

A Ballad and a Tale

By B. Paul Neuman

I.—The Heavenly Lover

I

IT was the joyful sunrise hour,
The world beneath her lay unrolled,
As from the highest nunnery tower
She watched the shadows turn to gold.

The glistening glory climbed the sky,
It touched the height, and searched the vale.
The forest laid its sackcloth by,
And all its songsters fluted "Hail!"

The splendour lit the slumbering town,
The crowded haunt of busy man,
She looked through tears that trickled down,
Chafing against the iron ban

That

That barred her from the world whose stir
 Makes every morn a glad surprise.
That happy world was not for her,
 Save to behold with yearning eyes.

For her the damp and moss-grown walls,
 The changeless order of the days,
The fellowship of patient thralls,
 The loud monotony of praise.

She wrung her hands, "Oh hearts of stone!
 To cage a little fluttering dove,
Had I but known! Had I but known!
 I still were free for life and love.

"Thou Heavenly Lover, who, they said,
 Wouldst come to woo, and stay to win,
Was it a lie, or art thou dead
 Or hast thou seen and spurned my sin?"

She mourned like any prisoned bird,
 Her breast upon the stonework bowed,
Till with a guilty start she heard
 A voice that called her, clear and loud.

II

There came a knocking at the gate.
 The wondering portress opened wide;
With lowly mien, in piteous state
 A white-haired beggar stood outside.

His head all bare, his feet unshod,
In coarsest garments scanty clothed,
Upon his face the brand of God—
The awful scars men feared and loathed.

The meek-eyed sisters held aloof,
But, pointing to a wooden shed,
“A couch of straw, a sheltering roof,
And food are there,” the abbess said.

“And who”—she cast her eyes around—
“Will tend this leper for the sake
Of Him who once on holy ground
The leper’s bond of misery brake?”

In silent fear they stood, and shame,
Their eyes cast down, their cheeks ablaze,
Then from her tower the novice came
With hurrying step and wondering gaze.

“You called me?” “Nay,” they cried, “not we.”
“I heard the summons, and obeyed.”
“Then go,” the abbess said, “and see
The burden that is on you laid.”

She heard a tremor in the voice,
The pity in their eyes she saw,
But duty left no room for choice,
The leper called her from his straw.

III

She raised the latch and stepped within,
The dimness seemed to strike her blind,
She felt the pangs of fear begin
To shake the purpose of her mind.

When, lo! as o'er the horizon rim
The great sun looks on tropic seas,
And laughs, and at the sight of him
With one quick throb the darkness flees,

So, suddenly a point of light
Shone forth, then burst into a flame,
The shadows spread their wings for flight,
And o'er the gloom a glory came.

The ashen laths were cedar wood,
The flagstones priceless marble gleamed,
The bed a jewelled wonder stood,
Such wonder never poet dreamed.

And there were trees with soaring stems,
And spreading leaves of gorgeous hue,
And dazzling fruits that shone like gems,
And over all an arch of blue.

The lengthening walls were edged with flowers,
The air was fresh with odours sweet,
White blossoms fell in noiseless showers
And made a pathway for her feet.

And on the bed as on a throne,
 He sat for whom her soul had yearned,
 A tender radiance round Him shone,
 But o'er His head the aureole burned.

“And hast Thou come indeed?” she cried,
 “And will Thou love me for Thine own,
 And one day set me at Thy side,
 Yea even share with me Thy throne?”

Then as she felt the splendour grow,
 And brighter beams of radiance shine,
 She cast her down, and whispered low:
 “Nay, not Thy throne, Thy footstool mine.”

IV

With gentle words He bade her rise,
 And smiled away her new-born fear,
 “Come forth,” He said, “for Paradise,
 The home of those who love, is here.”

The narrowing bounds of time and space
 Were straight abolished and forgot,
 One glance at that beloved face,
 And earthly memories irked her not.

He led her by broad-bosomed streams
 Whose waters sparkled clear and blue,
 By forests flecked with golden gleams,
 And all was fair, and all was new.

The very air she breathed seemed strange,
Strange forms of life stood everywhere,
On everything was written change,
And all was new and all was fair.

With joy she yielded up her will,
The hours might crawl, the æons fly,
It seemed they two were standing still
While time, and life, and death rushed by.

Great cities rose before their eyes
And fell again to dusty sleep,
They saw the star of empire rise,
And sink into the stormy deep.

They saw a long-drawn vast array
Whose numbers none could count or guess,
Climbing a rugged stony way,
And faint with heat and weariness.

Not one small world alone engrossed
The scene on which their eyes were bent,
To this great struggling suffering host
A thousand stars their legions sent.

Yet all she looked on seemed but naught
(Though everywhere new marvels lay),
Compared to one entrancing thought—
“*He loves, has loved, will love for aye.*”

One longing still her soul possessed,
"Lord, speak Thy love," she whispering, cried.
Smiling, he laid her fears to rest;
"For love of Thee, the leper died."

v

With trembling steps, when evening fell,
The abbess sought the lowly shed,
"Did you not hear the vesper bell?
Come forth, and rest, my child," she said.

But there was silence. Greater fear
Cast out the less. She pushed the door,
And on the threshold paused to peer
Into the gloom that lowered before.

Her feeble lamp she held on high,
And by its flickering flame she saw
A slender childish figure lie
Stretched out beside the empty straw.

With such a smile upon the face,
And such a gladness in the eyes;
The abbess from her vantage-place
A little sternly bade her rise.

In vain : no more the iron rule
Could bind the soul that yearned to roam,
From hard routine of dreariest school ;
The Lord of Love had borne her home.

II.—The Uttermost Farthing

I

JOHN CROFTS and William Medlett had been friends for many years. They had come to London together as young men from the same small country town. Nay, their friendship ran back to a still earlier date, for they had been at the same grammar school, and had sung as choir-boys in the same old parish church. And now, as middle-aged men, they had a rare fund of ancient memories and associations to fall back on, trivial reminiscences that had a singular interest for them—for them and for no one else.

This formed, no doubt, the real basis of their friendship, such as it was. Their acquaintances, sacred and profane, talked of David and Jonathan, and of Damon and Pythias; but both these comparisons were ludicrously inappropriate. There did not exist in the composition of either of the friends one single grain of poetry or romance.

Nor were they clever men. Of the two, perhaps Medlett was the brighter, he certainly had more self-confidence. On the other hand, Crofts had more perseverance, and rather more taste for reading. On the whole, the difference in their abilities was so slight, that for many years they kept a fairly even progress up the hill of success. They had each obtained employment in a large wholesale business—Crofts with Barston and Franks, the great hosiery firm, Medlett with Coningsby, Lord, and Whaler, who ruled the markets in the matter of waterproofing and rubber goods.

Beginning

Beginning as office boys at eight shillings a week, they had steadily worked their way up, till Crofts was head of the woollen department with a salary of three hundred a year, while Medlett acted as a kind of general sub-manager with an income of fifty pounds a year more.

They had both married: Crofts when he was about five and twenty, his friend a few years later. In consequence, the former had been burdened with a growing family, while the latter was still free to save the greater part of his salary. Crofts had found it a hard struggle, and once or twice had been obliged to borrow from his friend, who lent readily enough, only taking a bill of sale on the furniture as a matter of form.

"Better do the thing in a businesslike way," he said, as he made the suggestion, and Crofts was glad to agree.

Before very long, however, he was able to repay the loans, for his wife inherited, on the death of her mother, a sum of between three and four thousand pounds. On the strength of this he moved from Holloway to St. John's Wood, and sent his children to good schools.

His family consisted of five children—two girls and three boys. The eldest, Nora, was a dark, rather plain girl, with straight, black hair, marked eyebrows, a thin, firm mouth, and a square chin and jaw. Next to her came two boys, Jack and Will, of whom there is little to say but that they were very ordinary, English, middle-class schoolboys, rather dull at their books, but well-meaning, wholesome lads. Then came Jane, named after her mother, dark as Nora, but of a slighter and more delicate build, inclined to be pretty, and her father's favourite. Edward brought up the rear, a little slip of a boy with flaxen hair and a snub nose, very precocious, and, already, at seven, winning prizes at his school.

By

By this time Medlett had married, and had come to live in Woronzow Road, a few doors from his friend. They travelled to and from business together, and found new themes of conversation and discussion in their family experiences.

The years passed on, bringing to the two, only very gradual changes. Their children grew up, and, curiously enough, showed no inclination to be friendly. This may have been partly due to the fact that their wives only just tolerated each other. Mrs. Crofts, perhaps on the strength of her inheritance, was a little inclined to play the great lady, while Mrs. Medlett was abnormally quick to resent the faintest suggestion of patronage. But the heads of the two families continued their habits of intercourse undisturbed by these domestic differences. They had grown so accustomed to travelling and gossiping together, each looked upon the other as a necessary part of his life. Affection between them there was none. In the bosom of his family Crofts often let fall queer little remarks depreciatory of his friend, and Medlett, in his own way, did much the same.

One morning, as they were sitting together on the omnibus, Medlett remarked :

“ I wish I had a lot of money to invest. I was told of a first-class thing yesterday.”

“ There are so many first-class things,” said Crofts, sententiously.

“ Yes, but this is a real *bonâ fide* ” (he docked this last word of one of its syllables) “ concern. Plenty of capital and real good people. One of our governors put me on it. It’s a new motor.”

“ A new what ? ” asked Crofts.

“ A new motor for driving wheels ; it will work a stationary engine, or a sewing machine, or a carriage. It can be made in any size, and burns petroleum.”

“ Has

"Has it been tried?"

"Oh, yes, that's the beauty of it. It isn't just an inventor's notion. It's been working in the States for some time now and the American company is doing a roaring trade. This company is being formed to work the patent over here."

Crofts shook his head.

"It sounds rather risky to me," he said, "if I were you I should take good care before I put a penny in."

Medlett laughed.

"Oh, I've gone into it over and over again. It's as sound as a thing can be. Of course there's always some risk, but it's a perfectly genuine business. I don't call it speculative. Trust Mr. Whaler for that. He's one of the safest men I know to follow."

There the conversation dropped for the time, but a week or ten days later Crofts recurred to it.

"Have you taken any shares in that company?" he asked.

"What company?" replied the other, as if he were in the habit of making investments every other day.

"You know. That motor business."

"Oh yes, of course. Well, I've put a few hundreds in."

Crofts knew that a few hundreds would represent all the savings of many years, and he was considerably impressed with this proof of his friend's faith.

"What interest do you expect to get?" he asked.

"Well, Whaler says that the American company pays twelve per cent. on the original shares, and that they are steadily rising in the market. He thinks we shall certainly pay seven the first year, and go on rising. Only last Saturday he said, 'You mark my words, in five years time those ten pound shares will be worth thirty.'"

"Two hundred per cent., eh?" remarked Crofts, and fell a-thinking.

Nora was always bothering to take lessons in music, and painting, and dancing. She was not exactly her father's favourite, but he stood a little in awe of her. She could be very outspoken, could Nora, and then what a will she had! And with the children all growing up, expenses seemed to increase by leaps and bounds. And whenever Mrs. Crofts was in favour of some expensive alteration or innovation, she always made objection difficult, by suggesting that her money was available for the purpose. A substantial increase in their income would be an enormous relief. As for the risk, Medlett was no speculator, and besides he was acting under good advice.

A few days after, as they were returning from town, Crofts remarked to his companion with rather elaborate carelessness :

"By-the-by have you a prospectus or anything of that motor company you were speaking about the other day?"

"Yes, I think I have it here," said Medlett, and as he spoke he took out his pocket-book and drew forth a paper. "You can keep it if you like," he added, "I have another copy at home."

Crofts took it home and studied it with great care. It was skilfully drawn and was backed by a fine array of names.

Finally he introduced the subject to his wife. She was by nature rather cautious, and at first pooh-poohed the idea altogether. But gradually he wore down her objections, and in her desire for a larger income she let suspicion sleep, and believed very much what she wished to believe.

And so at last, after many doubts and much discussion, a thousand pounds of Mrs. Crofts' inheritance was invested in shares of the Limpan Motor, Limited. The dividends were paid half-yearly, and after the second payment at the rate of six and a half per cent, Crofts with his wife's full assent sold out the remainder of her stocks, and invested the proceeds in a new issue

of motor shares. In the course of one of their many conversations he mentioned to his friend the fact that he had put more of his eggs into this basket, but exactly how many, he did not say.

Then Medlett had his stroke of luck. An old aunt had left him, some years before, a small house at Brixton, let as a baker's shop. The baker was unfortunate, and the rent fell in arrear. Medlett without being cruel, was not particularly soft-hearted, and talked of distraining. The tenant pointed out that it was not by any means every one's house, that it would very likely be empty for some time, and that in such an event the goodwill of the business would be utterly lost. He admitted he could not carry it on himself any longer, but he suggested that Medlett should take it over, and put him in as manager at a small salary, with the use of two or three rooms, letting the rest of the house as lodgings. Medlett's solicitor, whom he consulted, strongly advised him to accept the tenant's terms, and offered to advance him any reasonable sum on the security of the house. A new railway was projected which would probably pass through the street, and might have to take the premises. Then there would be compensation for disturbance. Medlett admired and agreed. The lawyer was speedily justified. The railway did come, the house was required, and the owner of the premises and proprietor of the goodwill, received a really handsome sum as compensation. Medlett's first idea was to invest the whole of the proceeds in Limpan Motor shares, if that were possible. He thought it might perhaps please Mr. Whaler, as well as give him a better idea of his sub-manager's social position, if he told him of his intention. To his great surprise his principal strongly dissuaded him.

"I don't feel easy about those Limpans," he said. "I was going to speak to you about them. They're going back in the market
without

without any apparent reason. It looks as if somebody knew something. I've a great mind to get out at a small loss." And a few days after, he came into Medlett's room and told him he was instructing his broker to sell.

"If I were you I should do so too; they may be all right but I don't like the look of them," he said; and Medlett determined to follow suit, and did so, losing something like £50 on the transaction.

As it happened, Crofts was away on his holiday at this time, but of course there would have been no difficulty in communicating with him. And Medlett felt as though he ought to let his friend know what he was doing. Yet he felt also a strong reluctance to do so. He had praised the investment so highly, had spoken with such an air of authority as to the unassailable position of the Company, he felt sure Crofts would twit him mercilessly on the mistake he had made. Besides, he kept assuring himself, there was probably no real occasion for selling. Nay, it might be wiser to keep in, for getting out now would mean a serious loss. At any rate he would wait a bit and watch the market. If the shares kept on falling, he would give Crofts a word of warning as soon as he came back from his holiday.

But while Crofts was luxuriating at Margate there came to him, forwarded from Woronzow Road, an important-looking official envelope bearing the seal of the Limpan Motor, Limited.

"A bonus so soon!" he exclaimed as he opened it. Then the next minute he horrified his eldest daughter, who happened to be sitting in the room with him, by jerking out a couple of vulgar, dirty oaths such as she had never before heard him use. She looked up astonished.

"Why, what ever is the matter?" she asked. "Bad news?"

"Hold

“Hold your tongue, and don’t speak till you’re spoken to,” he answered, roughly.

The letter that had so upset him, was simply a call of thirty shillings on each of his three hundred Limpan shares. They were ten pounds shares, seven pounds ten paid up. He remembered speaking to Medlett about the liability, but his friend had assured him there was no likelihood of any further call being made for a long time to come. If there should be, he had added, and it were inconvenient to pay the call, the shares could always be sold. That was what must be done, and at once, too. It would be all he could do to find £450, and then there was the remaining pound still liable to be called up. Decidedly it would be well to get rid of them without delay.

He hurried up to town, and went straight to the office of the broker through whom he had bought. As soon as he indicated the object of his coming, the broker shook his head.

“Limpan’s? Oh, dear, that’s a bad business. You don’t mean to say you’ve been holding on. Why we advised our regular clients to get out six weeks ago. Sell at a small loss! My dear sir, it’s not to be done. There’s simply no market for them. A few big men are holding on, just on the off chance of their pulling round. With that liability, no man in his senses would give a threepenny piece for the lot.”

“But what’s the matter with the company?” gasped the unhappy Crofts.

The broker shrugged his shoulders.

“I’m sure I can’t say exactly. There’s some roguery over in America, and the English directors are not a very gay lot—two M.P.’s and a speculating parson on the board; you know the kind of thing. I never really liked it.”

“But

"But it was you that bought the shares for me!" cried Crofts, longing for some one on whom to fasten the blame.

Again the broker gave a little shrug.

"I suppose I acted on your instructions; you have certainly never been one of our regular clients."

"No, it was Medlett who made me do it; he'll be pretty hard hit, too."

"Medlett? Medlett? Oh, yes, I know. He's all right. He sold his shares with Mr. Whaler's in one lot."

"When?" snapped Crofts.

"Oh, three weeks or a month ago. They nearly left it till too late. As it was, they dropped a bit over it. But they soon recouped themselves. Everything they've touched since has gone all right. They did a splendid thing in Argentines last week, and got out just before the fall. Good-day."

For Crofts, without a word, had suddenly turned his back and rushed out of the office.

The very next morning he laid wait for Medlett on his way to town and had a violet quarrel with him. In spite of their long and close association there had never been any real affection to hold them together. Of late years especially, there had been many little jealousies. The Medlett children were much better-looking than the young Crofts, and were certainly dressed in better taste. Then Medlett on the strength of his intimacy with Mr. Whaler, had taken to assuming airs that irritated Crofts. And now it was gall and wormwood to Crofts to think that while he had been left to be robbed and swindled, the man who had led him to make the investment, had not only escaped unscathed, but had actually reaped no little gain.

Medlett was genuinely shocked at the news, and if Crofts had not immediately put him on his defence he would certainly have offered

offered at least temporary help. But when assailed with the most violent reproaches, accused of having deliberately and with sinister motives induced his friend to take the shares, and then purposely left him to be robbed, he soon lost his temper and told Crofts he had no one but himself to thank for his loss, and that if he hadn't the sense to watch the market, he might at least have got some one to do it for him. The very fact that he was conscious of a neglect of duty made him more sensitive to reproach, and he felt it quite a relief to be able to bluster with some show of reason. Before they parted he did, however, try to patch up the quarrel, and made his offer of assistance with some reference to their long friendship. But Crofts was too angry to listen.

"Friendship?" he snarled. "There's an end of that, thank God. That's one good thing at least out of all this. No, I've done with you and yours for good and all. Jenny will be glad of that. Often and often she's begged me to have nothing more to do with you. *They're a low lot.* Those were her very words. I wish I'd listened to her."

Medlett was angry too, by this time.

"*Low*, indeed," he answered; "I like that. You can just tell your Jenny that if it hadn't been for me, you'd have been sold up long ago, you and she, and brats and all."

They were crossing Manchester Square. Their loud voices, and violent gestures, for they had both lost control of themselves, had excited attention, and several people turned round as they passed. Crofts incensed by the other's last remark, would certainly have struck him, had not a judicious policeman who had been quietly following them for some little distance, come up and touch his arm:

"Now then, gentlemen, *if* you please——"

They both started, for the appearance of the man in uniform recalled

recalled them to themselves. Crofts crossed the road hastily, while Medlett hailed a passing hansom and drove down to the City.

And, there, for many a long day, all intercourse between them ceased. Medlett indeed was astute to prevent any chance meetings, changing his routes and times. But Crofts took no such precautions, and rather gloried at the opportunity of scowling at, or turning his back upon his ancient crony.

Meanwhile the Limpan Motor had, under the safe conduct of an eminent firm of city solicitors, rapidly gone from bad to worse, and from worse into voluntary liquidation. Crofts attended every meeting he possibly could, having recourse to all kinds of excuses to account to Messrs. Barston and Franks for his frequent absences. Coming away from one of these meetings he made the acquaintance of two other shareholders who were also full of their losses. Their common misfortune made them mutually sympathetic. Half an hour spent together in a neighbouring Bodega strengthened the tie so much that, from a general brooding over their wrongs, they advanced to a resolve to take concerted action to right themselves. The two treated Crofts with deference for they had only two or three hundred apiece in the Limpan. One of them mentioned the name of a solicitor he knew in Basinghall Street, a real good man and no mistake, up to every dodge. Crofts agreed at once—the description attracted him in his present mood. Whereupon the others suggested that he should go down and instruct Mr. Pledgcut.

“You seem to understand all about the law,” they added. He accepted with a sense of importance; it was about the first pleasant feeling he had experienced since the crash.

But now he began to realise the truth of the venerable maxim, that the law is a jealous mistress. His constant brooding over his wrongs,

wrongs, and his possible remedies, were sadly interfered with by the demands upon his time made by Messrs. Barston and Franks. And there came an hour when in spite of all his ingenious and plausible excuses, he received a warning from his employers, so forcible, and so free from ambiguity, that for a time at least, he resumed his habits of regular and punctual attendance.

Meantime his losses had entailed great changes at home. With an income diminished by a third, it was impossible to go on living at Woronzow Road. They were fortunate in being able to sub-let their house from the next quarter day, and thereupon moved to a smaller one at Kilburn. This involved a considerable sacrifice of household gods, over every one of which Mrs. Crofts shed weak and irritating tears. Indeed the poor woman became a sad burden to herself, and to her husband. She could not forget that it was her money that had been lost, or rather her dear mother's, and was constantly invoking that awful shade to behold the ruin and desolation that a husband's recklessness had brought about. In prosperity she had been rather a fine-looking woman with what young Frank Medlett called "no end of cheap side upon her." Now it was pitiful to see the way in which she collapsed. Lifeless, spiritless, she spent the mornings in bed, the rest of the day in the parlour, her hands in her lap, bewailing their misfortunes, and cultivating a crop of ailments, which whatever they may have been originally, soon became real enough to justify a doctor's visits. And so by a kind of tacit abdication the reins of domestic power slipped from her nerveless grasp into the keeping of her eldest daughter.

Nora was at this time just past her majority. She was a plain girl, the outline of her face being too square, and the features too strongly marked for beauty, but her dark eyes were unmistakably fine and her hair was like black silk. She had from the first
espoused

espoused her father's quarrel with a fierceness that sometimes over-awed him. The deterioration of his character which had already begun to appear, the illness and incompetence of her mother—these were to her so many items entered in that long account which she hoped one day to present to Medlett for payment. As each fresh shadow fell across their path, she arraigned her father's enemy anew, and thought with fierce and gloomy satisfaction of the day of reckoning.

Meanwhile economy had to be rigidly practised. She had an instinctive horror of running up bills, but every month she found it harder and harder to get money from her father for the ordinary household expenses. She suspected that he was spending more than he could afford on the lawyers, but beside this she soon discovered that there was another and a more humiliating reason. One night he came in very late—it was after midnight. She had been sitting mending the boys' socks. She went into the hall with her candle, and there, vainly trying to put his umbrella in the stand, stood her father obviously, unmistakably drunk. There was a dreadful kind of half simper on his face as though he were conscious of his condition, and could not quite make up his mind whether to try and conceal it, or to carry it off as a joke. She saved him the trouble of decision. One low cry she uttered of shame and disgust, then set her candle down on the stairs and rushed up to her bedroom. For the first time since their troubles began she gave way to despair. But even then she did not forget to lay this too at the door of their enemy, and the larger part of her prayer that night was concerned with him.

From this time things went still worse with the devoted family. The elder boys were taken from school. They were both wild to go to sea, and through the good offices of the clergyman whose church they attended, this was arranged, though their necessary

outfit was only procured with the very greatest difficulty. Then Mrs. Crofts took a severe chill, and having apparently no particular desire to live, passed away, feebly lamenting her troubles, and prophesying unutterable things to come. Again Nora had desperate work to get from her father the money for the funeral. And in order to pay for mourning for herself and Jane, she had to begin giving music lessons, the clergyman's little girls being her first pupils. The loss of his wife, so far from steadying Crofts, seemed to have exactly the opposite effect. For some time after that evening when he had horrified Nora, he had mounted guard over himself, and taken good care there should be no repetition of the scene in the hall. Now he relaxed his efforts, and took small pains to conceal his weakness. And so the housekeeping supplies grew harder and harder to obtain, and Nora was driven more and more to depend upon her own earnings to eke out her father's small and spasmodic cheques.

One momentary thrill of joy came to her. It was on the morning when Jane came running in, full of the news that there was a board up at the Medletts' house. She was astonished to see her sister's dark eyes light up, and an exultant smile transfigure her countenance.

"I knew it would come," she said. "God is just."

The younger girl was much impressed, but a few days after, she brought in the information that, far from implying disaster, the move only meant a great rise up the social ladder. The Medletts had taken a large new house at Hampstead, near the Heath. This time Nora said not a word, but the expression of her face as she bent over her work was so hard and forbidding, the child was afraid to pursue the subject.

Before their troubles Nora had felt little, and had professed still less interest in religion. She had attended church as regularly as she considered

considered the conventions demanded, and she had been obliged to "get up" one of the gospels at school. But when the blow fell, she began to feel an awful joy in the stern sanctions of the moral law. Her own prayers, once so empty and formal, suddenly became a living reality when she found that in them she could summon her enemy to answer at the judgment seat of God. And now as she thought of his prosperity, and compared it with what she called their undeserved misfortunes, she felt as she had never felt before, the need of some new life to redress the wrongs and injustices of the old. Reserved and self-contained as she had always been, she shared these feelings with one, and one only. It was her younger brother, Ted as they called him, to whom she confided her anticipations of retribution. It was upon this boy that she looked as the chosen instrument by which the family wrongs were one day to be righted. He was unmistakably very clever indeed, and his school career so far had been a series of unbroken successes. Whatever else happened, she was determined, even if she had to starve herself to do it, that his chances should not be interfered with. Perhaps in her anxiety for him she was less than just to the others. Jane, who was not clever, was taken from school to be a little drudge at home that Ted might be able to go among his companions without blushing for his clothes. To him she constantly talked of their enemy and his wickedness. She hunted out passages in the Bible that portrayed in vivid colours the requital of the transgressor. In these she gloried. The roll and ring of the words, seemed to fire her blood. And when the boy once asked her whether we ought not to forgive our enemies, she answered that punishment must come first. When they had been well punished, then would be the time to think about forgiveness. And when, unconvinced, he still urged his difficulties, she grew so angry even with him

him, that he was glad to let his doubts and perplexities remain unresolved.

Soon after Mrs. Crofts' death the Medletts made a great effort to be reconciled. Nora happened to be working at the window one afternoon, when she saw a smart-looking fly drive up to the door, and Mrs. Medlett got out, leaving some children inside. She rang the bell, but before the little maid-of-all-work had mounted half the kitchen stairs, Nora herself, a dangerous light in her eyes, had opened the door and stood waiting for her visitor to speak, making no sign of recognition, meeting her rather nervous approaches with an icy stare.

"Oh, Nora, my dear, we were so sorry to hear——" she began, as she mounted the top step and held out her hand.

And Nora, looking full at her, very deliberately shut the hall door in her face.

Thenceforth for many a day the two families pursued their separate paths, holding no intercourse with each other, the one steadily climbing upwards, the other just as steadily slipping down.

One night, about six months later, John Crofts came home very drunk, and—a rather unusual thing for him—in a very bad temper. Next morning, instead of going out at his usual time, he loafed about doing nothing, evidently in a state of severe depression. The day after, he told Nora that what she had dreaded for a long time had at last taken place—he had been dismissed from his post as manager of his department. She urged him to go at once to see his principals with a view to reinstatement, but the decisiveness of his refusal suggested to her at once that the occasion of his dismissal must have been very serious indeed, or—and this seemed more probable—that it was the last of a long series.

It would be wearisome and profitless to trace the steps by
which

which the family's fortunes declined as its head lost situation after situation, sinking gradually from the managership of a large department to the desk of a clerk at thirty shillings a week. Before this was reached, the house had of necessity been given up. They had gone into lodgings, and within four years from the winding-up of the Limpan Motor, Limited, those lodgings were on the top floor of a shabby-genteel lodging-house in a street off the Edgware Road.

For the full thirty shillings never reached Nora's hands. Crofts had become a confirmed, though seldom a violent drinker. It was only by desperately hard work that she could manage to keep up the semblance of respectability. Jane did a great deal of the mending and cooking now, while Nora gave lessons in music and drawing, in both of which she was proficient after the manner of amateurs. As for Ted, his continued success formed the one break in the cloud. For the last year and a half he had kept himself at school by prizes and scholarships. He was now thirteen and growing fast. Upon him Nora lavished all the affection for which her vengeful heart could find room. And when at Christmas he won an exhibition of fifteen pounds she rejoiced exceedingly, not so much perhaps for the success itself, but because among the beaten boys was Oscar Medlett, a big boy of fifteen.

From that time Nora had no doubt. Evidently Ted was to be the chosen instrument. She had long since given up all hopes of her father. When at night she brooded over the family wrongs, she set down as equally accomplished facts, the death of her mother, and the ruin of her father's character.

And ever as the days went by and the clouds gathered darker, religion became to her more and more a reality—an awful reality it is true, and yet one to which she clung with an ever-increasing intensity of purpose. She felt the universe to be incomplete with-

out

out Someone at its centre to enforce with unsparing hand the sanctions of the moral law. The texts and phrases which speak of the wrath of God thrilled her heart with a feeling akin to joy. "*He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh; the Lord shall have them in derision.*" "*Depart ye cursed into everlasting fire, there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*" These are types of the passages on which her soul, hungry and thirsty, loved to dwell.

She thought her cup of sorrow pretty full already; but what would she have said had she known that the bitterest drop was yet to come?

II

John Crofts had for some time been descending the ladder with accelerated speed. He was now rapidly approaching the bottom rung. His last piece of work—some copying—he had obtained by pestering the solicitor whom he had formerly instructed to act for him in the Limpan winding-up. By a similar process he had extracted a couple of shillings on account, and this he had expended at the nearest public-house. Consequently the work, when he brought it back the next morning, was not only three hours late, but so badly done, so full of mistakes and inaccuracies, he was paid the balance due to him and told very curtly it was no use applying for any more work there.

Half an hour afterwards he found himself in Fleet Street, "stony-hearted Fleet Street," without a penny in his pocket, and without the prospect of getting one, while within he felt an imperious demand for more liquor, that simply *must* be satisfied somehow. He knew it was no use going to Nora. It was, he was well aware, only with the greatest difficulty she could find the bare necessities of life, and he was by no means anxious to enter
into

into any conflict with her; he had already learned to dread her plain speaking. To look for work and then wait for a week before getting any money, would be, he felt, quite intolerable. Slowly and carefully—for he had learned to love loafing—he reviewed every source from which he could raise money, and one by one he pronounced them all sealed. Then a sudden inspiration seized him. There was Medlett! True, he had ruined him—curse him! but wasn't that all the more reason for getting every farthing he could, out of him? Another thing struck him. On two or three occasions he had received five-pound notes enclosed in a blank sheet of paper, directed in a boy's hand. He had wondered whether they could have come from his former friend; now he felt sure of it, and at the thought of his wasted opportunities he could have wept. Drink, which had killed his self-respect, had at least scotched his yearning for revenge. In the light of those five-pound notes and of future possibilities, he began to reconsider his judgment. Perhaps Medlett was not so much to blame after all. Anyway, it was foolish keeping up that sort of feud for ever. It was absurd to talk about it as Nora did. That was just the difference between a man of sense, a man of the world, and a silly, hot-headed girl. Medlett must have a rare lot in him; there could be no doubt of that. He was junior partner now in his firm and rolling in money, simply rolling in money. What a lovely house he had, and as for hansoms, of course he never went about in anything else. And to think that for years they kept side by side as it were, rising step by step together. If it hadn't been for that stupid quarrel he should have been just where Medlett was now.

The result of these cogitations was that he went home, and to his great joy found his eldest daughter out. He made an excuse to get rid of Jane, and going into Norah's room took from her desk
a sheet

a sheet of paper, an envelope, and a stamp. Then he sat down and composed a long letter to his former friend.

It was not an easy letter to write, but he was thirsty; and before long the deed was done. He pictured his destitution in terms which were not ill-chosen, admitted that he had felt bitterly against his friend, but added that time and the memories of the past had softened his resentment, or he could never have brought himself to ask for help. He besought his friend to procure him work if he possibly could, and at the promptings of the aforesaid thirst, introduced a postscript.

“A small loan for pressing necessities would be very acceptable.—J.C.”

Medlett received the letter the same evening, and carried it off to his little smoking-room to digest with his dinner. He was shrewd enough to read between the lines, knowing, as he did, a good deal, and guessing more of Crofts' present condition. As he looked round the cosy room, self-complacency began to don the garb of kindness. The world had indeed gone well with him. A quite remarkable success had attended his speculations. It really seemed, he said to himself, reverentially, as if Providence were bent on rewarding his industrious and persevering youth. And this poor devil had gone utterly to the wall—no doubt there was a good reason for it somewhere; Providence knew how to discriminate between the wheat and the chaff. Still, there he was, practically penniless.

“It's no good finding him work, but I'll send him another fiver,” was his conclusion; for Crofts had been quite right in his surmise: the previous notes *had* come from Hampstead. Crofts, it need hardly be said, was delighted with the result of his application, and spent a full week in the public-house looking for work, returning home at night with more

more and more of the Devil's hall-mark upon his flabby, sodden face.

At the end of the week he managed to find some more copy-ing work, which brought in a few shillings. He never thought, now, of taking anything home; but he was forced to spend a few shillings on boots. The rest went, of course, to, or rather towards, satisfying his thirst. Then he found himself once more in the picturesque but uncomfortable condition of the empty-pocketed. The idea of applying again to Medlett suggested itself, and he quickly went through the various stages of indignant refusal, calm consideration, enthusiastic adoption. Once more he paid a surreptitious visit to Nora's desk in her absence, and once more he renewed his application for work, and managed to introduce a statement to the effect that arrears of rent had swallowed up the greater part of the five-pound note, and how to provide the children with warm clothing for the winter he did not know. As he wrote this, he said to himself that if this appeal produced any substantial result, he would see that Ted had an overcoat and Jane some new boots.

The letter reached Medlett at a favourable moment. The fates were still propitious. He had followed his senior partner into a speculation from which they had escaped with the spoils of victory in the very nick of time, and his banking account was at least £350 to the good by that transaction.

"Poor devil! Again, so soon?" he murmured, and put his hand into his pocket, fingering the loose silver. Then the Limp-an shares came into his mind.

"I ought to have told him; I wish I had," he thought, and put his hand into another pocket. He drew from his pocket-book a bank-note, slipped it into a sheet of paper, across which he wrote without any attempt to conceal his handwriting:

"You

"You must make this do. It is enough to give you a start. I cannot find you work."

When Crofts received the letter and found a ten-pound note enclosed, he shed copious tears of joy. And to prove to himself that he could keep his word, and was a most tender hearted father, he walked Ted straight off to a ready-made clothes shop, and to the boy's undisguised amazement, selected and paid for a warm winter overcoat at twenty-eight and sixpence. Such a coat as Ted had not worn since the days of adversity began.

Now Ted was a very sharp lad and unusually observant. When his father wanted to pay for the coat, he wondered where the money was coming from. He saw him take an envelope from his pocket, open it, unfold a sheet of paper, and produce a bank-note. As he handed the note to the shopman the envelope fluttered to the ground. Crofts had not noticed the fall. But Ted as he picked it up, noticed three things: the handwriting which was large and clear, the postmark which was Hampstead, and the engraved seal which was a large, antique M. M and Hampstead gave him a clue, and it occurred to him that perhaps the wicked Medlett of whose iniquities Nora was constantly talking, had been trying to make atonement. He had an instinctive feeling, however, that his father would be annoyed at his conjecture, and so handed back the envelope without a word. But the hasty snatch, the guilty look, the quick suspicious glance at him, all these confirmed in the boy's mind the truth of his surmise.

On their way back Crofts suddenly asked :

"Do you know of anything Nora wants badly ?"

The boy's first inclination was to answer "food," but he checked it, and after a little consideration replied by mentioning a pair of gloves.

His

His father nodded and smiled. At the next draper's they stopped, and Crofts bought two pairs of the best ladies' gloves. It was nearly dark when they reached home, but Nora was standing by the window, trying to mend her one, shabby-genteel pair, and to economise lamp oil at the same time. Crofts went up to her, kissed her—a very unusual thing for him to do—and taking out the gloves put them in her hands. She uttered an exclamation of surprise and looked up with startled eyes. He smiled.

"Take them, my dear. You needn't look so scared. It's all right. Things seem to have taken a turn."

She opened the paper and stared mechanically at the gloves. Then she raised her eyes and saw Ted in the glory of his new coat.

"Oh, that is good," she exclaimed, "I have been wondering what he would do this winter for a coat."

"Don't you care for your gloves?" asked her father, in rather an injured tone.

"Oh, yes," she answered, "one must wear some when one goes out teaching, and these are mostly holes. But father, what has happened? Have the Limpans paid anything at last?"

Crofts was one of those who even under the pressure of trouble can only tell the truth when it is, as it were, fortified by a certain proportion of falsehood. And his conscience had the very convenient habit of crediting him with the truth, and ignoring the rest. He had often repeated to Nora the story of the Limpans' shares, and the villany of Medlett had lost nothing of picturesqueness in his telling. But he had never been able to tell her the absolute truth—that his law expenses had swallowed up all, and far more than all the paltry sum he received after the winding-up was carried through. Perhaps he may never have said so in so many words, but he had certainly succeeded in leaving on her
mina

mind the impression that there might still be something considerable recovered when everything had been settled, and he had even talked vaguely but largely of reconstruction. And though she had learned long since that his statements must be accepted with caution, yet this impression had somehow remained unshaken.

Her father shook his head.

"No. Don't talk of Limpans, I hate the name." Nora looked at him with a smile whose meaning he could not read.

"Never mind, father," she said. "A time will come. *Vengeance is mine. I will repay.*"

"Yes, my dear, certainly," answered Crofts weakly, feeling uncomfortably conscious of the scene that would ensue if Nora should find out in any way the source of this new wealth, "but we mustn't bear malice."

"Bear malice?" and her eyes seemed to blaze as she spoke the words. "It isn't a question of malice. He has ruined you, killed poor mother—yes," she went on with increasing excitement, "*killed her*, as surely as if he had strangled the life out of her with his own fingers, and brought us all to beggary. Bear malice, indeed! Why, to forgive or to forget such wrongs as these, would be to encourage wickedness."

"Well, well, well," exclaimed Crofts fretfully, half irritated, half cowed by her vehemence, "you needn't work yourself up into a passion, Nora. What is there for supper? Stale bread and Dutch cheese I suppose. I think I'll run out for a minute and see if I can get a bit of something."

But Nora knew what running out for a minute meant.

"Let Jane go," she said. "She hasn't been out all day, and she's a capital little shopper."

"No," he answered, "she'd be sure not to get what I want." Which was perfectly true.

He

He went out about nine, and came back half an hour after closing time quite drunk and very cheerful.

As he pulled himself up to the top flight of stairs, Nora opened the sitting-room door, a candle in her hand, and crossed the passage to the box-room in which she and Jane made shift to sleep.

He saw the light and looked up.

“Shay, Nora, hey! Do’n go bed yet. Wansh hav’ li’l talk—Shtop, d’y—ear! there’s goo’ girl—I’m all ri’ tell you—Medlett sholly goo’ f’ler—been drinkin’ ’shealth.”

The light disappeared. Fortunately perhaps for him, Nora had not caught the last sentence. But she had heard enough to fill her with a feeling only too nearly akin to loathing. She blew out the candle, for the moon was full, and artificial light was an extravagance. As she undressed, she looked round the miserable little room, and each squalid detail from the cracked, rickety glass to the torn and dirty window curtain, seemed to mock and exult over her. Inch by inch, in spite of all her efforts, they were sinking. Jane was growing up a simple drudge, and her hands were beginning to look like those of any little maid-of-all-work. There was Ted to be sure, and that thought generally brought back courage if not cheerfulness. But to-night her gloom was too deep for any dispersal. No matter how successful he might be, his success would come too late to save the rest of them. She could not go on like this for another twelvemonth, whatever happened. Then another thought, never far remote, leapt to the front—yes she could. One year, two years, ten years if need be, till the day of recompense. He, no doubt, was lying in his snug bed, sleeping the sleep of the just, surrounded by every luxury, heaping up riches month by month. Ah, she must pray. And then with clenched hands and eyes staring straight upwards, she poured forth a silent passion of imprecation so eager,

so vehement, that though no word was uttered, it seemed to choke her. She ended with "Our Father," which she repeated from old habit. The forgiveness clause presented no more difficulty to her than does the Sermon on the Mount to an army chaplain.

"If he had merely injured *me*, I daresay I could have forgiven easily enough," was the only explanation she vouchsafed her conscience, but it was quite sufficient.

A fortnight later Nora returned home one dull, foggy night, between nine and ten. It was her late evening, and she was fairly tired out. Her feet were damp, for the soles of her boots were in holes, and the long walk home—her pupil lived in Camden Town—had left her limp and cross. However, Jane had some hot tea ready, and though she felt too tired to eat the bread and butter which was ready cut for her, the mild stimulant refreshed her. She sent the child off to bed, and sat down to her nightly task of mending clothes. Ted was doing some extra work with a view to some new prize he was trying for. About eleven his yawns became so frequent that in spite of his protests she insisted on his going to bed. Then for some time she was left alone to her mending and her thoughts. These were as usual of a sombre description. The gleam of brightness which had come with the last accession of wealth had vanished. Indeed the mysterious air assumed by Crofts when she pressed him as to his source, had occasioned her fresh uneasiness. Her faith in her father was so grievously shaken that his honesty did not seem to her quite above suspicion. But she never forgot where to lay the ultimate burden of blame. "It is all his doing," she murmured. "How long, oh Lord, how long?"

She was surprised to hear the hall door open. It must be her father she knew, every one else was in, but for the last week he had

had been drinking, and seldom came home before midnight. She was still more astonished to hear the sound of conversation, faint at first, but growing louder as the talkers mounted the rickety stairs. One voice she soon recognised—that of her father, evidently half intoxicated. The other voice sounded familiar, yet she could not say to whom it belonged. Every time she heard it she seemed to be on the brink of recognition, but when it ceased she found it had eluded her. The staircase was a long one, with a rather sharp turn about half-way between the floors. She could not imagine who her father's companion could be. For one moment the idea that it was a policeman crossed her mind, but she instantly rejected it; her father's voice, though she could not distinguish the words, sounded perfectly placid. Then it struck her that he was probably bringing one of his public-house acquaintances home with him. He had never done such a thing before, but the unforeseen had happened so often in her experience, she felt as though nothing could surprise her greatly. Meanwhile the steps were mounting, but very slowly, the narrow, creaking stairs. She knew the landing was quite dark, for the floor underneath was unoccupied, and she felt no inclination to show a light. And now as the footsteps turned the angle of the staircase, she could distinguish what was said. Her father's articulation was subject to what he himself sometimes alluded to as "a slight affection." The stranger spoke, and again she racked her memory to link that voice with its appropriate name.

"That'll do—I won't come any further. I'm quite satisfied. I will send to you to-morrow."

Then she heard her father speaking in a manner laboriously slow and portentously solemn.

"Berrer come up now you'r 'ere. You shtand there. I'll go ge' light."

Then

Then silence, followed by the sound of an unsteady step, and the creaking of the crazy baluster as if some one were clinging to, or leaning heavily on it. And then after a moment's pause there came a strange shuffling sound succeeded by a noise—half-sob, half-scream—and that followed by a horrid thud, thud, thud, the sound of something heavy falling down stairs.

Nora sprang to her feet, took the candle from the table, and threw the door wide open. As she did so she heard the other voice exclaim in a horror-stricken tone :

“Good God, Crofts ! what have you done ? Are you much hurt ?”

The draught from the quickly opened door extinguished her candle, but before it went out she saw for one short moment the face of the stranger. It was Medlett—the enemy of the family.

The shock of the discovery drove the thought of her father out of her mind for the minute. The one idea that seemed to dominate every other was this—that the very man upon whose head she had for years been invoking the wrath of heaven had, in some mysterious way which as yet she could not divine, been delivered into her hands.

It was his voice that broke the spell.

“For God's sake, Nora, get a light ; your father has tumbled down those cursed stairs and hurt himself. Hark how he groans.”

The door of the third room opened and Ted appeared in his night-shirt, a candle in his hand. He had been reading over his lessons in bed.

As the flickering light revealed Medlett's face all white and drawn, her tongue was loosed :

“You killed my mother, and now you have murdered my father,” she said in a strong, harsh voice.

Medlett

Medlett had not sufficient imagination to be susceptible to dramatic effects.

"Don't talk rubbish," he said, roughly. "Here, you boy, bring that candle."

Ted obeyed, and at the same moment Mrs. Rouch, the landlady, in a very ancient, pink flannel dressing-gown, hastily tied round the waist with a piece of sash-line, came puffing upstairs, a kerosene lamp in her hand.

"Dear, dear," she panted. "Whatever 'as 'appened? Oh, the turn it give me, to be sure. I thought it was the chimbley gone. Oh, bless 'is 'eart, poor man, 'is 'ead must 'ave caught the edge of one of the stairs; they're beastly sharp at the sides. Look, 'e's all smothered in blood. Oh, Mr. Worrall," she added, as the first-floor lodger appeared in his shirt sleeves, "just bring a nip o' brandy; there's a good soul."

"All right, mum," replied Mr. Worrall, who was a railway porter, and had an ambulance certificate. "Let's look at 'im fust. Alcol's the very wust thing in many cases."

He spoke very slowly, in a deep bass, and Mrs. Rouch was silenced. And as he stooped and straightened out the huddled figure, and then gently felt for the wound, they all gathered round, awe-struck, speechless.

"There's a 'ole, sure enough," he at last pronounced, "and a fracture I should say, but whether comminooted or not I can't tell. It'll be a 'orspital case, mum. I'd better get a policeman to bring the ambulance round."

"No, no," exclaimed Medlett. "Get a cab and take him to the nearest hospital at once—St. Mary's, I suppose."

"What I want to know is 'ow did all this 'appen?" suddenly interjected a sharp, thin voice. It was Mr. Rouch who appeared on the scene, fully dressed, having stayed behind to complete his toilet.

Nora stepped forward and pointed to Medlett.

"That man pushed him down stairs. He ruined us years ago. I suppose he came to gloat over his work. I heard them quarrelling on the stairs."

She spoke in short, jerky sentences. Her words seemed to choke her. Her father would die, she had no doubt of that, but he should not die alone or unavenged. And as she stood there, "white as chalk and 'er eyes all a blazin'"—so Mrs. Rouch subsequently described her appearance—the intensity of her passion powerfully impressed her audience. Even Medlett, to whom the possibility of such a charge had never occurred, felt a sudden chill of fear as he realised the position in which he might find himself. He showed, however, no sign of this, when he answered, addressing Mr. and Mrs. Rouch :

"It is true I used to know him years ago, and lately he has come begging over and over again. I helped him time after time. To-night I happened to meet him. There was a block near the Marble Arch, and my cab had to stop. He saw me, got on the step, and asked me to lend him a couple of sovereigns to get a sewing-machine for his girl——"

"Liar !" interjected Nora, going, if possible, a shade whiter.

"I saw," continued Medlett, taking no notice of the interruption, "that he was half intoxicated, and it suddenly struck me that he might be imposing on me by his tales of poverty, and at the same time he did not seem in a state to find his way home safely, so I told him I would give him the money he wanted, and perhaps more, if he would take me home with him. He got in. When we reached this house the lights were out. He had no matches. I had only two, and these went out in the passage. We had to feel our way upstairs, and he, in his condition, kept lurching and slipping about. Before we got to
the

the top landing, I told him I was satisfied and would send him what he wanted. He wouldn't hear of my going, and asked me to wait while he went up alone and got a light. A minute after I heard a lurch and a sort of scream. Then his body come bumping down, and nearly knocked me over."

Nora stamped her foot with rage, for she saw that the mention of "my cab" and the sovereigns had produced a marked effect.

"Isn't it enough," she cried, "to have killed our mother and murdered our father, but you must slander him before the breath is out of his body. As though he would have touched a penny or your miserable money. He would have died sooner. He hated you almost as much as I do. 'Slip,' indeed, when I heard you say, '*Good God! what have I done?*'"

"That looks bad if it's true," said Mr. Rouch, in an audible aside to his wife.

"I'll swear I never said anything of the kind," cried Medlett, who had entirely forgotten what he had said.

Ted, who had set down his candle and gone over to where his father lay, with a roughly extemporised pad under the wound, looked up quickly, and was upon the point of speaking, when he caught sight of Nora's eyes fixed on him with a peculiarly stern and forbidding expression. And the moment she saw she had arrested his attention, she made a hurried, imperious gesture, which he rightly interpreted as a command to hold his tongue.

So for a few minutes they kept their watch in silence. The injured man seemed to labour more and more in his breathing, and his face grew, or seemed to grow, more dreadfully livid. At last the street-door opened, and Mr. Worrall appeared, followed by a policeman and an exceedingly well-groomed man, whom both Mr. Worrall and the policeman treated with marked respect.

The doctor—for such he was—knelt down at once by the patient's

patient's side and commenced his examination. He felt his pulse, pulled open his eyes, held a light to the pupils, and then felt with his fingers for the wound in the back of the head. Then he looked up.

"Better take him to the hospital at once. It's just possible he may become conscious before—before the end. You have the ambulance there?"

The policeman nodded. "The other man's got it downstairs."

"Is there no hope?" asked Nora, in a low, husky voice. Her mouth and throat were parched, as if burned with fever.

The doctor shook his head gravely, but gave no verbal answer.

"Then I charge that man with the murder," she cried, pointing to Medlett, her concentrated passion seeming suddenly to liberate her voice, which rang out clear and strong.

"Can't do that, mum, while the party's alive," said C 68, the suspicion of a smile hovering over his expressionless countenance. "You can make any statement you like at the inquest, you know," he added, soothingly.

She made no further remark, and Medlett, after giving his name and address, and requesting the doctor, on his behalf, to superintend the removal to the hospital, drove home in a cab.

Nora accompanied the little party, and waited till she heard the doctor's verdict, that there was no immediate danger, that in all probability there would be no marked change for several hours; recovery was absolutely hopeless.

It was striking one when she got back. She had the key with her, and let herself in quietly. The reaction from the intense excitement of the last hour or two was upon her; for the first time, perhaps, in the course of years, she felt a craving for sympathy. It would have been a comfort to have had even Mrs. Rouch to talk to; anything was better than this cold, black solitariness.

solitariness. But the distant sound of muffled snoring was the only sound that fell upon her as she carefully felt her way upstairs. Would there be a light up there, she wondered. She shuddered at the thought of the dark, silent rooms, and she stopped, pressing her hands upon her forehead, trying to remember where she had put the matches. But as she turned the fatal angle in the staircase, she saw with joy the sitting-room door slightly open, and within the glow of light. Still walking warily, for fear of waking Jane, who had slept undisturbed through all the commotion, she nevertheless quickened her steps, and pushed open the door with a sigh of relief. To many people the close, untidy, ill-furnished room would have looked cheerless enough ; but compared with what she had pictured and expected, it was delightful. There was a little fire in the grate, and a kettle on the hob. Two candles stood on the table, and half a loaf and a piece of butter, accompanied the teapot and cup that were set opposite her usual chair. On another chair drawn up to the table, asleep, his head resting on his outstretched arms, sat Ted. As she saw him and noted the preparations for her return, her eyes filled with unwonted tears, and with a sudden impulse she stooped and kissed his forehead very gently.

Gentle as the touch was it woke him. He looked up for a moment half dazed, then came to himself with a start.

“Oh, Nor, is that you? I was dreaming about the old house. I thought I was a little chap in bed and mother came up to kiss me good-night.”

She smiled on him, but laid her fingers on her lips and softly closed the door.

“What do they say at the hospital?” asked the boy.

The question recalled her from her melting mood. The lines round her mouth seemed to harden, as she answered quietly :

“They

“They say there is no hope. He may live a day or two, and may possibly be conscious. We must go the first thing in the morning.”

The boy looked down and his lip quivered. Partly to make a diversion she asked :

“Did you get all this ready for me, Ted ?”

“Yes,” he answered ; “I had to borrow the butter and the coals from Mrs. Rouch ; I couldn’t find any in the cupboard.”

“It was very good of you, dear,” she said, fetching another cup and filling one for him and one for herself.

They drank their tea in silence, and to please him she tried to eat a piece of bread and butter. The tea, the light, the fire, the simple sitting still, all seemed to refresh her ; but deeper and most comforting of all was the sense of human love and sympathy that for the moment drove out the dogs of hate, and gave her peace as well as rest.

Not for long though. The boy fidgeted about, and after several false starts, suddenly said :

“Nor, I am sure you are wrong about Mr. Medlett.”

“What do you mean ?” she asked quietly enough, but every nerve tense in a moment, and the dogs out on the trail again.

“I was awake, reading in bed, and I heard them come up. They weren’t quarrelling at all ; and what Mr. Medlett said was : ‘Good God, Crofts ! what have *you* done ?’ I heard it quite distinctly.”

The dogs were in full cry now, but the fear that she might be balked of her vengeance just as the opportunity seemed to have so wonderfully arisen, made her calm and wary.

“Look here, Ted,” she answered, “you may be right about that, or I may—I don’t know which is. But one thing is absolutely clear ; that man—don’t call him ‘Mister’—ruined us.

Mother

Mother never got over it, it was that killed her ; and, as for poor father, you know it lost him his work and drove him to drink. If this fall were a pure accident, Medlett would be his murderer just as much, only he would get off scot-free—and that he shan't."

And she shut her lips tightly.

Ted sat thinking, and a pink flush mounted to his cheek. Nora herself, with all her faith in his cleverness, had no idea how he would carry himself in such a crisis. Like most strong-willed persons she had great confidence in her own ability to bear down opposition ; the only question in her mind was how long the process would take.

After a pause the lad began again.

"Of course you can say what you think you heard ; but they will be sure to ask me. And I shall have to speak the truth."

"And let the man who killed your father and mother escape ? Oh, for shame, Ted. Why savages have more feeling than that."

"Savages know it is wrong to lie," answered the boy slowly, but with a hint of doggedness in his tone that irritated his sister intensely. She began to feel with dismay her helplessness in face of this new and unexpected obstacle.

They were both overwrought, and it was a toss-up which temper would break down the sooner.

Nora made one more effort.

"Ted, I am older than you, a good deal ; you have obeyed me for years in little things ; now that I ask you to obey me in a big thing, I am sure you won't refuse and break my heart. If that wretch escapes, I shall lie down and die."

There was another pause, a long one this time. She leaned back and watched his face with devouring eagerness. If this appeal failed she had no resource, no hope.

It seemed to her an interminable time before he spoke. He was rather incoherent but quite resolved.

"It's no use, Nor, I can't tell a lie like that to get a man hanged when I don't believe he's done it. I'm sure it was right what he said—that he had been sending father money for ever so long. It was his money bought my coat and your gloves."

She saw she was beaten, and the tension of the strain she had been putting on herself was too great for her self-control. She abandoned herself to a storm of passion, hysterical in its violence. One sign of restraint she still showed—she made no loud noise. She showered on the boy every adjective of reproach and contempt her not particularly abundant vocabulary supplied—mean-spirited, ungrateful, cruel, cowardly, stupid, these were some of the epithets which preceded what sounded like a half-finished curse.

Half-finished, for before she could complete her sentence, the boy jumped to his feet, his cheeks crimson, his eyes sparkling, his breast heaving with passion.

"*Cowardly, mean, cruel, ungrateful*, am I?" he cried, "and what are you? You who would swear away a man's life. Yes, I know you heard the same as I did. You daren't look me in the face and say you didn't. Why, you're no better than a murderess yourself. You are no sister of mine; there, I'd sooner die than go on living with you."

And he rushed out of the room, slamming the door after him.

The sight of his fury and the sound of the door sobered her. She sat up and listened for any sign of movement in the house. She heard Ted go into his own room; then there was silence. Jane even if she had been awakened was evidently not alarmed.

Relieved as to this, she lay back and began to think. Once more she lay as if waterlogged in the trough of a storm. She felt very, very tired; the future seemed utterly blank of hope, and yet she

she must think, think, think. Her head was aching with a dull, persistent pain that seemed part of the universal misery that surrounded her life. She kept losing the thread of thought, beginning with the events of the night, then wondering what she was thinking about, and having painfully and laboriously to go over the ground again. At last with infinite pains she fixed her attention on Medlett, and slowly, clinging to him as the central figure, reconstructed the whole story. Then she remembered what the boy had said about his sending money. Had her father really stooped to beg from their enemy? It seemed impossible, and yet—now she came to think of it there were several things that occurred to her, and made her shudder lest it should indeed prove to have been so. As she looked round the room, her eyes rested on a coat that hung against the wall. It was the jacket Crofts used to sit in while at home. She got up and walked across the room, for a sudden idea had struck her. She put her hand into the breast pocket and took out half a dozen letters and papers. She opened the first, it was an answer to an application for work. The second gave her the information she was seeking. The envelope had the monogram M on the flap, and the sheet of paper inside was headed with the Medletts' address at Hampstead. On it was written the following brief message :

“You have had £30 in less than three months. I cannot send more at present.—W.M.”

It was all true then. Medlett's money had been helping them to live. The thought was almost intolerable. She went to the work-basket and took out two pairs of gloves. With the aid of the scissors she cut them into shreds, and threw them into the fire. This done she once more sat down in the chair and took up the burden of her thoughts. She had made revenge—justice she called it to herself—the goal of her life, but how it was to be reached

reached she had never been able to divine. And now when quite suddenly the opportunity presented itself, only one obstacle stood in the way. The boy for whom she had worked and sacrificed and half-starved herself, of whom she had grown so proud and of late so fond, in whom she had seen the chosen instrument of vengeance, this boy was the fatal hindrance that had ruined her plans and blighted the one strong hope of her life. She knew nothing of the irony of fate as the old Greeks conceived of it, but she felt as if she had been made the sport and jest of an unseen power against whom it was useless to fight.

And as she realised the fact that the last five years of her life, with all its pains and humiliations and heartburnings, had been simply thrown away in utter futility, another thought pierced her with poignant pain. One element in her daily life had sweetened and made it tolerable. It was the affection of her favourite brother. And now that had gone too, gone irretrievably, the last, and perhaps the most futile sacrifice on the altar of revenge. She remembered his thoughtfulness for her this very evening. It had been like healing to her bruised and angry spirit. It had called up, or called back for a few blessed moments another and a better Nora. And now he hated her—would have nothing more to do with her, would not call her sister, called her murderess instead. And she had cursed him, the boy whom she now discovered she loved with a love stronger even than her hate.

Ill-nourished, overworked, her nerves shattered by this night's experiences, the thought of all her misery fairly overcame her. She threw herself on the floor and broke out into hysterical sobs, biting her lips hard to prevent their being audible, and in a last attempt to keep some vestige of self-control. Her loneliness appalled and crushed her. She had sacrificed Jane and the other boys to Ted that through him she might taste revenge. She had
never

never gained their love, and his she had won only to fling it away again. And so at last, after all these years, it dawned upon her too late that she was the victim not of blind fate or of malignant powers and principalities, but of her own hard heart and stubborn will. It was she herself who with cruel and relentless hand had exacted from her own starved and prisoned soul the very uttermost farthing.

III

“Oh! dear Nor, what is the matter? Do wake up. You frightened me so dreadfully.”

She had fallen asleep, utterly worn out; and woke to find herself still on the floor, with Ted kneeling by her side, in his shirt sleeves, his face stained with tears.

“Please forgive me, Nor. I didn’t know what I was saying. I think I must have been mad. Please don’t make me do *that*. Any other way I will help you to get your revenge.”

She raised her head from his coat which he had slipped under her as a pillow. As she saw his anxious expression and the signs of recent tears, as she heard the tone of his voice, the lines of her face relaxed into a smile almost like that of a happy child. She had been living for years among people whose language was more forcible than polite. She was still under the influence of strong excitement. The joy of finding again that which was lost overcame her. Let one or all of these mitigating circumstances excuse her manner of speech as she sprang to her feet and kissed him on the lips:

“Damn revenge! It’s love I want.”