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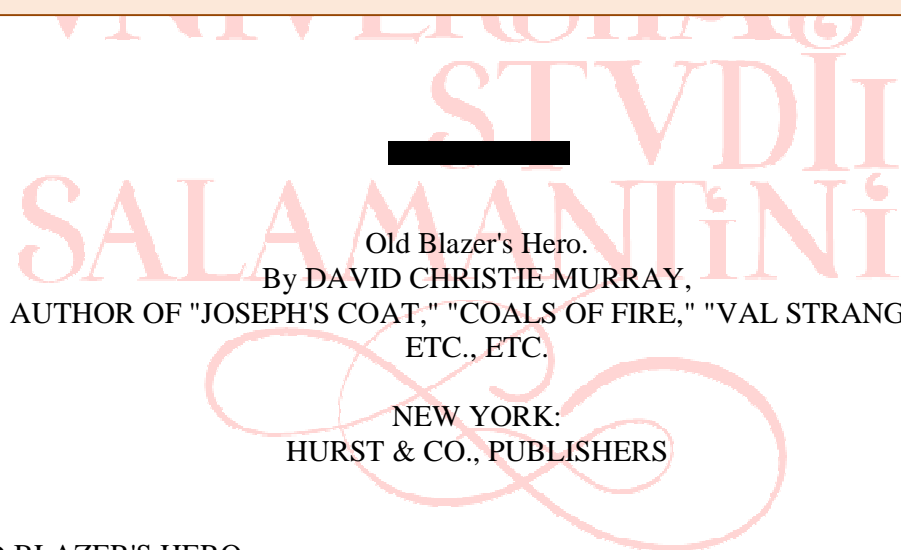
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[1]
OLD BLAZER'S HERO

CHAPTER I.

ON a winter night half - a - dozen children romping in a roomy kitchen made a noise like the confusion of Babel. They were all well clad, and well - to - do in aspect, flaxen - haired, rosy - cheeked, blue - eyed, and wholesome. Within certain conditions a pleasanter sight than they afforded could hardly be asked for, though their presence and the noise they made gave but poor assistance to the study of the higher mathematics. A bearded young fellow of six - and - twenty, or thereabouts, with a penholder between his teeth, and a heap of papers scattered loosely before him, sat with both hands in his hair at a big table by the window, and

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looked about him occasionally with an air of abstraction which always melted more or less quickly into a smile. The smile was invariably followed by a momentary relaxation from study, whilst the young man watched the joyous gambadoes of the children, who shouted all together with a wild hilarity, and seemed to acquire fresh vigour each time from the mere fact of remaining unrebuked. Always in a little time the young man's smile grew abstracted, and faded slowly away as his thoughts gradually drew back to their own refuge.

A great fire with a solid core of red heat burned without noise or flicker on the hearth, and on one side of it sat an elderly woman in a widow's cap and a gown of respectable black. With all the diversity of feature and expression which marked the group of children, there was so strong a likeness between the elderly woman in the chimney corner and every individual member of the noisy little assembly, that a stranger would have had no difficulty in deciding their relationship. Like the children, the woman in the widow's cap

[3] and the respectable stuff gown was plump, blue - eyed, rosy, and flaxen - haired. In her case the flax was marked by a thread or two of silver, though not so strongly as to be at first sight noticeable; and her countenance, for all its rosy plumpness, was drawn to an expression of complaining resignation. She sat with her hands—which like her face were plump and helpless - looking—in her lap, and, with eyebrows raised, as who should say that things were intolerable, and must yet be borne with, she looked into the glowing coals.

Facing her sat a woman of a different pattern—bolt upright, lean, and full of nervous energy. Her knitting - needles, which in the light of the glowing coals had a quite startling look of being red - hot at moments, clicked with an amazing swiftness and determination. Every little motion of the flashing needles was as brusque, decided, and imperative as the 'shoulder arms' of a martinet drill - sergeant. Every little tug which unwound the ball of worsted lying in her lap was marked by the same energy and decision.

[4] Her evening dress of clean - washed and primly starched light print fitted tightly about arms, bust, and waist, and gave to her ungainly figure something of the look of an unsymmetrically packed pincushion into which the bran has been rammed too hard. She sat so rigid and unbending whilst the quick knitting - needles clicked with their alternate flash from the look of red - hot steel to silver, and silver to red - hot steel, that only head and hands seemed alive, and one might have fancied it possible to stick pins into any part of the print - clad bust and arms without fear of exciting sensation.

There was a momentary hush amongst the children whilst they took breath, and evolved plans for the making of wilder noise than they had yet created. After the recent hubbub the kitchen seemed almost at peace by contrast. Then in a moment of inspiration one of the group proposed that their next amusement should be the game of Sacks to the Mill. This cheerful and invigorating indoor pastime begins by everybody trying to catch hold of

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somebody else's ankle with a view to bringing him or her to the ground. This object in any one case once achieved, it becomes the business of the rest swiftly and unanimously to choose a victim, and forcibly to deposit that victim upon the recumbent figure. This point is no sooner gained than a similar choice, as swift and unanimous, remains to be made. Finally the game develops into a wrestle of two, and that happy child who lies uppermost on the struggling pile is conqueror. Since it rarely happens that the infant councils are prompt and decided enough to pinion the first body with a second before the fallen one can rise, the game is capable of an almost infinite expansion. Another advantage is that from beginning to end every player can shout his loudest.

The new game had only lasted for a minute or two when at one appalling and universal shriek, mingled of joy, terror, triumph, and excitement, the woman in the print dress bundled her knitting - needles, the unfinished stocking, and the ball of worsted all together,

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slapped them resoundingly upon the big table, and charged upon the struggling mob of infantry. She sorted them from the confused heap in which they lay upon the floor, and set them on their feet with a swiftness and dexterity which looked dangerous. There was a dreadful silence.

The domestic resumed her knitting and her seat. The flashing needles clicked audibly for half a minute, and the children looked at each other with shy and disconcerted glances.

'And how do you think your brother Edward can do his figures, I should like to know?' the decided female demanded after this terror - stricken pause.

'Oh, let the children play, Hepzibah,' said the young man, looking up smilingly. 'They don't hurt me.' He had removed the penholder to make way for this brief speech, but now he gagged himself with it anew, and turned back to the consideration of his papers. 'You was never like other folks,' said Hepzibah. It's all very well for the children to play, no doubt, but leave 'em to go on in that

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way and there wouldn't be a decent rag left on their backs for 'em to be seen in the street with. Them as has the rips to mend knows what that sort o' game 'll end in. Besides which a body can't hear their own ears for 'em.'

'Ah!' said the widow, shaking her head dolefully, the children are a dreadful trouble. It wasn't so i' my days. If I'd ha' dared to ha' spoke above a whisper I should ha' been reprov'd. Little gells was made to go about like little ladies i' my time, an' little b'ys as wouldn't be told had them about 'em as ud make 'em.'

'Well,' said the young man, rising and stretching himself, and then stooping over the table to arrange his papers, 'I'm very glad the times have altered, mother: -

I thank the goodness and the grace
That on my birth have smiled,
And made me in these Christian days

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A happy English child."

'Don't you be blasphemous, Edward,' said his mother feebly.

'Not I,' returned Edward, taking his place behind her chair and caressin her cheek

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with Ms hand. 'Why, I'm old enough to remember when you liked a bit of fun yourself as well as any one of 'em, and looked as bright and pretty at it too.'

'Ah! them days soon pass by, Edward,' answered the widow, feeling for her pocket handkerchief. 'There's no abiding joy i' this world.'

'And that's the best reason for making the most of it while it lasts,' said Edward, coming from behind her chair and taking up a place before the fire. He stood there looking down upon his mother.

'If it's mekin' the best of it to squall i' that way,' said Hepzibah, knitting with added energy, and to rive the very frocks on their backs into tatters, I should like to be told on it.'

The young man, with his hands in his pockets, turned round good - humouredly on Hepzibah.

'I've seen Sacks to the Mill played before to - night,' he said, laughing. 'I remember when I was quite a little chap going with a

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nurse of mine to some sort of Christmas merrymaking at Farmer Bache's. She was a buxom, strapping girl of about seventeen or eighteen as near as I can guess, and she had an eye like a sloe and a cheek like a cherry in those days.'

'Get along with you, Master Edward,' said Hepzibah, cutting the story short, and rising with an air of displeasure not too well affected. I can't stay listenin' to your nonsense all night. - Children, it's time you was in bed. Kiss your mother, and troop upstairs with you while I get the candle, there's good b'ys and gells.'

Whilst the ceremony of kissing and saying good night was in progress, there came a rap at the front door of the house, and Hepzibah having disappeared into some darkened backward region in search of a candle, Edward himself answered the summons. The open door admitted a draught of keen and wintry air and a cloud of whirling snowflakes. The white carpet on the road was unmarred except by the track of the new - comer.

'That you, Shadrach?' Edward asked,

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'Why, yes, Mister Ned,' said the arrival humbly. 'I thought I'd tek the liberty of mekin' a call this evenin', if I'm not held to be i' the way.'

'Not a bit of it,' responded Edward. Come in.'

The arrival kicked his toes noisily against the doorstone to clear his boots from the snow, and then mounting the step turned about and repeated the process with his heels.

'Come in, Shadrach, come in,' repeated Edward, standing half sheltered from the roaring wind behind the door. We shall have the house full of snow.'

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'Hepzibah's rare an' particular about her kitchen quarries, Mister Ned,' responded the other, entering with a clumsy step. 'I've ketched it too often not to have growed a bit particular myself.'

Having entered, he stood stamping in the dark and polishing his feet upon the door - mat; and Edward, returning to the kitchen, left him to follow.

'Here's Shadrach,' he said, addressing

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Hepzibah, who had by this time found her candle, and was now pecking cautiously at the glowing fire with a very small scrap of paper to secure a light.

'Oh,' said Hepzibah; 'and what might he want, traipsing all the mud out of the street into the kitchen, as was only clean swilled this blessed afternoon?'

'Perhaps he'll tell you,' said Edward, with a look of humorous mischief. 'I've often thought he would, and perhaps he may to Hepzibah who knows?'

Hepzibah made no answer, but having secured a light, trooped the children out of the room before her, bestowing a passing nod upon the arrival, who was in the act of entering the kitchen, and stood on one side to let her and her charges pass. Shadrach, who had a long, meek face, and habitually wore his mouth a little open, was dressed in his Sunday black. The more overlapping folds and wrinkles a tailor could get into a suit the better his clients used to be satisfied a score and a half years ago in that part of the

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country. There was a taint of meanness and spareness about the fashion of giving merely cloth enough to fit the figure, and it was held desirable that a coat especially should be large and roomy. The tips of Shadrach's horny fingers just emerged from his sleeves, and his coat collar irritated the hair at the back of his head. A woollen comforter with all the colours of the rainbow in it surrounded his neck and dangled to his knees.

He entered with a propitiatory and apologetic aspect, smoothing his hair as if he were entering chapel, and, sitting on the extreme edge of the chair assigned to him, hid his fingers in the voluminous cuffs of his coat, and concealed them further between his knees, as if it were a point of etiquette, painfully to be observed, that the hands should be invisible. His eyes, which were round, pale grey, and as wonderingly wide open as a baby's, were carefully directed to objects which did not come well within their sphere; as the shells on the high mantelpiece, the clock face to his left, and an almanack tacked to the wall on

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his right. Since he made it a point of honour with himself not to move his head whilst he regarded these things, and carefully refrained from looking at anything which it would have been easy and natural for him to look at, the effect, to a sympathising observer, was a little embarrassing. The greetings extended to him he answered in a deprecatory peacemaking sort of murmur, and altogether he was most exasperatingly humble and unobtrusive.

By - and - by, however, he thawed so far as to observe that it was deadly cold, and bitter seasonable for the time of year; but Hepzibah's entrance froze the conversational fount

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again, and he resumed his sheepish examination of the shells, the clock face, and the almanack.

Mister Edward glanced now and again at him and Hepzibah with an outer seriousness, which was belied by the twinkling of his eye; and after a pause, in which little was audible except the click of the knitting - needles and the rumbling of the winter wind in the chimp my, the widow cleared her throat as if to

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speak, but Hepzibah held up the ball of worsted with an air of warning, and Shadrach spoke in her stead.

'The night,' said Shadrach, rolling his round eyes from the shells to the clock, and from the clock to the almanack— 'the night is dark, the snow comes down, The wind is like the gaffer's frown; it stops the heart and chills the blood, An' does no mortal mon no good.'

'Theer!' said Hepzibah, dropping her work into her lap, and laying her hands upon it with a look of answered expectation and wonder. 'Did you mek that up as you come along, Shadrach?' she demanded.

'Finished it that instant minute,' returned Shadrach mildly. 'It's a gift,' he added, 'as I wouldn't tek no credit for, not if it was offered me. The highdears is put into the head. That's how it is. They'm put there.'

'Ah!' said Mister Edward, with great solemnity, 'that's how it is, I should suppose, Shadrach.'

'Yes, Mister Edward,' Shadrach answered

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'Theer's no account of the thing to be given, not by the cliverest. I'n heerd it said as Dr. Watts himself could river mek out how it happened.'

'Really!' said Mr. Edward, and then bolted with a haste which, to a bard less simple-minded, might have looked suspicious.

When he returned Shadrach had somewhat recovered from the seer - like trance, and was talking humbly and with an obvious fear of trespass to Hepzibah and the widow.

'That's how it seems to be, Hepzibah,' he was saying. 'Young Mr. Hackett's said to have surrounded the old mon's scruples, and he's gi'en in his consentment, and his promise to as much as two hundred pounds in golden money on the weddin' day.'

'Will Hackett?' said Mr. Edward rather sharply. 'Will Hackett isn't going to be married?'

'That's how it's gi'en out, Mister Edward, the village over,' returned Shadrach.

If the bard had been less concerned with the clock - face and the shell he would have

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seen that Hepzibah was signalling to him, and had been from the moment of the young man's return. Mr. Edward stooped over the table, and turned the figured papers about with an assumption of carelessness.

'And who may be the young lady that's been so happy as to win Will Hackett?' he asked. Hepzibah dropped her signals, and, plunging back into her chair, took up a dozen false stitches with her knitting - needles, and stopped the rapid clicking to undo them.

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'It's said to be Miss Mary Howarth, Mister Edward,' replied the unsuspicious Shadrach. There was silence again for the space of a minute or two. The young man bent over his papers, took up his pen, dipped it in the ink - pot, and made an unmeaning sign or two amongst his figures. Then he spoke in a voice of commonplace with the faintest touch of scorn:

'That sounds a likely story, Shadrach. Where did you get it?'

'Why,' said Shadrach, 'it's not looked on

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for a likely sort o' story, Mister Edward, but it's known to be true. Mr. Hackett's been a rackety sort of a chap, and Miss Howarth has allays been that quiet and chapel - going, it's a bit of a shake for folks.'

'H'm!' said Edward. 'I should think so.' He laid his pen down carefully after wiping it on the skirt of his coat, and taking the papers in both hands shook them delicately into order. 'I am going out for a while, mother,' he said as he bestowed the papers in a drawer below the table. 'I shan't be long.'

'You'd better say good night now, then,' returned the widow. 'I'm going to bed, and I shall leave Hepzibah to sit up for you.'

He stooped over her and kissed her and said good night.

'I wish you'd bring your table nearer to the fire, Edward,' said the widow. 'You get chilly out there, sitting so near the winder.'

Edward left the room without response, and a moment later the front door was heard

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to close behind him. The widow despatched Hepzibah for a candle, and on its arrival bade the domestic and the visitor good night and withdrew.

'Well,' said Hepzibah in a bitter whisper when her mistress's back was turned, 'of all the wool - gethering fools as ever wool - gethered I do believe as you're the king and captain.'

'Why?' asked Shadrach. 'What have I done now?'

'Done' cried Hepzibah, throwing her knitting on the table. 'Done!'

""Done" was the word I used, Hepzibah,' the bard responded.

'Couldn't you see what iverybody else in the village could see, as Mr. Edward worshipped the very ground as Mary Howarth trod on? And you must come and blurt out afore him as her's going to wed that scamp of a Will Hackett, as 'll mek her sup sorrow by the spoonful afore she's done with him!'

'They didn't seem to tek on about it much,' said Shadrach, mildly solf - defensive, 'nayther him nor his mother.'

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'Tek on?' said Hepzibah, rising and snatching at the knitting with a gesture of complete exasperation. 'What did you expect him to do?—get on the table and howl? And as for his mother, her's a creature as niver saw nothin' in her born days and ud niver ha' found so much as a church door unless her'd had somebody to arm her into it.'

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Shadrach sat wisely silent, and after a lengthy pause Hepzibah, having buried her wrath in the knitting with a multitude of wrathful snorts and clickings, spoke in a more moderated tone.

'He'd ha' learned it somewhere anyhow,' she said; 'and perhaps it was as well he should hear it when there was nobody by as could understand his feelings except me. I nussed him when I was a gell, and perhaps it stands to reason as I should think well of him; but it passes me to think how any maid could go by him and light on that Will Hackett, as is the roysterer and taverner of the country - side. Not as he isn't well - looking enough with his moustaches and his swaggerin'

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airs, and there's them as ud break their heart to please their eye, and a body ud think it was the will o' Providence to give the prettiest outsides to the platters as is the dirtiest in.'

Still Shadrach thought it wisest to say nothing until the storm had blown itself out. When Hepzibah had been silent for something like half an hour he broke in upon the clicking of the needles, the ticking of the clock, and the rumbling of the wind

'The tongue's a block of sore offence, And runs away with men's good sense; And in this month of cold December I've sinned with that onruly member. Hepzyber! may the lesson be Of use to thee—of use to me!'

'Shadrach,' said Hepzibah, with a sigh of admiration, 'it's wonderful!'

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CHAPTER II.

IN an upper room in the 'Chase Arms' on this same night of wind and snow there sat an assemblage of vocal amateurs whose use and wont it was to gather for their own amusement, and the practice of their favourite art, on Wednesday nights throughout the winter. The party consisted mainly of the younger tradesmen of the town, with here and there a mechanic whose musical loves had lifted him a rung or two on the social ladder. The especial charm which this gathering presented for the observer lay in the fact that every member of the circle was convinced that he could sing, and that his compeers could not. It happened—as it often happens—that the general opinion was truer than the individual.

Down below, in the bar parlour, sat the

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oldsters of the place, whose tastes ran rather for politics than music. To them, as they sat arranging the affairs of Europe over their pipes and grog, entered with something of a noisy swagger a young man of handsome but dissipated appearance, who bestowed a general salute upon the company and called for cold brandy. He was received with cordiality and a touch of respect not accorded to every corner, and whilst he stood sipping his brandy and chatting with the hostess there rose in the upper room a clatter of glasses and stamping of feet which communicated a sensible vibration to the floor, and set swinging the jugs and cups which hung above the window. Then a piano began to tinkle, and a ventriloquial rendering of *The Mistletoe Bough* made itself faintly heard at

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intervals. The jingling piano filled in the pauses, and the chorus rose in a defiant howl: 'Oh - h the mistletoe bough Oh - h the mistletoe bough!' 'What's that?' asked the latest corner, setting down his glass and appealing to the company.

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'Why,' said one, 'it's held to pass for music with some on 'em upstairs.'

It's well to know what it's meant for,' said another.

'Ah!' said a third, if Mr. Hackett ud goo upstairs an' show 'em what it means to sing a song! It's a goodish while, Mr. Hackett, since that counter - tenor o' thine was heard in the "Chase Arms."

'I doubt,' said the first man, rubbing the tip of his nose meditatively with the back of his hand—I doubt whether Sims Reeves himself has got a nobler orgin. It's a gift as is known to run in a family, an' I can remember, when I was a lad, standing under the wall o' the Manor House of a summer hevenin' - nigh on sixty year ago it is now—and hearing thy grandfather, Mr. Hackett. The winders was up wide an' I heard him sing, right through, from start to finish, "If ever I plant in thy bosom a thorn." I never heard it sung like he sung it from that day to this.'

'Hastn't?' said the landlord. 'Then thee'st niver heard Mr. Hackett sing himself

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I can remember Mr. Hackett's grandfather, an' his singin', quite as fur back as thee canst. A beautiful orgin it was. A fine orgin. But not to be counted alongside of his grandson's, or named i' the same day with it. I'm only a saying' afore Mr. Hackett's face,' pursued the landlord, with an air of laboured impartiality, what I've said behind his back, ah! many and many's the time.'

Mr. Hackett swaggered a little, tapped at his legs with the riding - whip he carried, and asked for more brandy.

'Come, now,' said Hazeltine, the jobmaster, who had first ventured to broach the topic. You might do a thing as ud please the present company a good deal less than by singing a song for us, Mr. Hackett.'

'I'm in no great voice to - night,' said Mr. Hackett, swaggering and sipping. 'I'll see how I feel by - and - by perhaps.'

'Come!' cried the landlord, that's as good as a promise. But thou'lt niver clear thy pipes wi' that cold stuff, Mr. Hackett. Let me put that glass o' one side, an' give thee

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a drop of summat warm—summat as 'll put thee in proper fettle for a song!'

'No, no, Warden,' said Mr. Hackett, with an easy air of lordship. 'Leave it. Leave it. Let us go upstairs, and see what the piano's like.'

The landlord threw open the door. The owner of the counter - tenor passed out, and the company streamed after him. The young fellow's appearance in the upper room was hailed with a mighty shouting and beating of tables, and like a man to whom this sort of reception was customary and commonplace, he nodded here and there about him, and seated himself in a chair which one of his admirers had obsequiously vacated. The landlord had carried up Mr. Hackett's glass, and the young man sat sipping its contents, and

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chatting with affability and condescension to those about him. All but the more important people stood in an admiring and expectant circle.

Mr. Hackett himself was a great deal too, well pleased with this sort of popular incense

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to wish to put an end to it, and he sat there, delightfully conscious inside, and delightfully unconscious on the outside, until from the farther circle there arose an occasional feeble clapping of hands, accompanied by murmurs of invitation.

'Let it be "The Death of Nelson," Mr. Hackett.'

'Give us "Tom Bowling." '

'Let's have "The Thorn."'

'You might let's have "Sally in our Alley" again, sir.'

One bolder than the rest said with a respectful facetiousness:

'We'll hangcore him till he gives us the lot of them—Hey, Mr. Hackett?'

'Oh!' said the landlord, 'thee seest how the public opinion runs, sir. Now we've got thee here, thee seest, and if thou happen'st to be in a yielding temper, it '11 be some time afore thee gettest away again.'

'Very well, gentlemen,' said the centre of interest, rising. 'If you will have it, you will have it. I'm as hoarse as a crow, but if

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you make me sing it's no fault of mine, and you must put up with it.'

'No hard job to do that, Mr. Hackett.'

'To put up with it!' in a voice of genial complimentary scorn.

'We'll do that, sir. You see who gets tired first, thee or we.'

Mr. Hackett threw down his riding - whip and sauntered to the piano. He struck a chord or two and the character of the instrument seemed to change. It jingled still—it would have jingled under the hands of the king of pianists—but its voice was richer, fuller, and softer than it had been. Even now he was not going to waste a sniff of the incense which was wafted about him, and was at once so common and so delightful. He preluded at half - random for a minute or two, and when he had whetted expectancy to its keenest edge he struck the opening chords of 'The Bay of Biscay,' and in due time began to sing. His voice was of that rare and exquisite quality which inspires immediate confidence

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in the listener. On the song of nature's born singers the soul embarks without hesitation at the call of the first true note. It is likely enough that Mr. Hackett had more to learn than he imagined, but he sang with a dramatic passion so genuine, and by turns so fiery, so despairing, so triumphant, that to every hearer the walls of the chamber made themselves air, and the wide waste of heaving sea—which no eye in that assembly of inland men had ever actually beheld—lay tossing and raging below black sky and howling wind, and the first glare of dawn arose to mock despairing hearts, and the white glint of the sail which brought the hope of life again was seen as clearly as the ringing cry of joy was heard.

If there had been nothing else to have accounted for it, it would have been a remarkable tribute to Will Hackett's vocal powers that a wayfarer should have paused in the street at

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the first note of his song, and should have stood stock - still in the wind and snow to listen. There was, however, much else to account for this circumstance, for the

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wayfarer was none other than Will Hackett's unsuccessful rival. He had forgotten the wind and the snow half an hour before, and now in the very act of standing still to listen he forgot the song. He doubted the news he had heard, and had tried vainly to persuade himself that he had no belief in it at all, but his thoughts were comfortless and disturbed. He had been Mary Howarth's servant and suitor these two years, and though he had been more than sufficiently shy in his suit and timid enough in his hopes, he had hardly identified swaggering Will Hackett as a rival. Other rivals there had seemed to be in plenty. It is natural to a young man in love to detect rivalries easily and occasionally to create them, and he had been so far gone in love that it had seemed inevitable to him that the whole world should covet the particular treasure he prized. It was almost outside the range of possibility to his mind that a young man should know Mary Howarth and not fall in love with her; but he had always felt safe from the one man whom it now seemed he

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ought most to have dreaded. With Shadrach's news in his mind he began to dread Hackett in more senses than one. It is a bitter business to have one's suit set aside in another's favour, but it is bitterer still to know that the choice is altogether mistaken, and that the girl to whom a lad has given his heart is throwing her own away. The Hacketts had been gentlefolks time out of mind, but for the last three or four generations the family had been rolling so industriously downhill that it was a marvel they had not long since reached the bottom. This sweet - throated Will's great - grandfather had in his time drunk and gambled away one half the family belongings. The grandfather had in like manner reduced his share by a moiety; and the father, whose career was briefer and more rapid than that of his predecessors, had left the remnant of the pro. perty so heavily mortgaged as to be almost valueless. Since his death the Manor House had been closed and was likely to remain to, for the mining resources of the district

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round about were fast being opened up, and coal pits and blasting furnaces are undesirable neighbours for a country seat. Twenty or thirty years earlier the placid landscape smiled fair with pasture - land and wheat, but now it was scarred and riven on every side, and defaced by unsightly mounds of mine and furnace refuse. In winter the snow that lay upon the ground grew dingy in a day, and in any summer shower the sickly trees & sipped ink. The discovery of the mineral resources of the land would have made careful people wealthy, but it had only encouraged the later generations of the Hacketts to larger extravagances. Master Will had inherited the tastes and proclivities of his ancestors, and was as deep in debt as he knew how to be; the depth depending not on the boldness of his own venture—in which case he would cheerfully have braved an Atlantic of liabilities—but on the confidence and courage of his creditors.

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If there had been nothing worse than the fallen fortunes of his family with which to

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reproach Will Hackett, the thing might have been borne with an approach to equanimity; but the young fellow kept the family reputation alive in all ways, and the graver sort of people shrugged their shoulders at the mention of him, whilst the feebler held up their hands in horror. The long and the short of it is, he was a rake and a roué, and the last sort of man in the world for an innocent girl to think of marrying. Now the disappointed lover knew all these things, and they galled him terribly. He had always known them, for Hackett and he had been chums so far as that was possible for the steadiest and for the unsteadiest of all the youngsters of the neighbourhood, and the young Sobersides had more than once helped to smooth over the consequences of the rake's escapades.

He had liked him greatly once upon a time—almost everybody had liked the ne'erdo-weel in his earlier days. Bright, handsome, loud, jovial, generous, always ready to lend or spend, though sore unwilling to expend present coin on parted joys, he had

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been an almost universal favourite. But now most men, and it need hardly be said most women, fought a little shy of him. His father's old friends died off, or grew more careful than they had been in their younger days, or turned a cold shoulder on poverty. There were few in what he thought his own station to consort with him, and so he came to be on terms of pot - and - pipe intimacy with sporting landlords and people of their kidney, and was away downhill on the family route as fast as he could travel.

Edward Blane, sunk deep in the memory of these things, stood in the storm, wrathful, sore - hearted, and piteous. It takes no great time to sing through 'The Bay of Biscay,' but when the song was finished and the applause which followed it aroused him from his thoughts, he awoke out of a dream which had carried him both into the past and the future by a year or two. He could not have told then or afterwards what impulse drew him into the hotel and led him to the upper room in which the singing was going on. The

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thing he seemed most to desire just then was solitude, and he had no mind to exchange unmeaning talk with people he did not care for, or even to listen to Will Hackett's delightful singing. Yet he entered and stood rather moodily propping himself against the door, until his old half - abandoned crony discovered him, and crossed the room to shake hands.

'Why, Ned, old lad, it's a hundred years since I saw the last of you. What brings you here?'

'I heard your singing as I was going by,' said Ned. 'I wouldn't come up till you'd finished.'

'And now,' cried the landlord, it's pretty well beknown as there's nothing Mr. Hackett wouldn't be willin' to do to oblige, Mr. Blane, and he can hardly do less than sing another song to pay him for standin' out i' the cold to listen to the first un.'

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'Ay, sing us a song, Will,' said his old companion. 'They're all rarely pleased to hear you.'

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'Why, so I will,' answered Hackett, but I'll have a little brandy and water first, if you please, Warden.'

The landlord bustled from the room and came back with the glass. Then Hackett, having disposed of the brandy and water, sang another song. This time he chose

'Sally in our Alley,' and the unlucky lover, though not easily disposed to be affronted as a rule, felt a personal application in the ditty and took umbrage at it. The joyful and tender exultation of the line, 'Oh, then I'll marry Sally,' especially wounded him, and the singer's accidental smiling look in his direction seemed to his raw and distempered fancy as if it were meant to barb the shaft. He leaned moodily against the wall, with his hands behind him, and resigned himself to bitter fancies.

Hackett, his song being over, began to rally him upon his gloomy temper and pressed him to drink.

'You're taking rather more yourself than's good for you,' said the sufferer. 'Better stop it and go home.'

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'Who? I?' cries Hackett. 'Not a bit of it. To - day's the only day we own. We mayn't be alive to enjoy ourselves to - morrow.

And that, I think, 's a reason fair To fill the glass again.

Fill up, landlord.'

The foolish youngster spoke with so much aplomb, and with an air so gay and sprightly, and laughed so heartily in his speech, that everybody but Ned Blane took the speech itself to be full of wit and humour, and laughed loudly with him. But Ned Blane was known to be a trifle stricter than most men in his way of thinking, and therefore surprised nobody by his solemnity.

And in brief the popular tenor sang so often, and found it so essential to drink between songs, that when but an hour had gone by his ditties were all of the Bacchanalian sort, and were sung with less taste and refinement than might have been asked for from so accomplished a vocalist.

All this was gall and wormwood to the unfortunate lover. His thoughts ran before

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him into the future, and he saw the girl he cared for sitting lonely and pale and sad at home, and in the same flash of time saw her husband as he saw him now, swaggering and roystering with boon companions who were unworthy of him. These fancies cut him to the heart, and at last, taking Hackett by the arm, he whispered in a tone which sounded a trifle fierce from so ordinarily mild a man:

'Come home, Hackett. If you can't see when you're on the way to make a fool of yourself your friends must see it for you.'

'In vino veritas' is a very old proverb, and if it have truth in it, it may be allowed that, along with his congenital vices, Mr. Hackett had at least the congenital merit of being good - tempered. He laughed allowingly, and suffered himself to be drawn away, but in

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the keen fresh air of the streets he began to reel and to talk thickly, and his rival, with a heart growing momentarily heavier and sorer, piloted him home, and, bidding him good night at the door, turned away, feeling as blank and desolate as the night itself.

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CHAPTER III.

CHURCH bells were ringing on a March morning. They rang under a sky half covered with a tatter of ragged cloud, through the vivid rents whereof broad sunshine poured. The wind, which buffeted the music of the bells, chased the tattered clouds so swiftly that the sunlight flowed over the heath, the cluster of cottages, and the church, like a series of charging waves. What with the wild wind, and the racing waves of light, and the metallic clangour of the bells, there was a sense of rollicking jocundity abroad. The day seemed to brag of its own rude health and vigour.

A quarter of a mile away from the centre of the music which tumbled in such exuberant and wind - swept mirth stood a sign - post, hold -

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ing four gaunt arms abroad and pointing down four roads. Against the sign - post leaned Ned Blane, wearing an air of deep chagrin, and kicking with occasional sudden emphasis at any projecting bit of turf which lay within reach of his feet. Ned was a handsome sad well - proportioned fellow, and his figure showed signs of unusual agility and strength, but—when he was not animated by some transient spurt of anger at the projecting bits of turf—every line of it seemed to indicate a sort of lassitude of resignation. His soft felt hat raked over his eyes and half obscured them; his crisp brown beard jutted out forlornly as his chin reposed upon his breast. At times he rolled his broad back about the sign - post in a fashion indicative at once of restlessness and fatigue, and his clenched fists were rammed hard into his side pockets. The young man's attitude was an acceptance of the inevitable and a protest against things in general. Whilst he lounged there thus dejected he was unaware of the approach of a portly

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broadcloth personage who picked his way with a cat - like nicety and deliberation amongst the shining puddles on the western road. This gentleman shone all over with a subdued lustre of newness. His hat, his satin scarf, his broadcloth overcoat, his gloves, his boots, were all offensively shiny and rigid; but their wearer was tall and plump and of a smooth and plastic aspect, so that they sat upon him with less aggressiveness than they might have worn upon another man. He had the air of an ecclesiastical dignitary in disguise.

The broadclothed portly man had for a long time held in view the figure of the melancholy loungee at the sign - post, for the post stood upon an eminence, and was visible on three sides from a distance of a mile or thereabout. He glanced round a dozen times from the church tower whence the windy bluster of the bells was pealing to the lounging figure and back again, as if he coupled the music and the dejected young man in his mind.

Finding himself still unnoticed, when he had grown quite near he coughed behind one

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of his glossy gloves with an air of accident, and having thus attracted the lounge's notice he bade him good morning. There are people who in speaking convey the impression that their vocal organs are oiled. Mr. Horatio Lowther was one of these. His salute was a benediction, and he emphasised the 'good' as though he lavished the kindly wishes of his heart upon it.

At the sound of the cough Ned drew himself up with a start and blushed like fire. He pushed back the soft felt hat and nodded in answer to the salutation.

'It is a lovely morning,' said Mr. Lowther, pausing. It gives one a sense of—'He did not say what it gave one a sense of, but he waved his shining black gloves hither and thither, and smiled with the look of a man who has achieved a conversational felicity.

Ned's face wore an expression of disgusted weariness which he tried in vain to replace by one of interest as he surveyed the landscape, in answer to the invitation conveyed by the waving black gloves,

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'I The weather's right enough,' he answered.

'The bells,' said Mr. Lowther. The bells. Those morning bells! How many a tale their music tells! I perrisume'—he had a knack, which suited his voice and face to perfection, of lengthening certain words in this way—I perrisume they are ringing for young Hackett.'

Ned looked at him with sudden keenness. Mr. Lowther, with his head slightly thrown back and a little on one side, was smiling softly and benevolently at nature and the bells, and appeared to be unaware of the other's gaze. Observing this, the young man put off his startled and angry air, and drew both hands from his pockets. A pipe came forth with one and a tobacco pouch with the other; and he busied himself with these, looking down the while. He answered in an uninterested tone:

'Yes, they are ringing for Will Hackett.'

'Has it occurred to you?' asked Mr. Lowther, preserving his attitude and his smile - 'do you think - '

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'Has what occurred to me?' asked the other, looking up at him.

'That Hackett might have done - I wouldn't indicate a breath to disparage the young lady.' He was still smiling softly at the landscape and the bells, and could not be supposed to know that Blane was looking at him with eyes of wrath and wonder. 'But might he not now - might he not have done a little better?'

'Perhaps he might.' The answer sounded as uninterested as before, and the speaker stooping for a reed of grass, began to probe his pipe with it. 'I don't know where though', he added in the same casual tone. 'It seems to me he has done a lot better than he deserves.'

'It may be so,' responded Mr. Lowther. 'It may be so. But in a woridily sense.'

'It's his own affair,' said Blane, as if the talk wearied him.

'Assuredly,' Mr. Lowther answered. 'Oh yes. Assuredly. Quite his own affair.' He paused there and smiled on his companion.

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'I do not say that we should set too lofty a valley on our worldly goods, but it befits us to be careful even of our own temporary welfare. Do you happen to know if our young friend receives anything with the bride?'

'No,' said the other gruffly, 'I don't.'

'No?' returned Mr. Lowther, half questioning and half assenting. Perhaps to Ned's ear the tone may have seemed to indicate a shade of doubt of his veracity. Perhaps the young man may have had something to disturb him that morning. He turned wrathfully upon Mr. Lowther.

'No,' he said loudly, and with angry emphasis.

'My dear young friend,' cried Mr. Lowther, somewhat taken aback by this unlooked-for vehemence, and recoiling a pace or two.

'I am not your dear young friend,' said Ned, with a smile, which had as much anger as amusement in it. 'I have nothing in the world to talk to you about; and I would a great deal rather be alone.'

'That,' replied Mr. Lowther very sweetly,

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'is an intimation not to linger. I will accept it in that sense, Mr. Blane, and will wish you good morning. Good morning, Mr. Blane.'

The windy music of the bells and the swiftly alternating bands of shade and shine were still careering over the heath as Mr. Lowther turned his broadclothed back upon the finger-post, and left the young man staring sadly after him.

'What do you want to know about Will Hackett's affairs for? Is he in your clutches, you fat old spider? Heaven help him if he is! The bit he has left won't be long in going after what he used to have if he has got into your web.'

Until the actual coming of the wedding day he had never been able to convince himself that his sweetheart would really make so bad a business of herself as to marry Will Hackett. Something was to have turned up to prevent so egregious a sacrifice, some outbreak on the part of the intended bridegroom, or discovery on the side of his victim. His

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wife could be nothing less than a victim, to the unlucky rival's fancy; and he found people enough to agree with him and confirm him in his opinion. Not that he traduced the man who had won, or gave anybody reason to guess of his own condition. But people talked, and Hackett's prospects were pretty freely canvassed in Ned Blane's hearing and out of it. It was generally agreed that his wife that was to be had thrown herself away, and the public sentiment was blended of surprise and pity. For Mary Howarth was a girl of unusual intelligence, was supposed by those who knew her to have much firmness of character, and was known to be serious in her thoughts and ways.

Ned had quite resolved to see nothing of the wedding ceremony, for to what good end should he vex himself by that? And yet here he was, a mile nearer the parish church

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than he had a right to be, and hankering after pain with that unreasoning instinct which prompts children to irritate sore places. When Mr. Horatio Lowther had got some two

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or three hundred yards away Ned lounged after him slowly and irresolutely, and often turning about as if to regard the landscape. He was too sick at heart and self - occupied to see anything in Nature's face that morning, though, curiously enough, in later days there was no scene more vividly and clearly marked on his mind. Many a time he recalled the blustering wind and pealing bells and changing light, and the keen, fresh odours of any wild spring morning would come to him with a memory of heartache.

Mr. Lowther entered at the lych-gate, and Blane still followed at a distance. There were no faces at the cottage windows and no idlers or wayfarers in the road. The bells were silent now, for the wedding procession had entered the church. He must needs enter the porch, and there, in company with two or three peeping children, whom his presence awed into supernatural gravity and silence, listen to the murmuring and echoing voice of the curate as it rolled indistinctly about the hollow building, which was more than five-

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sixths empty. He heard the groom's voice more clearly, for Hackett's loud swagger was but little tempered by the place and the occasion. The listener turned away and stood at the entrance to the porch, looking out upon the graveyard for a little while; and then, stepping lightly by instinct, walked down the path and into the village street.

It was all bare and empty as he had left it, but a sudden unreasonable fear of being observed set him walking rapidly, and he felt as if any one who should chance to see him must know how raw and desolate and heartbroken he was. His being in that neighbourhood at all became on a sudden a proclamation of all that he suffered, and the more this mood grew upon him the faster he walked. The road he traversed was lonely and house - less, for the parish church was a mile from the town, which had grown up away from it, and had left it as the centre of a mere hamlet.

Behind him and somewhat gaining upon him, though not rapidly, was a man on horse

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back. The horse, fat and unwieldy, was urged into a jogging shuffle, and a number of harness chains which hung about it kept up a monotonous jangle. The rider was black as coal from head to foot, and his white eyeballs and white teeth gleamed like those of a negro. He had no saddle; his bridle was a rough piece of cord knotted about the nose of his steed, and he held on precariously by the mane. He was sweating and breathless, and an occasional attempt at a holloa after the retreating figure died off ineffectually within him. But by dint of hard kicking and tight holding he quickened his pace and kept his seat until he came on a level with the foot passenger and gasped his name.

'Mr. Edward.'

Ned Blane looked up and recognised the Bard.

'What's the matter?' he asked, for Shadrach's face was wild.

'The Blazer; the Old Blazer,' said Shadrach, breathing hard.

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'What! Not on fire again?

'No; drowned out this time. Seven - and - forty down. You'm wanted. I seen you by the church an' I've been tryin' to holler iver sence, but I've had all the breath shook out o' me.'

The first feeling in the wounded lover's heart was so terribly like thankfulness that some absorbing duty called him from himself that he stood stock - still for a moment, more horrified at himself than at the news. In the next instant he turned back upon the way he had travelled, running like a deer.

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CHAPTER IV.

THE proprietors of the Old Blazer had no right to call upon the services of Ned Blane; but in such a case no man who was.. competent to discharge the duties of superintending the work of rescue could hesitate to obey the summons. Blanc was doubly competent. His business duties as mine-surveyor had made him familiar with the workings, and in similar cases he had more than once given proof of courage and resource. He threw himself heart and soul into the work, and even forgot for an hour or two at a time that his sweetheart had that day married his rival, and that her marriage was likely to endanger her happiness. Now and then, in the very middle of his labours, the one thought or the other, or both together, would assail him with a sick-

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pang; but there was no time to brood, and the pain had to be stifled and the intruding thought dismissed.

It was night-time, and the roaring wind had fallen, to be followed by a thick drizzle. Great cages of fire burned here and there, and smeared the thick atmosphere with a murky light. The scattered crowd looked listless enough on the surface. The engines panted with a noise of fear and hurry, and echoes from the waste of darkness beyond the circle of the flaring cressets answered drearily. Faces shone like hot metal in the near light of the fires, or took a ghostly pallor as they stood against the borders of the darkness. Knots of shawled women waited motionless round the hovels by the pit's mouth; the rest of the lingerers moved purposelessly hither and thither, sliding and staggering about the slippery and uneven ground.

All was being done that could be done, and for the moment there was no more need of the man who felt most need of labour. He stood disconsolate near the mouth of the

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mine, with his hands folded behind him and his eyes upon the ground. The drizzle was growing thicker, and the crowd, knowing that there was no hope of rescue, or even of early tidings, had begun to fall away, when he felt a hand upon his shoulder, and, turning, found Hepzibah by his side.

'I've brought you a change o' clothes and some victuals, Master Edward,' she said as he turned upon her. 'You should ha' sent a message to the missis. Dinner was kept waitin'

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for a hour and more. We've only just found out as you was here, though anybody but a set of thickheads might ha' guessed it.'

He took the things from her half mechanically, and having bestowed them in one of the hovels, came back into the rain and stood there looking gloomily about him. He had time to think now, and his thoughts were growing poignant. He felt like a man awaking to the consciousness of pain after some numbing and terrible disaster. Periods of enforced absence from the memory of trouble serve only to dam the tide of bitter thought,

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which flows all the more rapid, relentless, and overwhelming for having been obstructed. It is thus that the awakening from sleep is the most terrible event of the day to men who have to endure any profound sorrow of the heart. For a little while the bitterness has been forgotten, and then comes the payment for forgetfulness.

Hepzibah, who could guess something of her young master's troubles, though she was scarcely competent to calculate their forces, laid hands upon him and insisted on his return to the hovel, where she opened her basket and forced him to eat. He obeyed, but with a sick reluctance, being quite disgusted with himself for attending to mere bodily needs at all at such a moment, and inclined vaguely to be angry with himself even for having a body to attend to.

But, after all, if it were not for the pressing and imperative needs which sorrow finds so disgusting, grief would be almost, if not altogether, incurable; and the reluctant meal, the sleep that weary nature imposes on the

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sufferer, and the countless distasteful little duties the body lays upon us, are the ministers that woo us back to contentment and to peace of mind. No man is able to philosophise in this manner at the time when philosophy would be of greatest service to him; and, indeed, to all but the greatest and the wisest philosophy is a slippery and untrustworthy comrade, deserting us when we are most in need of his companionship, and pressing his advice upon us with great insistence and completeness of wisdom when our troubles are over and we have no special need of him. The function of philosophy in this regard may fairly be said to be invariably to lock the stable door when the mare is stolen. A physician who will not prescribe in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred until the disease is cured, and who then appears with all the resources of the pharmacopoeia at his back I A pilot who brings you a chart pedantically accurate in detail after you are shipwrecked! The police constable of popular satire, who is always in stately evidence too soon and, too late!

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Whilst Blane forced himself to eat, Hepzibah sat and watched him in silence; but when he pushed the food away and arose from the stool on which he had been seated, she broke into complaint and reproach. He paid no heed to her until she laid both hands upon his arm, and in her earnestness gave him just such an imperative little shake of

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command as she had been wont to use for the emphasis of reproof when he was a child. He laughed rather forlornly at this, and turned upon her:

'Well, Hepzibah, what is it?'

'Why, it's just this,' responded Hepzibah. 'You've got your mother and the little uns to think of. There's nobody else in the whole wide world for them to look to but you, Master Edward, and—you understand me—it's no part of your business here to be doing anything rash and throwing your life away. I know—because Shadrach told me at the time—you went down the Old Tump when nobody else would go. And there wasn't a creetur there as saw you go as ever expected to see you back again. Don't you go playing

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any of them tricks here. And look here, Master Edward, you take heart; pluck up a bit of a sperrit and bethink yourself. There's as good fish in the sea as ever come out of it. Now don't you go jumpin' at me as if I'd stuck a pair of scissors into you. I shan't say no more; least said soonest mended; but a nod's as good as a wink to a blind horse. And now I'm going away, but not before I've got your promise to get into your dry clothes. If you say you'll do it, I know you'll do it; but I shan't go until you've promised.'

He gave the promise and she went away, leaving him in the hovel alone. He opened the door, and, accosting one of the loungers, said:

'If anybody asks for me you can say I'm here. I'm going to get a change.'

The man nodded in response; and when Ned had exchanged his saturated garments for the dry ones Hepzibah had brought him he sat down and surrendered himself to his own comfortless reflections.

After the space of some half-hour or thereabouts

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a knock came to the door, and the man who had accosted him outside entered.

'Here's Mr. Hackett asking for you, sir,' he said.

'Mr. Hackett' cried Blane, rising in surprise and fear. He could think of nothing but some sudden misfortune which could have brought his rival there at such a time, and he went out to meet him with the feelings a man may have who walks to the gallows.

'Hillo, Ned!' cried Hackett's voice as Blane emerged from the hovel, and turning round in the direction of the voice the surveyor saw his rival swaggering, with his feet planted wide apart and a bottle in his hand.

'They told me you were in charge here,' said Will, 'and I snatched a minute or two to run up and see how things were going on. I've brought a drop of comfort for the fellows who're at work here. Pass it round, boys.'

He handed the bottle to the man standing nearest him, and the fellow took a pull at it, and after politely wiping it on the sleeve

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of his coaly flannel jacket, passed it to the next.

Hackett, glistening from heel to shoulder in a long india-rubber waterproof coat, and with a felt hat stuck rakishly at the back of his head, had his face turned away from the glare of the cresset, so that his old companion could but dimly discern his features.

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Blane's unformed fears of half a minute earlier were gone, but a terror as great and more tangible was in its stead. He advanced without a word, and seizing Hackett by the sleeve, turned him round gently but firmly and brought his face into the light. He knew then what he had only guessed before. The bridegroom had been drinking.

'You have no business here at such a time as this,' he said roughly. Go home.'

'No business here!' said Hackett. 'Why have I got no business here?'

'You know as well as I do,' Blane responded with a choking and rapid voice, why you have no business here to-night. Come with me.'

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He had kept his hold upon Hackett's arm during this brief exchange of words, and now, gripping him harder than he knew, he was leading him away. Hackett twisted his arm from the other's hold and laughed.

'Don't you fret about me, Ned Blane,' he said, with a laugh. 'I'm perfectly right where I am, and I know what I'm doing. Did you ever read the life of that great and good man, Doctor Johnson, Ned?'

'Never you mind that great and good man, Doctor Johnson, just at present,' said Blane, who by this time, between wrath and anguish, was as white as a sheet. You go home.'

'I'm taking a leaf out of his book, my boy,' said Hackett. 'There's nothing like having the reins in your own hands at starting.'

Such a tempest of anger raged through Blane's mind that it was a matter of wonder to him afterwards that he did not then and there knock Will Hackett down. But he restrained himself and, turning abruptly, walked back to the squalid shelter he had so

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recently quitted, and closed the door behind him. He sat down, but the passion in his mind brought him to his feet again in a second, and he prowled to and fro in the limited space at his command, torn with wrath and pity, and almost maddened by the sense of his own helplessness. He must stand by and look as if it were nothing to him that the girl he loved with all his heart should have thrown her life away. The confinement in which he stood seemed to stifle him, but he dared not venture into the outer air, passionately as he seemed to crave for space and room, for fear of again encountering Hackett and being tortured into some act of violence and despair, which would only proclaim his own misery and could serve no good end in the world.

He was alone wrestling with himself for a full hour, and at the end of that time he was called out to some small duty. He got through it doggedly, compelling himself to listen and understand with as strenuous an urgency and compulsion as would have been

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needed to hold a struggling man physically, and then betook himself to a waste field hard by, and there walked up and down in the darkness and the rain.

He did not know how long he had been thus occupied when a voice hailed him excitedly, and he ran, shouting in answer, towards the engine-house. The little remnant of the day's crowd was gathered closely about it as he entered, and he had to push his way through with some force until he was recognised and room was made for him to pass. Three or four of the more intelligent and instructed of the workmen were gathered in the

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engine - room, and with them was a mine-surveyor—one Atkinson—who had a little while before arrived on the scene prepared to tender his services in case of need.

'Here's a strange thing, Blane,' said the new arrival, shaking hands with him. 'The water in the shaft has gone down thirty feet within the last ten minutes. It can't have gone down in the waft without having gone

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down in the workings, and a draught, like that can't mean anything but this: the weight of water has broken into some lower workings that I don't know of, and the Blazer is more than two - thirds drained already.'

In the excitement of this news Blane forgot his personal griefs, and instantly became master of himself and the situation. He called for the plan of the mine, studied it for a moment, and then turned quietly upon his fellow-volunteer.

'We can get at them now,' he said. 'The fall in the water has left bare this old air-way, which is bricked up in the shaft. We must break through at once.—Shadrach, rig things up in the downcast.—Meshach '—this was Shadrach's brother—' get lamps and picks. See that the lamp casings are watertight.'

The two men were gone about their several affairs as briskly as the orders were conveyed.

'I'll make one,' said the new volunteer. 'But it's likely to be a wet job, and I'll borrow a suit of flannels from one of you chaps, - - And

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you'd better do the same, Blane. It'll be well to have dry things to come up to.'

The little crowd outside was excited but intensely quiet. The shawled women stood like grouped statues in the red glare of the cressets and the murk of the night. Preparations were made rapidly, without noise or bustle, and in a few minutes the rescue party was ready to descend. It consisted of Blane, his momentary colleague, Shadrach, and two others—all tried and experienced men, who knew that they might be venturing upon a desperate enterprise, but had faced the like so often that scarcely a nerve fluttered among them.

They entered the skip which hung over the black cavern of the pit's mouth. The word was given, and they swung downward with a last look at the smoky flare of the fires in the iron cages, and the Rembrandtesque faces of the anxious watchers gathered round. Few words were spoken as they descended, and the few, short, sharp, and to the purpose. The gleaming walls of the shaft reflected the

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light of the lamps, and seemed to shoot upwards in streaks of fire and blackness whilst the travellers stood still. In a minute the floor of the skip began to heave beneath their feet like the deck of a boat at sea—answering to the regulation of the engine on the bank—and a second or two later they came gently to a standstill.

'Here,' said Blane, striking the bricked wall resoundingly with the point of a pick.

Shadrach lay on the floor of the skip at full length, face downwards. The two other miners steadied him as he hung chest and shoulders over the black space. He worked the point of the pick into a crevice of the wall, and after a tug or two out came a brick

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and fell with a splash into the water, which, from a couple of fathoms lower down, reflected the light of the safety - lamps with a sulky and oily gleam. He and his companions peering into the hole thus made saw nothing but what looked like a solid darkness.

'Go on,' said Blane. 'That's the place. You'll be through directly.'

Shadrach worked industriously, and the

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bricks fell fast until there was a hollow made big enough easily to admit of the passage of a man. Shadrach bridged the chasm between the skip and the wall with his body and wormed himself carefully through the orifice he had made; then turning, thrust out a hand for his lamp.

'It's deadly wet,' said Shadrach. 'I'm up to mid - thigh in it.'

Nobody spoke in answer to this statement, but, man by man, bridged the chasm and entered upon the air-way. When all were landed they set out upon a difficult and broken road, which in places was so low that they were compelled to go snakewise, and even then came into occasional contact with the sharp ridges of the roof. By-and-by the road dipped suddenly. The passage was higher at this point than it had been hitherto, and the men could stand in a crouching posture whilst they paused to take breath. Blane went down upon his hands and knees, and thrusting his lamp before him surveyed the depression in front.

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'Lads,' he said, turning and looking upwards at his companions, 'there's water here. I fancy we shall have to dive for it.'

'That 'll be queer work,' said his fellow-surveyor gravely. 'It be a bad business for anybody who gets stuck down there. And who's to know whether the road rises again and gets free of water? And if it does, who's to say what the distance is? '

'I'll try it feet foremost,' said Ned Blane. 'I shall come out of it easiest that way if I find the road too narrow or too long. If you get a tap from the other side you'll know it's pretty easy to follow.'

He blew out the light of the lamp, and encased the lamp itself in a waterproof tin box which was suspended about his shoulder. Then kneeling down again, he slipped feet foremost into the black water, and slowly disappeared from sight, his companions following every motion with eager glances until the water closed over his head, and a bubble or two rose upon its inky surface. The little pool lapped its boundaries idly and

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noiselessly, and the watchers, crouching immobile and silent, kept their eyes upon it. Suddenly it ebbed by three or four inches, and a second or two later was heard a muffled and inward tap, tap, tap, from beyond it.

'Who goes next? ' asked the volunteer. 'Be careful about your lamps and matches, lads.'

The Bard put out his lamp, encased it as his predecessor had done, and slipped backwards into the water. Then his companions followed. The volunteer, having put out his light, fumbled in the dark awhile to fix it in its case, and then went after the others. When he had emerged upon the farther side, he found a lamp or two already relighted,

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and in a while the journey was begun again. The road still presented the same characteristics. At times they could walk stooping, at times they could make their way upon their hands and knees, and again at times they were compelled to crawl. On a sudden when they were in the straitest pass they had yet come to, the

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leader's light went out. The lamp of the man behind him followed suit.

'Get back, for your lives!' shouted Blane; 'the choke - damp's on us!'

In the narrow way there was no room to turn, but they shuffled backward with breathless haste, tearing their thick clothes against the jagged roof, and wounding hands and knees upon the broken way below. Another lamp went out, and then another. But by this time they had reached a less difficult portion of the air-way, and were making more rapid progress.

'We shall be all right on the other side of the water,' said Blane. 'The gas can't get past that.'

They hurried on by the light of the foremost lamp, which by good hap was still burning, until they reached the water. And here, by some disaster, the lamp went out. One after the other they struggled through this gap of safety. The volunteer, having been the last to enter, was first to leave. Arriving on the safety side he took a match

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from its waterproof case and struck it. His comrades came up one by one, dripping and breathless: one—two - - three.

'All here?' asked Blane as he emerged, shaking himself like a dog, and wringing the foul water from his hair and face.

'No,' said one of the men. 'Where's Shade?'

Shadrach Was absent. They waited for a little time, and the volunteer surveyor ignited one match at another whilst they watched and listened.

'This is getting serious,' said Blane. 'I must go back for him.'

'It's mere madness to go back,' answered the volunteer gravely.

'Madness or no,' said Blane, 'I'm going;' and this was the last word spoken. His comrades offered no opposition to his design, and once more he slid backwards into the pool and disappeared. Halfway through his foot touched something which instinct rather than memory told him had not been there upon his first or second passage. It

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was difficult working his way past it, but when he had got far enough to touch it with his hand his fingers grasped the hair of the missing man. He forced himself a little farther, and took hold of the rough collar of a flannel coat, slimy and saturated. Then began a terrible and almost hopeless struggle. The pent breath in his body seemed fit to burst him. His temples throbbed horribly, and he could hear a ding-dong as of some monstrous bell. The watery blackness turned blood-red, and with every tug he gave at the dragging body of the man he risked his life, for he felt as though he must draw breath or die. Fortunately for the two lives this awful struggle was of brief duration. Blane came gasping and spouting out of the water into the black darkness of the air-way, and having drawn but a single rejoicing and mighty inspiration, set both hands to

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the soaked collar still below the water, and with one great heave dragged the half-drowned and insensible man to safety.

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CHAPTER V.

'SHADRACH,' said Hepzibah, 'there's one thing as I wonder thee'st niver done.'

It was June weather. The sky was streaked with faint lines of green and rose near the horizon, but the unfathomable soft haze of the zenith still held the warmth and brightness of the fallen sun and delayed the coming of the dusk. The evening was wonderfully still and tranquil, and sounds which would have been inaudible in the common turmoil of the day came clearly from the distance. Children shouted at their play, sheep bleated from the meadows; very far away, with a soft and regular pulsation, the blows of a steam hammer sounded. Noise seemed removed.

Hepzibah had brought a kitchen chair

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into the garden, and sat under an apple tree thick with blossom, from which a sailing flake or two of pinky white would fall now and then, floating hither and thither capriciously as its curves directed it through the warm still air. She was busily hemming a coarse sort of towelling, and the zip of the needle and swish of the thread went on uninterruptedly. Shadrach, who was something of a dandy, was attired in his roomy suit of black, his tall shining hat, and his coloured comforter. He stood with his mouth only a little less wide open than his eyes, and with changeless visage and motionless head looked from side to side, or fixed a comfortless glance on a particular apple-blossom above him.

'Ah!' said he inquiringly. 'And what might that be, Hepzibah?'

'I wonder thee'st niver made up something about Master Edward and the Old Blazer.'

Shadrach's face wreathed itself into a slow smile as he looked at her, but catching her eye just as the smile was at the full, he drew

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his features with a ludicrous suddenness to their original expression, and looked sideways on vacancy as if he saw a not particularly interesting ghost there.

'Ha!' cried Hepzibah, 'thee'st made up summat a'ready!'

The Bard's aspect, half Shy, half boastful, proclaimed the truth of the guess.

'I've wrote down what I've done,' he answered. 'But it ain't finished yit.'

'Not finished!' said Hepzibah. 'Why, as a general run o' things, Shadrach, it's been your use to hit th' iron hot. And here's three month gone by!'

'Well,' the Bard explained, 'when I begun upon it, I settled up to have it done in a week's time or thereabout, and I went so far as walk into Armstrong's the printers, and price the printin' of a handful.'

'Shadrach!' Hepzibah exclaimed, with a voice and manner which proclaimed that the idea half delighted, and half appalled her. 'You never did!'

'I did though,' Shadrach responded. 'I

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thought to put 'em on sale at a penny apiece, as bein' summat towards the widders and orphins.' Hepzibah dropped her sewing and surveyed the proportions of this enterprise with awe. 'But when I come to look at it,' Shadrach continued, 'I worn't more than half content. It seemed to me as if it was a bit too rough dug out like, and I abode awhile to tek th' edges off on it. Well, then—' He paused and became utterly unable to encounter Hepzibah's inquiring gaze.

'What then?' she asked him.

'Well, then,' said Shadrach, 'I took a piece of a journey into Brummagem.'

'What did you go into Brummagem for?' demanded Hepzibah. The Bard's manner indicated so much importance and mystery that it was very disturbing to be kept in suspense.

'I went,' said Shadrach, looking anywhere but at Hepzibah - 'I went to the newspaper.'

'The what?'

'The newspaper. "Arise Birmingham Gaze-at-it."' This was Shadrach's version of Aris's Birmingham Gazette.'

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'What for?' asked Hepzibah. Shadrach had to be pumped, and yielded but a limited return for each stroke of the handle.

'I see'd th' editor,' said Shadrach.

'Did you?' returned Hepzibah, in a tone which the Bard felt to be almost wounding—it expressed so little of the sentiment proper to the circumstance. This, however, was no fault of Hepzibah's. If she had understood she would have been as full of wonder for Shadrach's temerity as he himself was.

'I think,' said Shadrach, scratching his cheek pensively, 'he was the merriest gentleman I iver looked at. He loffed when I went into his room and *in him first. I gi'en him the poetry, and I says, "It's about the Blazer disaster," I says, "nigh by Barfield." He teks it and looks at it, and says he, "Be you the poet?" he says. "Yis," says I, "it's my own meking-up, all on it." He went solemn all of a minute, and he read it through from start to finish, and then up he gets and says he, "Excuse me a minute," as polite as you please; "I must have a bit of a talk about

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this," he says, "with my collogue." So theer I abode for two or three minutes, and then he come back again a - rubbin' his hands and smilin'. "I should like to print this," he says, "very much, but I'm afraid it's a bit out o' date." I said it was a bit out o' date. "But," I says, "it ain't that easy to do it all of a rush." He loffed again, quite merry and hearty. "No," he says, "it's cost a peck o' trouble, evident. I shouldn't like to lose sight on it, not altogether," he says. "I can't print it," he says, "but I should be rare and glad to have a copy on it."

'Niver!' cried Hepzibah in high delight.

'He did though. "Rare and glad to have a copy on it," he says. "Might I get one o' my young men," he says, "to mek a copy?" I said as I'd be very pleased, so he rung a bell on the table and a youngish chap come in. "Just copy that out, mister," he says, and the young chap sat down and copied it. "Don't alter a letter," said th' editor. "I wouldn't have it altered for annything."

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'Niver!' cried Hepzibah again. The

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narrative absorbed her so that she altogether forgot her sewing and sat with both hands idle in her lap.

'I'm a-tellin' it to you just as it happened,' said Shadrach. ' "I wouldn't have it altered for the world," he says. And when it was done he rolled up my paper and he gi'en it to me with just a little bit of a bow like this, an' he shook hands, and says he, "I'm much obliged," he says, "and I'm very pleased to ha' seen thee," and all the time he was a - loffin' and a-smilin' to do your heart good. I was niver kinder treated i' my life.'

'Why, Shadrach,' said Hepzibah, fully alive to the dignity of the interview by this time, 'that's a thing as thee'st remember to thy dying day.'

'And it 'is,' responded Shadrach with solemnity. 'But theer's gifts as nigh on iverybody can lay claim to, and theer's gifts as is just gi'en here and theer.'

Hepzibah took up her sewing again and went on with it thoughtfully, but the way in which the thread lingered now and then

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showed clearly that her mind was still occupied with the remembrance of the honours bestowed by fortune upon Shadrach and his gift.

Shadrach meanwhile had drawn from one of his coat-tail pockets a crumpled and dog's-eared sheet or two - of foolscap paper covered with a set of knotted, corrugated, and involved hieroglyphics. Hepzibah sewed on, - but looked attentive and expectant. The Bard cleared his throat and began:

' "Lines on the Fatal Disaster at the Old Blazer." '

'Put it up for a minute,' said Hepzibah. 'Here's Mr. Edward.'

She would not have stopped him had the theme been different, but she had a delicacy about Mr. Edward's praises being chanted in his hearing. Mr. Edward resented the mention of his own heroism; and even Hepzibah, who was privileged to say almost what she pleased to the members of the Blane household, had been compelled to silence.

There was something odd about Mr.

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Edward this evening. His walk was lurching and uneven; his cheeks were blanched and his eyes were strangely glazed. Hepzibah arose in alarm.

'Why, Mr. Edward,' she cried, what's the matter with you? You look as if you'd seen a ghost.'

'No such thing's ghosts,' said the miserable young fellow thickly. Don't you bother 'bout me. I'm all ri'.'

Terror, pity, and shame rushed upon the two simple creatures in such a flood that their wits were swept away. They could only gaze at each other in profound dismay, whilst Ned Blane stood blearing at them with drunken eyes, his head and shoulders lurching though his feet stood still. The frank, manly youngster was all gone, and a brutish caricature stood in his place, inert, fatuous, mournful to behold.

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'Master Ned,' said Shadrach, more in horrified surprise than blame, 'you've been a-drinkin'.'

'Very well then,' returned Master Ned,

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with ghastly unchanging gaze and lifted eyebrows. 'Why not? Why shouldn't Old Blazer's Hero cheer his heart a bit as well's other fellows? Eh? '

'Oh, Master Edward!' Hepzibah broke in, half crying. 'That's no way to cheer hearts, poor dear soul. It would be the way to break 'em—yours and mine, and all on us—if it happened often. But anybody may be overtook in a fault, and it niver happened afore. Go to bed, Master Edward, there's a love. Do now.'

'Poor 'ar' never rejoices,' said poor Ned, with an idiotic laugh. 'Been to the "Chase Arms." Been drinking. Hero's health. Old Blazer Zero. That's me. Saved your life, old Shadrach. Come and have drink on the strength of it.'

'To think of his coming through the streets like this!' said Hepzibah. 'There's crowds in the place as 'ud be wicked enough to take delight in it. And him the stiddest, aimiablest—Oh, for pity's sake, don't let his mother and the children see him! Help me to get him upstairs, Shadrach.'

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But unhappily Master Edward was in no mood to be helped upstairs, and refused all offers of aid in that direction. He wanted to drink with Shadrach. He had saved Shadrach's life, risking and almost losing his own to do it, and he was moved to tears by the reflection that Shadrach had never offered to pay for a drink in reward for this service. He had never thought Shadrach a mean fellow until then, but he gave it to be understood that the memory of Shadrach's ingratitude in that particular had often cut him to the heart.

'Better late than never,' said Master Edward. Come and do it now, and I'll forgive you.'

Shadrach was deeply wounded by this imputation on his gratitude.

'As for askin' a gentleman to drink wi' me,' he pleaded, I should never ha' found the cheek to do it. And you know full well, Master Edward, it's very wide o' what you'd think and say if you was in your right mind this minute'

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'Say I'm not in my right mind again,' said Master Edward, with increased thickness of utterance, and I'll give you a hiding.'

This threat from a man so placable, amiable, and peace-loving seemed, both to Hepzibah and Shadrach, of as little value as the breath which served to speak it.

'Why,' said Shadrach, respectfully propitiatory and explanatory, 'you know right well, Master Ned, as you bain't i' your right mind just this minute.'

And thereupon, without any sort of further warning, Master Ned knocked Shadrach down. For a moment the unexpectedness of the blow and her amazement at it held Hepzibah paralysed. But in another moment she had pinioned her young master by the arms, both her arms being passed through his at the elbow, and whilst she held him thus Shadrach rose to his feet from the turf and picked up his hat, regarding his assailant with

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a sorrow and amazement so profound and so unmixed with anger or resentment, that the drunken man's eyes, lit and cleared by the emotion

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which followed the blow, caught the meaning in a flash, and he stood rebuked and ashamed. Then being for the moment no better than a mere bundle of foolish nerves, with no brains to guide them or will to control them, he began incontinently to weep, and to maunder that it was an accident, and that he loved Shadrach like a brother. And being willing in this maudlin mood to do anything to which he was bidden, he was smuggled upstairs secretly, and there partially undressed by Shadrach and finally locked in by Hepzibah.

It was too late to go back to the garden, where the dusk and the dew were falling fast together, and Shadrach had no mind to take the humble place which was allowed to him in the family circle. So Hepzibah undertook to meet him at his mother's house, when the children should have been got to bed and the latest of home duties performed. When, true to her promise, she arrived, an hour later, Shadrach sat in his company clothes beside the smouldering fire, and received her with a sidelong nod of the head

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'Master Ned's all right, I reckon?' said Shadrach. 'You wouldn't ha' been here else.'

'I pep at him afore I left,' Hepzibah answered. 'He was fast asleep. But oh, Shadrach, it's a dreadful thing to have happened.'

'None so dreadful,' returned the Bard cheerfully. 'There's a many as has been caught out once in a way, as niver suffers 'emselves to be caught out again.'

'There can be nothing worse, I think,' said Hepzibah, 'than for a man to take to drink.'

'Hepzibah,' said the Bard, 'that's poetry.'

'No!' cried Hepzibah.

'Yes, but it is, though,' the authority declared stoutly. 'Or if it is not I will mek it so. Wait a minute. There can be nothin' wuss, I think, Than for a mon to take to drink, Unless—but that is more uncommon—It is to see a drunkin womman.'

'Poetry!' said Hepzibah, in a sort of charmed stupor. 'Why, they slipped off my

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tongue as if they'd been no more than common words. I allays thought it took a effort, Shadrach!'

'I should think it did an' all,' Shadrach replied, as if he were a little nettled by the implied disparagement of the gift. 'There's a many as can get as fur as the fust two lines, but four's a trial. Thee try thy hand at four, Hepzibah, and see what thee canst make on it.'

'No, no,' returned Hepzibah, humbled already by the test proposed. She was so full of the dreadful event of the evening that even the amazement of having deviated into poetry could not charm her from the theme. She returned to it whilst the Bard, with his head poised critically on one side and his mouth a little wider open than usual, was still tasting the combination quatrain. 'Mister Edward,' she said mournfully, 'isn't the man he used to be, Shadrach.'

'No!' said Shadrach, dropping the study of the quatrain instantly. 'As how?'

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'He's been changed from the very night

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when you come to the house and spoke o' Mary Howarth's weddin'. He was used to be the gayest creetur—always ready with, his bit of a joke, poor young gentleman, and the smile on his face like sunshine. And now theer's niver a merry word to be had for love nor money. He draws himself about as if he took no interest in life, and sometimes he'll smile that sad it would break your heart. Thee know'st, Shadrach, when you've nussed a child, an' lived to see him grow up the finest young man of a parish, it ain't like a stranger.'

'Thee think'st he frets about her?' asked Shadrach wistfully.

'Shadrach,' said Hepzibah, wiping a tear away with a corner of her herden apron, 'I've niver believed as you'd be a-sittin' afore me now if it hadn't been for that. It was only a man as was desperate of his life could ha' run the risk he did. I've heard it said by more than one as it seemed like going back to death more than it was like a common rescue. His heart was broke, poor thing, and he set no

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worth on his life at all. It was a hundred to one again saving you, Shadrach, and Master Edward isn't like a novice as doesn't know the ins an' outs o' things.'

'I allays set it down to his bein' fond o' thee,' said Shadrach. 'He knowed you'd fret if anything had happened to me.'

'He know'd I'd ha' fretted a sight worse,' replied Hepzibah, with a rather tart decision, 'if anything had happened to him.'

'That's human nature,' said the Bard humbly, 'an' what's human nature has got to be took and be put up with.'

'Of course it's human nature,' returned Hepzibah. 'If I'd ha' nussed you an' carried you about as soon as I was big enough to do it, and seed you grow up bit by bit into the likeliest young man for miles and miles, and then to fall into trouble over a pale-faced chit of a girl as throwed herself away on a wastrel like Will Hackett—' Here Hepzibah wiped her eyes again with the corner of her apron, and left the theme unfinished.

A minute or two later there entered a

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little old woman, whom both Shadrach and Hepzibah greeted as 'mother.' The little old woman had a fretful face, a fretful voice, and with these, as it seemed, a fretful temper.

'Hast been callin' me "mother," ' she said, addressing Hepzibah, this ten or twelve 'ear. Beest goin' to keep the lad danglin' at thy tail till he's grey? '

'Nay, mother,' said Shadrach mildly, it stands to rayson her can't leave wheer her is while theer's trouble i' the place:

'Well,' said the little old woman querulously, theer's a pair on you. When I was a wench the gells liked a mon as ud have 'em to church whether or no, an' stand no shilly-shallying'. And if the gell was that standoffish for a number o' 'ears as thee'st been, Zibah, the lads ud ha' routed out another from somewheer.'

'He's fine and welcome, I 'm sure,' said Hepzibah, rising and drawing her shawl about her.

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'Say not so, Hepzibah!' said the Bard. 'Let nothin' come 'twixt you an' me, For I am iver true to thee.'

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'Who's to tek care on him? ' asked the old woman, and do his mendin' and get him his bit o' victuals when I'm gone? It 'll be no great time, I reckon, afore I'm carried out toes foremost, and him no more to be trusted to tek care of himself than a child, as is no more than could be expected, considerin' his gift, and the way his thoughts goes wool-gatherin'.'

'Well, well, mother,' said Shadrach, 'if I'm contented, so must thou be. - I'll see thee home, Hepzibah.'

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CHAPTER VI.

'HAY-BERRY-HAM said Mr. Horatio Lowther. 'Hay-berry-ham!'

Mr. Lowther was seated in his office at a table overspread with papers, which he was in the act of sorting and docketing. He made no cessation in his work as he uttered this curious call; but his voice took an ascending tone as he repeated it, until its oily smoothness gave way to a grating shrillness. When the cry had been repeated half-a-dozen times a voice was heard overhead:

'Hillo!'

'You have been there all the time?' asked Mr. Lowther. Why did you not answer sooner?'

'Better late than never,' said the voice, and a pair of corduroyed legs came into view

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on the open stairway which led from the upper room to the lower.

'What do you mean by "better late than never?" ' asked Mr. Lowther, frowning.

'Nothing! ' said the voice gruffly, as its owner came into view. 'I might ha' said " Better never than late." It would ha' been truer about most things.'

'Hay-berry-ham!' said Mr. Lowther, speaking rather high in his head, and in a tone of dignified reproof and protest.

'Abrum,' the other corrected him doggedly ' Christened name, A—b—r—a—m, Abrum. Don't put me on the rack and drag me out into four synnables. I won't have it.'

'Did you get the document at the County Court last night? ' asked Mr. Lowther.

'Yes,' said Abram, a little more doggedly than before.

' Then go down to Mr. Hackett's and take possession.'

'That's a nice job, that is,' the man grumbled. He was a clean-shaven, wooden-featured, bald man, with moist eyes and a

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chronic scowl of satire. 'Where's the hurry? ' he demanded. 'It 'll do at night, won't it? Come now. Why shouldn't I put it off till after dark? '

He bad come downstairs in his shirtsleeves, and on receipt of Mr. Lowther's commands had reached down a coat from a nail on the office wall. He had struggled halfway into the coat, which was rather too small for him, when he paused to put these questions.

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'You know very well that it will not do after dark,' said Mr. Lowther. He added suavely, 'Procrastination is the thief of time. Do what you are told.'

'All right!' returned Abram, struggling with the coat. 'Hadn't I better wait till about two minutes after one o'clock? Everybody turns out of the factory just then. Everybody knows me, and when I go into a house they know what I'm there for. Bless your heart, I'm known as well as you are.'

'Do as you are told,' said Mr. Lowther 'and do it now'

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'Shall I send the Town Crier round to say I'm going?' Abram asked, standing on tiptoe to reach his hat. 'They're a very young married couple, Gaffer. The gell's always been particular respectable. Folks ought to know as the bailiff's in the house.'

'Do as you are told,' repeated Mr. Lowther, and do it now.'

Abram departed, grumbling inarticulately, and Mr. Lowther, with great smoothness of voice and suavity of manner, called him back in order to irritate him.

'Let me see the document,' he said; and be sure that it is in order.'

Abram, who by long experience of his employer could read him like a book, returned with a smiling alacrity in order to irritate Mr. Lowther, and lugging the paper from his breast-pocket, presented it with a burlesque flourish of politeness. Mr. Lowther, having failed of his purpose, glanced casually at it and returned it, and Abram took his way in glee, but had no sooner reached the street than he allowed the tip of his nose to rise and

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the corners of his mouth to descend to their normal expression.

He walked at a great pace to Hackett's house, a semi-detached villa on the edge of the town, and having knocked at the door, made himself as small as he could to avoid observation, until a clean little rosy-cheeked maid, in a pink print and a smart cap, answered to his summons. The rosy maid blanched when she saw him, for Mr. Lowther had had dealings with all sorts of people in his time, and—little fish being proverbially sweet—he rather liked the small fry best. And the maid knew Mr. Lowther's messenger from home experience. Abram, though a duly qualified servant of the court, was in a sense Mr. Lowther's retainer. When not engaged in his professional duties, Abram did odd jobs for Mr. Lowther, and even in the exercise of his profession was oftener engaged in his behalf than in that of all other people put together.

'Gaffer in?' said Abram, nodding at the maid to claim his old acquaintance with her.

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'No,' answered the girl. 'Master's gone to the races.'

'Missis in?'

'Yes.'

'Tell her there's a party wants to speak to her.'

The maid during this brief colloquy had, more by defensive instinct than design, closed the door little by little, until by this time only one of her eyes was visible behind it, but the visitor pushed it open with authoritative shoulder, and closed it behind him when he had entered upon the neat little hall. The little maid recoiled before him, and

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disappeared with a backward gaze of terror. Abram watched her as she mounted the stairs, and shook his head twice or thrice up and down.

'Pretty ockipation this is,' he said, grumbling half aloud. But if it's got to be done, it's got to be done; and it's just as well to have a cove in the business as does it pleasant as it is to have a cove in the business as does it unpleasant.'

The maid, panting a little and somewhat

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scared, knocked at the drawing - room door. Her mistress's voice bade her come in, and she entered, and, having closed the door, stood silent for a moment or two. The three months' bride was seated near the window looking out with absent eyes. A half-finished piece of embroidery was in her hands, but they lay idly in her lap with an air of weary lassitude. There was a hint of the same expression in her face, which was of a delicate and rather meagre oval. Her eyes were of a darkish blue-grey, mystic and dreamy. Her lips were mobile and tender, but she had a very decided little chin; and the form of her eyebrows, too, notwithstanding the dreamy mystery of the eyes they surmounted, looked as though she might upon occasion claim a will of her own.

When only a second or two had gone by in silence, a dim sense that there had been something stealthy and afraid in the girl's action intruded itself upon her day-dream. She turned and awoke from her fancies with a little start at this curious thought, and a glance

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at the maid's face confirmed it. She rose, and laid the embroidery on a table near her.

'What is the matter, Sarah '

'Oh, if you please, ma'am,' said the maid, ' the bumbailiff's in the house

'What is in the house?' asked Mrs. Hackett. Her experience was at fault. She had been tenderly nurtured, and knew little of the disgraces and miseries of life.

'Mr. Whitelaw, ma'am,' answered the scared maid. 'He's the county-court man, if you please, ma'am. He was put into father's house when we was sold up.'

This sounded alarming, but the alarm was only vague. What could the man want here?

'Where is he?' she asked. 'In the hall? I will go and see him.'

She descended the stairs, a little fluttered in spite of herself, and encountered Abram in the hall. The man, to do him justice, explained his mission civilly, and even with some delicacy.

'You won't put yourself about about me, ma'am,' he said, 'neither about eatin' nor yet

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about sleepin'. I ain't particular, nor used to be particular. Dessay when Mr. Hackett comes home he'll put this little matter straight. Prob'ly it's a oversight. Often and often I finds it so.'

She left him standing in the hall unanswered, and returned to her old place and posture by the window. The outlook on the summer day had already seemed a little tristful and weary. She had once or twice failed to banish the intruding fear that her marriage was an irretrievable misfortune. It was early to have to do battle with so horrible a conclusion; it was earlier still to be vanquished by it, even though loyalty was yet too

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active and self-respect too strong to allow her to be conquered for more than a moment at a time.

And here is the place for the revelation of a fact which in its own way is a tragedy. The poor thing had not gone through the ordinary gates of enchantment to marry Will Hackett. She had married that handsome and sweet-voiced prodigal, not in the least

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because she loved him, but because she was going to reform him. Life was to have been all nobility and self-sacrifice and lofty duty until this black sheep should change his colour, and then she was to have her reward, poor child. But Master Will was one of those effusive, amiable, generous, and free-handed gentry who have no more heart than a turnip. He had seemed so affectionate In his courting days he had been so easily guided. When a young man has his arm round a pretty girl's waist it is not difficult to seem affectionate; and young men in their courting days have often seemed easily guided, though they have turned out sadly tough in the mouth and rusty in the temper a little later on. But if once the girl who is tied to such a man has gone through the land of rainbows and magic promise he will never seem to her to be altogether the brute he is. Something of the old glamour will cling to him, and bring yet a hint of the old happy blindness to her eyes. Something of the old sweet thrill will stir in the heart at times. So aided, the black sheep

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may seem to be only a little—a very little—dingier than his brethren of the flock. There are cases—we have mostly been happy enough to know them - where to one faithful and tender pair of eyes in the world the blackest sheep has shown lustrous white. Shall we scorn that blissful folly, or laugh at it? Not I—for one.

For Mary Hackett there was none of this beautiful illusion possible. She had married a rake with her eyes open and as a matter of conscience. Perhaps it is too easy to say 'with her eyes open.' Let a home - reared maiden open her eyes as wide as she may, she can have but a little knowledge of the rake. She knows vaguely that he is not so good as the run of men, and she knows, on the authority of the silliest and falsest proverb to be found in the collection of all nations, that when reformed he makes the best of husbands. Master Will had been determined to be found out early. In taking a wife he had not proposed to cripple himself. His friends called him 'the married bachelor,' and he was proud

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of the title. It bespoke the fact that he had surrendered nothing of his liberties; that the yoke which weighed on most men who married had found no place upon his shoulders. His wife was little to blame, therefore, if she discovered the fatal error into which she had fallen a little earlier than most women would have done. She came of the solid, honest trading class, who abhor Bohemianism, and regard debt as the worst of evils, and idleness as one of the worst of crimes. These sentiments were born into her and were a part of her. The shifts of the new household had hurt her bitterly many a time already. The little pile of unpaid tradesmen's bills weighed like an incubus upon her spirit. The calls for each separate bill, and her compelled statement that she would speak to Mr.

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Hackett about it, were like stabs to her. And now, before she had found time even to begin to reconcile herself to her situation, she and her husband were put to open shame. The blow fell dull at first, and it was an hour or two before she began to know what

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pain it carried. The maid came to tell her that dinner was ready, but she could not eat, and would not trouble even to make a pretence of eating. In a while a tear or two began to flow, and when once she had given way so far she had lost control of herself, and flying to her bedroom she locked the door and cast herself upon the bed in an abandonment of grief and shame.

The weary dreadful day crawled on minute by minute and hour by hour when this burst was over, and she paced her room to and fro as she looked at the future. More than once a gust of wrath passed over her spirit and stirred the sick waters of despair. But she would have none of that, and wrestled against herself with all her forces. She had no right to anger—no right to reproach: she had thrown those rights away.

All the while her heart cried out for her mother. Pride held her back, but gave way at last before the imperious call of nature. The friendly darkness had fallen, and no one would see her come and go. She was not

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certain that she was not a prisoner, and even that fear spurred her a little in the way of her own desires, for she wanted to test it and to know the worst, if there were a worse than had happened already. So she slipped on bonnet and shawl and left the house, no effort being made to restrain her. She sped swiftly homewards - the mother's roof had always covered home—since her marriage as before it; and as she went there was such a promise of the peace she longed for in her mother's arms, that it impelled her to run.

Blank disappointment at the door. Mother and daughter had had but little intercourse of late, and the estrangement had grown so far already that Mrs. Howarth had gone away on a customary summer visit of a week to her sister without letting her daughter know of it. Her father was indoors, said the domestic, and would be glad to see her. No, she made shift to answer, she would call again when her mother had returned. She dared not face her father with the news.

The night had grown black and tempestuous.

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She had had no leisure to notice this before, but she saw it as she turned, and the gloom and threatened storm added their quota to the weight which rested on her. The road was lonely, with strips of green on either side of it, and here and there a stile, which gave a glimpse of open fields brooding darkly in the night. The tears she had shed so freely already, the hurried race to her father's house, the disappointment there, the darkness and loneliness of the road, all helped one way. She sank upon a hillock beneath the tall overhanging hedge and burst into a new passion of tears. Only a minute later she heard between her own sobs the sound of a quick footstep on the path, and rose to her feet to find a sombre figure bending over her.

'My poor dear creature,' said a pitying and familiar voice, 'what's the matter? Don't be afraid of me. I wouldn't hurt you for the world.'

Ned Blane!

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CHAPTER VII.

PERHAPS, if she had had but time to think of it, there was nobody by whom she would rather have been found in a situation so painful and humiliating, since it was fated that she should be discovered at all. Ned Blanc, to her mind, was wise, tender, discreet, and brave — and that is not a combination of characteristics at all to be looked for in every young man who may by chance surprise a woman in distress; and he was an old friend into the bargain. She shrank from him, however, in a new distress so acute that for the instant the pain of it killed the old one, and she seemed almost to recover possession of herself.

'It is nothing,' she said. 'Go away, Mr. Blane. Leave me. Pray do. I am going home.'

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At the first sound of her voice he knew her, and the tone seemed to enter his heart like a knife. He discerned a tragedy at once, but his mind outran the facts—distancing them by so much that he found Hackett guilty of a score of villainies before she had spoken her last word.

'Nothing!' he said in a voice of real anguish. 'Oh yes, dear, there is much the matter. Tell me. Can I help you?'

In all her life she had never heard the voice of a heart in pain until that moment. She had heard the voice of little sorrows often enough, but here she was in touch with something terrible. The voice shook her from head to foot with an instant revelation.

'Nothing,' she said, breathing unevenly and trembling. 'I am not very well, and I am foolish. Oh, pray go away, Mr. Blane. Let me go home alone. I am better. It is all over now.'

'Let me see you home,' he answered in a voice suddenly dry and commonplace. 'I won't distress you by talking. Take my arm.'

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She yielded, and walked by his side through the darkness, with a sob catching her breath now and again. There was enough in the encounter to fill both minds. As for the girl, she knew now what she had merely guessed before. The guess had never concerned her greatly. And suddenly she blushed hotly in the dark, and withdrew her hand from his arm so swiftly that the motion startled him. He had called her 'dear.' What right had he to speak to her in such a way? What right had she, a married woman, to take the arm of a man who addressed her in such terms?

'I will go home alone, if you please, Mr. Blane,' she said. The defensive feminine instinct was uppermost now, and made her altogether mistress of herself again.

'As you please,' he said as coldly as he had spoken last. 'Your wish is my law.'

There was not a touch of gallantry in the tone. Nothing, indeed, could have been further away from it, but she disliked the words, and slipped away with a chill 'good night,'

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and a 'thank you' murmured with half - turned head when she was a dozen paces from him. He stood stock - still until her figure was just melting into the darkness, and then walked after her, accommodating his pace to hers, and merely keeping her in sight—a moving shadow. When they left the grassy path, and came upon the road of hard-beaten cinder which marked the beginning of the town, she could hear his footsteps at a distance behind her, and knew that he was following. She was warm with indignation against him now, and the unlucky word rankled woundingly. Blane, for his part, was unconscious of having used it.

The new disturbance in Mary Hackett's mind was so much less poignant than the old that it came as a sort of relief from it. It would not have been altogether wonderful if there had been an underlying sense of complacency in it. The sorrow with which a woman regards the sufferings of her hopeless lover—even when she believes in them and can partly understand them—is not all sorrow.

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If she had cared for the man—if she had had even a remote fear of being in love with him—the case would have been very different. But, being free of any shadow of that sort, she was free also to find any little ray of comfort there might be in the fact that a brave man cared for her. And so, in the human, self-contradictory way, which is all the more marked when the humanity is feminine, she was angry with Ned Blane for being in love with her, and a little comforted thereby at the same time, though vaguely.

To reach home was to go back to all the shames and miseries which had haunted her throughout the day. The man in possession was in the hall when she entered, and was smoking a meditative pipe there as he walked up and down.

'I know the gaffer to be a smoker, ma'am,' he said, touching his bald forehead in token of respect, 'and so I thought you'd tek no offence if I took a puff or two here. The night's close, and it's a bit stuffy in the kitchen.'

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'You may smoke here if you like,' she answered in a choked voice, and escaped upstairs. It was beginning to grow late to her fancy—that is to say, it was nearing ten o'clock—but she resigned herself to a further waiting of two or three hours for her husband's return. She heard his step on the path and his key at the latch with a heart which beat half in relief and half in fear. It was something, though not much, to have him back so early; but the news with which she had to receive him seemed as shameful to tell as it had been to suffer.

'Mary,' called the jolly, rollicking voice from the foot of the stairs, 'where are you?' Then there was an exclamation, and 'Hillo! what do you do here?'

Her place was by her husband's side. If her sense of duty could not carry her so far now, how had it led her to the altar? But she moved reluctantly, and came upon the pair pale as a ghost, and with eyes red and swollen with crying. Hackett was reading the document

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Abram had presented to him by the light of a lamp which stood upon the little hall table, and he had thrust his felt hat on one side to clutch a disorderly handful of curls.

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'Will!' she said, laying a hand upon his shoulder. He turned with a grimace intended to make light of the thing, and went back to his reading.

'Old Lowther, is it?' said he, half to himself. 'He promised to wait, the villain. Well, who sups with the Lowther should have a long spoon, and mine's of the shortest. I'm afraid he'll get the best of it. Look here!'—he addressed himself to Abram—, you keep dark. I've got two or three gentlemen coming to supper and to take a hand at cards. I don't want you in the way. You understand?'

'Right you are, governor,' responded Abram. 'I'm willing to make things agreeable. You can have the plate in if you like, so long as I see it come out again.'

Hackett laughed at this, though rather comfortlessly.

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'All right, my lad,' he said. 'You stick to the kitchen.'

Will,' said his wife when Abram had re. tired, 'you won't have people here to-night?' She laid a timid hand upon his arm, and looked up at him appealingly.

'Why not?' he asked, staring at her in an affected astonishment. 'I must. They'll be here in five minutes, my dear, and you must get a bit of supper ready.'

'There is nothing in the house,' she answered miserably. 'It is too late to send out, and I am ashamed to send to the tradespeople already.'

He stood gnawing at his moustache for a minute, and bent his eyebrows as he stared gloomily at the floor.

'Oh, I'll put that all right,' he said, recovering himself, and turning with his usual jaunty swagger. 'I shan't be away more than ten minutes or a quarter of an hour, and you'll tell the fellows to wait. I'm going down to the "Chase Arms," and I'll get the landlord to send something up.'

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'Will.' she broke out sobbing, 'where is all this to end? You entertain your friends when we haven't even bread to eat ourselves that we can pay for honestly.'

'Look here, Polly,' said Hackett, turning upon her with an expression which had first surprised her on her wedding day, and had since then grown familiar: 'my business is my business. Leave me to it and mind your own. And don't take that tone with me, for I can't stand it, and I'm not going to try.'

She dropped her hands with a gesture of despairing resignation, and turned away. Mr. Hackett was a great deal too desirous of his own good opinion to permit the discussion to close in this manner. When a man is indubitably in the right, and is profoundly conscious that there is nothing in his career for which he can blame himself, he naturally likes to say so.

'I won't have those airs,' said he therefore, 'any more than I'll have that tone.' Miserable as she was she found strength enough for a flash of disdain at this. The scorn in her

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eyes was weary and sad enough, but it was none the less real on that account. 'And I won't be looked at in that way either,' he went on, in a tone more frankly wrathful than he had ever used before to her. 'Don't you try that sort of air on me, my lady, or you'll

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find it won't pay, I can assure you. If you think I married in order to have a perpetual wet blanket in the house, you're very much mistaken, let me tell you. And here's another thing. You've been pretty shy of my friends ever since we married; and lately, whenever one of them comes into the house, I notice that you go away and hide yourself. Now, I'm not going to stand that either. You'll come in tonight and take your place at the head of the supper-tablet, where you ought to be. Mind that, now.'

She never changed the weary look of anger and disdain which had impelled him to tag this injunction to his list of complaints, and he, growing restless under it, had turned away from her, and, opening the hall door, had delivered the greater part of his speech half

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in the house and half out of it. The young gentleman not only wanted to stand well with himself, but had, perhaps, even a stronger desire to stand well with other people; and if he had suspected the presence of Ned Blane outside it is likely that he would have moderated his tone: for although it is undeniably a pleasant thing to bully the feeble, and to have one's way with full assurance of courage, where there is no danger, the most triumphant swaggerer would prefer to execute his paces in private.

But, little as his presence was suspected, Ned Blane stood in the darkness, under the shadow of the hedge opposite, and heard more than enough of his successful rival's speech and tone to make his blood boil and his heart ache anew. He was not of the stuff of which listeners are made, and had lingered there with no hope of a glimpse of the family skeleton. He had been unaware of Hackett's entrance, for when he had once seen Mary beyond her own door he had retraced his steps awhile and had then returned. But the

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tone and the words together rooted him to the place, and he felt such a dangerous flood of rage rise within him that he knew he had only to make one physical movement to give it a chance to break all bounds.

By the time Hackett's diatribe was over, however, the boiling flood had all subsided strangely. He was bitter within until his heart loathed its own bitterness, but he was completely master of himself, and he knew it. The honestly incensed husband slammed the door behind him at the 'mind that, now; ' and so escaped without retort, and at the same time gave force and point to his injunction. He strode angrily down the little gravel path and fumbled for a moment at the gate. In his wrath he shook at it so noisily that he failed to hear Blane's footstep, and it was something of a shock to him to see the sombre figure looming so closely on him in the dark.

'Hillo!' he said, starting back nervously. 'Good night, Will!' said Blane, passing an arm through one of his with a singular

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slow and firm deliberateness. Ned's arm clenched on his old companion's so firmly that Hackett felt as though he were in custody, and made a half-unconscious movement to extricate himself, but the arm which encircled his felt like a bar of iron. Hackett had never had an idea that Blane was so prodigiously muscular as he seemed to be. He

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began to wonder a little what his old friend might mean by his silence, and the strange captivity in which he held him. Then he remembered the open door, and the recent address delivered to his wife—in the open air, for any passer by to have the benefit of it! 'Don't you think, Will,' said Blane, strenuously but quietly controlling Hackett's footsteps to the measure of his own, that you'd better keep those little endearments private—eh?'

'Oh!' cried Hackett, gladly seizing on the chance this gave him, 'you've been eavesdropping, have you, Ned? Come, now! that doesn't do you any special credit, does it?'

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'Now I'll warn you,' said Blane, with a curious dryness and coolness of tone which very much chilled his involuntary companion, there's nothing I should so dearly like at this minute as for you to give me a reasonable chance of quarrelling with you on my own account. Will you take that back, if you please?'

'Well,' said Hackett, who liked less and less the iron pressure on his arm, 'I don't recognise your right, you know, to make any comment on what you happen to overhear between my wife and me.'

'Will you take it back, if you please?' Blane asked again, as the other had not spoken.

'Haven't I taken it back?' Hackett demanded. 'I said you happened to overhear, didn't I?'

'Will you take it back, if you please?'

'I have taken it back,' said Hackett.

'Very well. And now for my question again. Don't you think those little endearments between man and wife are best kept private? Tell me now.'

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'I don't see what it has to do with you at all, Ned. You used not to be a meddlesome fellow. Let a man mind his own concerns, will you?'

He was a good deal less bellicose than he had been a while ago with the weaker vessel, but that, of course, was natural. He put more of good - humoured badinage than of remonstrance into his voice, and finished with a half-laugh.

'I don't see what it has to do with me either,' said Blane. The iron grip on Hackett's arm began to tremble perceptibly, and whilst the captive wondered what this might mean, he found himself suddenly released, but confronted face to face. 'I do see one or two things,' Blane was saying. I do see that you've married—one of the best girls in the world, and that you're as worthy of her as I am to be an angel. I do see that you bully her and snarl at her, like the mongrel dog you are. Business of mine? You may thank your stars, my lad, that it's no business of mine, for if it were you'd suffer.'

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'Now, come, Ned,' said Hackett in an almost genial, and altogether allowing and friendly way, 'you go too fast and too far. You do now, really. I'm in the most abominable heap of trouble. I've had shameful luck lately, and nothing's seemed to go as it ought to go. And I've had news to - night that's enough to put any fellow out of temper.'

'Go your way,' Blane answered, with something very like a groan. 'I've done with you.'

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I shan't bear any malice for what's passed between us, Ned,' said Hackett.
'Very well,' said the other. 'Least said soonest mended.'
'Ned's queer,' thought Hackett to himself as he went on his way. 'He's very queer. He used to be prowling a good deal about old Howarth's house himself. Is that it?'
So the one effect of Ned Blane's interference was that it gave Will Hackett a needle to prick his wife with, and that he made up his mind to use it.

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CHAPTER VIII.

MARY did not appear at the supper - table, in spite of Hackett's injunction; and when the latter went upstairs to insist upon obedience, he found the bedroom door locked against him. He reserved to himself the right to express his opinion with regard to this open defiance later on, and controlling himself without much difficulty—for he was one of those people who need to say how indignant they are before they can get up any great force of steam—he descended to his companions. They were easily contented with his apologies, and were, indeed, rather pleased than otherwise to be freed from the restrictions a hostess's presence would have imposed upon them.
The rosy maid, who waited at table, was

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amazed at the gaiety of the party, and more than a little frightened by it. She remembered the burdensome gloom, the terror and restraint which had been created by Abram's presence in her father's house, and her master's recklessness had something awful in it, to her simple mind. It even wore a look of impiety, and the rosy maid was in terror of a judgment, and broke a plate or two in her agitation.

Hackett's convives were four in number. Two were old cronies of his—by no means the pick of his old acquaintances, but such as fate and his own courses had left to him; and the other two were strangers to him, found in his friends' companionship on that day's racecourse.

'My friends' friends,' said Will, with his own genial and delightful swagger, 'are mine. I won't offer you amontillado and turtle, gentlemen, but plain fare and a hearty welcome you can have.'

There are people who do not care for these sudden expansions of the heart; but then, on

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the other hand, there are people who do, and Mr. Hackett's new acquaintances happened to belong to the latter type. They said they would be delighted, and they accepted with almost as much effusion as Will himself had displayed in his invitation. They were in all the better humour with themselves, and with the world at large, because the day's ventures had been prosperous; and they were all the more pleased with their host because his inspirations had for once in a way led him to choose the right horses, and they had followed his lead.

'And now, Will, my lad,' said one of them when the cloth was cleared away, 'before we settle down I've a favour to ask you. This gentleman is a mighty fine judge of music. He ought to be, for he ran the opera in New York for three years—didn't you, Bob?—and I

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particularly want him to hear you sing. In fact, it's a treat I've as good as promised him—haven't I, Bob?

This gentleman was a bald man in spectacles and evening dress. He had apologized

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on arrival for the character of his costume by the statement that he had been obliged to look in at the theatre in the great town hard by for an hour or two; and Hackett had been told, with an air of mystery and importance fully equal to the nature of the disclosure, that he had his eye on a singing chambermaid there, and had half a mind to engage her. The two squireens were mighty proud of their knowledge of this personage, and to be permitted to call him Bob was a glory they would not have exchanged to have been at Waterloo, and barely to have won money from a professional exponent of the three-card trick.

The great man said, with no particular enthusiasm, that he should like very much indeed to hear Mr. Hackett sing.

'I'm not in particularly good voice lately,' said Will, 'but I'll do my best for you.'

The entrepreneur leaned back in his chair, drew his glass towards him, and puffing lazily at his cigar prepared to suffer. His experience had made him familiar with the amateur

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tenor, and he dreaded him as the burnt child dreads the fire. Among the smaller of life's unescapable ills the amateur tenor bulks dark and large, and the gentleman from New York had suffered more from him than most men have; in part, of course, because of his position, which impelled musical incapacities of all sorts to whine and howl and growl and strum and scrape for him; but mainly because he was an uncommonly good judge of music, and bad music was as offensive to his ear as an evil odour is to the average nose.

At this ebb of his fortunes Hackett hailed with all his heart the chance of singing before such a man as this. He displayed no eagerness, but he had too much tact to make the common fuss, and wait for the usual eager pressure. He laid down his cigar upon an ash-tray and sauntered to the piano, and carelessly turned over a heap of music there. If in the whole range of English balladry there was a ditty on the rendering of which he particularly prided himself, it was that sweet old song, 'The Thorn.' lie decided that he

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would not sing more than once unless the important personage especially pressed him; and there was no such great difference between his singing of 'The Thorn' and any of his other pet ballads that the listener would be likely to note a falling off, and he wanted to create a good impression. So he opened the pages, balanced them on the music rest with a good deal of feminine - looking coaxing and persuading of the limp and well-used pages, and began.

Before he had sung through the first line the man of music rose softly from his chair, and dropping his elbows noiselessly on the mantel-board suffered his chin to fall upon his hands and put his heart into his ears. From first to last-not a flaw. Tone, phrasing, and expression absolutely just. The listener had heard finer voices, but he could count

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them on the fingers of one hand. What pleased him, even more than the voice, was the management of it.

The tender, melting rapture of the captivating

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rascal's voice reached his wife as she lay sobbing in her bedroom.

'No!' I exclaimed, 'by Heaven I may I perish

If ever I plant in that bosom a thorn!'

He warbled on, never thinking of her, and charming all listeners' ears but hers and one other's. And as for her, poor thing, it is not easy to be angry with her, because anger stilled her sobs for a moment at this tuneful lie. The barbed satire of the thing struck through and through her. It had been his pet song in his brief courting days; and though he had always ogled her in precisely the same way and at precisely the same places, she had never pierced to the mechanism of the handsome and devoted eyes he made at her, and had taken the declaration to be as solemn a piece of earnest as if he had spoken it, and it had been in prose. It had been through his chivalrous and devoted tenderness of this that she had hoped to lead him from his erring ways and make a good man of him. So affectionate, so easily swayed, so facile in confession,

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in repentance, in promise for the future! And now! And now!

Ned Blane must needs, torture himself; as happens with most young men who find themselves in similar case. He could have made choice among a score of streets and lanes to stroll in if he had a fancy for getting wet through; and by this time the threatening storm had burst, and the warm summer rain had soaked him to the skin in the first five minutes of its fall. But he must torment himself by being near his suffering idol, whom he had no right or power to comfort, and by the grim hate which was taking root in every fibre of him against the man to whom she was tied. And the song which struck up as he was passing for the fifth or sixth time made such an appeal to him as any man of common sympathy can understand. Perish rather than plant a thorn in that tender breast? The song itself was an unimaginable insolence of cruelty. Perish? He would have done it Ay, a thousand times. The desolate heart ached as it had never ached before.

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Young men exaggerate this love trouble at times, no doubt, and in a year or two Jane consoles for Sarah's want of feeling. And if Mary Howarth had married well and had been happy, Ned Blane could have put up with his trouble as many a stalwart, worthy fellow had done before and has done since, is doing now, and will do. But it was not a tithe of his trouble that he was left out in the cold. It would have been hard that another man should make her happy, and not he; but he was man enough to have borne that quietly. But to have that pure soul throw herself away on such a man as Hackett—that queen of womanhood degraded, that sweet heart wounded, the delicate, sensitive, weak thing rated and scolded—oh! all this was hideous and too bitter to be borne. His eyes burned dry with anger and his whole frame ached with pity.

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When the song was over three of the singer's guests were noisy in approbation. The important man turned his back to the fireplace, flicked off the ash of his extinguished

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cigar behind him, struck a light, took a meditative puff or two, and for a while said nothing. By - and - by, when the others had done with their compliments, he spoke.

'Mr. Hackett,' he said, 'will you be so good as to tell me where you studied?'

'Oh,' Will answered, 'I never studied at all, to speak of. My grandfather went through three or four years in Italy. He taught my father, and my father taught me, what little bit he knew.'

'Ah,' said the stranger, 'you come of a musical family. What was your father's name?'

'Hackett, of course,' said Will. He knew very well what the other meant, though he would not seem to do so.

'Of course,' the other answered smilingly. 'But his stage name?'

'My father had no stage name,' said Master Will, rather haughtily.

'He was the biggest landowner for some ten miles around,' said one of the young squireens.

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Will had relied upon one of them to say this for him; but in default he would have said it for himself.

'I beg pardon. Did you ever think of carrying that fine voice of your own to market, Mr. Hackett?'

'No,' said Hackett carelessly, fingering the pages of his music and looking round upon his questioner as he did so. 'I'm not a rich man, but I've never had need to do that yet. And I'm not sure that I should care to do it. They're not a very gentlemanly lot,' he added, with a very gentlemanly air, 'that get their living that way.'

'There are all sorts,' said the spectacled man, smoothing his head placidly with a hand all over rings; Mario's a nobleman, as you know.'

'Of course, of course,' said Will. He was not ill - pleased to let it be thought he knew it.

'There's a good two thousand a year in the voice if you cared to use it,' said the stranger guest.

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'Oh? ' said Hackett lightly. 'That's a bait, if I could see it to bite at.'

'Is it?' asked the other, still polishing his head and placidly puffing. 'It's there to bite at if you like to bite. Will you sing us another song, Mr. Hackett?'

This judgment from a man who ought to be competent warmed the vocalist's heart. He had been thinking of little else than of carrying that fine voice of his to market for a month or two past; but his habit of putting things off was native and rooted by habit, and what with that, and his pride, and his not quite knowing how to begin, his thinking had led to nothing.

'Do you sing in Italian?' asked the manager, turning to the canterbury and fingering the pile of music there. 'What's this? "Spirito gentil"? Try that, Mr. Hackett.'

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'No,' said Will; 'I'd rather not. I can sing it in a way when I know there's nobody by to see where I go wrong in the lingo. Here's "My Pretty Jane." I'm not afraid of that, if you like it.'

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"My Pretty Jane" by all means,' said the manager.

So Will sang 'My Pretty Jane,' and confirmed the good opinion the important personage had formed of him. The Man in Possession stole into the hall to listen, and so the vocalist had three more auditors than he counted on or thought about.

'And now,' said Hackett, when his song was finished and the applause was over, let us have a turn at the pasteboard.' And the others assenting, they sat down to the table and began to play.

It was the host's style to play wildly, and so it almost always happened that he lost or won with great rapidity. To-night the run of the cards favoured him, and he won a great deal more than two at least of his guests could have desired to lose. At last, what with his winnings on that day's racing, and his run of luck at cards, he had more than enough in hand to discharge his unwelcome visitor in the morning. He grew radiant, and he laughed

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louder and drank more than all his guests together.

There is a gambler's superstition, which, like all superstitions, will fulfil itself at times, to the effect that it is a fatal thing for a winner to count his gains before the end of the game. Mr. Hackett went on plungingly, carrying all before him, until he had made the calculation just mentioned, and then his luck turned. His play was no less scientific than it had been—that was impossible; but the seeming magic had gone out of his hand, and the fortune that had rained aces and kings of trumps upon him began to dole out twos and threes of worthless suits, and the pile before him dwindled, dwindled, dwindled, and vanished. Then he was for playing on credit; but somehow his friends were all very tired and sleepy on a sudden, and protested with unanimity that it was really time to be off, and that they could hardly see the cards. Really, now, upon their separate and united words of honour they were so sleepy they could hardly see

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the cards. There was no holding them there by force, and they went their way. And when they were outside, the theatrical manager laid a hand on the shoulder of the squireen who had called him Bob, and, said he:

'Your friend seemed rather hard hit at losing, didn't he?'

'Well, you see,' said the friend, in friendly excuse, 'he's on his last legs, poor beggar!'

'Oh! What's become of the family land?'

'Like grandfather, like father. Like father, like son.'

'Ah!, Does he drink? Seemed to take his whisky rather too kindly to - night, I thought. That fine voice won't last long if he drinks.'

'Oh, he takes his glass like the rest of us,' said the squireen, who was his own enemy but nobody else's, and could guess in what direction the manager was driving. 'That's all.'

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'There's money in that voice,' said the manager after a minute or two of reverie. 'Not so much as I said at first perhaps, but

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money. He wants a practical man behind him. On his last legs, is he? What does he do for a living?'

'Nothing.'

'M - m. I think I'll give him a look-up to-morrow.'

Meantime Hackett sat staring at the ornamental fire-paper in the grate. Three months married. Not a half - crown in the world. And then the Man in Possession. Well. He was told by a man who ought to know that his voice was worth two thousand a year to him. How could a man with a treasure like that come to grief? He sat sipping and smoking until he fell asleep. The Man in Possession snored stertorously on his comfortless couch of two chairs in the kitchen. Hackett snored from his arm-chair in the dining-room. The hapless wife listened in the intervals between the sobs she could not altogether quiet, and looked at the future.

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CHAPTER IX.

THE Man in Possession remained in possession for the space of three days, and at the end of that time departed, his claim being satisfied. News travels fast in little places, and there was not a creature in the town who was of an age and nature to understand who did not know that the newly married pair had been in trouble. The auctioneer currently employed by Mr. Lowther in affairs of this kind was cheerful in the rostrum, but apt to be low - spirited when trade was slack. He had brightened perceptibly at the prospect of disposing—partly to his own profit—of the garniture of that commodiously furnished residence Green Bank House, and had already dwelt in fancy on the graceful allusions with which it would be possible to introduce

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the well - known amateur's piano to a purchasing public. He was the first to learn that the Man in Possession had been paid out, for he had met Abram on his return journey, and the news, was something of a blow to him.

Mary Hackett did not know how the money had been paid.

'It's been got honestly,' said Will in answer to her inquiry. 'And that ought to be enough for you.'

She made it enough, but it was a day or two before she so far conquered the shame with which this public disgrace had filled her as to face the streets again.

It happened on the third morning that Mary, coming downstairs an hour or two before her husband, found a letter addressed to him in a strange handwriting, and without knowing why, was a little effrayed by it. The envelope was long and narrow. It was made of blue paper. Its contents, whatever they might be, were rather unusually bulky for a letter, and altogether, for a woman of

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her recent experiences, it had a legal and disturbing aspect. Lying on the table before her, beside her husband's plate, it spoiled her breakfast, but when Master Will came down, looking rather fishy about the eyes and rather dull and ill-tempered as was his custom of a morning, he brightened at the sight of the envelope and pounced upon it almost gaily.

The document he drew from it looked no less legal than the envelope had done, but Hackett having merely glanced at it thrust it into his pocket and sat down smilingly to breakfast. His morning appetite was pretty generally languid, and now, though he ate with heartiness for a mouthful or so, he fed by-and-by to trifling with the viands before him, and bit by bit grew gloomy again. Suddenly he looked up at his wife, who was gazing at him with an anxious and distressed expression.

'My dear,' said he, 'you are looking like a ghost this morning. Why don't you go out? A walk in the fresh air would do you good.'

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This solicitude for her welfare, which would have seemed quite natural a month earlier, was surprising now, but Mary was still more surprised when her husband arose from his seat, and taking his place behind her chair, caressed her cheeks with both hands. The surprise grew when he stooped down and imprinted a kiss upon her forehead.

'Take a walk, my darling,' he said; 'it will do you all the good in the world.'

She rose and looked at him timidly for a moment, then being easily touched by kindness and greatly craving for it and in need of it, she put both arms about his neck and leaned her head upon his shoulders. Will patted her gently, kissed her again, pushed back her face a little, and laughed at her quite brightly.

'Take a walk, my dear,' he said again. 'You want it. You haven't been out for a week.'

She hardly cared to face her little world again after what had happened, but Will's

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changed manner aroused new hopes and made her eager to obey him.

'Take a good long walk, my dear,' said Will, 'and get the roses back to those pale cheeks of yours.'

He was so gracious and affectionate and gay that she knew not what to make of him, but she obeyed him, and in spite of the timid reluctance with which she ventured into the street, the broad summer sunshine without was answered by some uncertain and feeble gleams within. She drew down her veil and hurried towards the fields, and once there sauntered in quiet solitude, thinking of many things, but most of all of Will's changed manner.

She had begun to know, quite a long time back it seemed, that her husband's nature afforded but a sandy and precarious soil to build upon. But if only she could woo his short-lived affection back to life again, could gain some gentle permanent influence over him—awake his better instincts, and justify her own dreams!

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She accused herself of despairing too easily, of being too harsh in judgment and too quick in temper. She vowed and prayed to be more charitable and more patient. She would be wise as the serpent, also. Little things that had wounded her prejudices—

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which she began to feel had been sectarian and narrow - - should wound her no more. Will was a man of the world, and he and she had been bred so differently! There was no real harm in many of the things which she had somehow felt to be shocking, and she resolved to be shocked no more. Her attempts at weeding that disorderly garden should in future be confined to those plants within its boundaries which were undoubtedly harmful. And so she dreamed her dreams and prayed her prayers and went home again, comforted.

In the meantime her husband was likewise engaged in preparations for the future. When the door had closed behind his wife he drew the legal-looking document from his pocket, and read it keenly. He had had, of course, no business training, but he read this particular

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document with a shrewd business mind, and in spite of certain numerous and bewildering legal technicalities mastered every word of it. He managed this by dint of dropping every unnecessary word from each sentence, and then combining the scattered passages of plain English, which for aught I know may be the fashion of lawyers themselves.

When he had mastered the contents of the paper he took pen and ink and set his signature at the foot of it, doing this, as he did most things, with a mighty flourish. Then having pen in hand he wrote a note

'MY DEAR POLLY, - I have had a sudden call from home. It is quite on the cards that I may be away for a week. I leave you a five-pound note for immediate expenses, and all the tradesmen's bills are paid and receipted. You will hear from me again in a day or two, and I think we are going to be prosperous.

'Always your affectionate Husband,

'WILL HACKETT.'

He enclosed with this the five-pound note

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he spoke of, then went upstairs, spent a vigorous half-hour in packing his belongings together, took a good look round to be sure that nothing had been left behind, and with his own hands carried his portmanteaus into the hall.

Next he rang the bell for the maid.

'A man will call to carry these down to the coach in half an hour's time from now,' he said, consulting his watch. 'Wait a minute.' He stood still to consider, poring upon the floor. 'I shall be late. I'll carry them a part of the way myself. I shall meet somebody who wants to earn a shilling, I dare say. And there's a letter on the breakfast-table; see that your mistress has it when she comes in.'

The maid opened the door for him, and he walked out, carrying a portmanteau in either hand. He looked right and left as he went, with an air which would have given an observer a right to imagine that he was not anxious to be seen. The portmanteaus were heavy, and the summer sun was powerful, and

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Will Hackett was neither accustomed to exercise of this character nor fond of it. He hailed therefore with great pleasure the appearance of the man late in possession, who was lounging along with his hands in his pockets, and a general air of having nothing to do upon him.

Will was conscious of no mauvaise honte in accosting the dethroned functionary.

'I suppose you're willing to earn a shilling, Abram?'

'I've got to earn what I can lay my hands on, Mr. Hackett, whether I'm willing or not,' said Abram, with a superfluous air of philosophy. 'What's the job? Carry them leather boxes How far? '

'To the "Chase Arms," ' said Hackett.

'All right,' responded Abram, and seized upon the luggage Hackett had relinquished.

When Hackett entered the cool and shaded bar - room of the 'Chase Arms' he saw a sight which surprised him more than a little. The sober and respectable Ned Blane was there alone, at that hour of the morning; and what

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was more, he had a glass of spirits and water before him.

'Hillo, Ned!' said the new - comer, 'I didn't know you did that sort of thing so early.'

Blane gave him no answer, but drained his glass, and walking into the stone-paved hall, stood there with his back turned to his successful rival. Hackett shrugged his shoulders, smiled meaningly at the landlady, and nodded his head in Blane's direction.

'Changing his ways a little, isn't he?'

'It isn't my place to talk, Mr. Hackett,' said the elderly landlady, 'but I'm sorry to see it, and I'd a deal rather not have his custom than have it. I like the young gentleman too well to want to see him comin' here too often. I'd say the same to you if I thought there was any use in it.'

'Don't cry bad fish, Mrs. Warden,' cried Will, with that captivating laugh of his.

'Good wine is a good familiar creature, and so is brown brandy. I'll take a little, if you please.'

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The elderly landlady filled his glass and set it before him with no very gracious air, and Hackett, taking up a besmeared and tattered copy of last week's journal, feigned to glance over its contents as he sipped.

In due time Abram arrived with the baggage, received his shilling, and lingered at the portal to watch the arrival of the coach, which was naturally an event for unemployed people.

Blane stood stolidly in the vestibule as if he awaited Hackett's departure, and the latter lifted his eyes from the dog's-eared journal a score of times to look at him through the bar - room window.

Now Mrs. Hackett's walk had lasted for perhaps an hour, and when she re-entered the house, full of grave and tender thoughts, the maid handed a note to her, and she, without so much as looking at it, carried it absently upstairs into her bedroom. The aspect of the place recalled her from her reverie at once. Two or three disordered drawers were stacked one upon the other on the floor, and

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a hundred articles were lying loosely scattered on the bed. She stood for a moment in wonder, and then, her eyes falling upon the note, she saw that its superscription was in her husband's handwriting. She tore the letter open and made herself mistress of its contents at a glance.

What did this clandestine departure mean? Was Will deserting her? Had he cajoled her from the house in order to get away in secret?

She shrank from the fancy, and pushed it away from her with all her force. She would not give houseroom to so terrible an imagination for a second. But the door was barred too late. The thought had found an entrance and insisted on remaining, let her blind her eyes to it as she might. She ran hurriedly downstairs and questioned the maid.

'Who gave you this letter?'

'The master, ma'am.'

'When?'

'Not quite half an hour ago.'

'Has any one called since I went out?' 'Nobody, ma'am. The master took away

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two portmantles with him, ma'am, and said he'd send a man to carry them to the coach; but he said afterwards that there wouldn't be time for that, and he carried 'em himself.'

'You are sure,' her mistress asked her, disguising to the best of her power her own pain and terror—'you are sure that nobody came to the house whilst I was out?'

'Quite sure, ma'am,' said the maid.

'That will do. You may go.'

The maid left her, and she stood for a little while quite still, looking straight before her with the letter in her hand; and then, suddenly rousing herself, she left the house and walked at a brisk pace towards the town.

She would understand this strange procedure—and at once. It was her right to understand it. Will had evidently known before he advised her to leave the house, with all those false caresses and all that pretended gentle brightness, that he was going to leave her. She drew her figure unconsciously upright, and trod the pavement like an indignant queen. Then, becoming aware of her own aspect,

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she essayed to calm herself, and succeeded at last in assuming a more ordinary manner. But whilst she was yet at a considerable distance from the main road she heard the sound of the coach horn. She was wont to be conservative of her dignity, and at ordinary times would have thought it quite a disgracefully hoydenish thing to run in the streets; but this was a moment to banish small scruples, and she ran her hardest.

Hackett was swaggering on the steps of the hotel, delaying to mount the coach until the last moment, and Ned Blane was watching him with eyes of hatred and contempt. Master Will, who was smiling along the street, turned pale suddenly, and made an active dash for the box seat. Blane strolled down the vestibule, and looked out sardonically for the emissary of law.

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The coachman's whip cracked, the guard's horn sounded, the coach went off in a cloud of dust; and Mrs. Hackett came to a standstill in the middle of the High Street, and turning, retraced her steps. Blane burst into

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a great laugh, which sounded so oddly that the little crowd of idlers stared at him. His merriment endured for a space remarkable for its brevity, and he looked back surlily and almost fiercely at the people who looked at him, and went back into the hotel.

'There's summat very queer come o'er Mr. Blane these late days,' said one of the loungers.

'Yes,' answered Abram, to whom this observation was addressed. 'It's to be feared as Old Blazer's Hero is on the road downhill'

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CHAPTER X.

JOHN HOWARTH, builder and timber merchant, was a small man who mistook himself for a big one. He rode nine stone, or thereabouts, and walked with as solid and stolid a deliberation as if he rode twenty. He dressed as it befitted a big man of the old school to dress —John Bull fashion, in boots and breeches, blue cutaway coat with brass buttons, high false collars scraping at his bit of side whiskers, blue bird's-eye neckerchief, and a hat rather broader in the brim and lower in the crown than common. Below his little rotund waistcoat a bunch of seals exuded from a very tight fob, and the builder, putting his small shoulders back with a wonderfully undeceptive air of being six feet, and as broad as a door, fingered the seals constantly.

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The inside man corresponded pretty closely to the outside. He was not often of the same opinion for five days together, and was as incapable of a lasting enmity as of a settled idea. But he had somehow arrived at the belief that he was an unshakable, unmalleable, adamantine sort of person, and superior to all such influences as those by which the weak permit themselves to be cajoled or driven.

The summer air in the neighbourhood of Haworth's house was fragrant with the scent of pine boards, and the spiteful noise made by a circular saw, which bit its steam-driven way through timber in a great shed in the rear of the house, was like the sound of a prodigious wasp in a prodigious passion.

The builder stood, with his shoulders squared and his nose in the air, at his own gate, caressing with the finger and thumb of his right hand a chin shaven as clean as a new-laid egg, whilst his left hand toyed with the bunch of seals. The finger and thumb on the clean - shaven chin conveyed a pleasant sense of personal niceness. The handling of the

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seals carried, as it always did, a sentiment of wealth and size and importance—a sentiment vague and undefined, but none the less agreeable on that account. There were wide-spread fields before him, and he looked at them as if he owned them, and felt like the lord of the manor.

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When a thing happened to another man the builder knew how to regard it with an eye of tolerable shrewdness, and could estimate its proportions (provided they were such as to be within his grasp at all) as accurately as the general run of men could do. But when a thing happened to himself, it took so different a colour from any it could possibly have worn in occurring to another that his judgment became perhaps a trifle confused. If Will Hackett had married another man's daughter, and had run away from her after a mere three months of married life, Howarth, not being quite so adamant as he fancied himself, would have pitied the man, and have thought the posture of affairs unhappy. But since it was his daughter who was deserted by

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her husband the fact had little more effect upon him than to make him feel that he was, if possible, of greater importance than ever in the parish, and an object of profounder interest. His mind was a combination of peepshow and whispering gallery, and, looking into it and listening in it, he saw and heard grouped neighbours engaged always in one contemplation and discussing one theme. He was not only the centre of the universe to himself, but, to his own unconscious apprehension, to other people also. It was almost a necessity of nature that people should be interested in John Howarth. John Howarth's affairs were so profoundly interesting to himself, that it stood to reason that other people should be interested in them.

This innocent misapprehension was mainly responsible for the generally received opinion that Howarth—though a shrewd man of business, and as good a judge of the worth of standing timber as could here and there be found—was the deadliest bore in five counties. If there was one point in his character -

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which, being his own, could hardly be less than absolutely flawless—he admired more than another, it was his power for dignified reticence about his own affairs. His confidence that he could, when he chose, be as secret as the tomb, gave him, quite naturally, a greater freedom when he chose to be communicative; for it is evident that a man who runs no danger whatever may do more things that look courageous than another man may who knows himself to be in peril. The steel-clad knights of old chopped up their social inferiors in leather with lighter hearts than many of them might have carried if they had been in leather and their social inferiors in steel. Being so perfectly armed as he was against any temptation to grow garrulous about his own concerns, Howarth was at liberty to talk about them when and where he pleased, and to whom he chose. So he talked about them everywhere and always, and to anybody who would listen.

Whilst he stood sunning himself in a conscious rectitude, which made him feel positively

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benevolent towards the world at large, he heard a footstep, and, turning to the left, saw Hepzibah approaching him with a basket on her arm. He made himself a little bigger than usual, and stepped ponderously—as became a man of his figure—into the road. Hepzibah at once displayed an inclination towards a detour, and struck out into the

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middle of the horse-road. Howarth, comfortably understanding that a person of Hepzibah's social position would naturally be humble in his presence, took a step or two into the horse-road to encourage her in accosting him. Either Hepzibah's humility, or—which was scarcely possible—her desire to avoid the honour of passing a good morning ' with the builder, sent her back to the footpath. Howarth, by a sort of majestic chance, returned to the footpath also, just in time to intercept the gaunt domestic.

'Mornin',' he said. 'Fine weather if it holds.'

Hepzibah, thus arrested, stopped short, with an eminently unconversational aspect. 'Yes; the weather's right enough.'

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'Ah,' said Howarth, 'it's fine likely weather, and it's pushin' the fruit on beautiful!'

He lifted the edge of the snowy napkin which partially covered the contents of Hepzibah's basket, and condescendingly selecting a particularly ripe gooseberry tasted it, and nodded approval. 'I suppose,' he asked, 'you've been up to Mother Jordan's garden for these?'

'That's so,' said Hepzibah, making a movement to get past him.

'Fine sunny bit o' land,' said Howarth. The old woman seems to get everythin' to ripen a bit earlier than other folks. Her little gell's in service with my daughter, Mrs. Hackett.'

Hepzibah made no response, but looked straight over Howarth's shoulder, and, having been intercepted in her last effort to escape, stood stock - still, with an air of resolute patience.

'How's the young master?' asked Howarth. 'I've heerd say as he's got a medal o'

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some sort for savin' Shadrach Randal's life. Is that true?'

'He's got the medal right enough,' said Hepzibah, with the same forbidding aspect, and dear enough it might ha' cost him.'

'Yes, yes,' assented Howarth. 'Dear enough it might ha' cost him, to be sure. He's a valiant chap, is young Blane, and a fine feller altogether. Between you and me,' he continued, taking out his confidential stop, 'it's begun to seem to me to be a bit of a pity as I hadn't found that out earlier.'

'Oh?' said Hepzibah, shifting her basket from one to the other, and looking straight before her. 'That's come to be the opinion of a good many people, let me tell you.'

'That's likely, too,' said Howarth; 'there's few men o' sense as I'm not at one with in regard to most questions.'

'It's a pity you weren't at one wi' most men o' sense wi' regard to that question some months ago, Mr. Howarth,' returned Hepzibah.

'I suppose folks are a-talkin'?' said the builder.

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'They generally are,' replied Hepzibah, about one thing or another.'

'There's some on 'em,' she added, making a forward move again, as has got nothin' better to do.'

'What are they saying now?' asked Howarth, lifting up the napkin again and selecting another gooseberry.

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'Saying?' repeated Hepzibah; 'there's some on 'em sayin' things as ought to make some folks' ears tingle.'

'Ah?' said Howarth; 'and what might they be?'

'Well, amongst 'em,' returned Hepzibah, steadily looking through the questioner's hat, they say it's a bit of a pity for a gell to be born of a father and mother as carries nought but clockwork in their insides.'

Howarth was disconcerted for a moment, and chose a third gooseberry from the basket Hepzibah carried. She tucked down the napkin decidedly, as if to make an end of this friendly pilfering, and readjusted the basket so as to be out of Howarth's reach.

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'And what might ha' started 'em on that tack?' asked the builder.

'It's a common way o' thinkin',' answered Hepzibah, 'as a gell's natural protectors is her father and mother. If I was t' open my mind, Mr. Howarth, I might say things I should be sorry for. And, letting that stand aside, I've got other things to think about. As for what the folks are saying, there's a many of 'em as is rare and ready to say afore your face what they say behind your back.'

'Behind my back!' said Howarth, ruffling. 'And what do they find to say behind my back?'

'Ask 'em,' returned Hepzibah grimly; 'there's some on 'em 'll tell you.'

'Very well,' said Howarth. 'I ask the first I come across. I ask you.'

'Oh, well,' replied Hepzibah ominously, 'when a thing's, asked for, it doesn't take much of a bold face t' offer it, does it, Mr. Howarth? They're saying, the most of 'em —since you will have it—as it's nigh on a

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fortnight now since your daughter's husband left the place for the Lord knows where. They're saying you let the poor thing marry a drunken wastrel with your eyes open. And they're a-saying as you and your wife, as ought to be the only ones i' the world as the poor thing's got to look to, have left her there -- to starve for all you know, or seem to care. And there's some of 'em saying it'll be a bit of a pity if Jack Howarth isn't stoned i' the market-place next Friday. Now you've got what you asked for, Mr. Howarth, and I'm glad of it, for it's a weight off my mind as I'd a deal rather have off than on it, and I'll say good mornin'.'

Therewith Hepzibah departed, bolt up right, and Howarth, with his finger and thumb at his clean-shaven chin, looked after her with an expression altogether piteous and crestfallen.

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CHAPTER XI.

IT was essential that Mr. Howarth's spiritual barrel organ should grind out a tune of which he could approve. If anything occurred to disarrange the machinery, there was nothing easier in the world than to find a new tune and to persuade himself that it was no more than a natural variation of the old one. In face of Hepzibah's news his sentiments at once became fatherly, and he was completely aware that he had been fatherly all along, and had only waited for a propitious moment to declare his

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benevolent intentions. It had hitherto been his opinion that it was Mary's place to come to him; he knew now that it had been his opinion all along that it was his place to go to her—after waiting, as a matter of course, quite properly until now.

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Seeing things thus clearly, he walked round to the back of the house, to save the trouble of admitting himself by the front door, and encountered Mrs. Howarth in the kitchen.

'Fanny Ann,' said Mr. Howarth, 'I'm thinkin' it's about time we went down street and took a look at Mary. We've had no news of the wench now for full a fortnight, and it's nigh on that time since that young villain of a Hackett cut and left her.'

'Ah! ' said Mrs. Howarth, 'I could ha' told you how that match would ha' turned out all along.'

'Couldst?' demanded her husband.

'Then it's a pity thee dissent.'

Mrs. Howarth was one of those stout women who appear to have grown fat on vinegar. Popular fancy parallels fat with contentment, and extreme leanness with tartness of temper; but facts decline, as they so often do, to give anything like universal support to theory. Mrs. Howarth, though fat beyond the common measures was an

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exemplar of moaning meekness. She was a prophetess by profession, but forbore to practise, contenting herself by the mere announcement of her prophetic instinct after the event. She was invariably hurt that her opinion had not been asked for in time to establish the righteousness of her claim to her own especial gift, and invariably on being questioned beforehand answered with ambiguous givings forth, such as 'Them as lives to see it 'll know the end of it ' - - - to which dark utterances she afterwards appealed in melancholy triumph.

'Ah!' said Mrs. Howarth, 'I could ha' told you what would ha' come o' that there marriage. You was full of it. You was all for marrying the gell to a gentleman. And where's your gentleman now, John? Ah, where is he?'

'That's just what I should like to know,' responded her husband, posing himself in vivid consciousness of his own physical majesty. 'I should like to have my hand on that young villain's collar.'

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'And them as was theer would see how that 'd end,' said the wife.

'End?' said the incensed father. 'And how would it end?'

'It ud end,' replied Mrs. Howarth, safely venturing on prophecy in respect to this extremely improbable contingency, 'in his borrowin' a five-pound note, an' the two of you sittin' down to drink together.'

'It ud end,' her husband declared, with a solemn and impressive gesture of the right hand, 'in his getting the soundest hoss - whippin' one man ever gave another.'

'Ah! ' said Mrs. Howarth, with her meekest air of mournfulness; 'and what ud he be doing the while, John? '

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'Fanny Ann,' replied Mr. Howarth severely, 'do you think as there'd be nothing in a father's eye in such a case? Do you think as that young rip ud dare so much as look at me?'

Mrs. Howarth distilled an acid tear from either eye, and wiped them away with the corner of her apron.

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'You'd ha' took no notice of anything I might ha' said, John,' she answered, 'and that's why I kep' silence. But we'll go and see the gell if you think as go we'd best; though, for my part, I don't see what's to come of it.'

'This'll come on it, anyhow,' said Howarth, venturing into the domain of candour, if with one foot only. 'I've waited as long as I think fit to wait, and now our goin' 'll stop the tongues as are beginning to wag again' us, Fanny Ann.'

'It was Mary's place to ha' come to us, John,' said Mrs. Howarth.

'There,' returned her husband, 'you and me's at one. It was her place to come to us, but sence her has not thought fit to do so, we must make it our place to go to her. Get your things on, and we'll go down at once.'

When Mrs. Howarth had made her preparations, the pair walked down the street together, and Howarth noticed, though his wife did not, that their progress towards their daughter's house, and their arrival at its door,

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created a considerable amount of public interest. He felt this to be befitting, and the internal barrel organ having set itself to the air of fatherly abnegation, he walked with much self - satisfaction in time with the tune.

Now, almost at the moment when Howarth arrested Hepzibah on her homeward walk, his daughter had found her way to the actual borders of despair. There had been no further news from her husband, and, of course, no further remittance from him. The little maid's monthly wage happened to be payable that day, and it also happened that the provisions of the house were so far reduced that they would last for the day only. To keep the maid under these conditions was an obvious impossibility. To dismiss her at a moment's warning without an equivalent for notice in the way of salary was equally impossible. So Mary Hackett's last twenty-four shillings went to the rosy-cheeked maid. She had lived very sparingly since her husband's flight, but one or two little debts

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which he had left unpaid had been claimed, and, slender as her resources looked, and slight as were her hopes of their renewal, she had felt to be bound to make the payments.

'You can go to-night after tea,' said the mistress, 'and here are your wages.'

The maid, partly understanding the position, began to cry.

'I have no fault to find with you,' her mistress continued, 'and I shall be glad to give you a good character; but I have no further need of you, and—'

She was about to say that she could not maintain her longer, but pride forbade that disclosure, and she left the girl to form her own conclusions.

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It was almost immediately on the top of this scene that her father and mother presented themselves. Mrs. Howarth's was not, perhaps, much of a motherly heart to go home to, but it was the only refuge she was likely to find, and she would fain have gone to it. But mamma, having made up her mind that she was the person injured in this

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melancholy business, and the one creature to be commiserated, entered with a mien so dolefully resigned, and so inapprehensive of sympathy, that her daughter's footsteps were arrested halfway towards her, and Mary stood still in what she felt to be an atmosphere of accusation.

Howarth, with one hand at his seals and another at his chin, made himself as large as he could, and looked about him as if he gazed upon a scene of open desolation.

'A pretty market you've brought your pigs to, miss!' said he.

Of the two, he had been rather more eager for the marriage than she had. It had been half to please him, and because his consent seemed partly to sanctify the effort, that she had imposed upon herself the task of drawing the prodigal from his evil ways.

The barrel organ was going to the tune of paternal kindness still, but it was only natural that before the internal air made itself audible it should at least be asked for. Perhaps it was not surprising, all things considered, that

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no verbal demand was made for it. This was the first visit the forsaken wife had received since Will's departure, and she felt herself profoundly aggrieved.

'You speak,' she said, 'as if I had been to blame.'

This and the faint show of indignation with which the words were spoken put the father out of tune altogether.

'I reckon,' he said, with some asperity, 'as when a gell's husband runs away from her after no more than three months as there's pretty likely to be some sort of a reason for it.' Mary's reply to this was disingenuous, or at least she felt it to be so.

'You have no right to say he has run away. He has left home on business. There is his letter.'

'M—m,' said Howarth, after having deliberately read the letter through, and handed it to his wife. 'Thinks he's going to be prosperous, does he? Well, I hope he may. But it looks very much as if I'd got a burden back again as I thought I'd got rid on.'

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This was intended to mean no more than that his daughter should come home with a due and proper sense of her own poor deservings, and of the parental magnanimity. In point of fact, it was Howarth's way of approach to a friendly understanding, but there are methods of approach which have the look of retreat, and this was one of them.

'You need not fear, father,' answered Mary, 'that I shall be a burden to you.'

'No?' said Howarth satirically. 'Well, that's a blessin', any way.'

'It's never been my way to be one o' them complainin' creatures as ud make you believe as all the worries i' the world was on their backs, and none of 'em on my shoulders,' said Mrs. Howarth. 'But if I've held my tongue it's niver been for want o' troubles to talk about, if I'd been one o' them as does the talkin' easier than the sufferin'. I've had enough

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to put up with this last five - and - twenty year, and if I'd been one of the complainin' sort I've had plenty to complain about. But that was niver my fashion, and I'm not a-going

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to alter my ways at my time o' life. But this I will say—'

And the hearers bowed themselves below the vocal storm. The builder had a sort of figurative umbrella to set up against it, which he had used on so many occasions that he knew how to trust its shelter. He began to build an imaginary house. This house was his hobby, and had been for many years, and he would have risked the enterprise long ago if he had not kept common sense enough to know that it would have ruined him. He began to go over the plans for it now, and in fancy's eye he saw the foundations dug out and the first bricks laid. His wife gave him time, and he made such progress with the sweet work that he had all but got the windows in when she finished her discourse, and silence recalled him to the actualities.

The mother's tearful protestations hardened the girl's heart. She would have asked for bread and they gave her a stone. The mere right to live without labour, with reproach for the wages of idleness, had no

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enticement for her, and the manner of giving the stone was as sterile of feeling as the gift itself. She would have melted at once at a word of sympathy. There was, indeed, such a dull impending storm within, that if she had heard but one solitary tone of kindness, it would have served for the electric spark which breaks the clouds into rain, and the tempest would have calmed her spirit and left a sense of healing in the air. It broke now in no soft and beneficent rains, but in sullen inward lightnings.

'Is this all you have to say to me?' she asked, with defiance in the tone and in her eyes.

'What d'ye expect we should have to say to you?' asked her father. 'Say as we're glad to see thee chucked over by thy husband, and sent back to be a weight on our old age?'

'I should never be a weight on your old age,' she answered. 'I will work for myself and never ask you for a crust.'

'You'll make a nice hand at workin' for

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yourself,' said the mother, and took up her parable again at such a length, that Howarth, turning to the blessed exercise of fancy, had the carpet down in the drawing-room before she had made an end.

From the parent's point of view it was absolutely necessary that Mary should be convinced of her own unworthiness, and should demand aid before they were justified in giving it; and, to do them such justice as they deserve, the couple were much readier to give all the help that was required than they professed to be. But they had made it a sine qua non that the help should be asked for, and their daughter had made it a sine qua non, on the other side, that it should be offered before she would accept it. Thus, when the mother's second jeremiad was finished, and Howarth's house of air was almost furnished, Mary put something like a definite end to the possibility of negotiation.

'I shall never ask for anything from you,' she said.

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Howarth's heart—for he owned such an

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organ, though it was not of the largest, and was something of the toughest—was a little stirred at this, and he was almost on the point of saying that the help might be had for the asking. But he deferred that kindly impulse, and the girl went on, with flashing eyes and heightened colour:

'I have done no wrong. If wrong has been done at all, I am the sufferer by it, and you have no right to come here and talk to me as if I were left alone in the world by any fault of my own.'

'Pride and hunger,' said the mother, 'are poor companions, Polly, and you'll find that out afore long. I don't see as we've made much by coming here, John,' she added, addressing her husband, and I think we may as well go home again.'

This manoeuvre was designed to do nothing more than to bring Mary at once to terms. It had a contrary effect; for Howarth rising, to point his wife's speech by a show of willingness to obey her, Mary advanced to the door with more than actually necessary vehemence,

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and throwing it wide open, stood on one side with heaving bosom and pale face and scornful eyes, as her parents left the room.

'Her won't be long o' that mind, John,' said the mother as the two came upon the street together.

'Her'd better not be, for her own sake,' the builder answered.

And so they made their consciences tolerably easy, and waited for the next overtures for peace to come from their daughter, under the profound impression that they had made offer of the olive-branch, and that the offer had been refused.

In the meantime the little maid, having received permission to go home, had started off to apprise her mother of the fact that she had lost her place. The maid was garrulous, as maids are at times, and she had such a budget of news to open as she had never carried before. She told the wondering old woman, her mother, how Mr. Hackett had run away nobody knew whither, and how Mrs. Hackett had no money left, she was quite

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sure, and how the shelves were bare in the larder; and how, when she had asked if she should call on the baker or the butcher or the grocer with orders, her mistress had answered quietly in the negative. And it chanced that whilst the maid was telling this doleful story Hepzibah arrived upon the scene in search of a further consignment of fruit for preserving, and was at once made a partaker of the news.

'Do you mean to tell me,' asked Hepzibah, that there's nothing to eat in the house?'

'There's barely as much,' said the maid, as 'I'll serve for tea-time.'

The kindly Hepzibah sat miserably astonished at this intelligence for a minute, and then brightened.

'It's lucky for him,' she said, 'I spoke my mind to old Jack Howarth a'ready this morning, for if I hadn't I'd ha' had to ha' gone to him now, for all so big as he thinks himself. But

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look here, my dear,' she added, growing suddenly confidential: 'this affair of Mrs. Hackett's ain't a thing to be talked about.'

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'No,' said the maid solemnly; she would not breathe a word.

The maid's mother, who was perhaps the most inveterate gossip in the township, promised a similar secrecy.

'And now,' said Hepzibah, have you left your place, or are you going back again? '

'I've got to go back for my things,' said the maid, 'and I've come to get mother's wheelbarrow to bring 'em home on.'

'Well, then,' said Hepzibah, 'you be there in half an hour in the back kitchen, and I shall come round to you and have something to say to you.'

There was an air of benevolent mystery about Hepzibah as she said this, which excited the curiosity both of maid and mother; but she contented herself by mystic nods and smiles, and having secured her supply of fruit, departed. She left the basket at her mistress's house, and ran with a gaunt and jerky gait, at which anybody unacquainted with the nature of her errand might have laughed, to her mother's.

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'Hes that there rabbit pie been cut into yet?' she demanded breathlessly.

'No,' said her mother. 'I was a - keepin' it for to - morrow.'

Hepzibah marched straightway to a cupboard in the corner of the kitchen, and there possessed herself of a substantial pie, which she proceeded to fold up in a snow-white cloth, which she secured by half-a-dozen pins drawn from different parts of her own person. The old woman looked on at this for a while in dumb astonishment.

'What on earth,' she asked at last, 'beest goin' to do with the pie? It isn't like thee, Hepzibah, to come and steal thy mother's victuals! '

'I'll get time to-night,' said Hepzibah, and come up and make a new un; but I want this now.' And to the old lady's infinite astonishment she took up the pastry and marched off with it, still breathless from her run.

She bore it straight to Mrs. Hackett's house, and, entering by the back door, confronted

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the maid, who was already there awaiting her.

'Now, mind you,' said Hepzibah, warning the maid with great solemnity, ' what you have got to do now has got to be handled very proper and polite. You've got to take this here pie to - Mrs. Hackett, with Mrs. Blane's best compliments, and to say '—and here Hepzibah began to blush and had some difficulty in encountering the maid's glance' you've got to say as Mrs. Blane had two o' these made, expecting company as never came, and as she's afraid as it 'll grow stale upon her hands, and as she hopes that Mrs. Hackett will be so good as to accept of it.'

Now, this is by no means an uncommon form of rural civility; but it happened unfortunately for Hepzibah's fraud that Mary Hackett and Mrs. Blane had never been on terms to offer each other this sort of homely rustic kindness. And when Hepzibah had gone, and the maid, nothing doubting the story she had to tell, but being fully able to divine the real intent of the gift, approached

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her mistress with the pie and Hepzibah's tale together, it seemed to Mary's outraged feelings the cruellest insult she had yet received. She was a little creature; but for a mere instant she seemed to tower, and she stood over the trembling maid like a statue of indignation. It cost her much trouble to quiet herself, but in a little while she succeeded. 'Take the pie back to Mrs. Blane with my best thanks for her kindness,' she said, 'and tell her that I can make no use of it.'

The maid, charged with this message, which seemed to her mind to make the deadliest possible breach in politeness, would willingly have abandoned the pie by the road - side, and indeed lingered a good five minutes in front of Mrs. Blane's house before she dared to ring the bell. When at last she plucked up courage to do this, and was rehearsing her speech in preparation for Hepzibah, the door opened and a bearded face appeared, kindly in expression by nature, but looking at this moment stern and white enough to frighten the maid's wits away altogether.

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'What is it, my dear?' he asked her gently, seeing that she was alarmed, though he had no guess as to the cause.

'It's not my fault, if you please, sir," said the maid, but missus won't keep the pie, and she sends it back to Mrs. Blane with her best thanks.'

'Oh,' said Blane; 'and who is your mistress?'

'Mrs. Hackett, if you please, sir,' said the maid.

Ned Blane dropped the pie dish, which went to pieces within its diaper cover. He stooped with an expression of grave pain to recover it, and stood with it in his hands—a wet and sticky mass—as he looked down at the girl.

'Mrs. Blane,' he said, 'sent this to Mrs. Hackett?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Thank you,' said Blane quietly; 'that will do.'

The girl, having discharged her errand, made the best of her way back, glad that it

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was over; and Blane having closed the door walked straight into the kitchen, where his mother sat in her customary place by the side of the hearth.

'Mother,' he said, depositing the wrecked pie on the table and turning upon her in grave reproof, this is an insult.'

'Lawk a mercy!' cried Mrs. Blane, 'what's an insult?'

'Your sending this pie to Mrs. Hackett.'

'Pie to Mrs. Hackett!' said his mother in great astonishment. What's the lad talking about, in the name of wonder? I've sent no pie to Mrs. Hackett!'

At this instant Hepzibah, who had been attending to some duties in the rear of the house, bounced suddenly into the kitchen, and hearing these words stood transfixed with a sense of her own guilty deceit.

Blanc looked up at her and read the truth in her face at a glance.

It was you,' he asked, who sent this pie to Mrs. Hackett?' Hepzibah paled and held on to the latch of the door for support. 'You

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sent it as coming from my mother?' Hepzibah was silent, and looked as if she were being charged with murder. 'Why did you do this?'

'Why? Leary me, Mr. Edward,' said Hepzibah, recovering herself a little, 'how you do talk, and how you do look at a body over a little bit of civility like that! The poor thing's never gone and sent it back again?'

'What is the meaning of all this?' said Blane, stern and cold.

'The meaning of it,' said Hepzibah, shaking herself back into courage by an effort - 'the meaning of it is as I wanted to do the poor creature a kindness as her pride wouldn't stand.'

Blane turned as pale as Hepzibah had been a minute earlier.

'A kindness?' he asked. What do you mean?'

'Mean!' said Hepzibah, half crying with the shock of her recent detection and the wretched sense that she was giving intense pain to the one creature she loved best on

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earth. 'What should I mean, but that the poor creature's starving?'

'Dear me!' said the lymphatic Mrs. Blane, in a voice as much moved and as expressive of tender interest as if she had asked a question about the weather. 'Are you talking about Polly Howarth, Hepzibah?'

The young man turned about and stood for a minute with one hand on the table near the broken paste. A curious little gasping sound escaped him. It was so slight that it did not attract his mother's notice, but Hepzibah went white again and made a movement towards him with her hands outstretched, as if she would fain protect and soothe him. He seemed to hear the step behind, and, as if to avoid it, he walked from the kitchen without looking behind him and went heavily up to his own room.

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CHAPTER XII.

A MAN'S virtues and offences are always in accord with each other. This dogma is neither so profound nor so shallow, by a good half, as it may seem at first sight to different minds. The mean man's virtues are mean, the brave man's vices have at least - the credit of being courageous. There is a sort of family likeness between every man's moral strength and his moral weakness. The observer knows that the vice and the virtue are alike cut out of the same piece of humanity.

This being admitted, as it must be, it becomes a matter of profound surprise to detect Ned Blane in the act of forgery. Yet, when he had sat in his own bedroom for some half-hour, he arose and shook himself, and set about that task with an air of resolution. He

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took pen, ink, and paper, and having set a page of his own handwriting before him, he began to write in a legal - looking hand, pausing every now and then to make sure of the form he commonly employed for a given letter, and then painstakingly avoiding a likeness to it. The letter, when completed, ran thus:—

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'1 Kesterton Square, Birmingham:

'June 30, 1857.

'MADAM,—I am instructed by Mr. William Hackett to forward to you the enclosed.

'Your obedient Servant,

'JNO. HARGREAVES.'

He addressed an envelope, and then, having unlocked a drawer in his dressing-table, took from it a Bank of England note for ten pounds, and folded it up and sealed it with the letter.

'I have business in Birmingham, mother,' he said as he entered the kitchen with the forgery in his pocket. 'I shall be back before dark if I can catch the coach, but if I

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don't manage that, you're not to sit up for me.'

Hepzibah looked at him with a timid inquiry, and as he left the room arose and followed him, laying a hand upon his arm.

'Well?' he said almost sullenly, without turning to look at her.

The hand which had touched him very gently and appealingly at first, tightened upon his sleeve, and began to tremble strongly. At this he looked over his shoulder and met Hepzibah's beseeching gaze. There were tears in her eyes, and he noticed a curious little throbbing in her throat, as if a pianoforte hammer were tapping from within.

'Don't break your heart, Master Edward,' she besought him, speaking with great difficulty. Don't go to the bad for her! There's nobody as is worth that, my darling. What good can that do?'

'Don't worry about me, Hepzibah,' he said miserably; it isn't worth while.'

'What else have I got to worry for if it ain't the child I nursed when I was a child

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myself?' said Hepzibah, holding to him with both hands. 'And, oh, as I should ever ha' lived to have to ask you such a thing! But, oh, my darling, do, do come home—'

She paused, and Ned filled up the broken sentence.

'Sober, I suppose,' he said.

'Oh, do, dear, do!' she begged him, clinging to him.

'Very well,' he said, with a gloomy laugh -- two little spasmodic sounds, as far from merriment as light from darkness—'you shall have your way for once. You pretty generally get it here.'

He stooped and kissed the hard-featured face, and Hepzibah, dropping her head upon his shoulder, clung to him, and shook with silent tears and internal sobbings.

'I've got your word, dear?' she asked when she could trust herself to speak.

'Yes,' he answered. 'Good night, Hepzibah.'

He set out on his seven-miles walk, and having posted his letter in the town, turned

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back. A certain halfway house tugged at him as if it had a cord about his heart, but he broke past it with a rage of resolution, and walked straight home, and at once went up to his own bedroom. Hepzibah heard the assured and steady footstep, and was thankful for

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the news it brought her, though the feet went like lead, and had not even a memory of their old lightness.

Next morning Ned Blane's criminal pretence was delivered into Mary Hackett's hands, and she felt her heart altogether cheerful and strengthened by it. She wondered still at the personal silence her husband kept, but at least here was proof positive that he was not the heartless creature she had found herself beginning to believe him. He had not found it in his heart to forsake her and to cast her back upon her parents. And she herself could face the world again. He had really gone away on business of some sort; and though she was still inquieted about him, she had no longer the shame of being forced to believe that the affairs he had

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spoken of were no more than an abominable pretext. Will had his faults, and grave enough they were, even when she could make the lightest of them; but as on a gloomy day even a transient gleam of sunshine brings brightness while, it lasts, so this halting and imperfect news of her husband and his intentions brought contentment to her spirit. But now came a consequence of the letter which the forger had not anticipated. Before the welcome bank note was so much as broken for the purchase of household necessities, Mary sat down and wrote a letter to that imaginary John Hargreaves, who lived in the imaginary Kesterton Square:—

'SIR, - - I should be greatly obliged if you would furnish me with my husband's present address. I am afraid that recent letters may have miscarried.'

If this 'little blind was something less than absolutely truthful, she posted it all the same, and calved her conscience with the hope that

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it might be true. Two or three days later her inquiry came back again, directed and redirected in half - a - dozen different hands, and at last officially marked 'Misdirected. No Kesterton Square in Birmingham.' This amazed her, and awoke new anxieties. Obviously Will was moving in crooked ways, and was in hiding from her. It was easily possible that he might be concealing himself in so large a town as Birmingham, and, inspired by some feeble hope of meeting him, she took the coach into town day after day, and walked wearily up and down the principal thoroughfares, thinking that perchance she might catch sight of him.

She had never known it until now, but she was a little short-sighted, and a thousand times her heart leaped within her in the crowded street as she imagined that at last the errant husband was in sight, and she would advance, fluttering from head to foot, to meet an absolute stranger. No habitude of failure lessened the shock of hope and fear and disappointment, and she would go home—if the place

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was worth calling home—by the coach at night too tired to care for anything. Her whole life seemed to have grown into one constant dull and empty ache.

She had borrowed a directory, and had hunted up the names of any and every quarter of the town which might by any possible stupidity have been miswritten as Kesterton Square; and she had some wild notion of calling at all the seventy-ones in all these

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different streets and lanes, roads, squares, and places, until she should alight upon the mysterious Hargreaves.

It seemed a strange and ghostly sort of life to lead, for she was altogether alone now, and hardly ever exchanged a word, except upon matters of mere necessity, with a fellow-creature. She called upon nobody, and nobody called upon her. Those people of the little township who had at first been indignant against John Howarth and his wife for their neglect of their daughter, supposed now, naturally enough, since Mary went on living in her husband's house, that the builder supplied

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the necessary funds, and so forgot their indignation. The girl's singular position was talked of eagerly for a while, and was then dismissed from memory. When anybody who had known Hackett came from a distance, there was a little spice for the narrator in the tale of his disappearance. But even this could not last for ever, and the history, though rustic annals die hard, began to flag in interest.

Then, as if Mary had not had trouble enough upon her shoulders already, a new one descended upon her, and she began to be certain that the house, night after night, was being watched, and became assured that the watcher was always the same person. The first suspicion which occurred to her came when, on a moonlight night about the middle of July, she threw open her bedroom window and looked out upon the deserted road and the tranquil wide-spread fields. She had no light, and the house and its neighbour threw their joint shadow on the road before her, and on to the hedge which faced their doors. Beyond the distinctly marked line of shade

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upon the field the moonlight lay in a broad vapoury whiteness, in which objects, though easily discernible, took strange and fantastic shapes. She had sat at the open window for a good five minutes, drawing in a sad tranquillity from the moonlight and the silence, when a dry stick cracked behind the hedge and drew her startled gaze to the spot whence the sound proceeded. Following this came complete silence. She listened till the wide air made a singing in her ears like the lingering echo of the waves which children find in sea-shells. Hearing no repetition of the sound, but suspecting rather than discerning an added bulk of darkness somewhere in the shadows, she closed the window, drew down the blind, and watched through the merest crevice between the bars. That something darker than the shadows began to move, and the cracking sound, heard more faintly through the closed window than before, again reached her ears. The moving object stole under the hedge for twenty or thirty yards, growing distinct from the other shadows whilst it

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moved, and melting back into them again whenever it stood still; and then, passing over a stile, appeared in the moonlight of the road, at that distance and in that light recognisable only as a man.

Mary never sat at her open window again after this, but she was often tempted to watch, and the watch was almost invariably rewarded by the earlier or later detection of the figure. Who the man was and why he was there she could not guess. Once a suspicion

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crossed her mind, but she dismissed it with shame and anger that such a thought should have occurred to her. It was to the effect that her husband mistrusted her, and had set a spy to watch the house during his absence, and report to him if it were entered. But one night, as she sat in the darkness in the lower room before the hour of moonrise, she was aware of the shadowy watcher pacing dimly up and down, trusting solely in the darkness, and taking no advantage this time of the shelter of the hedge. Vaguely as she had made out his aspect,

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she knew him for the same, and as she watched his goings to and fro the door of the neighbouring house was suddenly thrown open, and a broad ray of light darting from it, fell full upon the mysterious prowler's face. The face was, of course, Ned Blane's.

Mary was in a permanent mood now to be easily indignant, and she rose up in wrath against this intrusion upon her privacy. What right had he, or any man, to hang about the house in that way, watching her and spying upon her? Some sense of the unobtrusive and wordless devotion of the watch touched her here, and brought her down from the heights of anger to which she had ascended. And yet the proceeding was intolerable, and sooner or later was sure to be discovered, to bring about new whisperings of scandal and new unmerited sorrow.

Blane had recoiled at the sudden ray of light, and had disappeared before these varying thoughts and emotions had well had time to course through her heart and mind. But now he was back again, pacing up and down

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in the darkness. She could see the pale blur of his face turned steadfastly towards the house.

She determined to ignore him, and withdrew herself from the window. She would not even know of his being there, but that was difficult. Even when she had gone to her bedroom, and having prepared for her night's rest had blown out the light, she peeped again through an interstice in the blind, and saw the dim figure still going up and down.

The morning after this discovery Mary received a second letter from the mysterious Hargreaves, enclosing a second ten - pound note with the same formula as before. At first she did not notice any difference of address, but by-and-by her eye lighted upon the first line of the communication, and she saw that it was dated, not from Kesterton, but from Chesterton, Square. The forger had relied upon his memory, and his memory had played him false.

She had returned the borrowed directory

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a fortnight before, and not caring to ask for it again, she set out at once for the great town, determined, if possible, to unravel the mystery, and at least to discover if Chesterton stood in as airy a situation as its forerunner. There was no Chesterton Square to be found or heard of, and she came back troubled.

That night the watcher came again. A painful fascination impelled her by this time to keep as regular a watch for him as he evidently kept upon the house, and as he came in sight a suspicion burst upon her mind with so vivid and sudden a light that it looked like

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certainty. She lit a candle hastily, ran upstairs, and emptied the contents of a drawer upon the bed, and from the tumbled heap of papers before her, after a search of a moment or two, took a letter from Ned Blane to her husband, and setting this and the communication from John Hargreaves side by side, came, in spite of the stiff disguise of the legal-looking caligraphy, to the swift conclusion that they were written by the same hand.

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It was bitter enough in all conscience to have been deserted by her husband, even though she confessed to herself that she had never loved him; it was heart-breaking to be deserted by the people of her own flesh and blood; but to be insulted by the cheating charity of a rejected lover seemed tenfold worse than all.

She descended to the dining-room, and taking the bank note from the table on which it lay, crumpled it wrathfully in her hand and walked swiftly from the room into the hall, and from the hall into the roadway. The furtive watcher was away at a round pace in an instant, but she followed and called upon him by name.

'Mr. Blane! I will not be avoided. I order you to listen to me.'

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CHAPTER XIII.

NED BLANE stood stock-still in the dark and said nothing.

'How dare you insult me by your charity?' Mary asked him. She panted with haste and excitement, and her limbs were trembling.

Ned, with his hands in his jacket pockets, his shoulders rounded, and his head drooping a little, made no movement and answered never a word. In the act of walking away from her he had paused at her call of command, and his back was still half turned towards her. Mary, who had not yet begun to cool from the impulse of indignant attack which had inspired her to rush after him, took a further step or two and stood before him.

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'How dare you insult me by your charity?' she asked again, clenching the crumpled ten-pound note in her hand.

Still he said nothing. His figure, dimly outlined in the dark as it was, had a look of dogged impassivity about it which was discouraging.

'This came from you,' she said, holding out the crumpled bank note. 'You must take it back again.'

The manner of this speech was essentially feminine. Between the first sentence and the second there was a world of difference in expression. 'This came from you,' was spoken in a tone of outrage, but then the reflection assailed the girl's mind in spite of herself that perhaps after all there was another way of looking at the matter. The gift was kindly meant, and the very falsehood under cover of which it had come to her argued a delicacy on the part of the giver which deserved a better return than she was making for it. And then followed the reflection that ten - pound note number one was dissipated and

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done with, and that she had no means of returning it. And so it happened that the next sentence was suppliant and beseeching: 'You must take it back again. 'She held out the note almost timidly, and her eyes searched in vain for any sign of change or relenting in the dogged figure before her.

His immobility was exasperating, but it was not easy to see what ought to be done in face of it. She was more than half inclined for a moment to drop the note and go, but that would hardly have been courteous. It was difficult to be courteous to a man so obstinate. Possibly he might be amenable to reason. The reason of the position was certainly wholly on her side, and he could not be so stupid as to be blind to it. She began to reason with him.

'Surely, Mr. Blane, you must see how wrong you are in sending this to me.'

Mr. Blane was apparently decided to see nothing. Any movement in the obdurate figure, any shuffle of the foot, for a sign of yielding or uneasiness, any silent negative to

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urge her to an argument, would have been welcome.

'I can't accept this,' she went on desperately. 'It was cruel to trap me into taking the other. What would you think of anybody, Mr. Blane, who laid such a trap to humiliate you and catch your self-respect? How dare you pretend that this came from my husband? What right have you to send me money? What ground did I ever give you for treating me so?'

To all this the detected benefactor answered nothing.

'Take it!' she said imperiously, for by this time her own speech had warmed her anew into anger. He made no response; and when she had waited for a full half-minute, with the note extended in her hand, she moved away. 'I shall send this to you by post,' she said frigidly, and I will ask you not to write to me or speak to me again.'

She walked from him indignantly, and when she had gone but a step or two turned her head to look at him. He kept his posture

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—head drooping, shoulders rounded, the obstinate hands rammed into the side pockets. But somehow it did not look as if obstinacy alone was expressed in the posture of the figure. Now that she was but a little distance away from it, it began to seem solitary, bitterly solitary. A sense of pity touched her. The thought of her own loneliness and unhappiness brought tears to her eyes. She could scarcely leave him in that ungrateful and ungracious way, impracticable and obstinate as he was. She turned and spoke again, and the tears sounded in her voice.

'You must not think I don't feel that you meant to be kind. I know you meant to act delicately and like a friend. But you must see how impossible it is. Will you take this, Mr. Blane? I would much rather you took it from me. Pray take it.'

His continued silence drove her away in a new anger, and she did not turn again until she reached the gate. Then she could dimly see his figure in the roadway. A break in the hedge beyond where he stood allowed the

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drooping head to be seen in more defined outline against the sky. She entered the house and left him there, and all night long the fancy of the silent and solitary figure standing there oppressed her. She was often angered by it, and as often pitiful over it; but the gust of anger was strong and long, and the pity was a mere lull in the wind.

Once or twice in the course of the night she got out of bed to look down the road through the bars in the Venetian blind, and her fancy played tricks with her and showed her the mournful sullen posture unchanged. Improbable as it was, she more than half believed he was still standing there in the lonely night, and she hated him for it and was sorry for it by turns, until she fell asleep, and for a while forgot his troubles and her own.

Ned heard the retiring footsteps, the retreating rustle of the dress, the clank of the gate latch, the fatal sound of the closing door. He stood still for a long time. It was not worth while to move. There was nothing

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to do, nothing to hope for, nowhere to go. Nothing mattered very much. Nothing seemed able very much to hurt him.

By-and-by he heard laughing voices coming down the lane. They were vulgar and discordant, and the laughter was out of tune with everything. He walked on, taking little if any note of whither his footsteps led him, and at last, in something very like a waking dream, walked past his own house. The waking dream had a heart of ice and lead; but if he had had a mind to describe himself just then he would not have said that he was unhappy. He laughed once at a conceit which touched him as he sauntered along. It was not a very mirthful conceit either. He had thought that he felt very much like being dead and aware of it. He chuckled unreasonably at this, and then subsided into his old quiet.

He did not look up at the house as he went by, and so missed the sight of Hepzibah, who stood mournfully pressing the tip of her nose against a pane in the window of the dark

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front room, staring out upon the street. She saw him, however, and was struck by a something heartless in his gait and the attitude of his figure. He was strolling slowly in the direction of the 'King's Arms,' and Hepzibah knew what her own fears were. She paused in the narrow hall to snatch a wrap of some sort from a hook, and then slipped after him into the street. He was going so slowly that she had no difficulty in overtaking him, but when she had come within a yard or two her heart failed her, and she found no courage to speak to him. But he in a little while becoming vaguely conscious that a hurrying step behind him had suddenly accommodated itself to his own, turned round and recognised her.

'Been out for a walk, Mister Edward?' she asked in as cheerful and casual a tone as she could secure.

'Yes,' he answered her indifferently and walked on again.

'Master Ned,' she said with an effort, hardly knowing how she found heart of grace

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to speak at all, 'it 'd do you a world o' good if you'd tell a body what it is as is on your mind instead o' carryin' on all by thyself i' thisnin.'

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He went dogged again, and she, catching sight of his face in the lamplight, saw the futility of her own words, and yet having begun to speak could not repress them.

'I wonder at you, Master Ned, you as used to be so bright and brave, to throw yourself away i' this fashion. What can't be cured must be endured, my darlin'. Do be a man, and wake up a bit.'

'Good night, Hepzibah,' he answered, without so much as looking at her. The stony voice and manner quelled her, and she dropped behind and suffered him to walk away without further molestation. Seeing that he did not turn she dared to follow him, and having seen him enter the open door of the 'King's Arms,' she stood for a while in the street as strickenly and sadly as he himself had done a little while before, and then walked home crying.

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Blane sat down in a corner of the bar room, after having distributed a cold nod here and there, and obscured himself behind a newspaper which he did not read. His arrival cast a chill upon the company for a minute or so, but the broken conversation was resumed, though not without some meaning glances in his direction. The old landlady served him unwillingly, and was evidently desirous that her unwillingness should be seen. He took this with a stony unconcern, as he accepted everything. He was going to the bad, and he knew it. He walked forward with his eyes open, and he would not so much as try to turn back. In fine, he was doggedly bent on going to the devil with all possible expedition, a condition of mind which is only possible for men of originally good quality. He made no excuses, offered to himself no palliations. The fiend had clapped him by the shoulder, and he, looking him in the face and recognising his ugliness, had elected to go with him. Come, let us be life companions. Let us march miserably to the gulf together.

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CHAPTER XIV.

MIL WILL HACKETT was not the man to suffer very severely from the qualms of conscience. There had been a time when regrets for past misconduct had been a habit with him, and when remorse, if not repentance, would lay a hand upon him. But having made in his lifetime a prodigious number of good resolves, and never having held to any of them, he had come to a sage distrustfulness of himself which unhappily was productive of none of the ordinary good results of wisdom. So now, when conscience stirred within him, he had a formula or two by way of sedative for her, and these he administered with an almost complete success. 'The thing's done and can't be undone,' was one of them; and 'It's no use crying over spilt milk ' was another.

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He had left his wife basely, and in his heart he knew just as well as anybody could have told him that he had acted like a cur. Of course, that of itself was a disagreeable thing to know, and equally of course it was easy to be sure that no harm would befall her, and to promise that in due time he would go back to her with his pocket full of dollars—he was bound to the land of dollars—and more than make up for everything. And, side by side with this excellent intent—which he knew admirably well he never intended to carry out—was the natural sentiment of ill-usage, and a sort of forgiving resentment. Good

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wives make good husbands; and if Mary had known how to keep him, there was the making in him of he knew not what of amiability and good-fellowship and camaraderie in marriage. He felt that he could never have descended to the level of the average male milksop of married life; that surely would have been too absurd to have been expected from so high - spirited, so popular, and so manly a personage as himself. But yet if his wife had

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seen fit to laugh at his little peccadilloes and to make no fuss about them, he and she might have been reasonably happy together.

Of all the strange problems presented to the student of human nature—and they are many—there is none more marvellous than that offered by the liar who chooses himself for a listener. That I should have some hope of imposing a false motive upon a neighbour, and of inducing him to believe it the true one, is comprehensible. But that I should lie to myself about the things I know—and not merely lie, but be believed in lying—is surely amazing. Men do this thing day by day, and it is so common, that to some it has ceased to be even remarkable. Mr. Hackett did it hourly, and so draped in self - deceit the figure of himself he saw that at last it moved before him clothed in righteousness. When the robe slipped aside—as it did, as we have seen, pretty often—he hitched it on again, and decided not to remember the passing glimpse of the rags which lay below that pure, imposing robe.

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So, on the whole, he went away towards the land of dollars with a light heart, and when he had got over his bout of sea - sickness he found life on board ship sufficiently pleasing. He was beginning, to the discerning eye, to look a little dissipated, but he was young and was blessed with a good constitution, and the sobriety of a day or two would make him look almost as handsome and as fresh as ever. He had taste and tact enough to subdue his bar - room swagger in the presence of ladies, and it softened into a sort of manly self - confidence which some women aboard the vessel found not unpleasing. He was a pretty general favourite, and when one night there was music in the saloon and he allowed himself to be flattered and coaxed into singing, he made quite a flutter amongst the passengers. This was not in the least diminished by the fact that Master Will's purchaser got him apart and forbade a repetition of the programme.

'I don't mind it for once,' said the Impresario, ' but I won't have it again.'

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'You won't have it?' asked Hackett. The tone the Impresario took was new to him. He had been used to give orders, and not to take them. His eyes flashed and his face darkened as he put the question. His tone was haughty and disdainful enough, but his employer kept cool.

'No,' said he, ' I won't have it. You can keep your contract or break it, just as you please. But if you break it on your side I cancel it on mine You have signed to sing when I ask you not more than four ballads a day, and not to sing when I don't ask you. I've got it in black and white, my boy!'

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'Do you mean to tell me,' Hackett demanded angrily, 'that I'm not going to sing to please my friends?'

'Call this crowd your friends' asked the manager. 'Look here,' he added in a suave and reasonable tone: 'I want to make a bit of a splash with you in New York, and I don't want to have a lot of people going about there who'll say you're not half so good'

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as I say you are. Cheaper yourself here, and you may do a good bit of damage. And in short, my dear boy, as I've said already, I won't have it.'

This was perhaps the first moment in life at which Mr. Hackett had ever felt the controlling effect of the bit. It was natural that he should dislike it, and should even jib a little; but the manager sat serene in the saddle, and Will did not so much as try to throw him. He vowed inwardly that he would attempt that feat so soon as ever he should find a new rider, but for the present there was nothing for it but to answer to the curb and go the way his rider meant him to go. For without the rider he saw no chance of oats and stabling; and though his courage was mighty high, and his belief in the joys of freedom strong, he had no stomach for the bare herbage of the desert.

It is not altogether uncommon for a man to want all the advantages without any of the disadvantages of freedom. Will hated his manager from that hour, and burned and

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yearned to disobey him. But he dared not do it, and so began to live in a bitter, constant sense of servitude. In spite of himself he played into his employer's hands, for when, as was certain to happen, he found himself coaxed to sing again, he had to take refuge in the statement that he had found himself utterly out of voice, and did not dare to sing until he had thoroughly rested. The manager, who had heard the song, laughed over it. 'He would never have thought it possible,' he said, 'that so perfect an artist could have sung so badly.' The little society of the moving hotel grew naturally somewhat piqued to hear more, and all kinds of small traps were laid for the new tenor to fall into. The new tenor, with the fear of his Impresario before his eyes, walked warily and fell into none of them. Pretty girls were set to wheedle him, amateur musicians beguiled him to the piano; one imperious young widow, of many personal attractions, alternately ordered him to sing and sulked under his refusals; gentlemen astutely stood him drinks and led him on

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to speak of things musical; there were bets laid and taken as to whether he couldn't be got to sing again. All this, of course, brought compensation to his wounded spirit, but none the less he hated the manager, and the new feeling of restraint and the mastery of another.

His first appearance in New York was fairly successful. He took something like first place in the second rank of singers known to the American public of that day, and his name came to be a safe draw wherever he was announced to sing. He created no furore, as he had hoped and expected to do. The preliminary paragraphs puffed him egregiously, but said no word he was not prepared cordially to endorse out of his own opinion of himself. It was quite likely that if he had well and wisely trained he might

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have been a really great vocalist, but work was never in Will's line. He was one of nature's born singers, and as one of nature's born singers he was quite content to rest, though he missed the unstinted praise and unforced

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enthusiasm which honest work might have brought him.

But if the manager could see and did see that the chief tenor of his concert troupe sang only at his bidding, there were things much more important to the tenor's prosperity and his own to which he could not attend. He could not insure that Will should be early to bed and early to rise, or that he should go to bed sober and rise with his throat unparched. He could not insure even that this impracticable tenor should not dine heavily an hour before a concert, and sometimes take too much wine at dinner, and sing rather badly and wildly after it.

'You're making a dreadful ass of yourself,' he would say at times, for familiarity with many men had taught him candour, 'and you'll regret it a lot more than ever I shall. I dare say you'll last my time out, even as you're going. I'm beastly disappointed in you of course, and it's no use pretending that I'm not. But I'm speaking for your own good now, though I'm not

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likely to do you much. You'll be about as pretty to listen to as a raven in a year or two. Now if you'd only live straight and work a bit you've got a lifelong future. Go as you're going and I'll give you three years to ruin yourself in.'

To this harangue, or one pretty much resembling it, Will listened often, generally in sullen scorn, though sometimes, if it came early in the morning and his head was aching, not without brief inward reproaches. Meantime he lived in clover, of the growth he cared for, and his salary being paid weekly he generally had plenty of money in his pocket. He became very gorgeous in raiment, and had rather more of the music-hall than the concert platform air about him.

Being here, on his desired Tom Tiddler's ground, and picking up gold and silver, he of course forgot to send any of his gains to his wife. Old Howarth was well-to-do, and could take capital care of her. There was no doubt about that, and he never permitted himself to doubt that the care was taken. At any rate

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he refrained from making inquiries, and so escaped any burden which might have been laid upon his conscience. Meantime the money came in gaily, and for a man who had as little of forecast as he had it seemed inevitable that it should continue to come in always.

As time went on he and his manager came over and over again to open quarrel, and each grew heartily weary of the other. Hackett's constant cry was that the man who had found him out and opened the way to fortune for him was fattening on his work. The manager's retort was that the work was always indifferently done and often ill-done. Each grew anxious to escape from the contract, and after many, days the manager found his chance. The popular tenor had dined unwisely as his habit was, but on this occasion he was prohibited from appearing on the platform, and an apology was presented to the

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public in his behalf. Next morning a formal letter reached Hackett to the effect that the contract was dissolved, and that if he felt himself aggrieved he might seek a legal remedy. He felt himself

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aggrieved and he sought his legal remedy. The case went against him. The public found the details amusing, and Hackett found himself out of employment in a strange country, and nearly penniless. He shuffled along somehow, the sartorial glories growing dimmer, and engagements growing rarer and more poorly paid, as he showed himself less and less trustworthy in his work. Things were growing desperate, and looked so even when seen through an atmosphere of brandy - and - water.

The glorious voice began to go. It even cracked in public on that noble high A of which he had been so proud, and which had indeed been wont to ring out like a clarion. He turned into a restaurant after that night's concert, and sat alone in a sort of sick-hearted stupor. He had been hissed for the first time in his life, and he resolved that it should be the last. It was time to end it all, time to ring down the curtain on the poor tragi-comedy his life had been all along. The deserted wife came back to him in memory. He recalled her as she had been when he had first known

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her, and a faint remorse touched him. She had been right after all, and had had a reason for her reproaches. But it was of no use to think of that now. And yet he confessed that if he had his life to live over again he would arrange things otherwise. Despair told him, honestly, it was not a nice record. Well, let it go. It is gone. The stale proverbs came back again. No use crying over spilt milk. What is done can't be undone.

Whilst he sat in this mood he waited for the drink he had ordered, and sat absently tapping with the tip of a knife upon a newspaper which lay on the table before him. The journal was creased and crumpled, and had evidently been left there by some recent guest. Hackett's eye fell upon it, and he looked at it with no interest until he awoke to the fact that it was a newspaper from the old country, and he began to glance at its columns here and there. A Birmingham newspaper Who would have expected to find a Birmingham newspaper here? Some Englishman had left it behind him, probably a man from the

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Midlands, perhaps even an old friend or acquaintance. The thought touched him oddly, and he went on glancing here and there without noticing greatly what he read. And meantime the knife went on tapping, tapping mechanically at the same spot of the journal.

The fancy came into his mind suddenly, what if there were something there where he was tapping which might interest him, which might be of good or bad augury to him! He thought of this for a minute or two, fancifully and vaguely, and then glanced at the spot. The tip of the knife blade fell upon the name of John Howarth. The name of John Howarth was in the register of deaths, and the name that followed it was the name of Fanny his wife.

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CHAPTER XV.

THERE is hardly a vice or a virtue in the world which has not more or less the habit of reproducing itself. When a man begins to lie he finds himself often enough compelled to go on, and one falsehood breeds many. He that has stolen may find himself so placed that he must steal again. But the actual compulsive force of vice to vice is hardly found anywhere so strongly as in intemperance. The habit catches, not merely on the man who himself is abandoned to drink, but on people who surround him, and who are grieved and wounded by his folly. 'Qui a bu, boira,' is as true a proverb as ever was set upon paper, but it is equally true that he who has not drunk before may take to the foolish solace

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out of mere misery at seeing somebody else fall into the trap it sets him.

Ned Blane must needs take to drinking because Will Hackett declined to keep himself sober; and now, for the salvation of a life or two, as the fate which guides the destinies of men would have it for the nonce, another must needs enter the devil's circle, and go whirling towards the gulf for a while, only to be arrested at last by the force which set him in motion.

Mary Hackett was on terms of some familiarity with the Bard, and in her happy days had been wont to laugh with much heartiness over his effusions. Shadrach thought too highly of his gift to believe laughter at its manifestations to be within the sphere of things possible, and in his own simple-minded way looked upon himself as being by the possession of the gift set apart from other people. Mary had, on one occasion, when at a schoolroom tea the Bard had read a set of verses more or less pertinent to the occasion, so far relied upon her power over her own risible muscles as to

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congratulate him upon his production, and from that hour Shadrach was her willing slave. He was perfectly certain of the divine afflatus within himself, and yet his faith asked for a good deal of bolstering up from without, and he had as good an appetite for praise as if he had been an amateur actor, or the poetic pet of ladies in an obscure literary London circle.

It was a matter of absolute necessity that Mary should put her hand to some kind of work, and after much casting to and fro in her mind as to the best way of earning enough to hold body and soul together she decided on starting an infant school. News of this enterprise no sooner came to the Bard's ears than he set to work to hunt out pupils for her, and brought her half-a-dozen of the poorer sort, whose parents paid her sixpence per week a head. When the Bard happened to be engaged on night-work at the Old Blazer he would brighten himself up on an afternoon, and hie, in his tall hat and rhinocerine broadcloth and particoloured comforter, to the little outhouse of a place which Mary had

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hired for her school, and there humbly presenting himself would listen with a beaming satisfaction to the infant lessons. The scene inspired him to one of his highest poetic

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flights; and, since the production has a rare fine heart if but little art in it, a verse or two of it may deserve to be recorded in a form somewhat more stable than the penny leaflet, in which the Bard dared to print and publish it, could secure for him.

'How sweet it is to be a child,
So pretty, innocent, and mild!
And, oh! it is a lovely thing
To hear the little infants sing.
'With Mrs. H. they live by rule,
At nine o'clock they go to school,
And there they learn and there they sing,
And, oh! it is a lovely thing.'

The Bard was allowed to go to the school, and he became a familiar figure there; but little by little the beaming complacence faded out of him, and days came when he would sit glum and silent, and when even the scholastic successes of a niece of Hepzibah's, who was six years of age and had mastered many words of one syllable, failed to delight him. Then

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later he began to have little oddities of manner and motion which the schoolmistress was slow to understand. By-and-by these little oddities so grew and multiplied that she was forced to battle with herself lest she might understand them. And then at last, in spite of herself, she was compelled to understand and to beg the falling Shadrach to cease his visits.

The doing of this cost her bitter tears and nany a new heartache. But half her little world seemed now floating on that hideous drink whirlpool, and swirling towards its depths. Her husband she had found out long ago. Then her most faithful suitor, who had passed as a model of what a man should be, followed on the same road. The smart, bright, genial lad was clean spoiled. He had grown haggard and unkempt and surly, and his old friends had begun to give him the cold shoulder, and to pass him with averted unrecognising glance in the street. All this, as she knew full well, was in part the fruit of her unhappy marriage. It weighed upon her conscience to

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think that she was in any measure responsible for it. And though no man, or woman either, is the keeper of the foolish brethren who will seize any excuse for rushing on their own mischance, she knew that but for the misery of that propelling cause which she herself had afforded him Ned Blane would have lived respected and respectable, and the knowledge hurt her bitterly and often.

And now that the harmless, gentle-hearted Bard had joined the swinish ranks she saw her own work in the matter still. Ned Blane's misery and his falling off were breaking Hepzibah's heart, and Hepzibah's unhappiness had started Shadrach

Now this particular vice is the only one in nature in which shame and remorse for the crime leads to the crime's continuance. The wretched Bard's humiliation at his dismissal sent him back to his momentary comfort, and next day's conscience and headache sent him back again.

This dreadful new departure could not remain hidden long from Hepzibah's eyes and

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when she beheld it the staunch creature's heart seemed like to break at once.

'Shadrach,' she said, 'you can go home. You'd better. But, oh! to think that a man wi' gifts like yours should demean himself to this, which is a thing as the brutes that perish would not do.'

The wretched Shadrach swayed, and beamed upon her with a fatuous smile.

'Wass good talkin'!' said Shadrach. 'Does man's heart good.'

'I do' know what it does for a man's heart,' cried Hepzibah with sudden tears. 'I know it breaks a woman's. And Master Edward too! Then you, that was thought to be the soberest i' the parish! Go away, Shadrach, do; and God forgive thee!'

'That's a lill too much,' Shadrach protested, moved vaguely and stupidly by her tears. Tell you what it is, Hepzibah. It's Mist' Ned. That's what it is. Breaks your heart see a fine young chap like that.'

'Oh, you fool!' said Hepzibah bitterly. 'What's poor Mister Ned's fault to you as you

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should go an' copy it? Go away, and never let me see you any more!'

'All right,' responded Shadrach. 'I shall go to th' "Arms," and ask for Mister Ned. Said he wanted me to pay for a drink, because he saved my life—didn't he? So I will.'

'D'ye think he'd be seen 3rinkin' with the likes of thee?' demanded Hepzibah, driven nigh to her wits' end. Go home, an' be a a laughingstock along the road.'

And therewith her tears became a passion not to be resisted, and she hid her face in her apron after the manner of her class, and cried as if her heart were fairly broken. Shadrach took himself away, and left her to her grief, ashamed enough to be glad of absence from her, too bland and mild in his cups to be wrathful with her or with himself, and easily restored to a condition of vacuous self-satisfaction.

It was early evening still, and when, an hour later, Ned Blane reached home he glanced askance at Hepzibah's red eyes, and guessed himself the cause of her grief. He

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was more sober than he had often been of late at that hour, and the unspoken reproach of her face, its hungry pity and affection, stung him. It angered him to be pitied and wept over. A well of self - scorn and hatred lay within him, and threatened every moment to overflow its bounds, and drown heart and soul in its nauseous waters. And nothing seemed to keep those inward bitter sluices closed but wrath at anything which helped to open them.

He and Hepzibah were alone in the kitchen. She busied herself in preparing a meal for him, but she had not so far mastered the hysterics of her weeping that she could control herself completely, and an occasional sob escaped her. He, lounging against the upright of the mantelshelf, with crossed feet and arms, looked angrily at her for a time as she went to and fro about her duties, and at last he broke out fiercely.

'What's the matter now? What sort of a house is this to come home to?'

'Who made it the sort of house it is?'

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Hepzibah almost shrieked, turning upon him.

'Eh?' he said, advancing a step and staring wildly at her. 'Eh? What's that?'

'You,' returned Hepzibah. 'Ay, you may hit me, if you like, Mister Ned. Me as nursed you when you was a child, and loved you better than if even you'd been my own.'

'Hit you!' he answered her with a feigned contempt. 'Who's going to hit you? What's set you on this tack?'

'As if one of you wasn't enough!' cried Hepzibah, struggling with a new burst of tears. 'There's Shadrach must take to it. It's all your fault, and I'll tell you the truth, if you killed me the next minute. The poor silly creetur's tied to me, and you break my heart, and it breaks hisn to see it, and he's took your mad ways out of trouble.'

'Has he?' said Ned roughly, and flung into the garden, where he paced gloomily up and down.

Hepzibah came to him a few minutes later

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with an apologetic and tender manner, and told him that tea was ready.

'Never mind the tea, dear,' Ned answered. He had not given her a word of affection for months, and the phrase half frightened her, she could guess so little what it meant.

He walked about the garden for an hour, and at last entering the kitchen stood there irresolutely for a while, and then, as if with a sudden impulse, made for the hall and seized his hat. Hepzibah ran after him.

'Don't be afraid,' he said, turning round upon her. 'I am going to put an end to this.'

'No, no, Master Ned,' she besought him, clinging to him.

'Don't be afraid,' he said again. 'I shall be back when I've found Shadrach and seen him home. I'm going to have a word with him. Let me go.'

He was very grave and solemn, and there was a look on his face which she had never seen before. She released him, and stood in the doorway looking after him as he walked toward the 'King's Arms.' He disappeared in

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the gathering dusk, and Hepzibah went within, wondering and fearing.

There was a side bar at the 'King's Arms' which gave upon a by-street, and this chamber was frequented by the rougher sort. Ned walked into it, flinging the door aside and gazing about him. Shadrach was there, with the shining hat brushed the wrong way in half a score of places, and tipped drunkenly over one eye. He was clinging to the counter with one hand, and gently and rhythmically waving a quart pot in the other, whilst he smilingly spouted some specially prized verses of his which no man listened to.

Ned laid a hand upon his shoulder. 'Shadrach, come with me.'

'That you, Mist' Ned ' said Shadrach. 'Yo' pitched into me once because I'd river stood a drink after yo' saved my life.—This is Mr. Blane, lads, the gentleman as saved my life in th' Ode Blazer. Th' Ode Blazer's Hero, this is. He's the best gentleman i' the wide world, let the next come from wheer he wool. —Have a drink, Mist' Ned?'

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Blane quietly took the pot from Shadrach's hand and poured its contents on the floor.

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'Come with me,' he said. 'You don't seem to know when you've had as much as is good for you. You'll drink again when you see me drink again, and that, my lad, shall be never. And mark me, Shadrach; if you drink before I do, I'll break every bone in your body.'

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CHAPTER XVI.

SHADRACH wept a little and declaimed some what, in his own manner, but Ned led him away by the collar and made an end of his objectings. Hepzibah was astounded at the sight of her young master returning a mere hour after his departure. He went straight to his own room, and the grieving, faithful servitor, not knowing what had happened, listened to the solid footsteps tramping to and fro, to and fro, overhead, until long past midnight.

At early dawn Ned was up and away to Shadrach's cottage. The Bard was already astir, awkwardly pumping upon his own head in the back yard. Blane took the pump, handle, and sent forth a copious stream until Shadrach withdrew his head from the descending

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torrent, and began vigorously to towel himself, casting a sidelong look at his companion meanwhile.

'Well?' said Ned, when Shadrach had scrubbed away in silence for a minute.

'Well, Mister Edward?' returned the Bard.

'Do you remember what happened last night?' Ned asked.

'I've a sort of a memory on it,' said Shadrach shamefacedly.

'You'd better have a clear one. Hepzibah told me last night that you had taken to drink because I had. That was the long and the short of it. Now I'll have nobody going to the Mischief on my account, if I can help it and if I can't go alone, I won't go at all.' He made this with a sort of bitter facetiousness which somehow made it easier for him, but it was pretty obvious that he meant it. 'So I promised you that you should drink again when I did, and that if you drank before I did I'd break every bone in your body. Do you remember that? '

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'I can't say as I don't, Mister Edward,' responded the Bard, still towelling briskly.

'You'll remember it now, if you please,' said Ned.

'I'll remember it, Mister Edward,' Shadrach answered, and on a sudden began to blubber. 'If this is what things has come to, I'm gay as iver I made a fool o' myself. If I'd ha' guessed as it'd ha' put a stopper on thy game, Mister Ned, I'd ha' got drunk ivery night for fifty year.'

Ned turned away and paced the yard quietly for a while, and suddenly wheeling on Shadrach held out a hand to him.

'It's a bargain, Shadrach, between you and me.'

'It's a bargain, Mister Edward,' said Shadrach, taking the proffered hand, and it's a bargain as the pair on us 'll keep.'

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So Ned left him, having carried matters with a sufficiently high hand considering that he had been the first transgressor. When he was alone again he fell into a sick loathing which was half physical and half spiritual. It

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shamed him to pass people in the street, and to endure the most casual glances and greeting. It shamed him to think of his near past, and the foolish path he had travelled since Hackett's marriage. Shadrach's grotesque expression of affectionate devotion shamed him. His whole heart was sick with shame, and his body was sick with palled brandy, and the aching, burning, and nauseating desire of more. But through it all he felt he was a man again, and some ray of hope and promise of victory struck through the sick gloom which dwelt upon him. To have been a man once on a time, and to have been called a hero, and to have sunk as he had By snatches his very pains translated themselves into a kind of triumph. At least he was a man again, and was suffering and not yielding. Suffering! For these brief seconds it was a joy to suffer.

Then he would have a farewell glass, and would be rid of this horrible nausea, without in the least diminishing his utter determination to have done with his old vile courses. He

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could be himself again at a mere expenditure of fourpence, could be rid of this aching passion of need, and find himself strengthened for the fight. He would make his enemy serve his own turn, and would borrow from him weapons wherewith to fight him. The outlying public-houses were already opening. To yield this once was not to yield. It was but to recoil to spring the better. He would do it.

No. There were manhood and honesty in the man. He would not do it. He had passed his word. Had he ever been a liar? Should he begin now? No, by earth and heaven!

And so, now up, now down, he passed the gauntlet of his cravings, and reaching home locked himself within his room and threw his key out of window, thereby making victory certain until such time as Hepzibah should rise. A mere half-hour gained, but something in the circumstances.

Now, when it was out of his power to fall, the temptation suddenly dwindled into nothing.

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He laughed at it, though his laughter was bitter, and hurt him as much as it would have done to shed tears. He had had but an hour or two of heavy sleep during the night, and now he cast himself upon the bed, and after tossing for a time, fell into a slumber which endured until Hepzibah knocked at his door. She was gone before he could call to her, but he heard her clattering about in the yard a few moments, and threw up the window to speak to her. She stared to see him already dressed, with his hair dishevelled from his twistings and turnings on the pillow.

'I dropped my key out of window an hour or two ago,' he said. 'There it lies, behind you. Open my door for me.'

'Lawk a mercy, Mister Edward!' said Hepzibah. 'Haven't you been to bed all night? '

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'Yes,' he answered, 'I was up and out hours ago. I have been lying down since. Let me out, and I'll tell you all about it.'

Hepzibah took up the key, re - entered the house, and released him. When he descended

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there was nobody else astir. Hepzibah was laying the breakfast-things in the kitchen, and for a while he stood in silence.

'You was to tell me all about it,' she said at length without looking at him.

He told his story without a word of contrition or remorse until he came to the end.

'I've promised Shadrach,' he said then,

'and I've promised myself. There's an end of it.'

Mrs. Blane entering the kitchen saw Hepzibah crying over Ned and embracing him.

'Why, what on earth's the matter?' she asked wonderingly.

'Nothing,' said Ned in answer. 'There, there, Hepzibah! It's all over.'

Mrs. Blane was one of those women who would infinitely rather suffer than have nothing to be martyred by. She had seen the lad growing a bit wild—like his father—and had shed a tear or two about it, amiable, enjoyable, and self - consolatory. But she had missed the graver signs, and knew nothing of the history of the past twelve hours. She let

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things go for the meantime, knowing that Ned's 'nothing' meant nothing for her hearing from his lips. Breakfast was despatched, and the young fellow went about his business.

The great fight was fought and won, for once. He felt, looking back at it afterwards, that he had come out of it by something of a scramble, but he had escaped somehow. It had to be fought over and over and over again, but the footing was surer and the fight briefer and less severe time after time, until at last Old Blazer's Hero held his head erect again, and walked about his duties and such pleasures as the world still held for him—a saved man.

Life is full of queer problems, and many of them are inscrutable and insoluble altogether. But the strangest that ever presented itself to Ned Blane's experience was that the fruit of his own folly should cure him.

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CHAPTER XVII

THERE was a horrible, frowsy portion of the town into which people of the respectable classes rarely ventured. Probably the doctor and the rent collector were the only men who with any approach to frequency carried a decent coat into that squalid quarter. The amateur investigation of the houses of the poor, which has lately grown to be so fashionable, was less in vogue at that time; and the clerics of the parish were of the old-fashioned sleepy sort who were content to take things pretty much as they found them. The spot was vile enough to scare away anybody untoughened by custom for the endurance of its horrors. Festering pools of weedy water lay at the very doors of the ramshackle, ageblackened houses. The buildings themselves

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had sunk bodily into the slime of their foundations, until the ground without was a foot higher than the floor within, and in sinking they had canted helplessly over to this side or that in such wise that they had to be propped up on either side by slanting beams of timber. The supporting baulks were rotten with age and moisture, and might be carved with the thumb - nail.

Vile as the place was, it was highly prized by Mr. Horatio Lowther and by Mr. John Howarth, who between them owned the whole abominable plot of land and all the tumbledown bricks and mortar on it Both were keen hands at a bargain, and both were dearly fond of a good investment. Bell's Holly (probably Bell's Hollow originally) had proved a noble investment for each of them. The wretched tenements were let out in rooms, and brought in a far higher rent than wholesome houses of the same class, let in the ordinary fashion, would have done. There was a Board of Commissioners in the parish, whose obvious duty it was to see that this rookery was

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cleared; but it was not held fair or neighbourly for the Board to go poking its nose too closely into people's private business. Mr. Lowther was not only a private citizen of repute, but a personage renowned in religious circles, and so good a man was safely to be left to his own way of business; Howarth was known to be warm, and was naturally respected on that account. Nobody knew much about the Board, except that it was elected at stated intervals and without excitement of any kind, and Mr. Lowther, who was active in good works, was a member of it, year in and year out—a fact which in itself was enough to dignify the body if any one had ever been disposed to think of it. Now it befell whilst Will Hackett was away in America, and his deserted Wife was patiently teaching her infant scholars and nursing her own heart-break, that a clerk of John Howarth's who had been wont, in the pursuance of his regular weekly round of duties, to collect his employer's rents in Bell's Holly, fell ill, and for a while the task fell upon the

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builder's shoulders. It chanced further that one of Howarth's tenants, who of course could never have dwelt in Bell's Holly at all unless he had been in a state of abject poverty, sickened at the beginning of the hot weather, and discovered that even he that is down may have a fall in fear. He had been slack in payment always, being of a feeble and sickly constitution and too much given to beer, and now the payments stopped altogether. Howarth was not the man to stand this sort of nonsense, and having never been slothful in business, went in person to superintend the non - paying tenant's eviction.

The non-paying tenant lay on a dirty mattress on the floor, and though the day was sweltering hot, and hotter in the damp and breathless shelter of Bell's Holly than in most places, he was shivering under a foul and ragged blanket. Mr. Howarth disgustedly remarked within himself that there was no stick of furniture about the place which could have realised a sixpence. He fingered his seals and stroked his chin between his thumb

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and forefinger, and looked extremely large and important.

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'About that there rent, Millard? Eh? Come now. About that there rent?'
'I ain't got so much as a single farden, gaffer,' said the defaulting tenant.
'Oh!' said Howarth. 'That bein' the case, thee'st have to get out o' this.'
'Gaffer,' returned the defaulting creditor shivering, and staring at him with uninterested eyes, 'I can't move a foot, nor yet hardly a finger.'
'Thee'st have to move foot and finger,' said the landlord magisterially. 'Out thee goest.'
He had no idea that he was brutal. It never entered into his mind to ask himself whether he were acting well in the matter or not. The room in which the defaulting tenant lay was John Howarth's property, and was worth eighteen - pence a week to him. If the tenant could not find the weekly eighteen - pence he had no right to stay there. Nothing could be more obvious, and the advancement of any consideration outside the plain facts

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of the case would have looked like an absurdity.
'I ought to ha' gone to the workus, gaffer,' said the shivering creature on the floor; 'but the new Bastille ain't finished building yet, and the old un's full.'
'Well,' returned Howarth, 'that's no affair o' mine. Out thee goest.'
'Wheer?' asked the tenant.
Howarth looked at him in a little genuine surprise.
'Why, what affair is that o' mine?'
The man rolled over as if the discussion bored him, as perhaps it did, and drew the tattered blanket a little higher. Howarth stooped and pulled it off him—not violently but business - like, as if there had been nothing at all there but the blanket.
'Come along!'
'Gaffer,' said the tenant, shivering rather more violently than before, 'I can't set one foot afore another.'
The landlord rolled up the blanket into an untidy bundle and threw it downstairs.

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'Come along!' he said again.
He was not violent or harsh in manner, but simply and purely business-like. He was looking after his own interests, and that is a thing which every man has an undoubted right to do. He got his arms round the man, and being himself stiffly built and sturdy, lifted the skeleton frame easily enough to its feet. Then he helped him, neither kindly nor unkindly, but as if he were deporting a crate or an arm-chair, out of the room and down the stairs and set him outside the house, where he sat on the ground with his back against the wall, shivering in the hot sunlight.
'Now,' said Howarth, mopping at his forehead, 'I'll speak a word to the relieving officer as I chance to be passin' his gate this afternoon. I've got two applications for that room o' thine, and one on 'em 'll be in this afternoon.'
'Gi' me my blanket, gaffer; I've got the shivers deadly.'
Howarth gave the man his blanket, and marched into the next house. A dozen slatternly

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women stood with their hands under their tattered aprons, or tying up wisps of disordered hair, whilst they looked on at such part of this scene as was enacted in the open air; but no one of them said anything, or seemed to think anything, and Howarth himself, having with his own hands secured his own rights, went from house to house, and chamber to chamber, looking even bigger and more magisterial than common.

It reached his ears casually, a day or two later, that there were two or three cases of typhoid in Bell's Holly, and one or two in the workhouse infirmary, and he was aware, without associating the facts together, that he himself was feeling very strange and queer. He thought he would go home and have a cup of tea and go to bed. His wife was a little alarmed for him, but not much. She herself was suffering from the same symptoms, though apparently in a slighter degree, and was satisfied to attribute them to the unusual heat of the weather. But next day neither of them was able to rise, and the doctor

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being called in had looked grave and shook his head. Typhoid fever. Both cases very bad.

He took the news to Mary, who received it as if it had been a punishment for her own hardness to her parents. She hardly knew of what to accuse herself, and yet an inward voice of accusation seemed to speak. She might have been more yielding, more submissive, less bitter in her thoughts. And now her father and mother were dangerously ill, and might be dying; and though, had they lived in health, the feud could hardly have known any healing, nature spoke out and would have way. How desolate and lonely life would seem if this unfatherly father and unmotherly mother died and left her alone in the world! Their very living, even though they were alienated from her and she from them, had been a something after all.

She broke up the school and hastened home.

'Ah!' said her mother, recognising her feebly and fretfully, 'you've come at last!'

Mary kissed her for sole answer, and at once assumed the charge of the two sick

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rooms. While the pair were conscious they were harsh with her, but when delirium came the memory of late days seemed blotted out of it, and their daughter's voice and hand could soothe them when every other sound and touch seemed to wound bruised brain and suffering body. They were blinded mercifully from their own anger, and remembered her only by a kindly instinct.

The fever ran much the same course with Howarth and his wife, and so since it had touched him earlier he came out of the delirium and found himself upon the fatal plain of calm the sooner. The room was dim and cool, and Mary was moving noiselessly about the place. A hollow voice—the mere spectre of a voice—addressed her.

'That thee, Polly?'

She hastened to the bedside, and smoothed the clothes and pillows with a hand that trembled. It neared his cheek and he nestled upon it, rolling his head over to one side and holding the cool hand prisoner there like a child. She let it stay. It was the first caress

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he had offered her for many and many a day which had not seemed purely mechanical. A tear started at either eye and dropped heavily upon his face. He looked up at her with eyes like a bird's—so large and bright.

'Art a good wench?' he said.

He nestled down upon the hand again, and seemed to fall asleep. She watched him long, while in the unnatural attitude in which she stood cramps began to rack and twist her, but she would not move whilst there seemed any danger of disturbing him. At length, little by little, she withdrew and left him in unchanged attitude. Then creeping to her own room she let her heart have vent in natural tears. Love was back again. There was something left to live for, but it seemed for a time as if the pain of it were greater than the joy.

And John Howarth slept with his fathers, and for an hour or two no one discovered that he was gone.

Then little more than a day later his wife

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followed him without knowing of it, and the girl was alone again.

Everything they had owned came to their daughter, and for a while Mary left the place, and then coming back resumed her school, though she no longer had need of it, except for heart's food. She must have somebody to care for, so she cared for her children, and but for their society led a life very solitary and quiet.

She bought Mr. Lowther's share of Bell's Holly and pulled the old place down, and took advice about draining the land and building decent cottages there. Winter was coming by this time, and the weather was unseasonable for the sort of operations which were contemplated, but she walked one evening with a contractor who, had in early days been in partnership with her father to look at the place, and to hear his proposals. His business carried him farther than Bell's Holly, and when he had his talk out he bade her good - bye and left her.

She stood awhile in the midst of the ruins

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which as yet were but half removed, and then set out to walk through the wintry twilight home. The gas-lit town glimmered before her, and the keen frosty air made motion a pleasure. She was in a state of unusual hopefulness and brightness. Duty done and being done, and all the little cares and tender interests of daily life were drawing her back to the interest in life which is natural to youth. She thought of these things, and surrendered herself to the new influences half gladly and half regretfully.

She reached her own door and rang there. The rosy maid was taken into service again, and opened the door to her. Mary was passing upstairs with a cheerful 'Thank you' when the maid touched her tremblingly.

'What is it?' Mary asked her.

'If you please, ma'am,' said the maid, 'Mr. Hackett's here. He's asleep, ma'am.'

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FOR an instant this annoying intelligence seemed to paralyse mind and body, and if Mary had not already had a hand upon the stair - rail she would have fallen at the shock. She turned ghostly white, and her heart, after what felt like a pause, began to beat furiously. She could not have told if she were glad, or sorry, or resentful.

In a little while this extreme agitation subsided, and, standing with one foot on the lowest step of the staircase, with the maid staring round-eyed and frightened at her white face, she listened and heard the deep breath of the returned prodigal rising and falling in a regular cadence. The room in which he slept was on the ground-floor. The door was ajar, and a faint gleam of light came from a

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single gas jet, which was lowered so far that in daylight it might have been invisible.

Mary moved softly to the door, trembling from head to foot. Three steps carried her across the narrow little hall. and then she paused with a hand upon the doorpost of the room. The maid, open-mouthed and open-eyed, waited for what might happen. The mistress entered the room noiselessly, and peered through the dusk at the sleeping figure in the arm - chair. Hackett was lying broadcast with his feet wide apart, and his arms hanging loosely over the arms of the chair. His head had lunched forward, and his chin was tucked into his disordered waistcoat. Even in that poor light there was no mistaking him.

Yet when she had looked awhile she was impelled to turn the gas a little higher. In the clearer light the returned prodigal lay at a marked disadvantage. The feet seemed to be cast forward in ostentation of the gaping boots and the frayed edges of the trousers. All his raiment was wrinkled, and seedy, and

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disreputable. His shirt cuffs were crumpled and dirty, his cheek bore a week's black stubble, his nose had taken a tinge of red.

His wife absorbed all these details of his aspect, and stood wondering that she should care so little and feel so undisturbed. She did not know as yet that the shock of his return had dulled all power and feeling, and she stood and noted every shabby sign of social failure and moral degradation as if they were all painted in a picture and had no personal interest for her.

There was an odour of bad brandy and stale tobacco about this graceless returned prodigal, and his dissipated, out-at-elbows look was in accord with it. His wife sat down in a chair opposite to him, regarding him fixedly, going over and over again, one by one, the signs of squalor and decay, and little by little the thought grew up in her mind that she was bound to this man for his life or hers. The first apprehension of this fact arose clearly enough. It was not that the knowledge of it seemed incomplete; but at first

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she lacked the power to care about it. Then slowly it grew more and more definite, because more and more horrible, and at last it overwhelmed her, so that she rose in physical protest against it. She turned the gaslight to the full, and went anew over every sign before her. Hackett changed his posture, winking and muttering at the light, and she started behind the table instinctively to place some barrier between herself and him;

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but he settled back again in a mere second or two, and breathed more stertorously than before.

And now that she was awake to the terror of the position she set her wits to work to find out what she might best do for the moment. There was no creature to whom she might run for advice or assistance, and she was thrown entirely upon her own resources. But she managed in a while to grasp the position pretty thoroughly. Above all other things, it was evident that no pity, compunction, or affection had brought this rascally husband home again. He had come in search

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of spoil, and in that respect she was quite defenceless against him, for there was no Married Women's Property Act in these days. She did not even desire to defend herself in that particular, for in the flush of her dread of him and her abhorrence of him, she would willingly have surrendered everything in her possession, to be rid of him once and for all.

So she slipped to her bedroom and searched her desk to see what she had there. Finding some fourteen or fifteen pounds, she packed the money in a sheet of note-paper, and then wrote a hasty note.

'Take this, and make yourself respectable. When you want more write to me. Do not try to see me, for I would rather die than speak to you.'

She enclosed this and the money in an envelope, and, descending to the kitchen, gave it into the hands of the maid.

'You must sit up,' she said, 'until Mr. Hackett awakes, and then give him this. If he asks for me, never mind that. Give him this when he awakes.'

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Then she fled to her room and locked her self in, and barricaded the door, and lay in wait for what might happen. Footsteps and voices passed, and distant unimportant sounds shook her with dread a score of times. Once a rap at the door, following on the faint sound of stealthy footsteps on the stair, so made her tremble that she could find no voice to answer. The knock was repeated timidly and Mary whispered:

'What is it?'

'I've brought you a cup of tea, ma'am' the maid whispered back in a voice as frightened as her own.

'Take it away,' said her mistress. 'Don't come again until Mr. Hackett has gone away. The maid retired, and in the solitude and silence of her kitchen found things so dismal and oppressive that she was forced at length to wrap a shawl about her head and steal into the roadway. Drawing the front door gently after her, and nursing the note intended for Mr. Hackett in her hand, she went to the gate and stood shivering behind it, finding

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some comfort in the sight and sound of passers by. Amongst them was Ned Blane, and it was more timidity than discretion which prevented her from calling upon him and requesting his protection. But when an hour had gone by and the maid's nose was blue with cold, and her hands so chilled that she could no longer feel her own fingers or the note she carried, she recognised a passing figure in the dusk and hailed it.

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"That thee, Hepzibah?"

"What's the matter?" Hepzibah demanded, pausing and peering at her. "Who is it?"

"Me," said the maid, beginning to whimper a little. "I wish you'd come in and sit wi' me a bit. I'm afraid to be by myself, and I'm that cold I don't know what to do a-standing here."

"Where's the missis?" Hepzibah demanded.

"Her's locked herself in," answered the maid, with a dreadful enjoyment of the situation. The master's come home again, and

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he's asleep downstairs, and her's afraid of him."

"Will Hackett back again?" cried Hepzibah. "It's pretty plain to see what's brought him back. He's got news somehow as his wife has got money. Has her seen him yet?"

"Her's seen him," said the maid, "but he ain't seen her. He was asleep when the missis came home."

Hepzibah opened the gate with great cautiousness and, preceded by the maid, entered the house silently and stealthily. In the kitchen she drew forth a whispered history of the manner of Mr. Hackett's arrival. The maid, it seems, had heard a loud and bullying noise of knocking at the front door, and going in haste to answer it, had but just escaped from being staggered over by the new arrival, who, after glaring at her for a minute without apparent recognition, had felt his way into the front room, fallen immediately by happy or unhappy accident into the arm - chair and gone to sleep there. Then the narrator of these things produced the

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note with which her mistress had entrusted her.

"I'm to sit up till he wakens," she said; "and then I've got to gie him this. But I'm afeard to go anigh him."

"I ain't," said Hepzibah. "You just run down to Mrs. Blane's and tell her I shall stop and sleep at mother's to - night, with my compliments, and then run on to mother's and tell her to sit up for me. I'll see this job through, any way."

So the small servant, happy to escape, got out by the back way and run swiftly on her errand. She had scarce been gone a quarter of an hour when Hepzibah, seated there in listening wrath, heard a movement and a series of mutterings, and marching bolt upright into the front room confronted Hackett. He was rubbing his eyes with both hands and yawning when she first set eyes on him, but a second later he threw his hands aloft and stretched himself. The sudden sight of Hepzibah glaring stonily at him from the doorway froze him in that attitude for a

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moment, but he recovered himself almost immediately.

"Hillo!" he said, "what are you doing here?"

"I'm told to give you this from Mrs. Hackett," said Hepzibah, throwing the envelope on the table. It dropped heavily there, and a muffled jingle arose from it.

"Oh!" said Hackett, staring angrily back at her as he made a step towards the table. Hepzibah folded her arms and regarded him uncompromisingly. He became a little

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restless under her gaze, and to escape it took the envelope and opened it. When he had read the note he opened the package within it and counted its contents from one hand into the other.

'Where is Mrs. Hackett?' he asked, transferring the money to his pocket.

'How should I know?' asked Hepzibah in turn. 'What do you want with Mrs. Hackett? You've got what you came for.'

Will, finding no immediate answer to this direct attack, tried his wrathful stare again

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but finding himself looked down, swaggered round on his heel and began to look for his hat. It lay beside the chair he had lately occupied, and having found it, he stood brushing it with his arm, shivering sharply twice or thrice.

'Tell her I'll see her to-morrow,' he said, fixing his hat upon his head, and avoiding Hepzibah's gaze.

'Not I,' said Hepzibah. 'If you've got any messages give 'em yourself.'

Of course this was very discourteous and impudent; but Will was a little out of sorts and indisposed to combat.

'Let me get by,' he said, advancing towards her.

'Glad and willin,' returned Hepzibah, making room for him; 'and rare and pleased I should be to see the last of thee.'

Even this Mr. Hackett declined to resent, not caring to provoke just then any fuller expression of Hepzibah's sentiments concerning him. As well as his cold, cramped limbs and shuffling boots would allow him

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he swaggered to the front door, and throwing it wide open and closing it with a bang, marched from the house, and for that night disappeared. He turned up again next morning in a brand - new suit of clothes, with linen, boots, hat, gloves, and neckcloth, all new and fine, and made a call upon the solicitor who had acted for John Howarth.

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CHAPTER XIX.

THE returned wanderer was, of course, a great deal incensed by the note his wife had left for him, and it began to be clear to his own intelligence that before he had read that heartless greeting he had been inspired by the tenderest and most husbandly sentiments. After that, however, he was going to stand no nonsense. She had declared war, and it eased Will's conscience to be able to regard her as an acknowledged and open enemy. He was able to swagger in upon the solicitor and lay claim to his wife's belongings without any too pressing sentiment of self-disdain. At bottom he knew that he was acting like a blackguard, but he was not forced to admit as much to himself.

He put up at the 'King's Arms,' and his

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open arrival there excited a good deal of attention and comment. People for the most part gave him the cold shoulder, and there was not a soul who met him with that enthusiasm of friendship which he felt to be due to a popular traveller on his return to

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his native place. There were some who were willing to be friendly, but they were not the people he wanted, and altogether he was less happy than he had hoped to be. In respect of mere money he had never been so well off in all his life. Howard had died 'warm,' as the current phrase about him went—he was reputed a twelve-thousand-pound man—and Master Will had before him the prospect of an undisturbed nibble at that considerable hoard whilst it should last. The wife was defenceless against him, and as a last protest against the possibilities of conscience —what had he married her for but her money?

The averages get wonderfully good care taken of them always, and by way of balance in this instance, if Will Hackett undervalued

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Mary his wife, Ned Blane overvalued her almost enough for full counterpoise. For by this time there had never been so patient and so angelic a sufferer since the world began. So meek, so defenceless, yet so courageous she seemed to Ned's eyes, that he worshipped her. His own stalwart limbs and rude health defied disaster and seemed somewhat to merit it, if only for the sake of a rough - and - tumble with the world and fate; but she, so delicate, tender, and pallid, should surely have been sheltered from all imaginable ills, and have been called to confront nothing that was harsh, comfortless, or unfriendly. And thus, as was natural for a man in love, though it could only be absurd for any but a lover, the infant school was the scene of a most valorous slow tragedy, and the native instinct to hold body and soul together without a lapse from honour, became an enterprise purely angelic.

The passion which deified the girl naturally enough demonised the scoundrel who was her husband. To look at him fairly, Master

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Will was no more than despicable, but Blane was not in a position to assume a purely critical attitude. To him the unfaithful and selfish rascal stood mountainous, phenomenal, hideously deformed—hateful as the Great Napoleon, and the causer of woes as profound. Blane had carried a dull, slow despair so long that he had begun to think of himself as a man of a dull nature; but now that it began to be noised abroad that Hackett was back again and squandering his wife's substance, he began to hate with a heat and intensity which sometimes terrified him. The fierce loathing and revolt he sometimes felt at the bare existence of this poor and commonplace personage grown phenomenal would stab at him as if with the sudden anguish of a red-hot knife, and he would sicken and whirl with the intensity of his own hatred.

Resolutely hour by hour and day by day he had to fight against himself lest he should seek the man and lay upon him hands that could be nothing less than murderous. But to do the villain a damage would be to rob

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himself of his own right to despise him. And beyond that, he had no right to interfere. He kept, in the very midst of his madness, self - possession enough to know that he could not quarrel with the husband without throwing an undeserved stigma upon the wife. What were they, Mary and he, to each other? What could they ever be? If the

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current of his love had flowed in a smooth channel it would certainly never have run dry, for there was a perennial spring of loyalty within the man; but the obstacles it encountered dammed it and held it in until it gathered strength and volume enough to go dashing and spraying in these wild cataracts of passion.

Since he had broken the bestial bond which for a little while had held him, he had fallen back into all the regular ways of his youth, and amongst other revived habits was that of taking his mother to the old - fashioned Nonconformist chapel in which she had worshipped, after her own shallow fashion, all her life. He used to sit in sight of Mary

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Hackett there, and without criticising motives too closely, it is just possible that he continued that revived habit of his as much for the sake of seeing her, as for any reason which the pastor of the place might have found more solid.

It happened one gusty Sunday night in midwinter, a month after Hackett's return, that he went to chapel alone, and returning homeward, overheard a phrase which, in its own due time, brought him the supreme temptation of his life.

The Bard was dutifully elbowing Hepzibah homeward, and the two were butting against the wind, head downward and shoulders squared, when Blanc came up behind them. Hepzibah, with the wind in her ears, was unconscious of the footsteps in her rear, and shouting at Shadrach, said:

'Trust a woman for readin' a woman's heart. It's Master Ned her cares for.'

The unwilling listener stood suddenly still, and all the blood in his body seemed to riot for a moment in his heart and head. He was

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conscious of nothing for a while, and when he recovered himself he was surprised to see the dark figures still but a little way in front of him. He seemed to have been absent from himself and them for a long time.

Hepzibah's voice reached him, blown backward by the wind.

'No.' She was evidently answering some saying of Shadrach's which Blane had missed.

'No harm 'll come on 't. Her's as good as gold, and so is he; but it's him as her's grown to care for, though it's a million to one her never guesses it.'

Now Ned Blane had never played the eavesdropper in his life before, but if all self-respect had hung for ever upon the issue of that temptation, he would have let it go. He had followed to hear, simply and purely because he could not do otherwise, but now that he had heard he stood still in the roaring wind.

If that were true!

The thought haunted him thereafter day and night, and brought with it such temptations

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as the simplest - minded may fancy. Yet these were no temptations; for he would not dishonour her in his thoughts, however his own demon might strive with him.

But in a little while the true temptation came. That howling wind turned due north and blew for days. It bore bitter frost upon its wings, and, locked every stream and canal and lake and standing pond deep in black ice. There had been no such frost for years, and all the skaters in the township must needs turn out day by day or night by night according

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as their avocations bound them, or their want of avocation left them free) to revel on Parker's Mill - pond, a space of water some dozen acres in extent, which, being sheltered by thick - wooded slopes from the wild wind, had frozen marble smooth. Ned was not much of an expert, but the fleet passage through the stinging air at once inspired and soothed him, and he was there night after night amongst the crowd who sped to and fro in the coming and going of numberless torchlights and the steadier

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glare of cresset fires which burned upon the bank.

Saturday afternoon left him free for an hour or two of daylight, and he set out for the pool. As he reached the edge there was a great noise of applause, and a huge horseshoe line of spectators was formed upon the ice to watch the evolutions of some skilled performer. Ned, dangling his skates in his hand, walked over drearily enough to see what might be seen, and shouldering through the crowd at a place where it was less dense than at most points, beheld his enemy, who, with half his world for onlookers, was rollicking hither and thither with an enchanting grace and surety. His habitual swagger became him here, and was converted into a beauty. He circled, poised on the outer edge, at apparently impossible angles, soaring like a bird on even wing, waving and darting with a bold and sweet dexterity, and moving, as it seemed, more by volition than by mere force of skill and muscle.

And as he skimmed the ringing ice, followed

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by the hurrahs and hand - clapping of the crowd, restored to all his old kingship, Ned looked on, and was aware of such an inward volcano of rage and hatred as scorched his heart within him. There is no speaking of these things. The mere truth is that these extreme rages of great passion, whether they be of love or hate, are so rare that no words have been coined for them. We find words for the commonplace, because all men and women have felt it. But the little hate is as common as glass, and the great is, happily, as rare as the Koh-i-noor.

With that phenomenal and unnamable hate Ned Blane watched his blackguard rival as he swam in perfect grace and Mercurial swiftness on the frozen surface of the pool. The mere presence of the man was enough; but the popular applause choked him as if with sulphurous ashes.

There was at the south end of the sheet of water a mill - wheel, now frozen and set, but it had been working until yesterday, and near it the ice was known to be quaggy and unsafe.

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The bases of the horseshoe line were drawn away from this unsound spot of ice, and in the middle of it was a low post with a cross-piece upon it, and on the cross - piece was pasted a strip of paper, whereon was printed the word 'dangerous.' Now that day, as every day of late, Hackett had been drinking, and this sign of danger lured him nearer and nearer. He had but enough brandy aboard to spur him to his physical best, and he did things in spirituous recklessness which he would not have

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dared to do had he been altogether sober, for in that state his nerves were apt to turn aghast at very simple matters.

But now he was so sure of everything that, in spite of warning cries, he must needs go swimming and sailing nearer and nearer to the warning-post, trusting to his own swiftness to carry him harmless over the treacherous ice. And Blane, since one must needs tell the whole truth about him, stood looking on in a devilish satisfaction in the certainty that by - and - by the ice would give way with him, and maybe drown him, and so rid the earth of a villain grown phenomenal.

Crash! Hackett was through, and the ice starred right to the feet of the horseshoe line. The people started backward with a wild stampede, which set the solid floor waltzing like the slow movement of free - water beneath free wind. Ned Blane held his ground.

'Drown!' he said within himself.

Then in one mere - second—for at such times fancy will busy herself, and will get through more work than she will do in a common year—he saw all that might happen from this unnamable villian's death, and justified himself to let him die, and exulted in the thing that lay before him.

Up came Hackett, spouting and screaming with struggling arms, and down again he went like a stone. The crowd yelled and screamed, and went silent. He came up again and clutched at a square of ice, and went down with it. And then and there, with one incredible lightning flash, Blane read his own heart, and snatched his own salvation.

EPILOGUE.

ON a spring morning the wind was clanging and the bells were pealing, and rent clouds charged over the chill blue field of the sky at such a pace that the random gleams of sunshine cast between them swept hill and dale with a bird-like speed. The strong sunshine breasted the heathy hills and climbed them at a flash; the surly shadow crept in its rear, and the new bright racer leaped behind the gloomy edges of the cloudy shade, as if eager to annihilate it.

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Shadrach, standing at the door of his mother's cottage, clad in his Sunday best, with a white favour in his coat, and his hands enshrouded in monstrous gloves of Berlin thread, fixed his new hat with an air of resolution, as if prepared to hold to it in any extremity of the wind's boisterous jollity.

'I tek it,' he said, turning round to Hepzibah, who stood behind in a summery costume of white muslin and a very triumph of a bonnet—I tek it as a kind of a honour as ain't often done the likes of huz.'

'I should think thee didst and all,' answered Hepzibah. She spoke almost snappishly, being engaged with a hair - pin and a refractory glove-button, but she looked up a second later with a frank and smiling face.

'Yes,' said Shadrach's mother, hovering about Hepzibah and touching her here and there with decided fingers, and retiring with her head on one side to observe the artistic effect of each stroke. It's a thing as you'd ought to remember to your dyin' day, Shadrach. To be tied by the same words—it's a noble honour, Shadrach, and I hope as it bespeaks well for your future.'

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'Ankore to that, I says, ma'am!' said Hepzibah's mother, who was weak, like Shadrach, whilst Shadrach's mother was jerkily decided, like Hepzibah. Hepzibah,' she added solicitously, 'you're lookin' a bit coldish a'ready. You'll be froze in that book muslin afore you reach the church. Thee'dst better have a shawl across thy shoulders.'

'Rubbidge!' said Shadrach's mother. The wind 'll keep 'em warm enough. It's time we started, ain't it, Shadrach?'

Shadrach, with difficulty unbuttoning his coat, drew from an inner pocket a great turnip of a watch and consulted it with pride.

'Theer's a good three-rafters yet,' he answered.' Theer's no use in arriving before everybody. Master Ned and his good lady 'll be on the stroke o' time, I bet. Nayther too soon nor yet too late, that's Master Ned's method.'

'Well, then, shut the door and sit down,' said his mother;' and for goodness mercy's sake let me button up thy coat! Thee'st leave all thy finger-tips i' the button-holes.'

'Theer's a many curious things as comes to pass,' said Hepzibah, seating herself with a slow, angular precision, and spreading out the book muslin with careful hands, as nobody ud iver dream on, and this is one of 'em.'

'Ah!' returned Shadrach, 'Master Ned's got the wish of his heart at last, and I'm gay and glad on it. Her held him off and on a longish time, though. Her might ha' got it over this time last year, without seemin' anyhow uncommon. I've no mind to speak ill o' them as is departed—'

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'Departed!' repeated his mother, cutting him short with an air of disdain. 'I wonder how you can use such a word about such a creetur! A tavern railer, as was took by a judgment! And thee mayest say what thee likest, Shadrach, I shall niver think it anythin' but a straightfor'ard flyin' i' the face o' Providence as Master Ned should ha' tried to fish him out again. He was meant to be drowned, an' he was drowned; and what's meant to be wool be, in spite of all the Master Neds i' the world. And as for "departed," all I got to say is, you might know better than try to turn your own mother's stomach on your weddin' mornin'.'

'I used the word,' said Shadrach meekly, because I didn't wish to be too hard upon him.' 'Let him rest, poor creetur!' put in Hepzibah with unexpected gentleness. He was a fine figure of a man, but he'd got a bit too much of his grandfeyther and his feyther in him. He had nothin' to do with the makin' of either o' them, so far as I know, and Them Above 'll know how far he was to be made to answer.'

'That is ondoubtedly the way to look at it,' returned the Bard, 'ondoubtedly the way to look at it.' His Berlin - gloved hands groped indeterminately at his tail pockets, and catching Hepzibah's eye he looked confused, and sent a wandering glance around the apartment.

'What ha' you got there?' demanded Hepzibah.

The Bard's glance became more and more confused.

'What is it, Shadrach?' asked the bridegroom's mother.

'It's a line or two,' replied the blushing Bard. 'Nothin' particular; but I was afeared I might ha' lost it. It's a thing as I knocked off last night a-walkin' home from the pit.'

'What's it about?' said Hepzibah, clasping her knees with her hands, and looking from her own mother to Shadrach's with a beaming face.

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'It's about Master Ned and Zyber and me,' replied the Bard, avoiding his bride's glance and addressing the society impersonally.

'Thee and me!' cried Hepzibah rapturously, rising in her chair and thumping back again.

'Let's have it.'

Shadrach produced the manuscript from his tails, and read:

'It takes a heart fired from above
To risk your life for them you love;
What must it be, although too late,
To strive to save the life you hate!
Yet such it was with Edward Blane,
Who always bore the hero's name.

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'It was the act of Master Ned
Which let his humble friend be wed,
Because Hepzyber was so fond,
Her never could unloose the bond.
Till master Ned should married be,
Her would not wedded be to me.

'I hope good luck may come to all,
Whate'er their station may befall,
And all about the English nation
Be happy in their place and station;
As I am sure I am in mine
To be Hepzyber's valentine.'

This by immediate and unanimous consent, was voted Shadrach's chef d'oeuvre, and before the day was, out his mother had confided it to the printer's hands. It was issued, I may say, though I run beyond the temporal limits of my story to make the announcement, for private circulation only; and to this day framed copies of it, yellow with age, decorate several mantelpieces in the district.

'Time we was off, Shadrach,' said Hepzibah when the tumult of enthusiastic comment had subsided.

They passed out at the door and over the windy heath, the bridegroom sheepishly arming the bride.

'We shall have a run for it yet, I declare,' cried Shadrach's mother. 'There's the carriage a-drivin' to the church. I can see the white favour on the coachman's bosom.'

The wind-swept music of the bells rolled round them, and as they reached the gate, panting in indecorous haste, Mary Hackett stepped from the carriage and greeted them with a smile. The last ray of cloud was borne away by the boisterous wind, and the sky shone clear, as if for a happy omen.