The Lost Girl

By

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CHAPTER

CHAPTER I

THE DECLINE OF MANCHESTER HOUSE

Take a mining townlet like Woodhouse, with a population of ten thousand people, and three generations behind it. This space of three generations argues a certain well-established society. The old "County" has fled from the sight of so much disembowelled coal, to flourish on mineral rights in regions still idyllic. Remains one great and inaccessible magnate, the local coal owner: three generations old, and clambering on the bottom step of the "County," kicking off the mass below. Rule him out.

A well established society in Woodhouse, full of fine shades, ranging from the dark of coal-dust to grit of stone-mason and sawdust of timber-merchant, through the lustre of lard and butter and meat, to the perfume of the chemist and the disinfectant of the doctor, on to the serene gold-tarnish of bank-managers, cashiers for the firm, clergymen and such-like, as far as the automobile refulgence of the general-manager of all the collieries. Here the ne plus ultra. The general manager lives in the shrubberied seclusion of the so-called Manor. The genuine Hall, abandoned by the "County," has been taken over as offices by the firm.

Here we are then: a vast substratum of colliers; a thick sprinkling

of tradespeople intermingled with small employers of labour and diversified by elementary schoolmasters and nonconformist clergy; a higher layer of bank-managers, rich millers and well-to-do ironmasters, episcopal clergy and the managers of collieries, then the rich and sticky cherry of the local coal-owner glistening over all.

Such the complicated social system of a small industrial town in the Midlands of England, in this year of grace 1920. But let us go back a little. Such it was in the last calm year of plenty, 1913.

A calm year of plenty. But one chronic and dreary malady: that of the odd women. Why, in the name of all prosperity, should every class but the lowest in such a society hang overburdened with Dead Sea fruit of odd women, unmarried, unmarriageable women, called old maids? Why is it that every tradesman, every school-master, every bank-manager, and every clergyman produces one, two, three or more old maids? Do the middle-classes, particularly the lower middle-classes, give birth to more girls than boys? Or do the lower middle-class men assiduously climb up or down, in marriage, thus leaving their true partners stranded? Or are middle-class women very squeamish in their choice of husbands?

However it be, it is a tragedy. Or perhaps it is not.

Perhaps these unmarried women of the middle-classes are the famous

sexless-workers of our ant-industrial society, of which we hear so much. Perhaps all they lack is an occupation: in short, a job. But perhaps we might hear their own opinion, before we lay the law down.

In Woodhouse, there was a terrible crop of old maids among the "nobs," the tradespeople and the clergy. The whole town of women, colliers' wives and all, held its breath as it saw a chance of one of these daughters of comfort and woe getting off. They flocked to the well-to-do weddings with an intoxication of relief. For let class-jealousy be what it may, a woman hates to see another woman left stalely on the shelf, without a chance. They all wanted the middle-class girls to find husbands. Every one wanted it, including the girls themselves. Hence the dismalness.

Now James Houghton had only one child: his daughter Alvina. Surely Alvina Houghton--

But let us retreat to the early eighties, when Alvina was a baby: or even further back, to the palmy days of James Houghton. In his palmy days, James Houghton was crême de la crême of Woodhouse society. The house of Houghton had always been well-to-do: tradespeople, we must admit; but after a few generations of affluence, tradespeople acquire a distinct cachet. Now James Houghton, at the age of twenty-eight, inherited a splendid business in Manchester goods, in Woodhouse. He was a tall, thin, elegant young man with side-whiskers, genuinely refined, somewhat in the Bulwer style. He had a taste for

elegant conversation and elegant literature and elegant Christianity: a tall, thin, brittle young man, rather fluttering in his manner, full of facile ideas, and with a beautiful speaking voice: most beautiful. Withal, of course, a tradesman. He courted a small, dark woman, older than himself, daughter of a Derbyshire squire. He expected to get at least ten thousand pounds with her. In which he was disappointed, for he got only eight hundred. Being of a romantic-commercial nature, he never forgave her, but always treated her with the most elegant courtesy. To seehim peel and prepare an apple for her was an exquisite sight. But that peeled and quartered apple was her portion. This elegant Adam of commerce gave Eve her own back, nicely cored, and had no more to do with her. Meanwhile Alvina was born.

Before all this, however, before his marriage, James Houghton had built Manchester House. It was a vast square building--vast, that is, for Woodhouse--standing on the main street and high-road of the small but growing town. The lower front consisted of two fine shops, one for Manchester goods, one for silk and woollens. This was James Houghton's commercial poem.

For James Houghton was a dreamer, and something of a poet: commercial, be it understood. He liked the novels of George Macdonald, and the fantasies of that author, extremely. He wove one continual fantasy for himself, a fantasy of commerce. He dreamed of silks and poplins, luscious in texture and of unforeseen exquisiteness: he dreamed of carriages of the "County" arrested before his windows, of exquisite

women ruffling charmed, entranced to his counter. And charming, entrancing, he served them his lovely fabrics, which only he and they could sufficiently appreciate. His fame spread, until Alexandra, Princess of Wales, and Elizabeth, Empress of Austria, the two best-dressed women in Europe, floated down from heaven to the shop in Woodhouse, and sallied forth to show what could be done by purchasing from James Houghton.

We cannot say why James Houghton failed to become the Liberty or the Snelgrove of his day. Perhaps he had too much imagination. Be that as it may, in those early days when he brought his wife to her new home, his window on the Manchester side was a foam and a may-blossom of muslins and prints, his window on the London side was an autumn evening of silks and rich fabrics. What wife could fail to be dazzled! But she, poor darling, from her stone hall in stony Derbyshire, was a little bit repulsed by the man's dancing in front of his stock, like David before the ark.

The home to which he brought her was a monument. In the great bedroom over the shop he had his furniture built: built of solid mahogany: oh too, too solid. No doubt he hopped or skipped himself with satisfaction into the monstrous matrimonial bed: it could only be mounted by means of a stool and chair. But the poor, secluded little woman, older than he, must have climbed up with a heavy heart, to lie and face the gloomy Bastille of mahogany, the great cupboard opposite, or to turn wearily sideways to the great cheval mirror, which performed a perpetual and

hideous bow before her grace. Such furniture! It could never be removed from the room.

The little child was born in the second year. And then James Houghton decamped to a small, half-furnished bedroom at the other end of the house, where he slept on a rough board and played the anchorite for the rest of his days. His wife was left alone with her baby and the built-in furniture. She developed heart disease, as a result of nervous repressions.

But like a butterfly James fluttered over his fabrics. He was a tyrant to his shop-girls. No French marquis in a Dickens' novel could have been more elegant and raffiné and heartless. The girls detested him. And yet, his curious refinement and enthusiasm bore them away. They submitted to him. The shop attracted much curiosity. But the poor-spirited Woodhouse people were weak buyers. They wearied James Houghton with their demand for common zephyrs, for red flannel which they would scallop with black worsted, for black alpacas and bombazines and merinos. He fluffed out his silk-striped muslins, his India cotton-prints. But the natives shied off as if he had offered them the poisoned robes of Herakles.

There was a sale. These sales contributed a good deal to Mrs. Houghton's nervous heart-disease. They brought the first signs of wear and tear into the face of James Houghton. At first, of course, he merely marked down, with discretion, his less-expensive stock of prints

and muslins, nuns-veilings and muslin delaines, with a few fancy braidings and trimmings in guimp or bronze to enliven the affair. And Woodhouse bought cautiously.

After the sale, however, James Houghton felt himself at liberty to plunge into an orgy of new stock. He flitted, with a tense look on his face, to Manchester. After which huge bundles, bales and boxes arrived in Woodhouse, and were dumped on the pavement of the shop. Friday evening came, and with it a revelation in Houghton's window: the first piqués, the first strangely-woven and honey-combed toilet covers and bed quilts, the first frill-caps and aprons for maid-servants: a wonder in white. That was how James advertised it. "A Wonder in White." Who knows but that he had been reading Wilkie Collins' famous novel!

As the nine days of the wonder-in-white passed and receded, James disappeared in the direction of London. A few Fridays later he came out with his Winter Touch. Weird and wonderful winter coats, for ladies--everything James handled was for ladies, he scorned the coarser sex--: weird and wonderful winter coats for ladies, of thick, black, pockmarked cloth, stood and flourished their bear-fur cuffs in the background, while tippets, boas, muffs and winter-fancies coquetted in front of the window-space. Friday-night crowds gathered outside: the gas-lamps shone their brightest: James Houghton hovered in the background like an author on his first night in the theatre. The result was a sensation. Ten villages stared and crushed round the plate glass. It was a sensation: but what sensation! In the breasts of the

crowd, wonder, admiration, fear, and ridicule. Let us stress the word fear. The inhabitants of Woodhouse were afraid lest James Houghton should impose his standards upon them. His goods were in excellent taste: but his customers were in as bad taste as possible. They stood outside and pointed, giggled, and jeered. Poor James, like an author on his first night, saw his work fall more than flat.

But still he believed in his own excellence: and quite justly. What he failed to perceive was that the crowd hated excellence. Woodhouse wanted a gently graduated progress in mediocrity, a mediocrity so stale and flat that it fell outside the imagination of any sensitive mortal. Woodhouse wanted a series of vulgar little thrills, as one tawdry mediocrity was imported from Nottingham or Birmingham to take the place of some tawdry mediocrity which Nottingham and Birmingham had already discarded. That Woodhouse, as a very condition of its own being, hated any approach to originality or real taste, this James Houghton could never learn. He thought he had not been clever enough, when he had been far, far too clever already. He always thought that Dame Fortune was a capricious and fastidious dame, a sort of Elizabeth of Austria or Alexandra, Princess of Wales, elegant beyond his grasp. Whereas Dame Fortune, even in London or Vienna, let alone in Woodhouse, was a vulgar woman of the middle and lower middle-class, ready to put her heavy foot on anything that was not vulgar, machine-made, and appropriate to the herd. When he saw his delicate originalities, as well as his faint flourishes of draper's fantasy, squashed flat under the calm and solid foot of

vulgar Dame Fortune, he fell into fits of depression bordering on mysticism, and talked to his wife in a vague way of higher influences and the angel Israfel. She, poor lady, was thoroughly scared by Israfel, and completely unhooked by the vagaries of James.

At last--we hurry down the slope of James' misfortunes--the real days of Houghton's Great Sales began. Houghton's Great Bargain Events were really events. After some years of hanging on, he let go splendidly. He marked down his prints, his chintzes, his dimities and his veilings with a grand and lavish hand. Bang went his blue pencil through 3/11, and nobly he subscribed 1/0-3/4. Prices fell like nuts. A lofty one-and-eleven rolled down to six-three, 1/6 magically shrank into 4-3/4d, whilst good solid prints exposed themselves at 3-3/4d per yard.

Now this was really an opportunity. Moreover the goods, having become a little stale during their years of ineffectuality, were beginning to approximate to the public taste. And besides, good sound stuff it was, no matter what the pattern. And so the little Woodhouse girls went to school in petties and drawers made of material which James had destined for fair summer dresses: petties and drawers of which the little Woodhouse girls were ashamed, for all that. For if they should chance to turn up their little skirts, be sure they would raise a chorus among their companions: "Yah-h-h, yer've got Houghton's threp'ny draws on!"

All this time James Houghton walked on air. He still saw the Fata Morgana snatching his fabrics round her lovely form, and pointing him to wealth untold. True, he became also Superintendent of the Sunday School. But whether this was an act of vanity, or whether it was an attempt to establish an Entente Cordiale with higher powers, who shall judge.

Meanwhile his wife became more and more an invalid; the little Alvina was a pretty, growing child. Woodhouse was really impressed by the sight of Mrs. Houghton, small, pale and withheld, taking a walk with her dainty little girl, so fresh in an ermine tippet and a muff. Mrs. Houghton in shiny black bear's-fur, the child in the white and spotted ermine, passing silent and shadowy down the street, made an impression which the people did not forget.

But Mrs. Houghton had pains at her heart. If, during her walk, she saw two little boys having a scrimmage, she had to run to them with pence and entreaty, leaving them dumfounded, whilst she leaned blue at the lips against a wall. If she saw a carter crack his whip over the ears of the horse, as the horse laboured uphill, she had to cover her eyes and avert her face, and all her strength left her.

So she stayed more and more in her room, and the child was given to the charge of a governess. Miss Frost was a handsome, vigorous young woman of about thirty years of age, with grey-white hair and gold-rimmed spectacles. The white hair was not at all tragical: it

was a family trait.

Miss Frost mattered more than any one else to Alvina Houghton, during the first long twenty-five years of the girl's life. The governess was a strong, generous woman, a musician by nature. She had a sweet voice, and sang in the choir of the chapel, and took the first class of girls in the Sunday-School of which James Houghton was Superintendent. She disliked and rather despised James Houghton, saw in him elements of a hypocrite, detested his airy and gracious selfishness, his lack of human feeling, and most of all, his fairy fantasy. As James went further into life, he became a dreamer. Sad indeed that he died before the days of Freud. He enjoyed the most wonderful and fairy-like dreams, which he could describe perfectly, in charming, delicate language. At such times his beautifully modulated voice all but sang, his grey eyes gleamed fiercely under his bushy, hairy eyebrows, his pale face with its side-whiskers had a strange lueur, his long thin hands fluttered occasionally. He had become meagre in figure, his skimpy but genteel coat would be buttoned over his breast, as he recounted his dream-adventures, adventures that were half Edgar Allan Poe, half Andersen, with touches of Vathek and Lord Byron and George Macdonald: perhaps more than a touch of the last. Ladies were always struck by these accounts. But Miss Frost never felt so strongly moved to impatience as when she was within hearing.

For twenty years, she and James Houghton treated each other with a

courteous distance. Sometimes she broke into open impatience with him, sometimes he answered her tartly: "Indeed, indeed! Oh, indeed! Well, well, I'm sorry you find it so--" as if the injury consisted in her finding it so. Then he would flit away to the Conservative Club, with a fleet, light, hurried step, as if pressed by fate. At the club he played chess--at which he was excellent--and conversed. Then he flitted back at half-past twelve, to dinner.

The whole morale of the house rested immediately on Miss Frost. She saw her line in the first year. She must defend the little Alvina, whom she loved as her own, and the nervous, petulant, heart-stricken woman, the mother, from the vagaries of James. Not that James had any vices. He did not drink or smoke, was abstemious and clean as an anchorite, and never lowered his fine tone. But still, the two unprotected ones must be sheltered from him. Miss Frost imperceptibly took into her hands the reins of the domestic government. Her rule was quiet, strong, and generous. She was not seeking her own way. She was steering the poor domestic ship of Manchester House, illuminating its dark rooms with her own sure, radiant presence: her silver-white hair, and her pale, heavy, reposeful face seemed to give off a certain radiance. She seemed to give weight, ballast, and repose to the staggering and bewildered home. She controlled the maid, and suggested the meals--meals which James ate without knowing what he ate. She brought in flowers and books, and, very rarely, a visitor. Visitors were out of place in the dark sombreness of Manchester House. Her flowers charmed the

petulant invalid, her books she sometimes discussed with the airy James: after which discussions she was invariably filled with exasperation and impatience, whilst James invariably retired to the shop, and was heard raising his musical voice, which the work-girls hated, to one or other of the work-girls.

James certainly had an irritating way of speaking of a book. He talked of incidents, and effects, and suggestions, as if the whole thing had just been a sensational-æsthetic attribute to himself. Not a grain of human feeling in the man, said Miss Frost, flushing pink with exasperation. She herself invariably took the human line.

Meanwhile the shops began to take on a hopeless and frowsy look. After ten years' sales, spring sales, summer sales, autumn sales, winter sales, James began to give up the drapery dream. He himself could not bear any more to put the heavy, pock-holed black cloth coat, with wild bear cuffs and collar, on to the stand. He had marked it down from five guineas to one guinea, and then, oh ignoble day, to ten-and-six. He nearly kissed the gipsy woman with a basket of tin saucepan-lids, when at last she bought it for five shillings, at the end of one of his winter sales. But even she, in spite of the bitter sleety day, would not put the coat on in the shop. She carried it over her arm down to the Miners' Arms. And later, with a shock that really hurt him, James, peeping bird-like out of his shop door, saw her sitting driving a dirty rag-and-bone cart with a green-white, mouldy pony, and flourishing her arms like some wild

and hairy-decorated squaw. For the long bear-fur, wet with sleet, seemed like a chevaux de frise of long porcupine quills round her fore-arms and her neck. Yet such good, such wonderful material! James eyed it for one moment, and then fled like a rabbit to the stove in his back regions.

The higher powers did not seem to fulfil the terms of treaty which James hoped for. He began to back out from the Entente. The Sunday School was a great trial to him. Instead of being carried away by his grace and eloquence, the nasty louts of colliery boys and girls openly banged their feet and made deafening noises when he tried to speak. He said many acid and withering things, as he stood there on the rostrum. But what is the good of saying acid things to those little fiends and gall-bladders, the colliery children. The situation was saved by Miss Frost's sweeping together all the big girls, under her surveillance, and by her organizing that the tall and handsome blacksmith who taught the lower boys should extend his influence over the upper boys. His influence was more than effectual. It consisted in gripping any recalcitrant boy just above the knee, and jesting with him in a jocular manner, in the dialect. The blacksmith's hand was all a blacksmith's hand need be, and his dialect was as broad as could be wished. Between the grip and the homely idiom no boy could endure without squealing. So the Sunday School paid more attention to James, whose prayers were beautiful. But then one of the boys, a protegé of Miss Frost, having been left for half an hour in the obscure room with Mrs. Houghton, gave away

the secret of the blacksmith's grip, which secret so haunted the poor lady that it marked a stage in the increase of her malady, and made Sunday afternoon a nightmare to her. And then James Houghton resented something in the coarse Scotch manner of the minister of that day. So that the superintendency of the Sunday School came to an end.

At the same time, Solomon had to divide his baby. That is, he let the London side of his shop to W. H. Johnson, the tailor and haberdasher, a parvenu little fellow whose English would not bear analysis. Bitter as it was, it had to be. Carpenters and joiners appeared, and the premises were completely severed. From her room in the shadows at the back the invalid heard the hammering and sawing, and suffered. W. H. Johnson came out with a spick-and-span window, and had his wife, a shrewd, quiet woman, and his daughter, a handsome, loud girl, to help him on Friday evenings. Men flocked in--even women, buying their husbands a sixpence-halfpenny tie. They could have bought a tie for four-three from James Houghton. But no, they would rather give sixpence-halfpenny for W.H. Johnson's fresh but rubbishy stuff. And James, who had tried to rise to another successful sale, saw the streams pass into the other doorway, and heard the heavy feet on the hollow boards of the other shop: his shop no more.

After this cut at his pride and integrity he lay in retirement for a while, mystically inclined. Probably he would have come to

Swedenborg, had not his clipt wings spread for a new flight. He hit upon the brilliant idea of working up his derelict fabrics into ready-mades: not men's clothes, oh no: women's, or rather, ladies'. Ladies' Tailoring, said the new announcement.

James Houghton was happy once more. A zig-zag wooden stair-way was rigged up the high back of Manchester House. In the great lofts sewing-machines of various patterns and movements were installed. A manageress was advertised for, and work-girls were hired. So a new phase of life started. At half-past six in the morning there was a clatter of feet and of girls' excited tongues along the back-yard and up the wooden stair-way outside the back wall. The poor invalid heard every clack and every vibration. She could never get over her nervous apprehension of an invasion. Every morning alike, she felt an invasion of some enemy was breaking in on her. And all day long the low, steady rumble of sewing-machines overhead seemed like the low drumming of a bombardment upon her weak heart. To make matters worse, James Houghton decided that he must have his sewing-machines driven by some extra-human force. He installed another plant of machinery--acetylene or some such contrivance--which was intended to drive all the little machines from one big belt. Hence a further throbbing and shaking in the upper regions, truly terrible to endure. But, fortunately or unfortunately, the acetylene plant was not a success. Girls got their thumbs pierced, and sewing machines absolutely refused to stop sewing, once they had started, and absolutely refused to start, once they had stopped. So that after a

while, one loft was reserved for disused and rusty, but expensive engines.

Dame Fortune, who had refused to be taken by fine fabrics and fancy trimmings, was just as reluctant to be captured by ready-mades. Again the good dame was thoroughly lower middle-class. James Houghton designed "robes." Now Robes were the mode. Perhaps it was Alexandra, Princess of Wales, who gave glory to the slim, glove-fitting Princess Robe. Be that as it may, James Houghton designed robes. His work-girls, a race even more callous than shop-girls, proclaimed the fact that James tried on his own inventions upon his own elegant thin person, before the privacy of his own cheval mirror. And even if he did, why not? Miss Frost, hearing this legend, looked sideways at the enthusiast.

Let us remark in time that Miss Frost had already ceased to draw any maintenance from James Houghton. Far from it, she herself contributed to the upkeep of the domestic hearth and board. She had fully decided never to leave her two charges. She knew that a governess was an impossible item in Manchester House, as things went. And so she trudged the country, giving music lessons to the daughters of tradesmen and of colliers who boasted pianofortes. She even taught heavy-handed but dauntless colliers, who were seized with a passion to "play." Miles she trudged, on her round from village to village: a white-haired woman with a long, quick stride, a strong figure, and a quick, handsome smile when once her face

awoke behind her gold-rimmed glasses. Like many short-sighted people, she had a certain intent look of one who goes her own way.

The miners knew her, and entertained the highest respect and admiration for her. As they streamed in a grimy stream home from pit, they diverged like some magic dark river from off the pavement into the horse-way, to give her room as she approached. And the men who knew her well enough to salute her, by calling her name "Miss Frost!" giving it the proper intonation of salute, were fussy men indeed. "She's a lady if ever there was one," they said. And they meant it. Hearing her name, poor Miss Frost would flash a smile and a nod from behind her spectacles, but whose black face she smiled to she never, or rarely knew. If she did chance to get an inkling, then gladly she called in reply "Mr. Lamb," or "Mr. Calladine." In her way she was a proud woman, for she was regarded with cordial respect, touched with veneration, by at least a thousand colliers, and by perhaps as many colliers' wives. That is something, for any woman.

Miss Frost charged fifteen shillings for thirteen weeks' lessons, two lessons a week. And at that she was considered rather dear. She was supposed to be making money. What money she made went chiefly to support the Houghton household. In the meanwhile she drilled Alvina thoroughly in theory and pianoforte practice, for Alvina was naturally musical, and besides this she imparted to the girl the elements of a young lady's education, including the drawing of

flowers in water-colour, and the translation of a Lamartine poem.

Now incredible as it may seem, fate threw another prop to the falling house of Houghton, in the person of the manageress of the work-girls, Miss Pinnegar. James Houghton complained of Fortune, yet to what other man would Fortune have sent two such women as Miss Frost and Miss Pinnegar, gratis? Yet there they were. And doubtful if James was ever grateful for their presence.

If Miss Frost saved him from heaven knows what domestic débâcle and horror, Miss Pinnegar saved him from the workhouse. Let us not mince matters. For a dozen years Miss Frost supported the heart-stricken, nervous invalid, Clariss Houghton: for more than twenty years she cherished, tended and protected the young Alvina, shielding the child alike from a neurotic mother and a father such as James. For nearly twenty years she saw that food was set on the table, and clean sheets were spread on the beds: and all the time remained virtually in the position of an outsider, without one grain of established authority.

And then to find Miss Pinnegar! In her way, Miss Pinnegar was very different from Miss Frost. She was a rather short, stout, mouse-coloured, creepy kind of woman with a high colour in her cheeks, and dun, close hair like a cap. It was evident she was not a lady: her grammar was not without reproach. She had pale grey eyes, and a padding step, and a soft voice, and almost purplish cheeks.

Mrs. Houghton, Miss Frost, and Alvina did not like her. They suffered her unwillingly.

But from the first she had a curious ascendancy over James Houghton. One would have expected his æsthetic eye to be offended. But no doubt it was her voice: her soft, near, sure voice, which seemed almost like a secret touch upon her hearer. Now many of her hearers disliked being secretly touched, as it were beneath their clothing. Miss Frost abhorred it: so did Mrs. Houghton. Miss Frost's voice was clear and straight as a bell-note, open as the day. Yet Alvina, though in loyalty she adhered to her beloved Miss Frost, did not really mind the quiet suggestive power of Miss Pinnegar. For Miss Pinnegar was not vulgarly insinuating. On the contrary, the things she said were rather clumsy and downright. It was only that she seemed to weigh what she said, secretly, before she said it, and then she approached as if she would slip it into her hearer's consciousness without his being aware of it. She seemed to slide her speeches unnoticed into one's ears, so that one accepted them without the slightest challenge. That was just her manner of approach. In her own way, she was as loyal and unselfish as Miss Frost. There are such poles of opposition between honesties and loyalties.

Miss Pinnegar had the second class of girls in the Sunday School, and she took second, subservient place in Manchester House. By force of nature, Miss Frost took first place. Only when Miss Pinnegar

spoke to Mr. Houghton--nay, the very way she addressed herself to him--"What do you think, Mr. Houghton?"--then there seemed to be assumed an immediacy of correspondence between the two, and an unquestioned priority in their unison, his and hers, which was a cruel thorn in Miss Frost's outspoken breast. This sort of secret intimacy and secret exulting in having, really, the chief power, was most repugnant to the white-haired woman. Not that there was, in fact, any secrecy, or any form of unwarranted correspondence between James Houghton and Miss Pinnegar. Far from it. Each of them would have found any suggestion of such a possibility repulsive in the extreme. It was simply an implicit correspondence between their two psyches, an immediacy of understanding which preceded all expression, tacit, wireless.

Miss Pinnegar lived in: so that the household consisted of the invalid, who mostly sat, in her black dress with a white lace collar fastened by a twisted gold brooch, in her own dim room, doing nothing, nervous and heart-suffering; then James, and the thin young Alvina, who adhered to her beloved Miss Frost, and then these two strange women. Miss Pinnegar never lifted up her voice in household affairs: she seemed, by her silence, to admit her own inadequacy in culture and intellect, when topics of interest were being discussed, only coming out now and then with defiant platitudes and truisms--for almost defiantly she took the commonplace, vulgarian point of view; yet after everything she would turn with her quiet, triumphant assurance to James Houghton, and start on some point of

business, soft, assured, ascendant. The others shut their ears.

Now Miss Pinnegar had to get her footing slowly. She had to let James run the gamut of his creations. Each Friday night new wonders, robes and ladies' "suits"--the phrase was very new--garnished the window of Houghton's shop. It was one of the sights of the place, Houghton's window on Friday night. Young or old, no individual, certainly no female left Woodhouse without spending an excited and usually hilarious ten minutes on the pavement under the window. Muffled shrieks of young damsels who had just got their first view, guffaws of sympathetic youths, continued giggling and expostulation and "Eh, but what price the umbrella skirt, my girl!" and "You'd like to marry me in that, my boy--what? not half!"--or else "Eh, now, if you'd seen me in that you'd have fallen in love with me at first sight, shouldn't you?"--with a probable answer "I should have fallen over myself making haste to get away"--loud guffaws:--all this was the regular Friday night's entertainment in Woodhouse. James Houghton's shop was regarded as a weekly comic issue. His piqué costumes with glass buttons and sort of steel-trimming collars and cuffs were immortal.

But why, once more, drag it out. Miss Pinnegar served in the shop on Friday nights. She stood by her man. Sometimes when the shrieks grew loudest she came to the shop door and looked with her pale grey eyes at the ridiculous mob of lasses in tam-o-shanters and youths half buried in caps. And she imposed a silence. They edged away.

Meanwhile Miss Pinnegar pursued the sober and even tenor of her own way. Whilst James lashed out, to use the local phrase, in robes and "suits," Miss Pinnegar steadily ground away, producing strong, indestructible shirts and singlets for the colliers, sound, serviceable aprons for the colliers' wives, good print dresses for servants, and so on. She executed no flights of fancy. She had her goods made to suit her people. And so, underneath the foam and froth of James' creative adventure flowed a slow but steady stream of output and income. The women of Woodhouse came at last to depend on Miss Pinnegar. Growing lads in the pit reduce their garments to shreds with amazing expedition. "I'll go to Miss Pinnegar for thy shirts this time, my lad," said the harassed mothers, "and see if they'll stand thee." It was almost like a threat. But it served Manchester House.

James bought very little stock in these days: just remnants and pieces for his immortal robes. It was Miss Pinnegar who saw the travellers and ordered the unions and calicoes and grey flannel. James hovered round and said the last word, of course. But what was his last word but an echo of Miss Pinnegar's penultimate! He was not interested in unions and twills.

His own stock remained on hand. Time, like a slow whirlpool churned it over into sight and out of sight, like a mass of dead sea-weed in a backwash. There was a regular series of sales

fortnightly. The display of "creations" fell off. The new entertainment was the Friday-night's sale. James would attack some portion of his stock, make a wild jumble of it, spend a delirious Wednesday and Thursday marking down, and then open on Friday afternoon. In the evening there was a crush. A good moiré underskirt for one-and-eleven-three was not to be neglected, and a handsome string-lace collarette for six-three would iron out and be worth at least three-and-six. That was how it went: it would nearly all of it iron out into something really nice, poor James' crumpled stock. His fine, semi-transparent face flushed pink, his eyes flashed as he took in the sixpences and handed back knots of tape or packets of pins for the notorious farthings. What matter if the farthing change had originally cost him a halfpenny! His shop was crowded with women peeping and pawing and turning things over and commenting in loud, unfeeling tones. For there were still many comic items. Once, for example, he suddenly heaped up piles of hats, trimmed and untrimmed, the weirdest, sauciest, most screaming shapes. Woodhouse enjoyed itself that night.

And all the time, in her quiet, polite, think-the-more fashion Miss Pinnegar waited on the people, showing them considerable forbearance and just a tinge of contempt. She became very tired those evenings--her hair under its invisible hairnet became flatter, her cheeks hung down purplish and mottled. But while James stood she stood. The people did not like her, yet she influenced them. And the stock slowly wilted, withered. Some was scrapped. The shop seemed to

have digested some of its indigestible contents.

James accumulated sixpences in a miserly fashion. Luckily for her work-girls, Miss Pinnegar took her own orders, and received payments for her own productions. Some of her regular customers paid her a shilling a week--or less. But it made a small, steady income. She reserved her own modest share, paid the expenses of her department, and left the residue to James.

James had accumulated sixpences, and made a little space in his shop. He had desisted from "creations." Time now for a new flight. He decided it was better to be a manufacturer than a tradesman. His shop, already only half its original size, was again too big. It might be split once more. Rents had risen in Woodhouse. Why not cut off another shop from his premises?

No sooner said than done. In came the architect, with whom he had played many a game of chess. Best, said the architect, take off one good-sized shop, rather than halve the premises. James would be left a little cramped, a little tight, with only one-third of his present space. But as we age we dwindle.

More hammering and alterations, and James found himself cooped in a long, long narrow shop, very dark at the back, with a high oblong window and a door that came in at a pinched corner. Next door to him was a cheerful new grocer of the cheap and florid type. The new

grocer whistled "Just Like the Ivy," and shouted boisterously to his shop-boy. In his doorway, protruding on James' sensitive vision, was a pyramid of sixpence-halfpenny tins of salmon, red, shiny tins with pink halved salmons depicted, and another yellow pyramid of four-pence-halfpenny tins of pineapple. Bacon dangled in pale rolls almost over James' doorway, whilst straw and paper, redolent of cheese, lard, and stale eggs filtered through the threshold.

This was coming down in the world, with a vengeance. But what James lost downstairs he tried to recover upstairs. Heaven knows what he would have done, but for Miss Pinnegar. She kept her own work-rooms against him, with a soft, heavy, silent tenacity that would have beaten stronger men than James. But his strength lay in his pliability. He rummaged in the empty lofts, and among the discarded machinery. He rigged up the engines afresh, bought two new machines, and started an elastic department, making elastic for garters and for hat-chins.

He was immensely proud of his first cards of elastic, and saw Dame Fortune this time fast in his yielding hands. But, becoming used to disillusionment, he almost welcomed it. Within six months he realized that every inch of elastic cost him exactly sixty per cent. more than he could sell it for, and so he scrapped his new department. Luckily, he sold one machine and even gained two pounds on it.

After this, he made one last effort. This was hosiery webbing, which could be cut up and made into as-yet-unheard-of garments. Miss Pinnegar kept her thumb on this enterprise, so that it was not much more than abortive. And then James left her alone.

Meanwhile the shop slowly churned its oddments. Every Thursday afternoon James sorted out tangles of bits and bobs, antique garments and occasional finds. With these he trimmed his window, so that it looked like a historical museum, rather soiled and scrappy. Indoors he made baskets of assortments: threepenny, sixpenny, ninepenny and shilling baskets, rather like a bran pie in which everything was a plum. And then, on Friday evening, thin and alert he hovered behind the counter, his coat shabbily buttoned over his narrow chest, his face agitated. He had shaved his side-whiskers, so that they only grew becomingly as low as his ears. His rather large, grey moustache was brushed off his mouth. His hair, gone very thin, was brushed frail and floating over his baldness. But still a gentleman, still courteous, with a charming voice he suggested the possibilities of a pad of green parrots' tail-feathers, or of a few yards of pink-pearl trimming or of old chenille fringe. The women would pinch the thick, exquisite old chenille fringe, delicate and faded, curious to feel its softness. But they wouldn't give threepence for it. Tapes, ribbons, braids, buttons, feathers, jabots, bussels, appliqués, fringes, jet-trimmings, bugle-trimmings, bundles of old coloured machine-lace, many bundles of strange cord, in all colours, for old-fashioned braid-patterning, ribbons with

H.M.S. Birkenhead, for boys' sailor caps--everything that nobody wanted, did the women turn over and over, till they chanced on a find. And James' quick eyes watched the slow surge of his flotsam, as the pot boiled but did not boil away. Wonderful that he did not think of the days when these bits and bobs were new treasures. But he did not.

And at his side Miss Pinnegar quietly took orders for shirts, discussed and agreed, made measurements and received instalments.

The shop was now only opened on Friday afternoons and evenings, so every day, twice a day, James was seen dithering bare-headed and hastily down the street, as if pressed by fate, to the Conservative Club, and twice a day he was seen as hastily returning, to his meals. He was becoming an old man: his daughter was a young woman: but in his own mind he was just the same, and his daughter was a little child, his wife a young invalid whom he must charm by some few delicate attentions--such as the peeled apple.

At the club he got into more mischief. He met men who wanted to extend a brickfield down by the railway. The brickfield was called Klondyke. James had now a new direction to run in: down hill towards Bagthorpe, to Klondyke. Big penny-daisies grew in tufts on the brink of the yellow clay at Klondyke, yellow eggs-and-bacon spread their midsummer mats of flower. James came home with clay smeared all over him, discoursing brilliantly on grit and paste and presses and kilns

and stamps. He carried home a rough and pinkish brick, and gloated over it. It was a hard brick, it was a non-porous brick. It was an ugly brick, painfully heavy and parched-looking.

This time he was sure: Dame Fortune would rise like Persephone out of the earth. He was all the more sure, because other men of the town were in with him at this venture: sound, moneyed grocers and plumbers. They were all going to become rich.

Klondyke lasted a year and a half, and was not so bad, for in the end, all things considered, James had lost not more than five per cent. of his money. In fact, all things considered, he was about square. And yet he felt Klondyke as the greatest blow of all. Miss Pinnegar would have aided and abetted him in another scheme, if it would but have cheered him. Even Miss Frost was nice with him. But to no purpose. In the year after Klondyke he became an old man, he seemed to have lost all his feathers, he acquired a plucked, tottering look.

Yet he roused up, after a coal-strike. Throttle-Ha'penny put new life into him. During a coal-strike the miners themselves began digging in the fields, just near the houses, for the surface coal. They found a plentiful seam of drossy, yellowish coal behind the Methodist New Connection Chapel. The seam was opened in the side of a bank, and approached by a footrill, a sloping shaft down which the men walked. When the strike was over, two or three miners still

remained working the soft, drossy coal, which they sold for eight-and-sixpence a ton--or sixpence a hundredweight. But a mining population scorned such dirt, as they called it.

James Houghton, however, was seized with a desire to work the Connection Meadow seam, as he called it. He gathered two miner partners--he trotted endlessly up to the field, he talked, as he had never talked before, with inumerable colliers. Everybody he met he stopped, to talk Connection Meadow.

And so at last he sank a shaft, sixty feet deep, rigged up a corrugated-iron engine-house with a winding-engine, and lowered his men one at a time down the shaft, in a big bucket. The whole affair was ricketty, amateurish, and twopenny. The name Connection Meadow was forgotten within three months. Everybody knew the place as Throttle-Ha'penny. "What!" said a collier to his wife: "have we got no coal? You'd better get a bit from Throttle-Ha'penny." "Nay," replied the wife, "I'm sure I shan't. I'm sure I shan't burn that muck, and smother myself with white ash."

It was in the early Throttle-Ha'penny days that Mrs. Houghton died. James Houghton cried, and put a black band on his Sunday silk hat. But he was too feverishly busy at Throttle-Ha'penny, selling his hundredweights of ash-pit fodder, as the natives called it, to realize anything else.

He had three men and two boys working his pit, besides a superannuated old man driving the winding engine. And in spite of all jeering, he flourished. Shabby old coal-carts rambled up behind the New Connection, and filled from the pit-bank. The coal improved a little in quality: it was cheap and it was handy. James could sell at last fifty or sixty tons a week: for the stuff was easy getting. And now at last he was actually handling money. He saw millions ahead.

This went on for more than a year. A year after the death of Mrs. Houghton, Miss Frost became ill and suddenly died. Again James Houghton cried and trembled. But it was Throttle-Ha'penny that made him tremble. He trembled in all his limbs, at the touch of success. He saw himself making noble provision for his only daughter.

But alas--it is wearying to repeat the same thing over and over. First the Board of Trade began to make difficulties. Then there was a fault in the seam. Then the roof of Throttle-Ha'penny was so loose and soft, James could not afford timber to hold it up. In short, when his daughter Alvina was about twenty-seven years old, Throttle-Ha'penny closed down. There was a sale of poor machinery, and James Houghton came home to the dark, gloomy house--to Miss Pinnegar and Alvina.

It was a pinched, dreary house. James seemed down for the last time. But Miss Pinnegar persuaded him to take the shop again on Friday

evening. For the rest, faded and peaked, he hurried shadowily down to the club.