.

And then a bright idea came to her. She would write a book on the subject. She would draw a character whose besetting temptation should be a devil of drink; she would sketch herself, and in putting such a character on paper, she would perhaps be able to get rid of all that was daily, hourly troubling herself. She would need no help to draw such a story; it would only need to be a portrait of herself, or rather of her own circumstances. It would help her, and it would draw the attention of all the world and give to her public yet another proof of her versatility and of the wideness of her range.

She was flushed and triumphant when the cab drew up at the door of her house. She gave the man an extra shilling, and went into the dining-room with a smile and a gay word for Lessingham, who was there alone.

'Am I very late?' she asked.

Lessingham got up from the chair by the window where he had been sitting.

'Well, you are rather late, dearest,' he replied. 'Miss Day gave the youngsters their lunch and took them off to their dancing-lesson. What kept you? Mary, you've been crying!'

He spoke so suddenly that she could not help starting.

'How quick you are, dear boy!' she said, not attempting to deny the truth of his assertion. 'The fact is—well, I found I was no good again, and it disheartened me. I—I—don't laugh at me, but I bolted into a church on the way home, and I had a cry to myself over my failure.'

'My poor girl!' said he, tenderly. He drew her close to him with a gesture of infinite pity. 'I feel such a brute to have suggested such a thing to you. I am sure that cycling is not good for you. Give it up, my dear—give it up.'

'I'd rather try yet a little longer,' said she. 'Don't, because I have made a fool of myself like a spoilt child, make me own up that I can utterly fail at anything.

Besides, I've got a most glorious idea for a new novel, and I don't want to say or do anything which will put me off it before I get it fairly started and on the way to a fixture.'

Lessingham smiled as he drew her to the table.

'Upon my word, you are the most wonderful woman I ever heard of,' he said. 'You go and break your heart over a trumpery little failure, something that does not matter twopence whether you succeed in or not, and then straightway you go and hatch up an idea for a new novel that is to outshine everything else that you have ever done. You are a wonderful woman, and as curious in mental calibre as you are wonderful.'

'I am a very hungry woman, dear boy,' she returned lightly; and truly her heart was lighter at that moment than it had been for many a day. 'What, do you mean to say you have waited for me! Oh, how good of you! I do so hate eating by myself.'

At that moment the maid who had admitted her into the house came in with the lunch, which had been kept hot for them. It was but a simple meal, for the cook had substituted an omelette for the joint which had served as the *pièce de résistance* for the children's meal, but Mary enjoyed it as she had not enjoyed any food for a long time. And Lessingham, too, was gay because she was so like her old self. It was, indeed, on the tip of his tongue to say that, since going into a church to have a good cry had had such a beneficial effect upon her spirits, it would be as well to repeat the visit, and, indeed, to make a regular practice of it. But, somehow or other, he choked the words back, and, in truth, no more solid proof of the change in her could well have been found than that, for Lessingham had never been accustomed to keep back any word or thought from her, particularly for fear lest he should offend her or hurt her feelings.

'By the way,' he said, when the meal was over and they

were sitting idly over the cheese, 'I bought you a present this morning.'

'Did you really? What is it?' Her tone was interested and eager, and she watched him with a smile as he felt in his pockets one after another.

'Now, what the dickens!—oh, here it is. Now what do you think of that? I thought it the prettiest thing I had seen for ages.'

He produced from a little case a ring, which he held out towards her. Mary took it and slipped it on to her finger. It was a plain band of gold, enamelled in white, on which shone out in letters of ruby red a motto: 'I have fought the Battle of Faith.' A single ruby of exquisite colour was set between the end and the beginning of the motto, so that the words ran round the outside of the ring.

'There,' he said, as she took it from him, 'when have you seen anything as uncommon or as dainty as that?'

Mary sat holding the trinket like a woman turned to stone. 'I have fought the Battle of Faith.' What a mockery, what a hollow sham, that she should take such a gift from the husband whom she was daily and hourly deceiving! Dear God, was ever such a sham before?

'What do you think of it?' he asked.

She turned her eyes upon him, all the light gone out of their soft depths.

'I—I—it's pretty,' she stammered; then suddenly put it down upon the table, and, hiding her face in her hands, broke into a passion of bitter tears.

Lessingham was almost beside himself. He could not imagine what there could be in the gift of a dainty little trinket to arouse such a storm of grief as this.

'My dear, my dear,' he cried, 'what is it that is distressing you so terribly? What is it that has come like a wall between us till even a little gift like this, which I thought would give you so much pleasure, only serves to make you

more unhappy? Mary, my dear, love of my heart, what is it?'

She made no attempt to reply to him, but lay upon his breast sobbing as if her heart would break. Lessingham continued, by every tender word that he could call up, to soothe her and to induce her to confide her trouble to him.

'It is not that you don't love me any more?' he asked at last.

Then Mary found her voice.

'Oh no, no!' she cried, in a tone of agony. 'I love you more and more every day that I live. But I am not worthy of your love, of all your care and thought. I feel I have fought the battle of faith with so little faith, that I am such a poor thing, that I am so weak, so unfit——'

Lessingham at this point stopped her mouth with kisses.

'Have you any further indictments to bring?' he asked, with a smile.

'Plenty,' she cried, in a passionate voice. 'Especially——'

'Then I would rather not hear them,' he said, in a cool determined tone. 'You are quite as near to an angel as I am capable of living up to. If you were more perfect than you are, I should find my life an intolerable burden.'

She did not attempt to say more. A moment before, she would, with a little encouragement, have told him all that was troubling her; she would have confessed fully the terrible strain under which she was living, and would have taken to herself a tower of strength in him. But the moment passed, just as it had done with the clergyman in whom she had so nearly confided earlier in the day, passed and went by for ever.

Lessingham stayed with her until she was soothed into her own self again, and then he persuaded her, as he had done on a previous occasion, to go out with him, that she might try to forget her nerves and all her minor worries.

'I can't think,' he said to himself, as the door closed

behind her, 'what it is that is preying on her mind. Is it merely overstrain and the pressure of her life, or is it something more definite? She is actually distressing herself that she does not do enough, she, the noblest, pluckiest woman I have ever known in all my life. Ye gods, what a world it is! To think of all the useless, selfish, worthless odds and ends of women that are going around, who sit up and take all that they can clutch at from all and sundry, and who just behave as if they were goddesses set up on a pinnacle of glory, and the rest of the world could not do enough to show them how they appreciate them for condescending to live; and then to think that such a woman as Mary can fret herself with doubts as to her unworthiness—Good God!'

So Lessingham communed with himself, and so in his own mind he, manlike, looked upon the whole incident as a thing that had settled itself. Being but a man, though a well-meaning one, he never saw that the golden door had for a brief space stood wide open, waiting for him to enter into the jewelled room of perfect confidence with the wife he loved. Alas! alas! it is a door which stands open but seldom. Its hinges hang so delicately that a mere breath, a chance phrase, a careless look, can send them swinging to so that they can shut the door close to be opened sometimes nevermore. Alas! Alas!

CHAPTER XXVII

'LEST YE FALL'

When one is assailed by a special temptation, it is never safe to relax one's grip of the enemy for a single moment. The harness of our poor human temperament is full of joints, joints which shift continually and expose our weakness at many an unexpected point and in many an unsuspected hour.

MRS. LESSINGHAM'S new book was to be called 'The Way of Temptation.' It can only be said that she wrote it with her whole heart and with hope running high, for she had no difficulty in working at it without the smallest use of her 'medicine.' As the story grew beneath her hand, her spirits went soaring up until she was once more the gayest of the gay, and the black cloud of shame and grief which had almost overwhelmed her before seemed to have fallen completely away from her, so that she was justified in thinking that, by her courage and resolution, she had exorcised the demon which had once threatened to overcome her.

She worked early and late, and never a single drop of stimulant of any kind passed her lips. She worked with a will and with her heart, and the story grew and grew with amazing rapidity.

'I am sure you will be ill,' Lessingham told her again and again; but Mary laughed him to scorn, and kept on her way without the least regard either to bodily or mental fatigue or to her social engagements.

'No, I cannot go out while I am at work,' she said, with decision, when he was urging her one day to lay aside her work for a few hours. 'No, I shall not be ill, not at all,' she declared. 'If I stand still and idle my time away when I am all agog to work, I shall certainly be ill and worse than ill. When this book is done, dear old boy, I will stay idle for a week or two, and I will go anywhere and do anything that you like. But while my idea is red-hot, it is no kindness to try to make me cool off.'

In the face of this, Lessingham had no choice but to allow her to follow her own devices, and so the story grew and grew apace. It was a vivid presentment of her own experiences, of her own struggles and efforts. The situation of the characters was altogether different from her own life, and the scene was laid away from the Metropolis, yet 'The Way of Temptation' was really a faithful portrait of her own inmost self, of the Mary Lessingham who was known to nobody but her own heart. Lessingham read the story with the most intense interest when she had brought it to an end.

'I can't think how you, who have never in all your life taken a single drop too much, can know as you do the inner workings of a drunkard's mind,' he said, with a sort of gasp, when he had read the last words. 'Where do you find out what you know? Does it come in your sleep? Is it instinct, or what?'

Mary looked at him.

'How do you know that I have hit the nail on the head at all?' she asked. 'You are not a drinker yourself. I may be all wrong—my picture may be entirely out of drawing.'

'Out of drawing or not,' he replied, with a bluntness that was almost brusque, 'that book will make a big hit; ay, it will make one of the biggest sensations of our time. You will find yourself quoted, and talked of, and discussed as

you have never been quoted, or talked of, or discussed before. And I am afraid that you will have to follow it up with ever so many others on the same lines. You see, the Temperance people are all deadly in earnest, and there are so few writers who can write at once attractively and yet forcibly on the subject. Anyway, be that as it may, it is a wonderful piece of work, and is bound to put you up still further than you are. But there is one thing that you must promise me, or, on my word, I'll collar the manuscript and put it in the fire.'

Her face blanched to an utterly ghastly whiteness.

'What do you mean, Hugh?' she asked.

Her lips could scarcely frame the words, and her heart was beating so hard that it seemed as if he must hear as if he could not help hearing it.

'Well, it has taken it out of you most fearfully, as indeed such a wonderful piece of work was bound to do. And you must promise me that you will take three months' complete rest—that you won't touch pen and paper again for at least that time.'

'Oh, but why? I do need a good change and rest, I know; but three months—it is an eternity,' she cried.

'Three months, and not one single day less,' returned Lessingham, in a determined tone. 'You are looking most fearfully ill and utterly fagged out. Let us get away down to the old Manor House, and have a week or two of perfect quiet till you are feeling somewhat pulled together again. Then let us leave the youngsters there, and go away by ourselves for the rest of the time.'

Mary breathed freely once more.

'Well, I am quite ready for a holiday,' she said, with a smile; 'but have you thought over my engagements? I must consider those, you know.'

'Yes, I have been into that question already. You can well take three months, and any further commissions must

be put off till those already promised are out of hand. To tell the truth, I hate to have them booked so far ahead; but what are you to do?'

'Nonsense; there is nothing like having work, and plenty of it,' cried Mary, in her gayest tones. 'I don't believe, dear old boy, that work ever killed any one in all this world, especially work that is well paid for.'

'Well, I don't know so much about that,' he replied, looking at her significantly. 'You are looking about as played out as a woman very well could look. And several times I have been almost out of my mind about you, fearing that you were on the verge of complete break-down.'

'But not through——'

She had been on the point of saying that such a state of things had not been caused by work pure and simple, and then remembered that such a statement would give the whole situation away entirely, so broke the words off short, and laughed purely from the effort to evade finishing the sentence.

Lessingham looked up.

'Eh, what did you say?' he asked.

'I was going to say something intensely silly,' she replied promptly. 'Perhaps you are right, dear boy; but the temptation to go on, when one knows that every book one gets done means so much good money, is, I must confess, too much for my sordid mind to resist. But I am not pig-headed, no matter what other faults I may have, and I will do as you tell me; indeed, I will not touch a pen again until you give me leave. There, will that satisfy you?'

'It will, perfectly. And now, as to this new story. I promised Winkelmann, of course, that he should see it. I told him that I knew nothing of plot or subject, but that, from the way you were working at it, I believed it would be something out of the common good. As it is, I feel sure, as

soon as he sees it, that he will yearn to put everything else on one side, and to bring it out straight away.'

'It is not fit for serialization,' said Mary, quickly.

'I agree with you,' said Lessingham. 'Then I may arrange as I think best with Winkelmann?'

'Of course—as usual,' she replied.

So Lessingham went on his way, and carried the new book to Winkelmann the publisher. The result of that gentleman's perusal of it was exactly as Lessingham had predicted, for he was most enthusiastic over it, and was very anxious to lose no time in placing it before the public. To this Lessingham made some demur, as he insisted that Mrs. Lessingham should have at least a month's complete rest before she should be troubled with the proof-sheets.

'My wife has taken it out of herself most frightfully,' he told the publisher. 'Upon my soul, she has slaved at it as if she was possessed, and I can't have her worried by the proofs or by anything else that I can keep away from her. Besides, this is an extra, you know, and she has to think of all the work to which she is pledged, and to get up her strength for that.'

'Yes, yes, I have no doubt that you are perfectly right,' said Winkelmann; 'and you certainly know Mrs. Lessingham better than I do. It would be a thousand pities to over-strain her. By the way, how in the world did she get hold of such an idea?'

'God knows,' replied Lessingham. 'She came in one morning and told me that she had got a glorious idea for a new book, and that I was not to bother her about anything till it was done. She never gave me a hint of the story till it was finished, and how she comes to have that particular knowledge is simply the greatest mystery that I have ever known. I don't know whether you know it, but my wife is practically a total abstainer. I don't think she touches a

glass of wine in a month. She dislikes it extremely, and always swears that it gives her a splitting headache.'

'Mrs. Lessingham is gifted with the most wonderful power of intuition,' said the publisher. 'And a very good thing for all of us that she is.'

So the two men chatted, and came to their usual amicable conclusion, for the relations between Winkelmann and Lessingham were not of that order which expects impossibilities on the one side and unlimited complacency on the other.

And then the Lessinghams left London, although the season was yet young and Mary was as much in request as usual. A few people, who chanced to see one or both of them before the move was made, cried out at the absurdity, the utter selfishness, of thus abandoning the gaieties of town; but Lessingham was firm, and Mary was, in truth, so completely tired out that she made not the smallest attempt to go against his decision.

They found the old Manor House more charming than ever they had done before, and Mary there began to realize that she was more exhausted than she had imagined. The pure country air and perfect relaxation of the life, however, acted upon her like a charm, and after a few days she began to look more like her old self and to feel fresh and strong once more. The life they led at the old Manor House was so simple, so restful, with its quiet, almost childish pleasures and home-like joys, that Mary was soothed and rested into a delightful state of happiness. It seemed to her as if she could never be sufficiently thankful to her fate that she had been spared the great danger into which she had so nearly fallen.

It was always delightful, too, to be planning out fresh holidays. Both she and Lessingham were extremely fond of foreign travel, which they followed on a plan of their own. For them there was no joy in tramping through miles

of galleries, in trooping in and out of cathedrals and churches among a procession of tourists, in gazing at reliques, or in hearing echoes jodelled by persons hired for the purpose. No; their notion of enjoyment was in going to fresh places and exploring them on their own account, in finding out quaint bits and quiet corners left unnoticed by the ordinary sight-seer, in turning out old shops and searching over market stalls for things out of the common, and in going to churches only on the occasion of some great service, thus seeing them at their best and in use for the purpose for which they had been built and intended.

The heat of summer had gone by ere they tore themselves away from the old Manor House and found themselves once more in London, on their way for a long tour in certain German states, where neither of them had ever been.

'We will do a theatre or two,' said Lessingham, when they were dressing for dinner on the day of their arrival. They were staying at their own house, but taking their principal meals at different restaurants, the good old cook being left at the old Manor House.

Mary was nothing loth, being, like all highly imaginative people, extremely fond of the theatre; and so, when they had dined, they went off to one of the principal attractions then running, and made part of an audience such as usually may be seen in a London theatre at the silly season.

'We really ought to have a bit of supper after this,' said Lessingham, when they were leaving.

'Yes, it was rather harrowing,' Mary replied. 'Let us go to the Rupert. It is quite near. We can walk easily.'

'All right. Come along,' said he.

So they went off as gaily as two children out for a holiday. And then something happened to Mary, something that struck at her from behind, as it were; for as they went they passed a flaring-drinking saloon, out of which, as the great

glass doors swung open to allow of several persons to pass in, a strong odour of spirits came wafting out upon the warm night air, and she was instantly conscious that her mouth was watering for something to drink, not from mere thirst, but with a desire for strong drink of some, nay, of any kind.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A DEFINITE CONCLUSION

> Have you ever noticed how sometimes, when one has waited, and hesitated, and pondered, and fought against long mental odds, one suddenly arrives at a decision, and the rest of the way seems easy enough? It is most often like this when some great question of right and wrong is under consideration.

ALMOST unconsciously Mary Lessingham clutched tight hold of her husband's arm, lest she should reel over and fall to the ground. He felt her hand tighten, and looked quickly down at her.

'Hallo, are you feeling seedy, dearest?' he asked anxiously.

'Oh, it was nothing; only the smell of that place,' she replied.

'It was pretty bad, wasn't it?' he returned sympathetically. 'We shall be at the Rupert in two minutes.'

He led her in under the arched entrance, which distinguished the Rupert from any other supper-house, and told the waiter, who came to take his orders, to bring a bottle of champagne at once.

'This place is free from anything like a supper or drink kind of smell,' he said, as he set a chair for Mary. 'And, between ourselves, sweetheart, I don't know whether that kind of play is quite the right sort of thing for a breathless night like this. I don't wonder you feel a bit faint.

Yes,' he added to the waiter. 'Now, Mary, drink that. It will pick you up in a moment.'

She never knew how it was that she did not refuse the glass which he held out towards her. Perhaps because she was faint, or, at all events, because she was feeling somewhat overdone. Be that as it might, she took the glass without a word and drained it.

'That's pretty good?' he said.

'It is delicious,' she replied.

Mary Lessingham, in looking back afterwards, always thought of that night as the turning-point of her whole life. It was the first time that she had ever enjoyed, really enjoyed, champagne, or, indeed, any sort of drink.

Lessingham, seeing the light come back to her eyes and the colour to her cheeks, filled her glass again, and presently told her that she really ought to take a little more in the way of stimulant than she usually did, adding that he was sure she would find herself all the better for it. And Mary did feel so very much better that she in a way agreed with him, and even allowed herself to be persuaded into taking a tiny glass of curaçoa as a finish to the very excellent supper which had been put before them.

The devil, too, suggested a new idea to her. What if by her almost total abstinence she had created a distinct want which would not be put on one side? What if a certain amount of stimulant was absolutely necessary to an always well-worked brain and system? Could it not be possible that, by going without any stimulant whatever, she might have been all the time defeating her own purpose and actually creating a strong desire which ordinary indulgence would have kept at bay?

'After all, I am always taking it out of my head,' her thoughts ran, 'and perhaps I have been wrong all this time——'

'You feel better, dearest?' put in Lessingham at this

moment, seeing the grave look on her face and not quite understanding it.

Mary roused herself from her reverie.

'Oh yes, Hugh; I am all right,' she replied quickly.

'Have a little more,' he said, laying his hand upon the champagne-bottle.

'Yes, I think I will,' she replied.

So there began in Mary Lessingham's life a new phase, and, as she was holiday-making, it seemed to work very well, and she spent the next few weeks in a state of almost perfect peace and contentment. She was very careful, too, and did not allow herself to take but a very little stimulant, and then only with her meals, and as her general state of health improved day by day, Lessingham took great credit to himself for having persuaded her to indulge herself in a glass of wine now and again.

'I detest drink—or, I should say, drunkenness,' he said one evening when they were dining under the lindens of a celebrated German Kurhaus; 'but I am sure of one thing, that wine was given to man for a useful purpose. Now, I consider that the very moderate, I might say infinitesimal, amount of stimulant you take has done wonders for you. You look quite another being; you eat better, and are stronger, and, in fact, more as you ought to be.'

'If I don't get to taking too much,' said Mary, seriously.

Lessingham burst out laughing.

'I wish I was as sure that I should be created a Royal Duke with a million a year, or made editor of the *Heavenly Argus*, or something equally impossible, as that you will never reach that point of depravity,' he cried.

But there was no answering laugh on Mary's lips, no echo of his merriment in her heart. Only she determined that, come what would, she would never, never reveal to him of all others what a broken reed she was in reality; she made up her mind in that old garden, with the canopy of lindens

overhead and the scent of the flowers on all sides, that she would keep her secret a secret for ever; that no weakness, no distress of mind, no sudden wave of yearning for sympathy should ever betray her into disclosing to him, of all others, how low she had fallen, how near she had once been to destruction.

'What are you thinking about?' he asked her.

'Drink,' she replied.

'So? Hatching out another plot?'

She got up from her chair.

'Perhaps,' she replied evasively. 'I say, Hugh, let us go and listen to the music. We are wasting all our time here, and the sound of those violins is delightful.'

So she put off the subject, and drew Lessingham's attention from herself, as she had done many times before. And he, being in ignorance of the real state of her mind, went on his way all unsuspicious that everything was not just as it seemed with her, or that the smallest secret lay between his heart and hers. And at last their wanderings came to an end, and they went back to London, there to take up the threads of a workaday life again and to fulfil the social requirements of a very large circle of friendship.

By that time, Mr. Winkelmann, having exerted great efforts to get the new book out in such a way as to call close attention thereto, was quite ready with the first edition, and indeed it appeared just as the Lessinghams once more reached London. The success of 'The Way of Temptation' was assured from the very first; but the Lessinghams, well used as they had become to Mary's continued triumphs, were startled at the sensation which the new book caused throughout all classes of society. For weeks it was impossible to take up a journal of any kind without finding therein some mention of Mrs. Lessingham's new work; sermons were preached upon it, speeches touched on it,

nay, even a judge brought it in in speaking from the judgment seat which we call the Courts of Justice. In a sense Mary was overwhelmed as much as she was gratified, and naturally the pressure upon her powers became more and more intense with every day that went over her head. Her correspondence increased to an alarming extent, and a new terror was added to her life by the way in which those most deeply interested in the great 'Drink or no Drink Question' swooped down upon her, hailing her as a new and very important recruit to their ranks, laying at her feet their genuine unstinted homage for having made the way plain, the case clear, and the 'Question' of all and paramount importance.

As for commissions, they poured in upon her from all sides, and Lessingham at last refused to consider any further work for his wife until the commissions already booked were out of hand. She was offered such prices as surely never was woman offered before; but, as Lessingham very truly said, she was, after all, no more than one woman, and could not do impossibilities.

'She has only one pair of hands, only one brain,' he said one day to an important editor, who was loth to take no for an answer; 'and she can only do the work of one woman, no matter how much is paid for it. My wife is unfortunately booked up for at least three years ahead, and until that work is out of hand, it is useless for me to make fresh engagements for her. I wish with all my heart that I could persuade her to keep a dozen ghosts, and thus take all the commissions that have been offered to her during the past three months. As it is, she is too utterly conscientious, and will not even try dictating to a stenographer, because, when she did try one, she did not find her ideas run, and she thinks she could never turn out work as good as that which she does by hand. Really, my dear sir, I am truly sorry not to be able to accept on my wife's behalf the

very splendid terms you have offered me, but you see how I am fixed.'

After this epoch, Mary Lessingham found her life more full than it had ever been before, and infinitely more trying to live. Because where formerly she had been the gifted darling of a wide range of readers, she was now the great quotable authority on a burning question, which could not but be treated with the utmost seriousness. She was not only worked to death in a literary sense, but she was also urged, entreated, almost commanded to appear at this meeting or that, to give her opinion on this side of the great subject, or that view of some particular point, until life became well-nigh intolerable, and the very words 'drink' and 'temperance' like a stab of pain to her.

'Hugh,' she cried one day, when she was weary and worn with over-pressure—for, let me tell you, Mary Lessingham was not one of those happy gifted women of whom we occasionally read, but whom we never any of us know in the flesh, women who know not the fatigue of work, to whom brain-fag is an unknown quantity, who are represented as being never really happy excepting at such times as when they have shunted the world, the vain, weak, sordid, and frivolous world, and have buried themselves deep in a cosy den where, pen in hand, they weave brilliant yarns for the delectation of suffering humanity at large; but, on the contrary, she was one who wrote every line with her nerves and with a pen that seemed to be dipped in her heart's blood—'Hugh, I must put a stop to this once for all. If my present kind of life goes on, I shall become the mere slave of the temperance question; my work will go under, and our living with it. Why should I have to appear here and there, to show on this platform or that, to pretend an interest that I do not feel, and try to make speeches when I know perfectly well that I am simply the very worst speaker that ever opened her mouth?'

'It is the penalty of your position, my poor girl,' he cried pitifully; and, of a truth, he did pity her, and that most profoundly.

'I don't see why it should be so,' she replied indignantly. 'I have written the subject up, I have given the cause a lot of good material which they can go on using for years and years, and there I consider I ought to stop.'

'I dare say you do; but the temperance people very naturally think otherwise. They think, as you have given them such a wonderful picture in "The Way of Temptation," that you must possess a great store of knowledge, special and exclusive sort of knowledge, on which they can draw for all time. They little think that you, my poor child, are simply the very greatest fraud of the age; that you have, by your marvellous power of intuition and for a given purpose, put yourself for the time being inside the mind, the heart, the soul of a confirmed drunkard; and that, as a matter of pure fact, you neither know nor care twopence-farthing about the great question one way or another. Still more would they be astonished if they could learn that you know nothing at all about drink, and that all your apparently wonderful erudition is but imagination and nothing more.'

Mary Lessingham sat silent. A flood of thoughts went surging through her mind, a flood of thoughts that were bitter and full of shame, for what would Lessingham say, what would Lessingham think, if he could learn to know her as she really and truly was? The very thought of it was enough to turn her deadly cold and chill as with the chill of approaching death, the more so that it had been only that very day that she had come to a deliberate and yet almost sudden decision with regard to her work. For during several days she had found herself wholly unable to work without the aid of her 'medicine,' and only that morning, she had finally decided in her own heart that it was useless to try to fight any longer against the inevitable,

and had come to the conclusion that it would be best for her to choose between two evils, and so set her mind at rest from that particular worry for ever.

With the work she had done that day she was supremely satisfied as work, though her heart had sunk very low when she realized that the brilliant lines were the product not so much of her brain as of the stimulant under whose influence they had been written, and she had also felt a cruel sense of disappointment in finding that the demon which she had fondly hoped had been exorcised for ever, was still as rampant and as strong as it had ever been.

'Well, as Hugh said, I am a complete fraud,' her thoughts ran, when Lessingham had left the room; 'but it is no use wearing myself to fiddlestrings and keeping myself back when I might be making piles of money. I am on the crest of the wave now, and I may not stop there for ever. I must make my harvest while the fine weather lasts, and, after all, it is not like giving way to a vice for the sake of the vice; it is but a sacrifice, and what would be a vice under some circumstances may be a nobility under others. God forgive me if I have chosen wrongly, and help me, in any case, to hide it from Hugh and every one that I know; for no one, not even he, would ever really and truly understand or believe that it *is* a sacrifice, that it *is* an unselfishness, that never in all this world was a vice less of a vice.'

CHAPTER XXIX

SOUND ADVICE

> I think that often doctors give better advice than any other class of men. Perhaps it is because they know the value of surgical operations, and how much pain and suffering is saved by cutting deep before it is too late. I have known more than one woman saved in a worldly sense by the counsel given by her doctor; and, alas! I have known a good many whose lives were ruined because they would not do, or perhaps had not courage enough to do, as their doctor told them.

THE first effect of the decision to which Mary Lessingham had come was one of seemingly perfect peace. She herself procured the necessary means which would lead to the desired end, going quite simply and naturally to the Stores and buying two large bottles at a time, carrying them out to the carriage and putting them down on the floor thereof just as she would have put a parcel of soap or any other useful and harmless article of ordinary household consumption. She kept the cupboard in her study locked, but then that she had always done, ever since those first early days when every sheet of paper had been an important item in the list of her modest expenses. She only took just as much at a time as would make her brain run, as it were, and, for a certain time, she found that a very small quantity was enough to effect this result.

Away from her study, she continued to take a very moderate amount of stimulant with her meals, never half

as much as Lessingham was in the regular habit of taking every day. Sometimes she would take a glass of curaçoa after her dinner, but this was not often, and green chartreuse was the one liqueur that she never could be persuaded to touch.

For a time the new system worked well enough, but as the weeks went by, she began to find that it was necessary to her to increase the doses of her 'medicine' ere she could get any result therefrom. Then it began to tell upon her looks again, and Lessingham began to worry over her, and all the old-time fever of anxiety was back upon her again in tenfold force. Her nerve, too, was not what it had been; she began to feel that large assemblies took more out of her than they gave, and that certain people, whom before she had found amusing because they were silly or stupid or frivolous, seemed to have got upon her nerves so that she could not endure to be long in the same room with them.

Her own large receptions, too, became a trouble to her instead of the pleasure that they had once been, and as each month came round, so invariably did Mary Lessingham awake on that very morning with a violent headache, or with what was even more trying, a dull dead aching in her left foot, which rendered her almost helpless long before the hour came round for her guests and admirers to arrive.

'Hallo, have you hurt your foot?' Lessingham demanded one day when she rose from the lunch-table. It was the day of her usual monthly reception, when some hundreds of people would presently flit through the rooms upstairs.

Mary stopped short, and caught at the back of her chair that she might steady herself.

'It's nothing,' she said, making a wry face; 'I seem to get a sort of catch in my foot—well, it's more than a catch, for it hurts horribly at times, and always when I've got something on my mind.'

'But what have you on your mind, dearest?' he asked.

'Only all these people coming,' she replied.

'But you love your big reception days,' he cried.

'Yes, I do—at least, I used to do,' she made answer quickly. 'I don't know that I like them as I used to do. They do take it out of me so fearfully. I think I shall give them up.'

Lessingham's reply was prompt and brief.

'Don't,' he said, in very decided tones. 'If you do, people will say that you are going down-stream. Whenever you hear of a hard-working man or woman, who for several years has been seen in the swim everywhere, suddenly going to live at Twickenham or Weybridge or some such God-forgotten hole, because he or she finds society too great a strain or not good enough to keep up any longer, you may be perfectly sure that his or her doom is sealed. You can go abroad for months or years and you won't suffer at all; but, while you are in sight, don't give up your regular track—there is no greater mistake possible.'

Mary Lessingham sighed.

'I dare say you are right, dear old boy,' she said wearily. 'But sometimes I do find myself wishing that we had just a thousand a year, and that we could go away and live our own life and forget that we ever had any more prominence than our neighbours. It's very hard work being a celebrity—I'm sure if the others knew how hard it is, they would be content to stay in the pleasant shades of comparative obscurity.'

'And yet it is not so long ago that you used to love the blaze of light so thoroughly,' he said.

'Yes; but I had not got tired then,' she rejoined quickly. 'I was young and strong and fresh, and I had still something to achieve. Nowadays I feel so jaded, so worn and tired; but there, I don't want to begin repining or to get

myself into the blues. I have all these good people coming, and I must not let myself get down in the mouth.'

Lessingham watched her curiously during the course of the afternoon, and, seeing that she was apparently at her very best and brightest, concluded that the undefined pain in her foot had passed off and had troubled her no more. And when, at last, every one had gone away, and they were once more alone together, he spoke of it to her in terms of congratulation.

'What a good thing that pain in your foot went off, dearest!' he said.

'But it did not go off, Hugh,' she returned; 'it is worse than ever.'

'Then you had better see a doctor about it, and at once,' he remarked. 'I don't believe in that kind of thing going unrelieved or unchecked.'

After a day or two had gone by Mary did go to see a doctor; but he, although he was a great man in his line, could find nothing amiss with her.

'I should say it is a purely nervous affection, Mrs. Lessingham,' he said soothingly. 'I have known similar cases before.'

'But how could nervousness attack one's feet?' Mary cried, in genuine astonishment.

The great surgeon shrugged his shoulders.

'Ah, that is beyond my power to tell you,' he said, smiling. 'But it is so sometimes in cases where there is no apparent cause for it. One of my colleagues, for instance, has, I know for a fact, a similar pain through one of his feet, and he never has to attend a serious operation that he does not wake in the morning with a pain through one foot, exactly as if a nail had been driven through it. He describes it to me as being his ideal of crucifixion. He has been to me when there was no pain, and again when the pain has been most intense, but I have never been

able to find any cause for it beyond the general one of nerves.'

'That is but poor comfort for me, Sir Fergus,' Mary said, with a very faint smile.

The great surgeon shook his head.

'Ah, Mrs. Lessingham, the outer world never guesses how those who use their brains suffer in many ways,' he returned. 'It all seems so easy to them—your books, my sitting here waiting till patients file through my consulting-room, the painters of pictures in the Academy, Philip Lavender in his theatre—we all seem to them to have such smooth and easy lives. They look upon us all as being the lucky ones who don't know the meaning of strife or the sickness of hope deferred. It is true that we are through the ruck, and that we have mounted the lower rungs of the ladder, but at the cost of our nerves mostly, and we pay during all the rest of our lives for the efforts we made in getting somewhere towards the top. But we have our compensations, dear lady—we have our compensations.'

Mary rose.

'Yes, we have our compensations, and while we are struggling our way up, it seems as if they would entirely compensate for everything else we may have to suffer. You are Sir Fergus Tiffany, and there are twenty people waiting in the other room——'

'And sometimes I feel as if I would give anything to be in a quiet country practice, going my rounds with a good horse——' he began, when she broke in with a laugh that was quite like one of her old gay peals of amusement.

'No, Sir Fergus, you don't,' she cried. 'Or, if you do, you must feel a moment later that the sooner you go to Dr. Dillory and get yourself straightened up the better for you. I know I feel pretty bad at times, but never so bad that I feel it would be a relief to go back to the old drudgery when I lived for weeks together with my heart in my mouth,

hoping and praying that some wretched little editor would graciously condescend to accept a story for a couple of guineas. But thank you very much for your kindness to me.'

'Go and see Dillory,' said Sir Fergus. 'He will do more for you than I can. It is purely a matter of nerves, nothing more. Good-bye, my dear lady; good-bye.'

For a few days Mary Lessingham took no steps towards seeing Dr. Dillory, that great adviser in chest and nerve complaints. In truth, she felt that it was all but a useless quest, and that she would find no help or comfort either with Dr. Dillory or any one else—that she had cast the die and must abide by the consequences thereof; and had it not been that Lessingham several times asked her if she had yet been to Dr. Dillory, she would not have troubled any further about her health one way or another.

And when at length she did go to the great nerve specialist, it was only to find that her conjectures had been correct, and that, unless she was prepared to alter her mode of life, she could not expect what was troubling her to pass away. Indeed, the keen-eyed physician saw more clearly than either Lessingham or any one else had done that there was something more than mere nerves at the root of Mrs. Lessingham's trouble.

'You have told me everything?' he said suddenly. He was sitting close to her, and was perfectly aware of the start which she involuntarily gave as the words passed his lips. 'You know there are three people in this life to whom one should always be perfectly open and even garrulous—one's lawyer, one's banker, and, most important of all, one's doctor. Now, it is no use your coming to me and telling me your nerves are all wrong if you don't tell me everything that is on your mind.'

'I have my work on my mind, and surely that is enough,' said Mary, a hot flush rising to her cheeks.

'Yes; but you are the most successful woman of the day,' said Dr. Dillory, 'and I, for one, don't believe that success ever killed any one in this world. What else is it that is troubling you, and making you have all sorts of unaccountable pains in your foot? There is something. Come now, tell me, what is it?'

'Over-pressure,' said Mary, fully determined not to let out the actual truth.

'No, it is not that. Is it Lessingham?'

'No,' she burst out indignantly. 'Hugh is perfect—I only wish that I were half as much so.'

'That's all right. I didn't think it was that,' said the doctor, quietly. 'It's not a money trouble, for you must be making heaps of money. Do you sleep well?'

'Oh yes, usually very well,' Mary replied.

'Do you ever take anything to make you sleep?'

'Never. I have taken draughts once or twice by doctor's orders, but never without,' she answered, and truthfully enough.

'What wine do you drink?'

'I take what is going, and not much of it,' she replied.

'Is that so?'

His tone was peculiar, and Mary looked up quickly.

'What do you mean by that, Dr. Dillory?' she asked.

'You have the appearance of taking something for sleep or to brace your nerves,' he said, looking at her steadily.

'Do you mean that you think I am drinking?' she said. She asked the question with no show of indignation, and Dr. Dillory was thereby confirmed in his suspicion.

'You are taking something, I do not know what,' he said quietly. 'And if you really want my advice, Mrs. Lessingham, you will tell me everything, and give me a fair chance of being able to help you. Come, what is it?'

She did not speak for a moment, but sat there with a heart that seemed to be standing still.

'How did you find out?' she breathed. Her tone was scared, and she looked at him apprehensively.

Dr. Dillory smiled.

'We doctors see more than most men. Now, why have you begun this sort of thing, and what is it that you are taking?'

'Not for my pleasure,' she cried; and the tears came into her eyes as she looked piteously at him. 'Dr. Dillory, it is killing me. I cannot write a line without it.'

'Without what?'

'Chartreuse.' She whispered the word as if the very walls might have ears.

'Yellow or green?' he asked.

'Green.'

'H'm! that's bad. How much do you take, and how often?'

'Only before I begin to write, unless I am dreadfully pressed. But——' and she hesitated, as if she hardly liked to speak the words which would declare her subjugation.

'Yes, go on—but what?'

'But once or twice lately I have had to take it while I was writing,' she replied. 'Don't look at me like that, doctor; I don't take it for my pleasure. I hate the stuff. The smell of it makes me turn sick and faint, but I cannot write on anything else. What am I to do? I have made my place; my husband is—oh, well, you know what wretched health Hugh has. It's not his fault; but you know what struggles for life he has had over and over again.'

The great man put out a kind hand and took her slender wrist in it.

'Now, I want you to be calm and not to excite yourself like this,' he said, with quiet authority. 'It can do no good, and by letting me know all the circumstances of the case, I may be able to help you. You are shaking, and your pulse is jumping about in a wholly unnecessary manner. Just sit

still, and don't fancy that I am looking at you in any unusual way, because that is mere fancy, and although imagination is your own special line, you must not give way to it just now. Now, tell me, how long has this sort of thing been going on?'

'For several years.'

'Continuously?'

'No, no; only when I have been very much pressed.'

'And you don't touch it at dinner, at other times?'

'Never.' She sat with her hands tightly clasped together, although he was still keeping a cool professional hand upon her wrist. 'But, doctor, I ought to tell you that some time ago, last year in fact, I found out that brandy——'

'You have not been taking both?'

'No; but Hugh insisted on my learning to ride a cycle. I couldn't do it. I tried and tried, and at last one day I fell off my machine and almost fainted, and the instructor gave me some brandy, and then I got on again and went by myself. But when I went again a few days afterwards, I was just as helpless and unable to ride as I had been before. Oh, it is useless to struggle against it! I may just as well give up trying, for I am a doomed woman, doomed to drink.'

'Nonsense. By the way, did you go on trying to ride a cycle?'

'For a time,' she answered, with a great sigh. 'But in the end I gave it up, as I would give up anything but my work. That I must do at any cost; I cannot give that up.'

'I suppose Lessingham knows nothing of this?'

'Nothing, nothing; and you will never tell him? Oh, promise me, doctor; promise me!'

'My dear child, your secret is as safe with me as if I were a man without eyes, ears, or tongue,' he said reassuringly. 'At the same time, I most strongly advise you to

confide it to him of your own accord. Lessingham, though his health is so shaky, is a man of enormously strong will power, and he would help you to fight this battle far better than any one else in all the world could do.'

'I would rather die than tell him.'

'It will be much worse if he finds it out.'

'He will not find it out—he shall not!' she exclaimed.

'Such secrets sometimes betray themselves.'

'This one will not do so. No, doctor, too much hangs upon it. I could not bear it. If Hugh were ever to know, it would all be over between us, although I am doing it for his sake and the children's.'

'I believe that Lessingham would take a perfectly sensible view of the whole matter,' said Dr. Dillory, in a tone of conviction. 'However, no doubt you know him much better than I do. For my own part, I do not believe that there is the very smallest reason why you should not, if you really do wish to conquer this habit, easily train yourself to do without it.'

'You really think so?'

'Yes, I really do. But not all at one fell swoop. I will give you a strong tonic which will brace up your nerves and make you less dependent on fancy than you are now. And every day I want you to decrease the dose of chartreuse, until at last you will find that you can work without it. If you feel you want it while you are working, take a dose of the tonic instead of this liqueur. And remember that you will not conquer the habit in one day. It will take weeks, and it will be worth it.'

He turned his swing chair round to the table and began to write a prescription, stopping once or twice to consider carefully, as if it were something of an unusual kind. Then he turned back to her again, and held the paper out towards her.

'Now, try that, and come back to me in a couple of

weeks' time,' he said kindly. 'But, as a last word, you had better tell Lessingham.'

'No'—shaking her head resolutely. 'I cannot, I cannot. I nearly told one person, and—and something stopped me, and I have thanked God for it ever since.'

'Not Lessingham?'

'No; a clergyman.'

'Ah!' Dr. Dillory's tone was not sympathetic. 'Well, you have told me, and I am sure you will feel all the better for it. Come back in a couple of weeks' time. Good-bye.'

'Good-bye. And oh, Dr. Dillory, thank you so much. You will never half know how kind and good you are.'

To which Dr. Dillory made no reply than by a smile and a last pressure of her hand.

CHAPTER XXX

A MESSAGE

A puppy which has been confined by a string will often try to free himself by gnawing the cord with his teeth. His owner then substitutes a chain of steel for the softer hempen cord, and the puppy learns by bitter experience that freedom is not for him. So do poor human captives often learn wisdom when the Devil has changed the hempen cord of a pleasant or helpful habit for the steel chain of an irresistible desire or necessity.

AFTER Mary Lessingham had paid her first visit to the great physician Dr. Dillory, the arch-enemy of mankind began to draw the string by which he held her more closely, as if he would warn her that, in trying to set herself free from his toils, she had gone a step too far, and must be dealt with promptly and with a certain degree of severity.

She went away from the house in Harley Street with a new hope in her breast and a new sense of coming freedom running high within her. Poor Mary Lessingham! She went so cheerfully to the chemist's shop at which she always had her prescriptions made up, and waited there until Dr. Dillory's prescription was ready, although the chemist offered—nay, was most anxious—that she should allow him to send it home. 'I would rather wait for it,' she said.

'It is a very strong tonic, madam,' said the chemist, when he at length handed the bottle to her.

'Yes; but Dr. Dillory is very wise,' said Mary. 'I have great faith in him.'

'A very clever man,' said the chemist.

So Mary took the medicine home and began to take it at once, in accordance with Dr. Dillory's instructions, and certainly that night she slept as she had not done for a long time. The following morning, too, she took it as ordered, but the effect of it was to nauseate her, and she went up to her den with a feeling that there would be no work for her that day. 'I must not touch chartreuse this morning,' she told herself. 'I do hate it so. I will knock off work and go out, so as to get myself used to the tonic before I put any strain upon myself.

And she did go out, feeling as she always did when she ventured to go abroad during her regular working hours, as if she was doing something wicked, as if she was stealing from some one, or at least as if she was heinously wasting precious time—time which would never come back again, golden moments that were slipping by with horrible rapidity into the gone-by for ever. However, she was a resolute woman, and, having set herself to go out and to keep out, she stayed away from home till close on lunch-time.

All the same, the tonic which was to do such wonders for her proved itself an entire failure. Doubtless it was a fine strong tonic, and, if she could have swallowed it, it might have accomplished all that Dr. Dillory had expected of it. But, unfortunately, swallow it she could not. Each time that she tried to do so, and she did try duly and truly, she was instantly violently sick, and though several times she took a second dose, the result was always the same.

'I cannot take it,' she said piteously to Dr. Dillory when she went to him again, not having waited for the prescribed two weeks to go by; 'I cannot take it, doctor. My very soul seems to rise up within me and to say that, happen what will, I shall never, never swallow that stuff.'

'H'm! that's bad. That is not at all the effect that I intended,' said Dr. Dillory, thoughtfully. 'Well, my dear

Mrs. Lessingham, I will give you something else, only the one thing that I was most anxious for you to take, has a taste that it is hard to conceal—in fact, almost impossible to mask. However, as it has failed us, we must try something else.'

He therefore wrote her another prescription, and Mary went away this time rather less hopefully, for her good sense told her that if she was afflicted with a stomach so delicate that it would not retain or even receive the remedies her doctor ordered her to take, she had not very much chance of benefiting by his advice and experience. And when she came to taking the second medicine, she found exactly the same result as with the first one; indeed, although she persevered with dogged, almost desperate persistence, she grew to loathe the very smell of it so utterly that after a few days the mere attempt to take it was enough to put her right off work for the rest of the day.

'It is useless and perfectly hopeless,' she said to Dr. Dillory on the occasion of her third visit. 'I may as well give up trying to fight against it any longer. I have not touched one single drop of chartreuse since I first came to you; but then, on the other hand, I have not done a single line of work. Time presses, and every day that I waste is just the same as if I threw so much money into the street. I must make up my mind to let myself go and work as long as I can before this horrible devil has got such possession of me that I shall be capable of work no longer. I am a doomed woman, and you know it.'

'That is sheer nonsense,' said Dr. Dillory, sharply. 'You are no more doomed than I am, except in the sense that we are all doomed to die one day, when we shall most of us be very glad to get out of our frail bodies and have a good long satisfying sleep. Still, until that day comes, it is our duty to keep ourselves in as good a state of repair as we possibly can. I admit, my dear lady, that it is a little

disheartening that we have twice found a dead end, so to speak; but you must try again. We have not yet exhausted all the drugs in the Pharmacopœia, and they are many and powerful. I will write you a wholly different prescription, and you shall take it in tabloids, so that you can just swallow it down with a drink of water or a glass of lemonade. Or, still better, you might take it with your last cup of tea after your breakfast.'

'I might manage it that way,' said Mary.

The light leapt back into her eyes, and the little frail flower of hope began to spring up anew in her heart.

Alas, alas, poor Mary, poor wife, poor mother! It did indeed seem as if fate was against her, for the tabloids were no more useful to her than the liquid medicine had been. It is true that they did not make her sick, but they produced the most agonizing indigestion, and that made work just as impossible as the medicine had done. So she gave it up, and went back to her old ways, smuggling chartreuse into her den with yet greater frequency, and gradually increasing not only the doses in which she took it, but also unconsciously increasing the amount of spirits or wine which she took with her meals.

As on former occasions, the immediate effect of letting herself go was to send her pen flying along with increased speed and brilliancy. As an author she went higher and yet higher, as a woman she was fast becoming a wreck. In herself, apart from her work, she was also greatly changed from what she had been but a few months before. She was less sweet in disposition, more variable in mood, and she grew extremely capricious, so that Lessingham hardly ever knew how to take her or what mood she would be in. She was much more off-hand and haughty to the outer world, too, and people began to tell each other that popularity was beginning to spoil Mrs. Lessingham at last. With her children even she was capricious and hard to please.

'I cannot bear the noise,' she cried, one day when little Coralie was telling of her morning's doings at luncheon; 'I was never fit to have children. They must have their meals by themselves. Take them away, Miss Day, or—or——'

The governess, in dismay at this state of things, so new from the tender and devoted mother towards the children, got up and fled the room with her little charges, not daring to utter a single word. Lessingham, on the contrary, looked up in utter astonishment.

'My dear girl,' he said mildly, yet in a tone which admitted of no contradiction, 'you are very unreasonable. The child was behaving beautifully. You have always allowed them to be free with you, and——'

Mary looked down the table with eyes that fairly blazed.

'Hugh,' she exclaimed, 'may I not say a word to my own children——'

'They are my children as well as yours,' he said, very quietly, 'and you were unjust to Coralie. The child was as good as gold. If you are not well enough to have meals with them, make a different arrangement, but don't blame them for what they have not done. It is unreasonable, my dear.'

Her anger melted away in a moment.

'Did I seem to blame her? Yes, I am getting unreasonable. I am not fit to go on living, and some day you will perhaps understand why. I—I—I'm feeling over-done—I don't think I quite knew what I was saying. No, no, don't say another word. My head aches; I want to be alone. Go out—don't come near me. I will go and lie down alone.'

She held him at arm's length and edged out of the room. Once the door fairly closed behind her, she turned and ran up the wide stair, and then she shut herself into her bedroom, and locked the door securely behind her. And there for a whole hour she stayed, not crying, as she would once have done, but thinking about herself in an agony that was

infinitely too deep for tears. So she had come to be a terror to her own children, the little creatures for whose sake she had sacrificed all that was best and noblest in her character! How much longer would it go on? In all their married life Hugh had never before spoken to her as he had spoken that day. If he had been angry, cross, unreasonable, horrid, she would have been able to bear it better, but Lessingham had been none of these things. No; he had only told her quite quietly and deliberately that she had been unjust and unreasonable. He had found it necessary to take her children's part against her; it was the first time, it was the beginning of the end, and then—and then—oh, what did it matter when all was over between them, then? Indeed, let the end come as soon as it would, and the sooner the better, so that this fever and strife might sink into the blessed mercifulness of oblivion.

At last she felt that she could bear the restraint of the four walls of her room no longer. She roused herself and rang the bell.

'Where is Mr. Lessingham?' she asked of the maid who answered her summons.

'I think Mr. Lessingham is out, ma'am,' the woman replied. 'I saw him go out about half an hour ago, and I don't think he has come in again.'

'Good. If he comes in and asks for me, say that I shall be back in time for dinner.'

'Very well, ma'am.'

When the servant had gone, Mary dressed herself with great care and went out to the carriage, which had just driven up to the door.

'Go down towards Richmond,' she said; 'and drive slowly. I want to get the air.'

She settled herself down in the carriage, and sat looking neither to right nor to left, while all the time her busy mind was going over and over the great and awful changes which

had taken place during the past year or two in her own character and disposition. She felt like a prisoner in a condemned cell; as if each waning moment was one thread less, not of her life, but of her reason. 'If I could turn against my poor babies,' she told herself, 'I must be holding out much less well than I had even a right to hope I might do. And with Hugh, too. For a minute or so I felt as if I could have killed him. And he was right all the time—he was quite right. And I—I must have seemed wrong to him, though if he only knew he would pity me; yes, he would certainly pity me, though he might, nay, I know he would feel it impossible to forgive me.'

She let the coachman drive on to Richmond, and, when there, stopped at the maid-of-honour shop and bought a box of the dainty little cakes to take back for the children.

'I will go home now, Richards,' she said. 'But drive slowly; I don't want to be home too soon.'

Coming and going, it was all as one to her troubled heart and throbbing brain; the same wretched thoughts came up over and over again of how much deeper in the morass she had sunk, of how short a time there still lay before her ere she should drift into that region where all infirmities, mental, moral, and physical, hold sway.

When they were about three-parts of the way home, a sudden impulse seized her that she would get out and walk home, because the inactivity of sitting in a carriage was not helping her in any way.

'Richards,' she called, 'stop; I want to get out.'

The man brought the carriage to a standstill instantly, and then Mary got out.

'I am going to walk back,' she said. 'Drive home.'

She walked along, watching the handsome carriage until it was out of sight, and then she let her thoughts take possession of her again. So she did not notice the houses by which she passed, and walked unseeingly along until at

last she missed the turn which she ought to have taken, and found herself in a wholly strange street, leading she knew not whither. The fact of being in a sense lost was soothing to her just then, and she walked along without making any effort to inquire her whereabouts or to find out which was her best way home. The houses were semi-suburban and somewhat poor in character. There were a few straggling trees dotted adown the meagre streets, as if at some time or other an effort had been made to beautify and ruralize the district. Such efforts, however, had certainly not been crowned with success, and the general effect was poor and shabby. The street down which she was then walking gave her the idea of one which was occupied by people who lived grey, hard lives; lives untroubled by ambition; mere sordid existences passed, both in a moral and mental sense, from hand to mouth.

'It would be a relief to be back in a little box again, with all one's life before one, with all one's ambitions still to attain, with a clean and wholesome mind and a life that would be as stainless as a child's,' she told herself. And then she sighed, for that was a state to which she could never attain, for which it was no use hoping.

She noticed that all the people whom she met, most of them women, had an air as if they had just left some assembly, and as she gained the end of the street she came upon a church standing in a sort of circus formed by the joining of several roads, all of them just such little mean streets as that along which she had just come. Evidently they had just come out of church, and they were one and all looking as if they had been attending some unusual service. One girl, indeed, was crying, and great sobs caught her breath as Mary passed her.

'He was so kind!' she exclaimed. 'I feel quite another girl already. Some people help when you're in trouble, and some don't.'

Not knowing the girl or her friends, Mary could not—at least, did not like to—stop and ask what had been happening. But as she walked on and passed the first gate of the church, she saw that a clergyman was standing there. He was garbed in a long black cassock, and looked with keen, far-seeing eyes up and down the dusty white pavements. Just as Mary reached him he spoke.

'Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by?' he said.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE FINGER OF GOD

> It is hard to see sometimes whither the finger of God points. And yet it points always as truly to the right as the needle to the Pole. The difficulty is that we so often want to go another way to that which is directed of God.

As the keen-eyed priest uttered the words, 'Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by?' his eyes fell upon Mary Lessingham.

'Is it nothing to you?' he repeated, directly addressing her.

Mary gave a great start.

'Oh yes, yes,' she said, almost involuntarily.

'Then why pass by?' he said quickly. 'Come in—the door stands open wide. I am here to bid you welcome in the name of Him who died for you; nay, I am here to make you *feel* welcome. Don't pass by. Come in—come *home*.'

In all her life Mary Lessingham had never felt herself so completely under any influence so entirely strong as was the influence of this man whom she had never seen before. He drew her, himself walking backwards, into the shadow of the church door.

'Come in here,' he said, in curt, brusque, almost rough tones. 'Sit there. You are in trouble. What is it? Tell me.'

The thought came over Mary like a flash of lightning

that this was the second time that she had been mysteriously led into a church without any premeditation on her own part. This man was not smooth and sweetly kind as that other one had been, and yet he seemed to have power to draw her very soul out of her. He used no formal, priestly terms; she had no feeling that he was a priest who was trying to do his duty—his priestly duty—towards her. She only knew that a strong, honest, human soul was in touch with hers, and that this was a man who could and would help her—who *meant* to help her, whether she would or no. She clasped her hands together and looked at him piteously.

'Oh, sir,' she answered, in a trembling voice, 'I am indeed in trouble, in terrible trouble. If you could only help me; if I could only find help somewhere, anywhere!'

'Tell me about it,' he said. 'Tell me everything.'

'I cannot; oh, I cannot tell you!' she cried.

'And for why? It is quite easy, easier than it is to stay in bondage. You will have to tell it one day, and to One who knows. It is infinitely easier to unburden yourself to me, who am weak and full of sin, and who can therefore sympathize with and understand your troubles, than it will be to stand one day at the Judgment Seat and lay bare your whole soul to *God who knows no sin.* Come, be brave. I see that you are not poor, so that it is no question of poverty—which is really a very much over-rated trouble. Is it your husband? Are you unhappy with him?'

'No, no. I have a perfect husband.'

The priest turned and walked twice along the little room. Then he came back and sat down opposite her.

'You won't confide in me,' he said, in the strange masterful, quick tones which had first attracted her to him, 'so I must find out what it is, even if I have to probe your wounded heart to its lowest depths. Tell me now, is it drink?'

She uttered a low cry, which answered him as clearly as any words could have done, and then she covered her face with her hands, and waited as a child might wait for a blow.

If she had been looking at him instead of hiding her face with her hands, she would have seen that he threw his head back with a quick jerk of comprehension.

'So it's that,' he said, in a lower tone than he had yet spoken in. 'Well, now that you have broken the ice, you will find it easy to tell me all about it. What made you take to it? You are not the kind of woman who is self-indulgent. What made you first begin it?'

Where the other clergyman had failed, he won the day, and with one or two more attempts to draw back, she at last told him who she was and her whole story from the very beginning.

'I cannot write a line without it,' she ended. 'And I cannot give up writing—that is out of the question; so what am I to do? I am daily, nay hourly, growing weaker and weaker, more dependent on this stuff, less able to work or to accomplish anything without it. It cannot last long—already I know that it is stamped on my face as plainly as if I had "drink" written in letters of fire across my forehead. After a time, everybody will know, and what will happen to me then?'

'You have told your husband?'

'Not a word. I would not have him know it for the whole world.'

'The whole world is a wide expanse,' said the priest, with a smile. 'Will you take my advice if I give it?'

'If I can.'

'Go home and tell your husband. He will help you better than any one else on earth, if he is all that you say he is.'

Mary, however, shook her head resolutely.

'No, I can never tell Hugh,' she said. 'It is the one thing I can never do.'

'He will find it out one day.'

'I know it. My great desire is to put that day off as long as I can.'

'Yes; but with every drop that passes your lips, the day draws nearer. Tell your husband. Tell him at once—to-day.'

'I am afraid.'

'Then tell it to God. Ask Him to help you, ask Him to give you strength to tell your husband. Ask Him day and night, at all or any time of your waking hours.'

'And why not ask to be released from this bondage?' said Mary, raising her eyes for the first time to his. 'If God cares or knows what trouble I am in, surely He can help me without my husband knowing the truth. Surely He will sympathize with my desire that I shall not be lowered in the eyes of the one who thinks me well-nigh perfect.'

'God works in a mysterious way,' said the priest, 'and I feel that He will, in this case, work through your husband. Believe me, I am right when I say, "Tell your husband."'

'If you had a wife——' Mary began eagerly.

'I have a wife,' replied the other, quickly. 'And if ever she should fall a victim—yes, a victim, that is the word I mean—to such a temptation, I hope she will not hesitate to bring her difficulty to me. For why was the holy state made? for what was it intended? For the mutual society, help, and comfort that the one ought to have of the other, *both in prosperity and adversity.* There has never been, and there probably never will be, any time in all your married life when you have so sorely needed or will need help and comfort as you do now.'

'If I could believe that God would listen to me!' she murmured.

'If you ask Him, He will.'

'I have no faith. I have tried to pray, but my prayers never seem to be real; they seem so petty, so selfish, so conceited. And God never listens.'

'We sometimes, nay, we often think not; and yet, how often do we not find out that He has been listening all the time! He does not always work in our way, because He knows which way is the best for us.'

For a moment Mary was silent. Then she burst out in a very passion of words.

'Oh, sir, you are kind, and you feel for me—I see it, I feel it; but can it be for my good that I am forced into this horrible habit, that I am daily driven to do what I loathe, to make myself what I despise above all things? Can it be for my good that I grow sick with fear whenever my husband's eyes are turned upon me? Can it be for my good that I look forward to the time when my dear little children will call me not blessed, but a thing of shame—I, who would put my hand in a flame of fire for their sakes? No, no, a thousand times no.'

'Perhaps,' said the priest, looking at her intently, 'perhaps it *is* for your good that this trial has come upon you. Mind you, I do not say that it is, because I don't know, and I never tell those who come to me when they are in trouble what I do not believe with all my own heart and soul. I, even then, prefer to tell them only what I know, especially in such a case as yours. So I will not explain all your sad trial away with a few glib words and a few texts which can be made to fit any case more or less. No, but I can tell you this—that God is good, God is wise. He sees the paths clearly and definitely along which we are crawling step by step in the dark. We cannot even see to-morrow—God sees for all eternity.'

'But that does not help me,' she said piteously. 'It cnly makes me think how cruel it is of God to make me a

creature of shame against my own will. What have I ever done that God should use me so?'

'Perhaps it is not what you have done,' returned the priest—'at least, not because you have done anything wrong, although we are all weak sinners and our natural tendency is towards evil rather than good. Perhaps God sees that you are capable of resisting a greater temptation than the majority of people, and afterwards He will give you the greater glory which is given to those who have conquered in life's battle. But, be that as it may, He sent you here to me that I might help you to conquer this devil which besets you, and you must come to me continually and let me do everything that I can to strengthen and comfort you.'

'But what can you do?'

He cast a keen glance at her.

'I can pray for you,' he said simply. 'And every time that you come to me, I can teach you a little more of the glory and goodness of Christ, that Blessed Redeemer who hung upon the Cross that He might know how to sympathize with us when we are weak and sorely beset with temptations. To you as yet, the knowledge of Salvation is as a sealed book. You are like a little child learning to read—as yet you do not know the A B C; but after a while you will read without difficulty, and then for your pleasure. And when that time has come, there will be no more doubt, no more difficulty. All will be smooth and easy and victorious.'

She sat quite still for a few moments, covering her eyes with her hands.

'Oh, sir,' she said, in pathetic tones, 'I do not think you quite understand my case. But—but I am staying a very long time, and there may be others who need your help more than I do.'

'One thing at a time,' said he. 'If there are others, God

will point out the road to them, as He has pointed it out to you. You need not think about them. Your own plight is sorry enough. Why do you think that I do not understand your case?'

'Well, because you speak of it as a temptation. I assure you, I swear to you, that drink is not and never has been the smallest temptation to me. I hate it, I loathe it. Willingly, I would never let a single drop pass my lips again as long as I live. I never taste that stuff without my very soul turning sick within me. But it has got hold of me. I cannot work without it. And I am driven so that I cannot say, "I will give it up and give the work up too." I must work, for almost all depends upon me. But a temptation to me it is not and has never been.'

'Poor soul!' ejaculated the priest, in accents of the most profound pity. 'It is worse for you in one way, because it is your heart and not your mere appetite which moves you. And yet, it is not half as hopeless, not half as helpless, as if you drank for drink's sake. Then indeed you would be to be pitied, for your case would be well-nigh a question of time and nothing more.'

'And you do not pity me now!' she cried.

'With all my heart, with all my soul, as I would pity my own wife or my own child,' he replied; and there was no mistaking the earnestness or the intense humanity of his tone. 'And yet, not as I would pity the hopeless sot, who drinks and drinks for the sake of drink, and for whom, in this world, there is little or no chance of reformation. With you it is altogether different. Yours is a purely nervous condition, the outcome of your love and anxiety to do the best, to do away with the effects of your husband's bad health. Being such, the pressure may at any time be lifted from you and you may find yourself free. And if you could bring yourself to learn the infinite mercy of God, if you could bring yourself to study with faith the holy life of

the Blessed Redeemer, you would find that freedom. But the first step to that is to tell your husband.'

'No, no, I cannot do that,' she cried.

'Let me do so.'

His tone was persuasive, and his manner that of one wholly eager to act, to do, to overcome. Mary Lessingham, however, took fright at once, and even caught at his arm in the agony of her apprehension.

'Oh, sir, oh, sir,' she cried, 'you would never do that, you would never betray me! I came to you, or, at least, you made me come in here, but it was in confidence. I never thought that it was not safe——'

'Until you give me leave to speak, your secret is as safe with me,' he made reply, 'as if I were dead. Only One, from whom no secrets are hid, knows or shall know what is in my heart concerning you. Be under no fear; I shall never betray your trust. I only ask you, beg you, implore you because I *know*, I say I *know*, that it is for your ultimate good to speak while there is time, before it is too late.'

'It is the one thing I cannot do,' she cried.

He bent his keen eyes upon her with a pitiful smile.

'My poor child, the one thing that we cannot do is often the one thing which is essential to our well-being. Can you not feel that Jesus knows, that He wants to help you now? Can you not feel that He knew just this same kind of trial, that He aches to help you, and that in sending you here, He is trying to help you through me, His servant?'

'Oh, yes, yes, perhaps; but not in the same way.'

'Yes, just in the same way. I know that very many believe that the earthly temptations of our Lord were out-of-the-way preposterous kinds of temptation, such as even the weakest and most foolish would be able to resist without the smallest difficulty. But they forget or they never knew that the New Testament, like the Old, is written with a good deal of hyperbole, and must not be taken or accepted

literally. Of a surety, if the devil in person were to carry you into a high mountain and there offer you all the cities of the world if you would only fall down and worship him, it would be a comparatively easy thing for you to say, "Get thee behind me, Satan," and to successfully resist him. But when the devil comes in the guise of humanity, and so completely disguised that you do not recognize him; when he offers you as much power in your own world as your hands can grasp, and the conditions are no more than that you shall give up a little observance here, or stretch a point there—that you shall widen your principles and live less strictly all round; then it is much more hard to say no, and to keep to it. You don't realize that it is the devil until it is too late, and he has you in his grasp as surely as a terrier has a rat when his teeth are met in the back of his neck. My poor child, it is so easy to think that the Temptation was no such great temptation after all; but it is written that He was tempted in all things as we are tempted. Does that convey nothing to you?'

'If I could believe, really believe that He knows, knows from experience!' she murmured.

'He does. Have faith, come back, come often. The door stands open wide ready for you to enter in. But you can only enter with a clean heart, with a new life.'

'But if I could conquer alone, with your help, do you think I should be doing wrong to keep the secret a secret from my husband still?'

'Assuredly not. How could that be? If you can win the day alone, we shall know that God has decreed that it is not necessary for you to endure that special trial. And, with all my heart, I will pray that you may be spared it.'

'For me it would be the Gethsemane of Gethsemanes.' She rose as she spoke, and stood looking piteously at him. He took both her hands and held them in a firm strong grasp.

'Mind that you come back,' he said. 'For God sent you here, and here freedom lies. I shall be here at this hour every day during the next week. Meantime, set yourself to have faith that you will soon be able to work without this poison; do all that you can to save yourself and to keep yourself strong and well in bodily health. Pray, pray hard that you may be delivered, and come again. Perhaps no one will ever know, for I count as a mere blank to you. I have no belief in the penitence bench, for there is a vain-gloriousness which belongs to it alone. Some of the greatest tragedies of the world have been enacted in silence and without audience. We shall never know the actual story of the Garden of Gethsemane any more than we shall ever know the actual temptations by which our Lord was assailed. But God knows, and there is comfort in that. God bless you. I will pray for you.'

CHAPTER XXXII

THE AGONY COLUMN

> Sin seems to have the same peculiar kind of strength and fascination as some kinds of snakes. You may, perhaps, have seen a little rabbit under the spell of a boa constrictor. Did it not remind you of a poor human soul under the spell of some darling sin?

When Mary Lessingham at length came out of the church and found herself once more on the dusty pavement, she hailed the first cab that she saw and told the driver where she wished him to take her. It was not until she was more than half dressed for dinner that she bethought herself of the fact that she had not asked the clergyman his name, and that she had not the smallest idea what the church was called in which she had been. She had lost herself after sending the carriage away, and on the journey home had been too wholly engrossed with her own thoughts to take notice as to what streets she was passing through. So she had no clue to the whereabouts of the man who had impressed her so strongly, and who might have been of such help to her. It was as if fate was against her.

During the next few days she tried hard to find out the place. The very first day that she was out alone and had no particular engagement, she drove down to the spot at which she had dismissed her carriage on that memorable afternoon, and from that point she tried to direct Richards to follow the road as she remembered it. But, alas! she did

not find the church or the shabby little circus, and in the end she had to go on to keep an appointment without having succeeded in her quest. She then bought a map of London, and spent hours scanning it over in the hope that she might recognize some landmark or other which would lead her right; but that helped her no more than the personal search had done.

'I am fated not to find help,' she said to herself, as she thrust the map aside. 'I,' with a sigh, 'might have found peace by the help of a man so strong and so convincing as he was. But it is all of no use. I am a doomed woman, just as I told him, and it is no use trying to stem the downward flow of my fate.'

So for a few weeks she struggled on, and as work pressed and time passed, so did she drift further and further on the downward course, until she could see the effects of her habit of life so clearly printed on her face as to make her wonder whether all the rest of the world could not read the signs as plainly as she did.

She did not forget what the strange priest had said to her —no, not at all, and in a dim groping kind of way she sought with desperate earnestness to find that consolation which he had assured her would come if she had only faith to believe it. But it was like a child trying to learn a wholly incomprehensible lesson; it was like a person trying to learn a language without the aid of a teacher; it was like seeking a lost thing in the dark. Just at first she tried hard to pray, but, after a few efforts, her attempts at prayer seemed to her so futile, so unreal, and, if I tell the truth, so superstitious, that she gave it up and set herself to study out religion from the broad standpoint of one who has hitherto had no religion of any kind to speak of.

Lessingham, of course, knew that she was reading various religious works, and said nothing to her about them, believing that she was thinking out a new novel which would probably

startle the world even more than 'The Way of Temptation' had done. He was surprised at nothing that she chose to do, only he was worried and anxious about her—at the change which was becoming so rapidly marked in her looks, at the evidently poor state of her nerves, at the clearly shown signs that she was over-working both her mind and her body. Still, the great place that she had made as a woman of letters was one which could not be abandoned even if it should eventually prove her death. Not, mind you, that Lessingham did not idolize his wife, and that he would not personally have preferred that she should do half her accustomed work and make a quarter as much money, because if any actual choice had been left to him, he would unhesitatingly have chosen in that way. But she had made her mark, a great mark; she had 'arrived,' in the words of our Gallic neighbours; in modern phraseology, she had 'come to stay,' and the possibility of letting such a position go for want of holding the ground was, to him, himself a man of letters, a thing not to be thought of for a single moment; in fact, Lessingham never did think of it.

Just at this time he did, however, refuse several very good commissions for her on the ground that his wife was pledged as fully as was good for her, and he never told her that any such offers had been made. He thought of her and considered her in every way, and, personally, he put himself so completely in the background that his life was just then a mere echo of hers. His constant watchfulness over her made Mary's life still more difficult, and increased the strain upon her in a way which would very much have astonished Lessingham had he known it. She found herself, therefore, compelled to still further increase the doses of her 'medicine,' and even sometimes to take it at other than working times, as when she needed some fillip to enable her to get through some unusual strain or fatigue. Her work was more brilliant than ever, but it cost her more and more

both in vitality and in that which was wrecking her control over herself. She now always wrote with her door locked, giving as a reason therefor that she could not bear any kind of interruptions, and that the smallest breath from the outer world was sufficient to put her off work for the rest of the day. In truth, she had come to requiring so much of the deadly spirit before she found herself in a condition to work well, that she could not run the risk of being seen while she was under the first influence thereof, and her only chance of keeping her secret still was by means of this fiction.

It need hardly be said that she stayed in her writing-room during a longer portion of each day than she had done before, and that she got through considerably less work. Still, the work she did accomplish was of the most telling and brilliant description, and kept her name up at the very top of the tree and herself in the very front rank of those who make the literature of the age. By this time she had, as is common to most writing men and women, withdrawn herself a good deal from ordinary society. In truth, she could no longer endure the tax upon her strength; she could no longer afford to follow days of heavy work with broken nights; she could no longer expend vitality right and left with the prodigal hand of one young in years, untried in physical strength, and new to the flattery and adulation usually given to those who have struggled through the ruck and reached the forefront of the battle of life.

'It is not good enough, dear boy,' she said one day to Lessingham, when he was urging her to accept some invitation. 'What should I gain by it? You say it would do me good to be seen at this show; but with whom? No, no, dear old boy, if you feel like it, do you go; but for me, I simply cannot.'

So did she gradually slip out of one festivity after another, until it became as difficult to persuade her to go to a party

as if she were a great invalid or a very aged person, and the hostess who could welcome Mrs. Lessingham was a very proud and happy woman who was at once certain of the success and distinction of her party.

In one way, it was very bad for Mary that she made so little effort to find distraction from her ordinary life. It is always good for those who live by the work of the brain that they shall have from time to time to make efforts to keep themselves in touch with an admiring and at the same time critical world. There is nothing so bad for a woman worker as to let herself go. In men this is deplorable—in the case of women it is mostly fatal.

Nor is it of the smallest use for me to try to hide the fact that Mary Lessingham did at this part of her career let herself go with a thoroughness which, a few years earlier, she would absolutely have refused to believe of herself. At one time she had never shown herself unless she had made a complete toilette, declaring that because a woman was possessed of a brain, that was no reason why she should make a fright of herself or be able to take no interest in herself and her personal appearance. I do not mean to say that she let herself go in the way of being slovenly; not at all. She took her cold or tepid bath as regularly each morning as she had ever done; her clothes were always fresh and smart in build, and, when she did go out into the world, she was as well dressed a woman as one might meet in a day's march. But, on the other hand, she took to wearing loose gowns in the house, such as did not necessitate the use of corsets, and in these she spent the greater part of each day, and in these she did most, if not all, of her work. Then, too, she began, in the hope that it might steady her nerves, to smoke a good deal more than she had done before, and as the habit was pleasant and soothing to her, she, after a time, was rarely seen indoors without a cigarette in her mouth.

Now, the outward effect of all this was to rapidly alter her appearance and to complete the ravages which her first trouble had begun.

'Oh, is *that* Mrs. Lessingham?' Lessingham heard a young girl say one night when Mary had been induced to leave her shell and go to an important first-night. 'Oh, what a dreadful-looking woman! No wonder she writes such awful books.'

'My dear child,' he heard a man, wholly unknown to him, make reply, 'Mrs. Lessingham is one of the most fascinating women in London, which of course means in all the world. She is getting older, and the strain of work is beginning to tell on her, and I don't say that she isn't a bit spoilt now to what she used to be, but she is charming, and will be so to the last day of her life.'

Lessingham turned away without waiting to hear what the girl would say in reply to this. He did not want to hear what was the opinion of a feather-headed young creature who could no more understand the life and mind of such a woman as Mary than she could understand the working of the very Universe itself. And yet, all through the rest of the evening, the words rankled, and he found himself more than once involuntarily watching his wife as he might study the personal appearance of some one with whom he was but newly acquainted. 'What a dreadful-looking woman!' Oh, it hurt Lessingham more than any words of mine can tell that any one should think that of his wife, of the noble-hearted, splendidly courageous woman, whose first thought was ever of others, whose brain was as far removed above the brains of ordinary men and women as the heaven is above the earth.

'I suppose it's the strain,' his thoughts ran; 'no woman could live such a life and rise so far above the level of ordinary people and remain ordinary-looking as they contrive to do. And yet, that this little chit—— Oh, there, what an ass

I am to give it a second thought! I dare say she sets all her ideals by the models of Ouida and Du Maurier.'

And yet he could not dismiss from his mind the thought of what the girl had said, nor do away with the rankle and sting of what those words had implied, and his vexation found vent in finding fault with her gown.

'I don't like that gown you have on to-night, Mary,' he said, when they once more found themselves at home.

'Don't you? Why, what is the matter with it?'

'I don't know just why, but it does not suit your skin, and it is too baggy here. You look years and years older in it.'

'I am years and years older,' she said, trying to keep the tremor out of her tones.

'Why can't you wear white? You never look as well in anything else.'

'Oh, I am too old for white, dear boy,' she cried.

'Nonsense; you speak of yourself as if you were a hundred and ninety—you, a young woman yet. It is absurd of you.'

'Dear old boy,' she said, 'I could not wear white; I should look ridiculous, and you forget that my skin has gone a good deal.'

'Gone! Gone where? Of course, if you wear a hot, trying colour like that, you don't show to advantage. You ought only to wear white or black, or that cold, pale blue you used to like so much. A dead crimson like that makes your skin look a dull red too.'

Mary Lessingham felt her heart going down and down, but she did not dare to speak, for fear of betraying all that she was feeling; but after a minute or two she said very quietly, 'I won't wear it again. I thought it would be a nice useful kind of gown. I will give it to Miss Day. As she is so dark, it will suit her splendidly.'

'Yes; I dare say it will,' said Lessingham, who did not

care what became of the dress so long as Mary did not wear it again.

Oddly enough, her readiness to sacrifice a gown which she had put on for the first time that evening, served to soothe his annoyance and to make him forget for a time the careless speech which he had so unfortunately overheard. But the incident, although she did not know the actual cause of Lessingham's objection to the new gown, sank deep down into Mary's heart like a drop of molten lead. So the day of doom was drawing nearer and nearer, and she, being powerless to break herself of taking her 'medicine,' was equally powerless to avert the dawning of the day by so much as a single hour. If only she had not lost sight of that priest who had seemed such a tower of strength; if only she could have gone again and again to him for help and counsel, for some of his strength to help her to ward off the evil day!

'I wonder,' she said to herself, 'if I were to put an advertisement in the papers——?'

With a woman in her desperate state to think was to act, and a couple of days later a somewhat unusual advertisement appeared in several of the leading daily papers.

'IS IT NOTHING TO YOU, ALL YE THAT PASS BY? If this should meet the eye of a clergyman who saw a lady in great distress of mind at a church in the West End about two months ago, will he communicate with her at the address given below? His help is earnestly desired and greatly needed. Mrs. L., Boulter's Library, 500, Redmond Road, Bayswater.'

CHAPTER XXXIII

BROUGHT NEARER

If men and women would only think as much of keeping in with God as they do of keeping in with their fellow-sinners, what a wonderful world it would be!

AFTER a few days had gone by and Mary Lessingham had paid several fruitless visits to the little library in Bayswater, where by-the-bye she was entirely unknown, she at last found a letter awaiting her, addressed in a man's bold firm handwriting. She took it all in a tremor, and got into the carriage before she dared to open it.

'MADAM,' it said—

'I have seen your advertisement in *The Times*, and think that perhaps I am the person whom you are seeking. I have not forgotten the name of a lady who came to me at the church of St. Sebastien, in Greenland Road, W., about two months ago. Nor have I forgotten the details of her trouble; but, as you may not be that lady, I cannot give any further clue to her identity in this letter. I will, therefore, only say that her trouble was the temptation of drink, and that I urged her to confide in her husband at once. If you were that lady, or if you think that I should be able to be of the smallest service to you, I shall be glad to see you in the vestry of my own church, St. Matthew's, Carrington Square, S.W., or at my own house if you would prefer it.

'I am your sincere brother in Christ,

'NOEL EVERARD.'

In reply to this, Mary at once wrote back—

'You may have thought it strange, dear sir, that I should have to take the means of advertising to find you. The truth is that when I left the church in which I spoke with you and confided my trouble to you, I took a cab and drove home, and it was not until after I had entered my house that I bethought myself that I did not know what church I had been in and that I had never asked your name. I found the church and you by the purest accident. I had been for a long drive for the sake of getting fresh air, and when on the way home I determined to walk the rest of the way. I lost myself, and although I have since tried to find the church again, I have not been successful. Dear sir, I will go down to St. Matthew's to-morrow about five o'clock in the afternoon, on the chance of finding you. If it is not convenient for you to see me, will you have the kindness to leave me a note saying what day at about the same hour I might have a chance of finding you?

'I shall be so grateful for your help, for I am slipping down fast, and I feel that the dread day is nigh upon me.

'Yours with all gratitude,

'M.L.'

Accordingly, the very next afternoon Mary Lessingham went down to the church of which Noel Everard was the vicar. The sacristan told her that Mr. Everard was in the vestry, and that he would see her. Mary therefore dismissed her cab, and, following the man, was immediately shown into the clergyman's presence. He struck her, just as he had done before, both by his great strength of character and by his intense humanity.

'Thank God that I saw your message,' was his greeting. 'Things are not going well with you.'

'Worse,' said Mary, wretchedly. And then she told him

how impossible she had found it to break herself of her habit, and how still more impossible to tell her husband. 'I feel that my time is getting very short,' she ended. 'My husband is watching me and trying to understand what it is that is working on me to change me so, and before long he will find out, and then——'

She broke off in an eloquence too deep for words.

'I understand,' said Noel Everard, simply.

For a few moments there was a dead silence between them. At last he drew a long breath, as of having come to a conclusion.

'Mrs. Lessingham,' he said, 'are you a free agent?'

'As how?' she asked.

'I mean in this way. Are you free to take what line of life you will? I gather that your husband is a straight man, what is called a square man, living an upright, honourable life, but not thinking too much, if at all, of religious matters.'

'I think,' she replied, 'that with the exception of this awful curse which lies upon me, and to which I was driven not of my own choice, that your description applies to both our lives. My husband would, I am sure, rather die than do a dishonourable thing. But of religion we have never thought, we have never seemed to need to think. We were married in church, and our children were all christened there. And sometimes we go to church when we are in the country, because—well, because we are very friendly with the vicar of the parish where our little country house is, and it would be a slight to him if we did not go to church now and then.'

'But you don't mind slighting God,' said Noel Everard, looking straight at her.

'Well, we do not mean staying away to be a slight to God,' said Mary, quickly; and she shrank under his words. 'Oh, pray don't look at me like that! I don't think you

understand the thoughts of such people as we are. To you God is a real Person; to me He is nothing. I cannot believe in Him. He speaks to you and answers you, but to me He is deaf, and seemingly blind and dumb. I prayed when my little child was dying, but He did not hear; and I have prayed now, but He does not listen, or, if He does, He does not heed. If He cares that I shall be saved, if He cares whether I sink or swim, why does He not give me some proof that He is there?'

'Because God works in *His* way, not in ours,' said Noel Everard, in a voice that was so positive that it was almost stern. 'He does not choose to work a miracle just because you ask Him to do so.'

'Yet, if we are to believe the story of the Gospels, Christ worked miracles for all sorts of poor unconsidered people in those days; so why not for me now?'

'Perhaps because your besetting sin is pride——'

'No, no,' she broke in.

'Ah, there are many kinds of pride,' he rejoined wisely. 'At all events, you cannot argue with God Almighty; you must accept the lot that He chooses to send you. And I foresee that yours will not be an easy victory, but that it will come by a long process, a process of suffering and possibly of humiliation. But at the root of all is that indomitable pride of yours.'

'I am not proud; indeed, you are mistaken in me,' she cried. 'Ask any one who knows me out in the world, and I am sure that person will tell you that I have never been puffed up or proud of my position.'

'It is your pride not to be so. My poor lady, why will you not tell your husband of the trouble and temptation that assail you? Because you are too proud; you don't want to lower yourself in his eyes. It is natural enough, only you are carrying it too far. If you feel like that for your husband, who after all is only a human being like

yourself, why do you not feel more pride than to let God, who made you, see how weak you are?'

'If God made me,' she said, 'He made me weak.'

'Nonsense! You have a fine healthy physique, a sound clear brain, a stout heart, and you are an educated woman. What more panoply of war would you ask? However, it is no use arguing the question. My business is to heal you if I can, to bring you to Christ if it be possible, to help you by some means or other. I shall do neither by argument or discussion, for you are just now in no fit state to benefit by either. What you want for the moment is distraction.'

For a minute or so Mary stared at him as if she could not believe the evidence of her senses.

'I have tried every form of distraction that I could think of,' she said at last.

'Of what kind?'

'I have travelled. I have gone a great deal into society. I have fled out of London and buried myself in the heart of the country, and lived a simple, homely life. I have even tried to ride a bicycle.'

'I will recommend another form of distraction,' said he, quietly. 'One that will not be exactly an amusement, but from which you can learn, if you choose, some of the greatest lessons of life. You say that you are a free agent, and can'—with a fine inflection on the word—'*amuse* yourself as you will. So come to church every day at some time or other, and also spare some time to go with me on my rounds among the poor. No, I don't mean what is meant by the now fashionable word "slumming," which you are too noble and too true a lady to indulge in. I mean that you are to come with me, not to confer favours but to learn something; you are not to condescend, but to look up. Attach yourself to my parish. I will so arrange that it shall not interfere with your working hours, though it may take something from your amusements.'

'Oh, Mr. Everard,' Mary cried, 'I do not give up much time to amusements nowadays, I assure you! I used to do so, but of late I have not had the heart to go about; indeed, I seem to spend all the day after I leave my study trying to pull myself together to face the inevitable.'

'And you do not think,' he said, 'that, as it is all but inevitable that your husband must know the truth, it would be better to tell than to be found out?'

'No,' she returned, without the slightest hesitancy; 'because there is still a faint chance that I may win the day alone, and in that case I need not tell, ever, ever.'

'Your pride again,' he said.

'Yes, perhaps; but while there is that chance I cannot, will not, throw it aside. I will come and do as you say; and will you give me a list of the services, so that I may know to which I can come?'

'I will. And you will go my round with me to-morrow. I go between six and seven, because I often get hold of the husbands then. Come with me, and I will show you women whose lives are one long martyrdom of pain and suffering and toil, women who have to fight, ay, and to fight hard, to keep the wolf from the door. I will show you gently-born ladies, who, through no fault of their own, are ground down by poverty of the most cruel kind, who yet accept the will of God without a murmur, and who are daily, hourly adding leaf by leaf to the glorious crown which they will wear one day. I tell you that you cannot be brought in contact with lives like these without realizing that God knows and that He knows best.'

'God knows,' exclaimed Mary Lessingham, with a sudden quiver in her voice and a sudden rush of tears to her eyes, 'that I am more than willing to learn!'

CHAPTER XXXIV

AT LAST

The old saw says, 'Murder will out,' and so it is with other secrets than murder. A smoking lamp and drink will betray themselves in time.

WHEN Mary Lessingham had left the vestry of St. Matthew's Church and had gone home, Noel Everard turned and went into the church, passing straight up the aisle and kneeling down in front of the altar. And there he stayed praying as only such an one ever can pray, entreating of God to make him strong that he might be able to give strength to this sorely tried soul.

'Dear Lord,' his prayer ran, 'Thou knowest; Thou hast lived in the weak flesh of poor humanity, have pity and help her. Send light down upon me that I may know which course to bid her take. Dear Lord, it is the third time that Thou hast led her to the foot of the throne; let her not go empty away, I entreat and beseech Thee.'

Long, long did this good and strong man kneel there wrestling with God for the soul of Mary Lessingham. Men and women came and went, some from curiosity, some to think and pray, and each and all, seeing that Mr. Everard was kneeling there, slipped quietly away to another part of the edifice and left him wholly undisturbed. Then the organist, having come to practise, began to play, and Noel Everard knelt on with the sound of sweet music stealing about him, and through his brain there ran one single thread of thought.

'The husband must know it—the husband must know it.'

For his very life, he could not have told whether this conviction came to him through the music, by reason of his earnest prayers, or whether it was a message straight from the mouth of God, but at last he stood up, feeling certain that his first advice to Mrs. Lessingham had been good, and that to confide the truth to her husband was the only way by which she could hope to win the unequal battle in which she was engaged at that moment.

'Yes, she must tell the husband, or she must let me do so,' he said to himself, as he once more entered the vestry.

Yet, during the next few days that went by, it did not seem as if things were at all shaping themselves to that end. Mrs. Lessingham still obstinately refused either to tell Lessingham herself or to allow Mr. Everard to do so, and having given his word that he would not betray her, the clergyman was powerless to advance a single step in the matter.

'But mind you, and mark my words,' he said to her, when he had for the twentieth time been urging her to be brave to get the worst over without further delay, 'although you will not, yet the time is coming and coming fast when God will tell him for you. You cannot escape His will, and, believe me, the blow will be harder if it comes in that way than if you face it while you have the chance.'

'Yet you say that God is the God of mercy and forgiveness,' she said, in almost reproachful tones.

'To those who repent,' he rejoined quickly.

It did not seem as if God cared one way or another, for several weeks went by, and although Mary Lessingham went duly and truly to St. Matthew's, attending the services and going bravely round the poorer parts of the parish with Noel Everard, she was apparently no better or more easy at heart for doing so. Indeed, if the truth be told, the suffering and misery with which she was made acquainted

told cruelly upon her already shattered nerves, and caused her to feel that, although she had made a great position in the world of letters, she was yet an ignorant and superficial short-sighted woman, who knew next to nothing of real human nature, and whose limitations were, or ought to be, too painfully apparent to the whole world. The effect of this on her work was so potent that, to hide her deficiencies, she flew to her 'medicine,' and took more of it than ever, and Lessingham, quick to note the smallest change in her, was almost beside himself with anxiety and distress at the terrible deterioration in her looks and in herself.

'I wish you would knock off work for six months,' he said to her one day, when she had come down from her study and was sitting, looking jaded and flushed and worn, awaiting her afternoon cup of tea. 'You will kill yourself if you go on like this. Be advised by me, and give it up for a time.'

'I must finish this book, at least,' she said wearily.

'But you are content with the work you are doing!' he exclaimed. 'Why you need choose this time of all others, when you are thoroughly overdone and on the very verge of break-down, to be cooking up another story, is more than I can tell. You don't give your poor brain a ghost of a chance.'

'I'm not cooking up another story, Hugh,' she said.

'You are not? Then what in the name of fortune do you want to be going slumming and attending services at all sorts of inconvenient times for?'

'I feel that I have need of it.'

'Pooh, what nonsense! If all the rest of the world was as good and as unselfish and noble as you are, the world would be a very different spot to what it is to-day. But, mind you, I do feel, and I feel it continually, that you are not acting fairly by yourself.'

'What do you mean, Hugh?'

Her heart began to beat hard, as it always did when she feared he might be going to touch on the truth.

'You don't give your brain a chance,' he returned. 'I have told you so over and over again. I'm glad you are not hatching out another book, but I wish you had left the religious question alone. It will only excite you and make you uneasy and restless about yourself. You are not going down to that place to-day, surely.'

She had been meaning to go, but after what he had said, she felt that she would rather die than turn a step towards the church in Carrington Square.

'I have not finished my work,' she said. 'I only came down for a cup of tea. I am going upstairs again.'

Lessingham looked at her in utter dismay.

'What! you are going at it again? Oh, my dear, don't do it! Come out for a drive with me, and let us go to Richmond or down to Barn Elms, or anywhere so that you can get fresh air and quiet rest.'

Mary drank down her tea quickly.

'No, I have promised myself to go back,' she said, rather unsteadily. 'Don't try to persuade, Hugh; I'll go out with you perhaps to-morrow.'

She got up and made for the door. Lessingham followed her; but Mary put her hand out to keep him at arm's length.

'I must go, dear old boy,' she said. 'Let me have my way just for this once.'

In a moment she had passed out of the room and had closed the door behind her. Lessingham stood staring blankly at it, his face full of consternation and dismay.

'Now, what the devil am I to do?' he said aloud in his perplexity. Then he sat down and, dropping his elbows on his knees, gave himself up to all manner of hard and remorseful thoughts. 'It's not fit for a woman to bear the brunt as she has to do,' he told himself. 'And yet, what can I do to prevent it? I work as much as my miserable

health will let me, but if I were to work till I killed myself, it would not lighten her load by a single jot. She has made her place, and she will not let it go; but the place is too big for a woman to cope with, and if I were to break myself down by overwork, I could not help her, and she would be stranded more badly than ever.'

He pondered for a long time as to whether it was best and kindest to leave her to do her will, or whether it was not his duty to insist upon her leaving her work, for that day, at least, and taking some sort of change and recreation with him. So some three-quarters of an hour went by before he at last came to a decision that he ought to exercise some control and influence over her when she was unmistakably not taking proper care of herself.

Having come to this conclusion, he lost no time in hesitation, but at once sought her out, only to find the door locked fast against him.

'Open the door. It is I,' he said.

'You cannot come in. I am busy,' she replied.

Her voice sounded strange to him, as if she might be crying.

'My dear, do come out with me,' he called through the door. 'Open to me, dearest. You cannot be too busy to let me in for a minute.'

'What do you want? Go away. I am busy, very busy,' she said.

'Mary, I am sure something is wrong with you,' he urged. 'You ought to come out, you need rest and air. My dear, come out with me.'

'No, no; go away. I am busy, very busy,' she replied, in the same strange voice.

Lessingham turned away with a sigh, and went down to his own little den with a new sick sensation of fear overspreading him. What if this great position of hers was coming in between them so utterly that in future they

would drift apart and be as nothing to each other? What if the woman were to be swallowed up in the author, and Mary, his wife, his guiding star, was to shine only in another firmament than that of his life? The very thought was paralyzing to him; he felt as if the world, or at all events *his* world, was coming to an end.

He sat for some time trying to realize what it all meant, and at last he took a sudden resolution.

'Oh, this is perfectly absurd,' he said, getting up from his chair and making for the door. 'It is ridiculous to go on like this; to let one's wife drift away from one, and not to hold out so much as a finger to stop her. I will go and insist on her coming out.'

In two minutes he was halfway up the stairs, and his knock on the door of Mary's study was imperative and urgent. There was, however, no reply; and Lessingham knocked again, knocked yet harder.

'Mary,' he called, 'open the door. I want to come in.'

But Mary Lessingham did not reply, and Lessingham stood there with an awful dread thumping at his heart, fearing that she might be ill or dead. He listened. No, she was not dead, for he could hear her deeply breathing. Evidently she was in a fit of some kind, and, as soon as he realized it, he put his shoulder against the door and tried to force the lock. The door, being a stout one, resisted his efforts, so he fetched one of his heaviest dumb-bells, a relic of the old 'Varsity days, from his dressing-room on the next landing, and with it he battered in the panel of the door. Then it was easy to reach within and to turn the key, and the next moment he had entered the room, and Mary's secret, so long carefully kept, lay bare before him.

CHAPTER XXXV

FIRST INSTINCTS

> Most people feel human ties before human justice. It is against the law to help to conceal a crime, yet ninety-nine men and women out of a hundred would strain every nerve to save those who are near to them in blood or affection from the stern arm of the law or of public opinion. And when such efforts become known, the greater part of the world does not condemn, but applauds.

WHEN Lessingham burst into his wife's study, he gathered in one instant, by a single glance, the whole secret of what had been so sorely puzzling him in the past. She was lying in the big chair in which she generally sat to think out any very difficult points, sleeping soundly, her flushed face and heavy breathing denoting all too plainly the cause of such unconsciousness. Beside her on the table stood a bottle and a large red claret-glass. He picked up the bottle and glanced at the label—Green Chartreuse! Then he took up the glass and smelt it; it had the smell of chartreuse and nothing more. Nothing more! Good God! what more was needed to complete a woman's ruin? He did not look again at Mary, but glanced about the room as if in search of evidence which would confirm the state in which he had found her. The door of the large oak press in which she kept her writing-materials was open, and Lessingham went across the room and flung it wider still, opening also the second half thereof that he

might see clearly into the interior. Ah yes, there it was, the evidence for which he sought—evidence in the shape of a long row of bottles, some empty and some yet untouched, each of which had contained or still contained the same deadly spirit as that bottle on the table. Lessingham said not a word, and he lingered no longer. Why should he have done so, indeed, for had he not in the last few minutes learned enough to take the heart out of him for the rest of his life? So, without a second look at the unconscious figure sunk deep in the big chair, he went out of the room, closing the door carefully behind him, although he could not close the shivered panel as he would have liked to do.

His first thought was one of concealing the whole matter from the household. But how was it to be done? There was the smashed door, one panel of which was a complete wreck, for when a man thinks that his wife is dead or dying, he naturally does not stop to think first of the door which divides him from her. Nothing could possibly make that door good again but the work of a joiner and then that of a painter, and neither joiner nor painter could be set to work while she was lying there sunk in that ignoble sleep. No; he must hatch up some story, he must see that she was left entirely undisturbed, that she must not be approached by any one; and then how would he be able to get that door repaired without the whole household knowing exactly what had happened? In truth, he did not know, and he stood on the landing outside the room and wondered dismally what would be the best course for him to take.

It happened that Mary Lessingham's study had been chosen in the first instance because it was almost entirely set apart from the rest of the house. At some earlier date, a bathroom had been built out over a kitchen, and an extra bedroom over that again. These rooms were both approached by a short passage leading from the usual landing, and had each of them, therefore, a second door, which

completely cut off all noise from the rest of the house. Lessingham's final conclusion was to go back into his wife's study, and there to scrawl a few words on a paper which he set on the table where she usually sat to write. Then he went out, and, locking the outer door, took out the key and put it in his pocket. This done, he went downstairs and rang the bell of his own den.

'When Mrs. Lessingham rings her bell,' he said, 'come and tell me. She is not to be disturbed on any account whatever.'

'Very well, sir,' was the maid's reply.

Then he set himself down to wait until he should be summoned, a weary and dreary time of miserable thought and cogitation. And yet, when I say that it was a time of thought, I am perhaps conveying an entirely wrong impression, for Lessingham could scarcely be said to be thinking that wretched afternoon. Rather should I say that during the hour or more that went by after he left Mary alone to get over the effects of her sudden outbreak—for such it had truly been, although Lessingham did not know it as yet—his whole being was in a whirl of confusion and chaos. It was as if the end of the world had come upon him in a medley of disordered incidents and discoveries over which he had not the very smallest control. For a long time he sat at his writing-table trying to piece things together, trying to overcome the horrid revulsion of feeling that the discovery had been to him, trying not to be her judge, trying to think of other things, trying indeed to accomplish the impossible. And at last he got up and sought for his pipe, and with that trusty counsellor, he sat down in his favourite armchair and set himself to wait.

Meantime Mary slept heavily, and awaking at last with a sort of feeling that something out of the ordinary had happened. It was by that time nearly six o'clock in the afternoon, and she saw, when she had straightened herself

in her chair, that it was later in the day than she usually remained in her study.

'Let me see,' she said, 'I had an idea: I meant to do that little sketch the *Royal* wanted of me. I don't believe I can do a stroke of work to-day. Did I take too much, I wonder? I do feel so awfully queer, and my head—— Why, what is that?'

She sat up still more straightly in her chair, for there, on the table before her, was a sheet of paper with something scrawled on it in Lessingham's handwriting.

'I have locked you in,' it ran, 'as it is best the servants should know nothing of what I saw to-day. When you want to leave your room, ring your bell, and I will come and release you.—H. L.'

What impressed her most was the fact that the few lines were signed by Lessingham's initials instead of being with his Christian name, as was his usual habit. H. L.—H. L. —H. L. So the blow had fallen, and—— She got up unsteadily from her chair and faced slowly round to the door. Her head was still heavy and hot from the quantity of fiery spirit which she had taken, her vision was blurred, her hands trembling, her tongue clave dryly to the roof of her mouth, and her lips felt cracked and parched. Yes, here was the door with its broken panel. Evidently he had come to see after her, to call her, and she not answering, he had fancied that harm had come to her, and so he had broken in the door, to find—O God! to find what?—the secret that she had been keeping from him so long; the horrid, hideous truth that the wife he had loved, the wife he had admired and idolized and cherished, was a drunkard!

She did not cry, or break down, or weep—no, no; but her trembling knees gave way under her, and she sank down on the nearest chair and stared at the door, with its broken panel, as if it could tell her the story which had been enacted before her unconscious eyes. So it was all

over, and the blow so long expected had fallen at last. There was no longer any need to hide and contrive and conceal—he knew everything; it was all ended, the strife and the agony of hope and fear; the struggle was over, and now she could let herself go and drink herself into the quiet of the grave with what speed she chose. It was rather a relief than otherwise, and yet she felt strangely numbed, like one who has lost half of herself; as if she were wanting an eye or a limb, and must get used to the loss as best she might.

She never thought of ringing the bell to be let out of her durance; no, she just sat there and let the tide of thought and overwhelming catastrophe flow over her as it would. And at last, when Lessingham was beginning to get more and more uneasy, he came up again and softly opened the door. Mary did not move as she saw him in the doorway.

'You are awake,' he said. He tried to make his voice sound just as usual; but he did not look at her, and Mary shuddered as she saw it.

'Yes; I am all right. I—I——' The words died away in her throat, and she stopped short.

Lessingham went on speaking, still in the same studiously careful tone.

'Well, it is no use your staying here any longer now; it will only make the servants talk. Let me help you down to your room.'

She stood up at once.

'No, I don't want helping. I can walk quite well.'

She crossed the room towards the door.

'Don't go,' said Lessingham. 'Let me put those things away. There's no need to let the servants know anything about it.'

She turned herself about and watched him as he carefully put the red claret-glass and the bottle of green chartreuse

back into the oak press again. He locked the door and took the key out of the lock.

'You had better have this,' he said, holding it out towards her. 'What are we to say to account for the door?'

'I don't care at all. Anything that you like. I don't think it is at all necessary to account for it one way or another.'

Her tone was hard, as hard as his was forced, and a strange feeling of defiance came over her, as if, now that he had found out everything, it did not in the least matter whether the rest of the world knew it or not.

Lessingham altogether mistook her meaning and the signs of the sensations that were moving her.

'I don't suppose you do care,' he said. 'But it is just as well to keep it from the general public if we can. I think you had better go to bed, and I will say that you were faint, and that I had to smash the door in to get at you.'

'It was true enough,' said Mary, in a wild attempt to brave it out and show him that she did not care so very much after all.

Lessingham felt himself turning sick and dizzy. He was filled with shame that this could be his wife, Mary Lessingham, the great novelist, whose pages were eagerly scanned by thousands and thousands of readers, most of whom sought to gain some wisdom or help from them.

He helped her down the stairs as carefully as if she were really ill, and rang for her maid to come and undress her.

'Mrs. Lessingham is very unwell,' he said, when the woman came in answer to his summons. 'You must help her into bed as soon as possible, and then make a cup of strong tea.'

'Oh dear, sir, I am sorry for that,' said the maid. 'I am sure the mistress has been working a deal too hard lately. Was she faint, sir?'

'Yes, she must have fainted, for I could not make her

hear when I went up to see how she was, and why she was staying up there so long, and I had to break the door in to get at her.'

'Dear, dear! I am sure it is over-work. Shall I bring a little brandy with the tea?'

'I think not. Mrs. Lessingham has had some already,' Lessingham replied.

It was not quite true, in fact, it was not true at all to say that she had had brandy; but in his anxiety to shield her from the truth being known, Lessingham did not stick at a fib or two. The woman went downstairs to order the tea, satisfied enough with her master's story, and all unsuspecting that a grim tragedy had been enacted under her very eyes that day.

'I'm sure missis is killing herself,' she remarked to the cook, a stout and dignified person, who had latterly replaced old Nannie who had been with the family so long. 'It ain't what can be called a natural thing to be slaving away as she does all the day through, and then have half the world at her tail just for what they can get out of her. Human nature is no more than human nature, no matter who it is.'

'Why, what's amiss?' asked the cook.

'Just this, that master went and knocked at her door just now, and as she did not answer when he called and called, he just broke the blessed door in and found her in a dead faint on the floor. Missis looks awful, simply awful, and I've got to get her to bed while Polly makes the tea. And see to it sharp, will you, Polly?'

'I will,' replied the young person whose duty tea-making was. 'I'll bring it up in a minute or two. Do you think missis is going to be ill?'

'Goodness knows,' replied the maid.

'Has the master sent for the doctor?'

'Not that I know of. Oh, I dare say he'll wait to see

how she seems. Nothing upsets her so much as having a fuss made about her.'

She went back to her duties then, and Lessingham escaped downstairs again to his own den. He had been unhappy enough when he had left it, but he entered it again with the full consciousness that he was a thousand times as wretched a man as he ever had been in all his life before. And in her bed above, Mary Lessingham was lying face to face with the horrible certainty that her life was ended; that, come what might, there could never be any real comfort or pleasure for her again; and that the sooner the merciful grave closed over the inglorious end of her career, the less would be known and discussed the hideous infirmity which had wrecked her.

CHAPTER XXXVI

LIGHT IN DARKNESS

> One of the last resorts of the devil is to build a wall of silence between those who ought to be in close touch with one another. There is nothing more fatal to the machinations of the devil than explanations. A look, a word, a touch, may bring an explanation about, and the thickest mists of misunderstanding or misconception may be cleared away like a morning mist before the rays of a summer sun. But with every day that the wall of ice which we call silence is left undisturbed it grows thicker and thicker, more and more impenetrable.

FROM the moment that he entered Mary's presence after he had discovered her in unconsciousness, Lessingham was most scrupulous in saying and doing nothing which could give the servants the smallest hint of how matters stood between them, or of what had occurred on the afternoon when he had forced open the door of her study. The following morning he went to the nearest builder and gave orders to have the broken door repaired; and as Mary stayed late in bed and seemed generally unwell, no one had the smallest suspicion but that everything was exactly as Lessingham had said—that is, that Mary had fainted, and that he had broken in the door in order to get at her.

In truth, it was not necessary for Mary Lessingham to make any pretence at being ill. She was ill, poor woman, both in body and mind. For her the end of the world had

come, and there was not even the comfort of the deluge of oblivion to follow. No, for Lessingham was, as I said, scrupulously and studiously the same in all outward things, and she had neither the nerve nor the courage to lay bare her soul to him and to let him know through what stormy waters of temptation she had been passing, or what had brought her to the pass in which he had found her. No; he had uttered no word of reproach, he had not even looked reproachfully at her, and probably no one (with the exception of Mary herself) could have told that there was the slightest difference between them.

But to Mary, aye, and to Lessingham also, there was all the difference in the world. Lessingham could not be the same as he had been before. He had been stunned by the discovery he had made; he had felt very much as he might have felt had he discovered some fiend in the place of the wife whom he had loved so long and so faithfully. He realized all the effort and grinding self-sacrifice of her life, both before and after she had made her place in the world of letters; and yet that she, his ideal among women, should have let herself go in that particular direction was as abhorrent to him as if he had found her out in some vulgar and wholly unnecessary theft.

Still, he knew that he could not honestly blame or reproach her; he knew that she had borne the brunt of as fierce a battle as woman had ever fought, and that it would not lie in his mouth to utter one single word of condemnation to her. So he set himself to be just as usual, and, in doing so, took, though he did not know it, an entirely wrong course; for Mary, now that the long dreaded blow had fallen, did not care one way or another which course events took, and shut herself up, therefore, within a high wall of impenetrable ice, such as he would have found, even had he been possessed of the keenest desire to do so, impossible to pierce or scale.

So weeks and weeks went by, and slowly but surely the two who had been everything to each other, drifted apart, and were no longer one, but in all respects two. The end of the season was drawing near—indeed, in other years they had usually left town before this time, but this year they lingered on because each dreaded the quiet country life which lay before them, that life which heretofore had been so lavishly filled with simple domestic joys and pleasures, the life which both felt could never be lived again, excepting as a travesty and mockery of the happiness which once had been. And Mary, after a few days, worked just as regularly as before, taking her 'medicine' with more care, but with just the same deadly persistence, drinking little or nothing at meals, and scarcely going out into society at all. As for Lessingham, he scrupulously inquired each day, and several times each day, what she was doing and whether she would go here, there, or elsewhere with him; and, for the rest, he spent a good deal of time at his club, and was but little at home, excepting for meals and to sleep.

At last, when Mary, aye, and Lessingham also, were beginning to feel that a move to the old Manor House must be made, and the horrid plunge into the new life taken, Mary received a letter from Noel Everard.

'DEAR MRS. LESSINGHAM' (it ran),

'How is it that I have not seen you for nearly six weeks? I feel certain that something has happened to you, and that you are in trouble. Come and see me in the vestry at five o'clock to-morrow afternoon. God sends you this message, not I. I implore you not to disregard it.

'Your true friend in Christ,

'NOEL EVERARD.'

'God sends you this message, not I. I implore you not to disregard it.'

God sends you this message—God sends you this message! And for weeks she had not been near the church where the strong man, who had tried so hard to make her brave and strong as he was, ministered. Yet—*God sends you this message!*

'I'll go,' she said to herself. 'Yes, I'll go. At least, I can set his mind at rest and let him know that the worst has fallen upon me.'

Accordingly, that afternoon she went down to Noel Everard's church at the hour which he had appointed, and when she got there, the sacristan showed her into the vestry she had often entered before, yet with what a different heart!

'What has happened?' were Noel Everard's first words when the door had closed behind the sacristan.

'Everything,' she replied. 'And my life is ended.'

'Then God has told your husband?' He uttered the words very quietly, and Mary started at the firm conviction of his tone.

'I never thought of that,' she said.

'Yet, my poor friend, did I not tell you that God would work in His way, and not necessarily in yours? Did I not say that I knew it would have to come through the husband? Did I not say that it was pride that was holding you back, and that your pride would have to be crushed before you could find any help or comfort? Has not every word that I said come true?'

She stood staring at him almost wildly, but no words came to her blanched lips.

'Sit down,' he said, gently drawing her to a seat. 'And now tell me everything that has happened. How did the truth come out? What did your husband say?'

'I don't know. It happened one day, one afternoon. I was dreadfully overdone and tired and fagged, and he wanted me to throw my work up and go out with him;

something he said or looked or seemed to think made me turn stupid, and so I went back to work again, and I suppose I took too much of that stuff, and that when he came to try to persuade me again to go out, I did not hear. Anyway, when I came to myself again, the door was all broken in, and I knew in a moment that he had been in the room, and that the worst had happened.'

'Or the best,' said Noel Everard, briefly.

For a moment she gazed blankly at him; then she suddenly bent her head upon her hands and broke into a passion of bitter tears.

'No, no,' she sobbed; 'my life is all over, all ended. I wish I were dead. Yes, I wish I were dead. I mean it.'

'I dare say you do,' he said, laying his hand kindly on her shoulder; but, you see, we cannot lay down our burden just when we please, or just when we get into a difficulty. There would not be much glory in the battle of life if we could. Tell me, what did he say?'

'Nothing,' she flashed out, her tears dried in an instant; 'nothing. And, oh, if he would only say something, *anything;* if he would only abuse me, rave at me, swear at me; *if he would only strike me*, it would be better than this horrible dead wall of silence! It is killing me.'

'And what have you said?' he asked.

'Nothing. It is not for me to speak.'

'I think it is. Then he knows nothing of what you have told me?'

'Nothing, except that he forced the door and found me—— Oh, my God——'

'But you have no God. You acknowledge no God,' said Noel Everard. 'Or does it now come home to you that it *is* God who is working in you, that it *is* God who is trying to help you to help yourself? Does it not now come home to you that *God* sent your husband to your room that day, and that by keeping him in the dark, by keeping your lips

sealed as you are doing now, you are working against Him, and that you are wronging the husband who loves you, more than any words of mine can tell?'

'He does not love me now. How can it be possible?' she said mournfully.

'Many waters cannot quench love,' was Noel Everard's reply. 'And the love of a husband who, knowing nothing of the true facts of the case, and who could still utter no word of reproach, must be past all telling. And if human love can be like this, how much deeper, wider, greater, and stronger must be the love of that heavenly Father who has patiently brought you into this crucible of pain and agony! But for your good—for your good.'

She raised her sad eyes to his.

'How did you know that it would have to come to my husband's knowledge?' she asked abruptly.

'God told me,' he said simply. 'You had but just left me one day, and I was troubled and uneasy about you, for I was not sure which way I ought to act so that I might help you best. I was kneeling out there in the church, at the altar, praying with all my heart for you, and one thought came like a shaft of light—it came over and over again, "The husband must know it—the husband must know it." I knew then that I need seek no other way. I told you it must come through him.'

She was silent for a few moments; then she looked up again.

'Yet it has done no good.'

'That is because you have closed the door fast between you,' said Noel Everard. 'Oh, my poor friend, why will you still thrust the truth on one side? Do you not see, do you not feel, that God knows, that God sees and feels and hears?'

'If He would give me back——'

'You can drive no bargain with God Almighty,' said

Noel Everard, sternly. 'Believe in Him, ask Him—with faith. Oh, my poor woman, you have come right up to the Throne of Grace now! Don't keep your ears and your heart shut tight against Him any longer. Don't you feel that up there Jesus Christ, who died for you, who Himself in His own person went through every earthly trial and temptation, is leaning down, hoping, yearning to take you into His arms and make you whole as one of your own little children?'

But there he stopped, for Mary Lessingham had sunk forward upon her knees, and was sobbing as if her very heart would break.

'Stay here,' said Noel Everard. 'You will be quite undisturbed. I shall be back again shortly. I have business to attend to, very pressing business, and I will leave you alone with God for a little while.'

He went out, closing the door behind him; and Mary knelt on, crying bitterly. Like a surprise, conviction had come to her—like a shaft of golden sunlight piercing a gloomy cell. For the first time in her life she felt that she was with God; that there was a Guide and Friend up in heaven who was thinking of her and caring for her, and who would not leave her until she had set her feet back on the right path once more.

'Oh, give me back my husband, dear God!' she cried. 'Give him back to me; give him back to me!'

CHAPTER XXXVII

AT THE FOOT OF THE CROSS

> There is one Haven which never fails to give shelter; there is one Hand which is always merciful; there is one Heart which is always full of sympathy. Shelter and mercy and love, and free to all who seek them, but they must be sought. The whole gospel teaches this. 'Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find. Come to Me.'

As Mary Lessingham knelt there in the quiet and seclusion of the silent vestry a great peace stole into her troubled soul. At last she had found rest, at last she was content to cast her whole burden on Him who had so long been waiting to carry it for her. She felt like some weak and wayward child who has purposely gone the longest way round, who has out of sheer perversity trodden a path full of stones and thorns and briars, when she might as well—nay, when she might more easily have gone straight along the narrow one which lay right ahead. And yet she had got home at last. She was at rest and in peace for the first time for many and many a day. And how different to when she had prayed before, when she had only prayed because she wanted something, and not because she really believed that God could or would give it to her! Now, although she had but just reached the haven, she was able to ask in such a different way, with such a different spirit, and she knew that the God who had led her through the waters of strife to the

sacred restfulness of this outer aisle of the sanctuary would not leave her now.

Over and over again the same prayer rose to her lips.

'It does not matter if I have to give up, to see my place, that was never really my own place, slip away, away. If we have to go out and live in poverty, it does not matter. Only give him back to me, dear God; give him back to me.'

An hour went by. Still Noel Everard did not return, and still Mary remained in the vestry, obedient to the command which he had laid upon her. And at last the door opened, there was a glimpse of the clergyman's face in the doorway; then it was withdrawn, and he made way for another to pass in.

'Mary,' some one said.

She uttered a sharp cry, and swayed blindly where she knelt. The next moment Lessingham was down on his knees beside her and she was clasped in his arms—those fond and faithful arms in which she might for ever find a shelter against every temptation for all time.

'He has told me everything,' he whispered, after a little while, 'my poor darling, my brave love, all the struggle and agony that you have been through. I ought to have spoken, but I couldn't—I couldn't. I was so afraid of saying something to hurt you, blame you, reproach you, that I could not trust myself to speak. Now I see that I was wrong, all wrong. I ought to have spoken out at once.'

'Hugh, I can't write without it. Do you realize what it means to give it up?'

'That does not matter,' he replied. 'That you shall give it up is the great and most essential point. Nothing else matters. After all, what is poverty? We have been poor before, and we were happy.'

'So happy,' she sighed.

'And he tells me that you don't like it——'

'Like it!' she echoed. 'I hate it, I loathe it. The sight

of it turns my very soul to water, and the smell of it makes me sicken and turn faint. I have no love of it to conquer, and if only I am strong enough—— But, Hugh, Hugh, we have never thought of religion, you and I, darling. It was God who brought me through this, and if I get free, really free, it will be God's doing. Help can only come from Him. I never saw it, I never realized it till to-day. Oh, Hugh, I've been so proud of my place, so proud of what I've been to you, dear, and now it is all going to fall away, it is all going to fall about my ears like a house of cards, and unless I have help——'

Lessingham drew her to her feet.

'Our love can never fall about our ears like a house of cards,' he said, with a smile of infinite tenderness. 'And for the rest, sweetheart, we shall both need help, for you must give up your work altogether until you can work alone. So unless this—this burden is taken from you, we must get on without your working at all, because it is impossible that you can go on with this hideous sacrifice of yourself. So, dear heart, we will go and seek help together at the foot of the Cross.'

THE END.

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